

Wrexham Town Walk

In this walk around town you'll see the historic buildings of Wrexham and pass by the sites of those that did not survive.

Walking Time: 1 hour. Level walking.

Access: College Street and Town Hill are the only lengthy ups and downs on the tour. There are no steps involved in the walk.

Starting from outside Wrexham Museum. Look to your right.

Just off St Mark's Road by the side of the building was Church House.

Church House

Church House was the site of the public enquiry into the 1934 Gresford Colliery disaster. The disaster killed 261 miners and 3 rescuers in what was the greatest coal mining disaster in North Wales. Both Stafford Cripps, later Chancellor of Exchequer during the 1945-51 Labour Government, and Hartley Shawcross, later one of the Chief Prosecutors at the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials, were employed in the enquiry. The inquiry put the blame on William Bonsall, the Colliery manager, but many feel that the Director, Henry Dyke Dennis, who put on the pressure that led to corners being cut, had escaped lightly.

Church House and the nearby St Mark's Church (now the multi-storey car park) were demolished to make way for a retail development scheme. The Church was initially a response to the growing numbers living in the town in the mid 19th Century. Nowadays population size and attendance at church are not so closely linked.

Turn left out of the Museum forecourt and walk as far as the gates to the cathedral next door. Enter the cathedral grounds.

St Mary's Cathedral

Between the Reformation in Tudor times and the 1829 Catholic Emancipation Act, Catholics suffered varied but continual discrimination. Initially Wrexham's Catholics met near Seven Bridges Lane, now Market Street, to worship.

One of Wrexham's Catholics was Richard Thompson, ironmaster and colliery owner. He built the first Roman Catholic chapel in the town in 1828 in King Street, but only after tricking the owner into selling as he would not sell to a catholic. Thompson opened the chapel upstairs, while passing the building off as his home.

The 1829 Act was greeted by rioting in Wrexham. In 1857 Richard Thompson completed the building of the first Catholic Church in Wrexham in memory of his wife. Pugin lent a hand in the design. Since its opening it has become the seat of the Bishop of Wrexham.

Leave the Cathedral grounds and cross Regent St at the pedestrian crossing. Walk round the corner into Grosvenor Road and stop outside the Registry Office in its car park. The Registry Office faces the Cathedral.

The Infirmary

Look diagonally across the road and you'll see the College of Art & Design with its Neo-Classical front and portico. The College was originally the Infirmary for the town. Wrexham held a bazaar to raise money for a new infirmary in 1837. They raised the tidy sum of £1053 and the Infirmary opened a year later.

Health care was run very differently back then. Wealthy people gave money and in return could recommend people for treatment. If you gave a guinea a year, you could help 12 people including one in-patient as long as you paid a 10 shillings 6 pence fee for board (bring your own bed linen.) By 1860 the Infirmary was treating 2000 people a year. Not bad for then, but probably a week's work for a modern GP surgery.

The Infirmary served as Wrexham's hospital until 1926, when it became part of the Denbighshire Technical College. Since 1953 it has been a successful Art College.

Grosvenor Road

Opposite the Registry office is No.1 Grosvenor Lodge, the one time home of the Graesser family. Robert Graesser was a local industrialist who came to Britain as an immigrant from Saxony in eastern Germany.

Robert was a go-getter founding his own chemical works at Acrefair. Like all industrialists some schemes worked, others faltered. One of his successes was taking over the Wrexham Lager Beer Company and rescuing it from bankruptcy in 1892.

Turn right out of the Registry and continue along Grosvenor Road.

Grosvenor Road was originally a ropewalk where the cordswainers made their ropes. By the late 19th Century the street was definitely the home of those who had done well in the town. The Gummows, a local family of architects, designed many of the houses on this street. Each to the original owner's specifications. The hotel-restaurant, Graffiti, at the far end is the work of James Gummow.

At the end of Grosvenor Road, before the roundabout, turn right into Rhosddu Road.

Wrexham & East Denbighshire Memorial Hospital

You'll soon see on your left the attractive façade of what is now Yale College.

The people of Wrexham decided in 1918 to mark the sacrifice of local servicemen who had been killed during the First World War by building a new hospital. Everyone contributed to the cause: the William and John Jones Trust (set up by the former owners of Island Green Brewery) gave £50,000 to kick start the appeal and the Walter Roberts Pantomime Company raised enough money each year to staff a ward.

The Prince of Wales laid the foundation stone on November 2nd 1923. The hospital opened in 1926 and served the local community for sixty years. Luckily it survived planned demolition to become the home of Yale College.

The Yale College area has an interesting history: Jonathan Buttall made famous as the Blue Boy, a painting by Thomas Gainsborough, lived here in the late 18th Century.

Another resident was William Low. He set up the Channel Tunnel Company in 1867. His plan to build a tunnel under the English Channel got backing from Emperor Napoleon III of France and Queen Victoria. He started tunnelling till war in 1870 frightened off investors and the plan folded.

Roseneath was the former home of William Low.

Near the entrance to the College you can see a wellhead from one of Wrexham's old wells. While nearby is some pillar bases said to come from the old Town Hall on High Street.

Continue down Rhosddu Road. At the roundabout, keep straight ahead passing by Trinity Presbyterian Church of Wales on the right. Look out for the Library, a modern brick building on the left. Take the footpath between the Library and the Guildhall.

Llwyn Isaf

The Llwyn Isaf is now a green space in the heart of the town and the outside living room for Yale College students.

Originally there was a house on this site known as Ypsyty Ucha (Upper Hospital) - a name hinting at perhaps a past connected to friars or monks. In the 19th Century the house was called Llwyn Isaf and became home to the vicars of Wrexham.

The 1912 National Eisteddfod was proclaimed here and David Lloyd George got a rough reception from the Suffragettes. They were angry with the then Liberal Government's opposition to votes for women.

Keep to the footpath past the Library towards Chester Street. You'll pass through the old gateway to Llwyn Isaf. As you reach the gateway, look out for the Goscombe John Memorial to the Royal Welch Fusiliers killed in the First World War. Turn right and walk down Chester Street.

Chester Street Baptist Chapel.

Wrexham has been home to a Baptist community since 1672. In the early years they suffered a lot of discrimination. Officially by the state and unofficially by local people. The Jacobite Cycle club that had their meetings at the Wynnstay Arms Hotel on High Street frequently organised mobs to destroy Nonconformist meeting houses.

In 1762 the Baptists finally got their own place of worship when they built a chapel on Chester Street. They called it the Old Meeting to celebrate their origins in worshipping in private homes. The chapel was demolished in 1875 and its successor in 1987. They now worship in the old schoolroom.

Carry on down Chester Street past the Seven Stars Pub and Lambpit Street. You'll enter a pedestrian's priority zone.

Many think the name Lambpit comes from a lime pit formerly in this area. Next to the pub is the old Glyn Cinema that claimed to be the first purpose built cinema in North Wales. On the right is the People's Market. Local wags say it was given this name to impress a visiting delegation of Chinese industrialists.

Continue down Chester Street looking for the next street off to the right Henblas Street.

The Markets of Wrexham

Henblas is the real heart of 19th Century Wrexham, though redevelopment has removed many of the original buildings. Wrexham made its money as a market town and the markets were here.

Traders in the 19th Century came here from Birmingham, Manchester and Yorkshire and set up their own trading areas during the March fair. The Yorkshire merchants set up on what is now the Hippodrome site on Henblas Street. They sold leather goods so the local wits called their annual market: the Ides of March.

The Birmingham traders based themselves in what is now Tŷ Henblas. They were hardware dealers and their open-air square eventually became the Vegetable Market in 1898. Sadly, the Vegetable Market with its mock Tudor façade was demolished in 1992.

The Manchester traders sold linen and other textiles and based themselves in Manchester Square at the end of Henblas Street. In 1879 the Butter Market was built here and local farmers' wives competed to sell their unique dairy produce directly to the customer. Rationing in 1939 ended the tradition of farmhouse butter and the Butter Market became the canteen for the US Army Medical Corps during the Second World War.

Henblas Street was a place of entertainment too. People got their laughs at variety shows at the Hippodrome, which was a variety theatre from 1909 and

showed the first "talkie" in Wrexham in 1929. Less successful were the British Workman Public House Co at No's 12-14 Henblas Street - another well intentioned but doomed attempt to convert the people of Wrexham to cocoa.

Retrace your steps to Chester Street, before you do look out for the Bull above the back entrance to the Butcher's Market where locally produced meat is sold by traditional butchers.

Continue down Chester Street. Look out for Lion Yard next on the right - a street with no name.

Lion Yard was where a cockpit was built in 1700. Cockfighting was a popular pastime and gambling was why people went to watch. Though initially a sport for all - it became a working man's pleasure and was banned in 1849. The cockpit was demolished in 1889.

Stop at the end of Chester Street when you are outside The Feathers at the junction with High Street. You are leaving the pedestrians priority zone.

High Street

The history of The Feathers Inn shows how the fortunes of any business reflect people's changing habits. There has been an inn here for at least 300 years serving the buyers and sellers to and froing between the Beast Market at the other end of Charles Street and the historic town centre. Now it seems on the edge of the hussle and bussle but this was not the case while farmers bought and sold their stock in Wrexham.

In 1892 the Wrexham Illustrated described The Feathers as follows:

"The premises comprise smoke-room, commercial-room and numerous bedrooms, all handsomely furnished and well-fitted... At the rear (and still visible) is a large yard with stabling for thirty horses and coach houses. "

Once the commercial traveller, the Beast Market and the Horse Fair at Eagles' Meadow (now a car park) passed into history, the inn declined. However, High Street's renaissance as the entertainment quarter of Wrexham means that the inn could once again be open for business.

Next door to The Feather is the Wynnstay Arms Hotel.

The Wynnstay Arms Hotel sits comfortably at one end of High Street assured of its place in Wrexham's history. It was the social hub of the movers and shakers of Wrexham and further afield too.

In February 1876 local football enthusiasts founded the Football Association of Wales here in the hotel and organised the first national football team to represent Wales. Perhaps they met in the regency style ballroom. A century before the hotel had been the rendezvous for members of the notorious Jacobite Cycle of the White Rose society who caused much trouble in the town.

Formerly known as the Eagles Inn (from which Eagles Meadow got its name), the hotel in 1892 sat on 8 acres of land. Its entrance was "lined with stuffed birds and stags' heads" while behind there was stabling for 200 horses.

Times change and in the late 1960s the hotel was threatened with demolition. Campaigners saved the façade of the hotel so that the Wynnstay Arms blends the old and the new to create a hotel that serves the needs of people now whilst not spoiling a view that appeared in nearly every 19th Century print of Wrexham town.

The Williams Wynns.

If you drive between Wrexham and Sweaty, just south of Ruabon, look to the east and you'll see Wynnstay, the French chateau- style mansion of the Williams Wynn family. The family dominated life around Wrexham in late 18th & 19th Centuries as MPs, landowners and patrons. The 4th, 5th & 6th Baronets were all known as Sir Watkins and though they were not in the House of Lords were treated almost like royalty locally. Cartoons portrayed the 6th baronet as the Prince in Wales because he was so influential.

A fire in 1858 destroyed their country home Wynnstay. Despite the wealth needed to build the current chateau style building, somehow this tragedy heralded the family's loss of power. The current house took over seven years to build. Meanwhile, the Reform Acts weakened the family's political hold on the county of Denbighshire as Parliament began to represent people and not just property.

The family's estates covered much of North-East Wales as hinted in the number of hotels and pubs called the Wynnstay Arms. The house itself and its contents were sold off in 1947. Recently the house was turned into flats. It is unlikely though that the modern day residents of Wynnstay can live in the manner to which the Williams Wynn's grew accustomed.

Walk along High Street back towards the town centre. Look to the right and you will see the attractive entrance to the Butchers' Market.

The High Street was the financial heart of the town with at least three attractive buildings marking the banks' and assurance companies' contribution to the town's architecture.

The Butchers' Market.

This was the supermarket of the 19th Century but just look at the design - it blends into the street and makes the bold statement to people crossing the threshold that shopping here would be a quality experience. The Neo-Jacobean style was the work of Thomas Penson II. The Pensions were two generations of architects who also designed the Militia Barracks (now the

Museum) on Regent Street and the British School (now a nightclub) on Brook Street. These guys knew how to design buildings that would last.

The Butchers' Market building also included a large room on the first floor for a Corn Exchange and its own inn. All designed in modern planners' vocab to increase footfall. Initially, the cynics were convinced that the Market would fail saying that the butchers had always sold meat in the street and that they would never go indoors. Press reports recorded at the time that it took less than half an hour to prove the cynics wrong. The Butchers of Wrexham have been doing good trade there ever since.

At the cross roads of turn left into Church Street and walk towards the Parish Church.

The Parish Church of St Giles

The Parish Church of St.Giles is surely Wrexham's greatest landmark. Described in the 19th Century as one of the Seven Wonders of Wales, it is, like the Pistyll Rhoadr, truly a wonder to behold and not just local exaggeration.

The church is the historic centre of the town. The street pattern reveals how the town grew out from the boundary of the churchyard, which is typical of medieval towns across Britain.

Wrexham had a church in the 13th Century as both the Bishop of St Asaph and Madog ap Gruffudd, Prince of Powys gave income from the church to the monks at Valle Crucis, near Llangollen. In 1330 the tower collapsed. Tradition has it that the locals feared that God had punished them for having Sunday as their market day. They decided it might be better to have their market on Thursdays from then on. Despite these precautions, in 1463 fire struck and much of the church was destroyed. Between 1463 -1520 the church was rebuilt perhaps with the help of a patron, Lady Margaret Beaufort: the result a church that represents the culmination of the medieval and Catholic Church design. It records the final flowering of religious belief before the bloodletting and intellectual struggles of the Reformation.

St Giles' is a must for any visitor to the town. Though Oliver Cromwell used the church as stabling for his army's horses, others have appreciated its beauty. Both William Morris and Sir Giles Gilbert Scott stepped into the fray to save the church from the plans of well-intentioned clergymen in the 19th Century

The church is a place of worship but it is a welcoming place and there are regular tours up the tower especially during the autumn Heritage Open Days.

Before leaving the churchyard, go to the west end of the church and you'll find the grave of Elihu Yale, local man and benefactor of Yale University, USA. Look out for the inscription on his grave.

Leave via the main gates on Church Street and turn left along Temple Row heading downhill towards College Street.

College Street

College Street has plenty of character. The Welsh name though has even more: Camfa'r Cwn meaning the Dog's Stile. Presumably this was a stile to keep the dogs out of the churchyard rather than let them in. The street has seen all sorts in its time: the first Wesleyan Methodist preacher to preach in the town did so in Hughes' Yard, just off this street; while for many years College Street housed a bordel and a pawn shop used by the needy to get them through the week till pay day.

At the bottom of College Street turn right and walk up Town Hill.

Town Hill is the medieval heart of Wrexham. Like many medieval towns, the first buildings were around the edge of the historic churchyard. The medieval Wrexham can still be seen by looking closely at and going inside the properties on the right as you come up the hill, especially No's 5-10 Town Hill.

Look out for No.9 Town Hill for a long time Dodman's Shoe Shop.

Town Hill

No.9 dates back to the 16th Century and has been a chandlery (candle makers), a toffee-maker's and a butcher's. It was initially a pub called the Bull & Dogs hinted at the entertainment the regulars would attend before coming in for a drink.

However in 1898 William Dodman came to Wrexham from London. He's trained as a cobbler but he was looking out for business opportunities. He saw one in the expanding mining industry around Wrexham. All these miners needed boots and William Dodman was the man to provide them. He opened a workshop behind No.9 churning out workers' clogs and never looked back. Somehow he even got the contract for repairing the shoes of the US forces locally during World War II.

William Dodman was not just a cobbler. In his spare time he was "boxer, sprinter, scriptwriter, pantomime manager, masseur (nothing seedy!), motor salesman and Wrexham AFC director." William was the "Don King" of Wrexham boxing and looked after champion boxer, Johnny Basham. Johnny did his boss proud winning the UK Welterweight and Lonsdale belt in 1914. His record in 91 fights was 68 wins, 17 defeats and 6 ties.

You could stop off at the café next door and appreciate its historic interior while having some refreshment.

Continue up Town Hill till you reach the junction of High Street, Church Street and Hope Street.

This is the widest part of the street but only since 1940. Until then this was the site of the old Town Hall.

Town Hall

The Town Hall demolished in 1940 to allow the traffic to pass more freely was built in 1713. However, since medieval times there had been a courthouse and manorial prison on the site. A town guide printed in 1912 describes the Town Hall as follows (ornate script)

"Situate in High Street. The lower part was formerly used as a market, where eggs, butter etc were sold, but the space between the stone pillars which kept up the structure has been built up and shops and a wine and spirits store are kept. The upper part formed the Town Hall proper, having been used for magistrates' meetings, lectures etc. The walls are lined with old oak panels and the magistrates' bench and dock still exist, it is now used for a cloth warehouse."

Charles I is said to have made a speech to the people of Wrexham here, while in 1583 Richard Gwynn, a Catholic priest, was held in the Black Chamber (Y Siambr Ddu), the manorial lock-up, before being taken along the road to the Beast Market to be hung, drawn and quartered. His grisly end probably took place just outside Tesco's.

Turn left into Hope Street.

Hope Street

Walk along Hope Street. The Welsh name Stryd yr Hopp dates from the origins of the town when it was the road leading out to Hope. Pass by the building site that was WHSmiths. In 1699 the Three Pigeons Hotel was built on this site and in the 1840s it became the Lion Hotel. When a Russian cannon captured in the Crimean War was brought to Wrexham in 1857, the celebrations were held at the Lion. It seems it was a popular drinking den for the town's many soldiers. Another unlikely visitor was Guiseppe Garibaldi, the Italian Revolutionary, who had friends at Marchwiel Hall.

Fork left at the next junction and continue along Hope Street. Keep an eye out for a thatched building on the left and a tall gateway building on the right.

The thatched building is the Horse & Jockey pub. There used to be a lot of thatched buildings in Wrexham and its surrounds but very few have survived the 20th Century. The Horse & Jockey is the only historic thatched pub left in the town.

The gateway, officially known as Westminster Buildings, is all that remains of Wrexham's Agricultural & Scientific exhibition held in 1876. These exhibitions were very popular in the second half of the 19th Century. Any place that wanted to show that it was a bastion of industrial progress and entrepreneurship had to have an exhibition. Where Wrexham trod, Paris and

Glasgow followed. A temporary exhibition hall was built covering the land between Egerton Street and Rhosddu Road and Argyle Street and Hope Street: the result a huge display area featuring fine art, industrial design and products of the local industries - Bricks, Tiles & Terracotta; Mineral Water & Brewing and Engineering. Like all the great exhibitions the hall was temporary and everyone in the press complained about how much it all cost.

Regent Street

Hope Street becomes Regent Street by the pub. Regent Street was so named in the 1850s when this part of Wrexham underwent a building boom. The Catholic Cathedral, St Mark's Church and the Museum were all built at this time. Just off this street was the historic property of Bryn-y-ffynnon. The local historian, A.N.Palmer quotes a 19th Century description of the house (ornate script)

"After going through the lodge there was a broad gravel walk to the front door of Bryn-y-ffynnon and on the right a raised embankment, covered with grass, with clumps of tress and shrubs and flower beds; on the left hand was a flat lawn with a small fish pond in it; this lawn reached as far as the lime trees. At the back of the embankment was a kitchen garden, covering the whole of the ground from the lodge to Regent Street and [what is now] Hill Street, in which was a large number of choice fruit trees..."

Bryn-y-ffynnon house was demolished in 1915. The house and gardens stood where Wrexham Vic Youth Club and the Yales café bar and nightclub now stand. Regent Street has changed much: McDonalds is on the site of the former Seion Chapel, the demolition of which Pevsner describes as "a sad loss."

Continue up Regent Street till you reach the Museum.

County Buildings

Regent Street has completely changed in the last thirty years but one building still standing unchanged is County Buildings -the home to Wrexham's museum.

The Militia were an important part of the armed forces in this country from at least medieval times. By the mid 19th Century, service in the Militia was no longer compulsory. Instead wages and a cash bounty to new recruits kept a steady flow of men in each county's militia. In effect the Militia were a part time army training for one month a year and ever ready for duty throughout Britain.

The 1850s were a lively time to be alive: the country was at war with Russia, political unrest was high with the Chartists demanding "one man one vote", industrial unrest was ever present in mining areas such as Moss Valley and the Rhos with the colliery owners' lock outs and miners' strikes a regular

event. In short, the Establishment felt hard pressed and relied on the Militias to turn out and quell dissent.

In 1854 The Lord Lieutenant of Denbighshire called on the Justices of the Peace to build a decent HQ for the Militia as he felt the Town Hall was "insecure and unfit for the safe custody of arms." The JPs agreed to the building of a Militia Depot with "secure and suitable buildings and premises for the Militia Stores, and an Orderly and Guard Room, and Magazine and a sufficient yard wherein the men may be mustered."

The result was a building with four towers on each corner designed to impress the locals, whether they were planning to cause trouble or not. Initially there were even plans to dig a dry moat round the building and install steel shutters on the windows. Perhaps in case of a siege by the many malcontents of 19th Century Wrexham. Neither of these plans were put into effect - perhaps the JPs had run out of money or decided that the local populace were not that aggressive after all. In fact the opposite was the case. As the town turned out en masse to welcome the delivery of a Russian cannon captured in the Crimea. The cannon was paraded through town escorted by a one legged veteran and the Denbighshire Yeomanry Cavalry. The Militia supplied the band and the cannon was installed outside the Militia's HQ. The HQ was also the home for the permanent staff of the Militia and their families such as the Sergeant Major and the Quarter Master.

In 1877 the Government decided to seriously organise its armed forces and barracks were systematically built around the country. The Royal Welch Fusiliers gained a new barracks in High Town and so the Militia moved up the road.

Hardly twenty years old and the Militia building redundant. Luckily, Wrexham needed a new Magistrates' Court as things were getting cramped in the old Town Hall and the Police also needed a base in the town. In 1879 the builders moved in and converted the Militia HQ into a Police Station and Courthouse. The new building was named County Buildings and the name is still there in the stonework above the entrance to the Museum.

The Chief Constable for Denbighshire was based in the building and he had to deal with crises such as the Tithe Wars and near continual industrial disputes in mining areas. The one courtroom was soon not enough and in the 1890s an extra courtroom and exercise yard for the prisoners held in the police cells were built. During the Second World War the ARP had their depot here and their HQ was in the now demolished Imperial Hotel diagonally opposite. By the 1970s the Police and the Magistrates needed more space and moved out to brand new buildings on Bodhyfryd.

Since then the building has been home to the Citizen's Advice Bureau, the Art College and finally Wrexham County Borough Museum. If you have any energy left after your walk, then you can see more of Wrexham's past inside.

Location of Wrexham County Borough Council Offices Main switchboard (01978) 292000

