

A MERE MEANDER

An historical trail around Mere

Mere is a Wiltshire town bordering Somerset and Dorset where the Blackmore Vale meets the chalk Downs that extend westward from Salisbury Plain. Its name may come from the Anglo-Saxon *Maere* meaning boundary.

Mere was put on the map by Richard, Earl of Cornwall, a son of King John, when he built a castle in the 1250s on what is now Castle Hill. After abandonment in 1398, the castle gradually disappeared, as its stone was salvaged for building in the town. But the medieval street pattern that Earl Richard probably established still survives, with a central market place called The Square. The Duchy of Cornwall remains a major landowner in and around Mere.

After major fires in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Mere took on a new look when local craftsmen rebuilt it in the local stone in a vernacular style. Consequently, the town has a harmonious appearance and a pleasing domestic scale. Until late Victorian times, Mere did not expand beyond its medieval bounds and the older core of the town, featured in this town-trail, is clearly defined.

The Wincanton Turnpike in the 1760s put Mere directly on the London to Exeter road, which previously had been via the ancient route across the Downs to the north of the town. However, with twentieth century motor traffic, Mere became a bottleneck by the 1960s, despite the demolition of some older buildings for road widening. From 1975, Mere was once again by-passed with the opening of the A303 dual carriageway section.

Textiles were important in the local economy for many centuries. In the medieval period, sheep were kept on the chalk downs and Mere was a centre for the woollen industry. This was superseded by a cottage based linen industry, using locally grown flax. In the nineteenth century, this in turn was replaced by silk processing outsourced from London. A number of watermills remain as testament to the silk industry, which suffered sudden economic collapse in 1894.

Today's Mere has a good community spirit and a range of facilities serving the town and surrounding villages – a Library, Museum and Information Point; bank; post office; pharmacy; greengrocers; butcher's; supermarket; four inns and a café; and two public meeting places, the Grove Buildings and the Lecture Hall. Current businesses include wine importing, trout farming, horticulture under glass, candle making and brush manufacture.

We hope that you enjoy exploring Mere. The Information Point, Museum and Library in Church Street makes a good start. Interesting places along the trail are numbered in a suggested sequence as shown on the street map, but you can just meander!

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1. Mere Library, Museum and Information Centre



Built in 1839 and enlarged later, the library building was originally the National School . . . 'for the Education of the Poor According to the Principles of the Church of England'. A British School was established by religious Nonconformists at around the same time on the other side of town. The religious divide in

education between Church and Chapel was not resolved until 1922, when the schools amalgamated.

2. The Grove Building



This community building of 1891, with its exuberant Flemish-style gables, was financed as an annexe to the then National School by Miss Julia Chafyn Grove, a local benefactress. Her memorial cross stands at the front of the churchyard, from which you can see Castle Hill. Ascend the hill (via footpaths and steps)

for fine views over the town and of the Downland with its strip lynchets (ancient cultivation terraces).

3. Dolling Monument



Near the churchyard gates, a headstone records the fate of Edward Dolling, who died in 1737 aged 21 from inoculating himself with smallpox serum. Although the dangerous ‘variolation’ procedure could sometimes be used with some success, a verse below his headstone warns passers-by against such medical self-experimentation. Dolling’s brave attempt at inoculation was quite early in date, as Edward Jenner’s discovery of a more certain working method using cowpox serum did not happen until 1796.

4. The Chantry



This private house, backing onto the churchyard, was purpose-built around 1424 to house three chantry priests – the chaplains of the Chantry of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the parish church. Chantry endowments were taken over by the Crown during the Reformation, and the house

became a family home after 1548. William Barnes, an enlightened teacher and Dorset dialect poet, ran a school here from 1827 to 1835.

5. North Porch of St Michael the Archangel Church



Above the arch of this main entrance to the parish church is a statue of the Archangel Michael, the church’s patron saint, shown defeating the Serpent. The statue, dating from 1160, was an object of veneration in medieval times. Nearby is the stump of a medieval cross, destroyed in 1643 by Cromwell’s soldiers but restored from fragments that had been put to use as boundary markers. The church underwent a

‘Grand Restoration’ in the fifteenth century and includes a fine rood screen in front of the chancel. You will find guidebooks and further information within the church.

6. Milestone Cottage



An eighteenth century milestone survives here from the Wincanton Turnpike of 1758. The turnpike routed London to Exeter traffic through Mere, making the ancient road over Mere Downs largely redundant. Milestone Cottage formerly accommodated one of Salisbury Street's three former saddlery businesses. It also saw the start-up in 1922 of the embryo Hill Brush Company, now in a factory on the edge of the town.

7. Castle Street



The parade of buildings along Castle Street - best viewed from beside the public car park - incorporates a number of former shop windows. The Butt of Sherry PH originated in 1848 when a widow and her son set up as spirit dealers. Lander House was the home of William Lander (1763 – 1843), brazier and inventor, who produced a surveyors' 'waywiser' for measuring ground distances. Latimer House was the home of a 'Surgeon, Apothecary and Man-Midwife' who practised in the late 1700s and early 1800s.

8. The Old Ship Hotel



The Old Ship is grander than most buildings in Mere. Its central carriageway arch and elaborate overhanging sign reflect prosperity from passing trade, especially between the opening of the turnpike in 1758 and the coming of the railway in 1859 (to nearby Gillingham, Dorset), and again later with the advent of motor cars. The sign is by an eighteenth century local clockmaker, Kingston Avery.

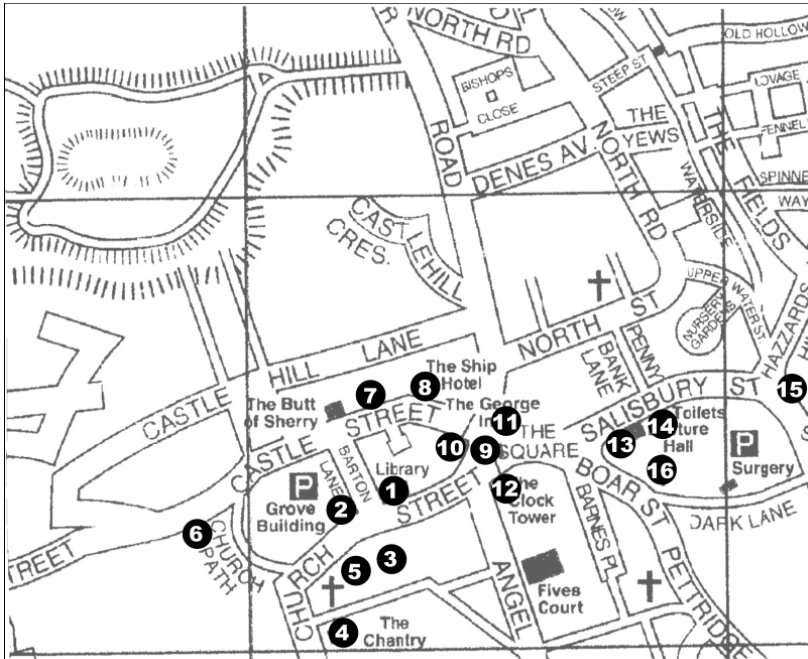
9. The Clock Tower and the former Victoria Hall (Co-op store)



The Clock Tower of 1868 is the focus of The Square. It was paid for by the then Prince of Wales, whose emblem appears on the side of the building. It replaced a medieval two-storey Market House that had open arches at ground level for traders' stalls. The young William Barnes, the Dorset dialect poet, ran his first school in the Cross Loft of the Market House in the 1820s. Lessons were accompanied by noise from the market and ticking from the town clock. The nearby Co-op supermarket was the Victoria Hall, built in 1899 to commemorate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee.

Map of Mere

(Access to Castle Hill is by footpath from Castle Street or Manor Road.)



10. The George Inn



The modern exterior disguises the age of the inn, which dates from 1580. King Charles II visited in disguise for refreshment on 6 October 1651 as a fugitive after the battle of Worcester. The King's flight is commemorated in the Monarch's Way walking trail that passes through Mere

11. Corner of Manor Road/The Square



This commercial building was once the main store of Walton & Co. Waltons dominated the retail trade in Mere from Victorian times through to the mid twentieth century. In their heyday, they had 14 departments in Mere, and branches in four nearby villages. A branch of the then Wiltshire & Dorset Bank operated in

Waltons store until a purpose built bank (now Lloyds Bank) was erected in 1858 on the other corner of Manor Road.

12. Angel Corner Tea Room



Until 1969, this was the Angel Inn, which included more of the building to the left before 1883. Subsequently, a Temperance Hotel was set up here, adjacent to the Angel, to compete against the demon drink! Behind Angel Corner is a Fives Court wall, recalling a game played in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by

striking a two-inch leather ball with the hand.

13. Gilyard Scarth premises, Salisbury Street (The Gables)



Etched on the glass of the inner doors you will see ‘Swan Coffee House’, which operated here for some seven years from 1882. Coffee Houses were opened in towns in late Victorian Britain as part of the Temperance Movement’s campaigns against alcohol. During the First World War, the building was a home for unmarried mothers called The Retreat, a courageous venture by the Rutter family of

Dewes House. Across the street, the Mere Snooker Club and Elite Financial Planning occupy the former Temperance Hall, which replaced a former public house called the Swan Inn.

14. Dewes House



The house is one of the largest and finest in Mere. It originated in 1660 but includes later alterations and additions. From 1855 to 1926, it was the home of the influential Rutter family, Quakers, solicitors and doctors. They spearheaded Mere’s Temperance Society, and provided the nearby Lecture Hall, where alcoholic

consumption is still forbidden under the terms of a Trust

15. Upper Water Street and Water Street



The Shreen Water springs from the chalk near the Mere by-pass. Its course is marked by several water mills formerly used for grinding corn, for brewing or textile industries. Yapps complex, with its landmark chimney, was successively a brewery, bacon factory and milk factory.

On the corner of Water Street and Dark Lane is the Silk House, a former silk mill.

16. United Reformed Church (former Congregational Church)



The larger church could hold 600 people and was financed in 1868 by Charles Jupe, a silk ‘throwster’. The smaller chapel, now partly a TV showroom, replaced an even earlier building in the early nineteenth century. Beneath it was the British School (see Mere Library).

Further Information

The Public Library in Church Street, which includes the Mere Museum and Information Point, has a number of publications on local history for sale or reference, including *The Mere Map* (2004) by Anderson, A. and *The Book of Mere* (2004) by Longbourne, D. The Museum features regular exhibitions on aspects of local history. A booklet *The History of the Church of St Michael the Archangel* (2008) by Tighe, M. and other historical publications are obtainable within the Parish Church.

Refreshments

The Angel Café; The Butt of Sherry PH; The Old Ship Hotel; The George Inn; The Walnut Tree Inn (Shaftesbury Road); Golden Valley (Chinese takeaway); Indigo Blue (Bangladeshi/Indian restaurant and takeaway); Fish and Chip Shop (Church Street).