



Medieval Windsor

[Medieval Sounding Music]

[Becky]

Hello and welcome to another episode of Windsor & Royal Borough Museum's Out and About podcast series in which we tell you the hidden histories and stories behind the buildings and landscape of the Royal Borough. In this episode, we'll be taking you on a journey around Windsor to discover what the town was like in the Medieval times. We'll also be joined by museum volunteer, George Smith, who is currently completing a master's degree in Heritage Management and who wrote his undergraduate dissertation on Windsor Castle in the medieval period.

We're going to start the tour outside Windsor Guildhall, home of Windsor & Royal Borough Museum, and will then explore the streets of Guildhall Island before following Thames Street to Windsor Bridge.

But first find a quiet spot to listen for a few minutes while we paint you a picture of the area from Saxon times onwards. Over to you George...

[Medieval music]

Guildhall

[George]

A thousand years ago there was no castle at Windsor. In fact, the modern-day town of Windsor was yet to exist. Though, confusingly, there was a town called Windsor, just in a different location altogether. It lay two miles south from the present town and was located where Old Windsor is today. In Old English it was called Windlesora, which meant winch by the river.

Archaeological excavations have revealed that the village was established by the late 6th or 7th century. Most of the buildings were humble dwellings but there was also a Palace used by Saxon kings, including Edward the Confessor. It is thought that Saxon kings enjoyed hunting in Windsor Forest.

There were other Saxon villages nearby to Windlesora including the familiar Dedworth and Clewer. Dedworth is thought to mean the enclosure belonging



to Dydda, or someone of a similar name, while Clewer means the dwellers by the Cliff.

Can you guess which cliff this might refer to? Hint, today we would call it a hill.

Walk along from the Guildhall towards the Castle and pause at the corner of High Street and Castle Hill so you can observe the high ground that the Castle sits upon.

[music- footsteps]

High Street/Castle Hill corner junction

You are now looking at the hill which the earliest inhabitants of Clewer lived near and which gave their village its name. But how did this hill become the site of the oldest and largest inhabited Castle in the world and a home to the Kings and Queens of Britain for nearly 1000 years?

[Music Transition]

[Becky]

Following the Norman Conquest of England in 1066, William the Conqueror decided that a ring of castles should be placed around London to protect it from invasion. It was calculated that each fortress should be roughly 20 miles from the capital. The hill, stood before you, was an ideal choice because of its location high above the River Thames and its close proximity to Windsor Forest.

There was just one slight issue. The land selected by William the Conqueror already belonged to the Lord of Clewer Manor; a man named Ralph. If you're a king, though, your money can be quite persuasive, so a deal was quickly struck for the land and the Crown committed to paying Ralph 12 shillings a year in rent; an arrangement that carried on for 500 years. The construction of Windsor Castle swiftly began in 1070 and lasted for 16 years.

[building sound effect]

Slowly walk up Castle Hill, past the Henry VIII gate, so you can continue to observe the Castle.

[music-footsteps]



Castle Hill

[George]

If you were stood on this spot 900 years ago, the original castle would have looked a bit different, not least because it was made entirely of wood. But its original motte-and-bailey style can still be seen in today's castle. The current Round Tower sits on the same raised ground where the original wooden fortified tower was.

The Castle was a fortress and to begin with that was its sole purpose. This quickly changed, however, when Henry I held court at Windsor Castle during Easter 1100. He had domestic quarters created within the Castle and from that point onwards the Castle was favoured as a royal residence over the palace at Old Windsor.

A town emerged to serve the needs of the Castle and it became known as New Windsor to distinguish it from the Saxon settlement of Old Windsor. The earliest reference to the new town appeared in 1130. The residents of Old Windsor were encouraged to move to New Windsor, and the former town began to lose status.

But, before we tell you anymore, turn right into St Albans Street.

[Footsteps]

St Albans Street

[Becky]

You are now standing in the oldest part of Windsor and will soon be walking through the streets of what is called Guildhall Island. The area previously belonged to the manor of Orton- a former Saxon village which was recorded in the Domesday book. By 1130, however, Henry I had obtained the land for the new town of Windsor and a large marketplace began to be built here.

Houses were built in a triangular shape between the Castle's gate (now known as Henry VIII's Gateway) and the new parish church of St John. It is likely there was a bridge across the outer moat of the Castle, leading from the Lower Ward to the marketplace.

The town provided the Castle with food, goods, craftsmen, and labourers. Edward I even granted the town of New Windsor its first town charter in



1277. It became a free borough, responsible for its own affairs and could collect tolls from those who passed over or under Windsor Bridge. The townspeople were also granted the right to pasture their pigs in the forest without charge.

If you look to the left side of St Albans Street, you will see more of the Castle's Walls. Behind here is the Royal Mews. In the medieval times, the King's great garden and a vineyard was located here, and in April 1251 the first royal stables were built. They were 80 ft long and were located in the roughly the same spot as where the Royal Mews is today.

St Albans Street was called Priest Street in the medieval period, presumably because it was the road where the local priest lived.

Windsor Parish Church

[George]

If you continue up the street, you will see Windsor Parish Church of St John the Baptist. The earliest reference to this Parish was in 1184 but it is likely it was older and formed part of the original settlement.

The Parish of St John came to occupy a central place in the Medieval town and played a prominent role in town affairs. By 1186, it looked after a leper hospital known as St Peter Without, which was located at a distance from the town, on the edge of Windsor Forest.

The Church you see before you, however, is not the original. It was built on the same site as the medieval church in 1822 after it was decided that repairs to the ancient building, which had Saxon arches and Norman features, would be so expensive that it was better to rebuild.

The current Church was built according to the floor plan of the medieval church; the old vaults of which still lie beneath the present floor. Old memorials were also retained and placed on the new walls.

Now turn back along St Albans Street towards the Castle. You will see Church Lane on your left. Turn down here.

[Footsteps- music]

Church Lane



[Becky]

As you move down Church Lane you will pass two other streets on your right: first Church Street and then Market Street. These are the oldest streets in Windsor as indicated by the cobbled paving.

Their current names, however, derive only from the 18th and 19th centuries. Church Street was for centuries previously known as Fish Street and Market Street was known as Butcher Row. Hmm, what do you think could have been sold on these streets?

[medieval market sound- chickens, church bells, carts moving]

[George]

Markets were held in this area once a week when farmers and craftsmen from the surrounding countryside would come into town to sell their goods. They placed their temporary booths and stalls between the permanent dwellings and shops that lined the streets.

[background sound of market]

People from nearby villages would also come into town to buy their weekly supplies, including bread, eggs, cheese, meat and fish. For many, coming to the market would have also been an opportunity to catch up on the latest news and gossip.

Walking through this area though might have been quite an assault to the senses, well to a modern-day person anyway. The smell would have been a perfect mix of fresh bread, fish, manure, and even sometimes, rotting animal carcasses.

[market sound]

[Becky]

The area was so dominated by markets that even the nearby Castle Hill was once called King' Market Place, perhaps indicating how important both the Crown and markets were to the Town's prosperity.

As you come to the end of Church Lane you will see on your left '1423 China Kitchen'. This is one of Windsor's oldest buildings and was built in no surprise- 1423; a time when this area was still very much alive with markets.

Look to your right and you will see Windsor Guildhall.



Windsor Guildhall

[George]

From the early middle ages, a Guild, also known as the Fraternity of Windsor Merchants, met to oversee the town's functions. In particular, they met to regulate trade and protect the economic interests of the town. From them, a town council evolved in the 13th century.

To begin the Guild had no permanent meeting place but would often convene in the Three Tuns Public house. This was located just behind Windsor Guildhall and is now called The Prince Harry Pub.

The first mention of a purpose-built Guildhall in Windsor was in 1369 and it was located opposite the entrance to the lower ward of the Castle. The guild must have really liked the Three Tuns, though, because they built themselves a new meeting place on the site in 1518. This was called Trinity Hall and is the building still standing today. But how can we tell this building is old? Observe the small windows and the beam where an overhang would have been. They are a definite nod to the Tudor period.

A wooden market house was later built in approximately the same location as the current Guildhall but that was demolished and replaced by the current Guildhall in 1698. The building was designed by Thomas Fitch, and originally consisted of a vaulted cellar, corn market and council chamber above. The extension, which you can locate from the change in brickwork, was added in 1829.

Now continue back up the High Street towards Thames Street so you can see the statue of Queen Victoria.

[Footsteps]

Queen Victoria Statue

[Becky]

At this spot in 1380, a market cross was placed here by John Sadler. This was the centre of the medieval town. In fact, if you had been stood by the market cross on a Saturday, you would have seen the markets in full swing. And if you were lucky, you could have found yourself in the middle of a fair. In 1350, it was decreed that two fairs should be held every year in the town, one for St George's Day and the other for midsummer.



Each of these fairs lasted for multiple days and attracted buyers and sellers from all over Berkshire and even beyond. The fairs were the greatest events in the economic life of medieval Windsor, and they even gave local traders the chance to sell their goods to the nobility.

Everyone attended- men, women, children, peasants, merchants, artisans, noblemen and knights. Therefore, the fairs were not just an economic hub, but they were the highlight of the social calendar. For the townsfolk of medieval Windsor, it was their one opportunity to do something very different from their normal routine. They could meet people from different areas, see foreign luxury goods, try new food, and enjoy being entertained by street performers.

You can imagine how alive the town would have sounded.

[medieval market hustle and bustle sound with music]

Traders would have been bellowing to attract customers [Traders bellowing sound]

There would have been musicians, jugglers, and magicians entertaining crowds [medieval music- street performance]

People would have been lining up to take part in archery and axe throwing contests [sounds of arrows hitting target]

And children would have been dancing and playing in the streets [sound of children playing]

Strolling through the markets stalls you would have smelt the luxury perfumes meant for the nobility; the aroma of exotic spices, wine and beer; the unfamiliar smell of foreign delicacies; and the more familiar smell of pies, enticing you when you began to feel hungry.

After you finished browsing the stalls, you might have even been lucky enough to watch a mystery play. They were a highlight of the fairs and were always based on a story from the Bible. And if you had any energy left, you could have even danced around the maypole.

[medieval music]

[George]

The market cross was at the centre of the fairs because it was the site where the town's four most important streets met, now known as High Street,



Peascod Street, Thames Street and Castle Hill. By the 13th century, the town had begun to spread out from the original marketplace and houses were built along these four roads.

Peascod Street led to Clewer Fields and a ferry at Datchet. It means Pea pod Street and takes its name from the pea fields that were in the area in the medieval times. The street's name is a reminder of how important peas were in the medieval diet. High Street, continuing on to what is now Sheet Street, was the main road to London going through Old Windsor and Staines. Thames Street was formally called Bishop's Street and was the main route to the River. This is the route we will now be taking.

[Footsteps]

Thames Street

[Becky]

As you walk along Thames Street towards the river, you will see the Harte & Garter to your left. It was once the site of two separate inns, both of which were established in the 14th Century. The Garter Inn was named after the Most Noble Order of the Garter and The White Harte was named in honour of the Royal Emblem worn by King Richard II.

If you look from the Hart & Garter hotel to the Castle, you will see three towers. The one closest to Queen Victoria's Statue is Salisbury Tower, the middle one is Garter Tower and the other is called Curfew Tower. These were built following the two sieges of Windsor Castle in 1193 and 1216.

The first siege was caused when Prince John occupied the Castle in an attempt to take the crown from his brother, Richard the lionheart. Over 500 foot soldiers attempted to capture the Castle. They used two stone throwing machines, sulphur, and black pitch (a type of tar). Despite the multiple assaults, the Castle was not overrun, and in the end, John left the Castle of his own accord.

Yet, in 1216, John was again besieged at the Castle. Though, this time he was king, and the previous year he had sealed the Magna Carta at Runnymede. The agreement was intended to keep the peace between John and his Barons and included 63 clauses; the most important of which covered the rights of free men to justice and a fair trial. King John, however, quickly changed his mind and asked the Pope to annul the agreement. The Barons were furious and



asked for help from the King of France. A large French army besieged Windsor in July 1216 and remained there for two months until they turned their attention to John himself who had moved to nearby Aylesbury. During the siege, sections of the moat were filled in to gain access to the walls. Despite this, a garrison of 60 knights and some foot soldiers successfully managed to repel the attackers on multiple occasions.

[George]

The Castle had proven itself as a military fortress, but the sieges had caused significant damage to the Castle's structure. Records show that £1000 was spent on building projects at the Castle between 1224 and 1230, including the replacement of the wooden keep with a stone one; known to us now as the Round Tower. In 1227 work also began on replacing the wooden walls that overlooked Thames Street. Several houses belonging to towns people had stood against the original timber walls, but they were demolished, and their owners compensated. It was the last section of the perimeter to be rebuilt in stone and the three round towers were included in the design to withstand siege weapons.

Houses were later rebuilt along Thames Street on the Castle side. The earliest deed for a property on Bishop Street, at it was known then, was in 1312, and further leases were documented throughout the century. In 1525 and 1526, three shops were built on the opposite side of the street. This began Thames Street's long association with shops.

Continue to follow Thames Street past Theatre Royal, Windsor and round the corner to Windsor Bridge.

[Footsteps]

Windsor Bridge

[Becky]

The earliest reference to Windsor Bridge dates to 1236 when records show that it was repaired with timber from Windsor Forest. It is not known when it was first built, but it is likely there has been a bridge near to the current site since the 1100s. The bridge was replaced many times over the centuries, but the current bridge was opened on 1st June 1824. Interestingly, bridge tolls were only ended at the end of the 19th century, around 600 years after the town was first granted the right to collect tolls in its town charter.



From the earliest days, the river was fundamental to the town's prosperity and was used to carry goods and people to and from the area. In the medieval period, there was a wharf located next to the bridge on the Windsor side of the riverbank. This was revealed during excavations by Wessex archaeology in 1987.

By the end of the 13th century, a riverside community began to develop from the Hundred Steps of the Castle down to Windsor Bridge and the wharf. The area became known as the Underor.

[Medieval music]

Conclusion

[George]

Towards the end of the medieval period, the town's population was just under 1,000. The population, however, had been very changeable. Periods of decline had been brought about by plague and disease, most notably in 1348 when the Black Death swept through the country. Just like many other places, Windsor suffered badly, and its trade decreased dramatically.

Economic difficulties continued for nearly a century, but the fortunes of the town began to improve towards the end of the medieval period when Edward IV ordered the construction of St George's Chapel. Building works began in 1475 and provided stable work opportunities for local labourers.

St George's Chapel hosted numerous religious relics and it soon became a pilgrimage site. [monastic sound effect] It was the burial site of two saintly men; King Henry VI and Master John Schorn, and relics in its inventory included a piece of the True Cross, two thorns from the crown worn by Christ at his crucifixion, and two fingers, part of the heart and part of the skull of St George.

Inns and public houses opened in the town to cater for the pilgrims, and so began Windsor's long tradition of welcoming visitors.

[Becky]

Engravings from the early Tudor period show that the castle sat prominently, towering over the surrounding landscape. Any visitor to the town would have been impressed by the scale and grandeur of the site. 600 years later this has not changed. After all, a pilgrim crossing Windsor Bridge might have had the

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same feeling of wonder that a tourist now gets as they sit on a train coming into Windsor and see the Castle rising up before them.

Though, that is not to say that the town of Windsor is overshadowed by the Castle. Instead it has a dual identity that has endured since the medieval time. It has always been a power seat of the British monarchy but also a prosperous town with a wide variety of industries and trades and its own accomplishments.

[George]

If you look closely enough, you can still see elements of the medieval town. The layout of Guildhall Island and the location of Windsor Parish Church is a nod to 12th century town planning, and the location of Windsor Bridge was decided nearly a thousand years ago. And as we highlighted in this podcast, there are even buildings that survive from the end of the period.

[Becky]

So always remember- gateways to the past are all around you. Look up, look down, look to the sides, and if you have an inquisitive enough mind, you'll almost hear the buildings and streets whispering their secrets.

Thank you for listening and look out for the next instalment in our series, when we will again be going about the Borough in search of hidden histories.

In the meantime, follow us on twitter and instagram @windsor_museum and find us on Facebook to have your regular fix of local history. You can also find more content from us on our website windsormuseum.org.uk

[Medieval music fades out]

The end.