

Bishop's Waltham

An historic town with a fascinating history

Bishop's Waltham is a vibrant and historic market town set in the glorious Hampshire countryside.

With a foot in the South Downs National Park and located at the mid point of a long-established route between Winchester and Portsmouth, Bishop's Waltham has long been a place to stop and relax.

From the impressive ruins of the medieval Bishop of Winchester's Palace to the numerous listed buildings of the town centre, history is everywhere. The medieval high street is remarkably well preserved with an excellent range of shops, cafés, restaurants and salons.

The earliest record of a settlement within the Bishop's Waltham area was of a church built in around 640 AD. From then onwards, the town has enjoyed a colourful history with the peak of activity in Medieval times. The town also has several important connections to maritime history.

The first Bishop's Residence built in Bishop's Waltham was started by Henri of Blois, William the Conqueror's grandson, in about 1136. Subsequently enlarged and embellished by the wealthy and powerful Bishops of Winchester over the following centuries it was, by the mid 1400s, a real Palace. Today it is a Scheduled Ancient Monument and classified by English Heritage as a Magnate's Residence. There are only 150 such classified 'residences' in the country.

Badly damaged in the English Civil War, today you can explore the extensive remains, including the ruins of the Great Hall, and imagine the many powerful figures who honoured the Palace with a visit – Henry II, Richard the Lionheart, Henry III, Henry IV, Henry V, Henry VI, Edward IV, Henry VIII, Queen Mary I, and Queen Elizabeth I, to name just the Kings and Queens.

In good weather, the grounds are ideal for a family picnic. Entrance is free. For more details see the [English Heritage webpage](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/bishop-s-waltham-palace).

Early History

640 AD – 1000 AD

Although the upper reaches of the river Hamble have been occupied since neolithic times, the earliest record of a settlement within the Bishop's Waltham area was of a church built in around 640 AD. The name of the town is also Saxon, being derived from two words – 'wald' (forest) and 'ham' (settlement). In 904 AD, King Edward the Elder granted the land to Denewulf, Bishop of Winchester, in exchange for land in Portchester. In the actual deed it is recorded that the king gained 40 'hides' (the name for a plot of land supporting a family) in Portchester in return for 38 in Waltham.



A Bronze Age beaker found in Little Shore Lane

The Middle Ages

Despite being destroyed by the Danes in 1001AD, the settlement grew steadily to become one of Hampshire's largest villages. It had an approximate population of 450 according to the Domesday Book of 1086, four times the size of most villages at the time. The same survey also notes that 'the bishop himself holds Waltham in demesne; it has always belonged to the Bishopric.' In 1136, Bishop Henri de Blois, brother of King Stephen, founded a grand palace in 'Waldham' which quickly became a key residence for the powerful Bishops of Winchester, hosting many royal visitors, such as Henry II, Richard the Lionheart, Henry V and Henry VIII.



Bishop's Waltham Palace as it may have looked
in the mid-15th century
(Image courtesy of English Heritage)

English Civil War (1642-1651)

During the English civil War, 200 royalist cavaliers were besieged in the Palace for three days and were forced to surrender, one captive informing the king, 'Waltham house in ashes'. In 1645, Oliver Cromwell ordered the slighting of the palace, resulting in today's picturesque ruins.



Part of Bishop's Waltham Palace as it looks today

Development of Trade in the Town

Beyond the palace grounds the town's trading roots were continually developing. By the late 13th century a weekly market was held, selling bread made from the flour produced by its two mills. And by the 15th century the town boasted a small wool industry. A fulling mill was in operation, cleaning the wool using water-powered hammers and the town was occasionally referred to as 'Waltham Woolpit'. Queen Elizabeth I granted the right to hold two annual fairs in Bishop's Waltham in 1602.



Abbey Mill on Station Road



Chase Mill on the Way to Waltham Chase

Modern History

By 1800 a total of four fairs occurred annually, drawing traders from all over the county. We also know that in the 18th century a tanning industry thrived in the town.

During the Napoleonic Wars, Bishop's Waltham served as a 'parole town' for up to 200 captured French and Spanish naval officers. The officers were billeted with civilians or in local inns – ordinary sailors were imprisoned in floating hulks in Portsmouth and other harbours.



Bishop's Waltham Market House in the 1840s



The best known officer to stay in Bishop's Waltham was Admiral Pierre-Charles Villeneuve, commander of the joint French-Spanish fleet that was defeated by Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar. He was first accommodated in The Crown Inn (where a blue plaque commemorates his stay), but was then moved to Vernon Hill House. He was later exchanged for four British captains and returned to France.

The second half of the 19th century marked the beginning of Victorian prosperity for Bishop's Waltham. This prosperity came from the creation of a number of enterprises, in particular the Bishop's Waltham Clay Company set up in the area now known as Claylands. Most of the enterprises were instigated by Sir Arthur Helps, Clerk to the Privy Council and Private Secretary to Queen Victoria. He built houses for his workers in Newtown and was influential in a number of projects which benefited the town; the introduction of the railway, the opening of the gas works and the provision of gas street lighting at quite an early date.



Brick workers in front of the old kiln

Naval Connections

Bishop's Waltham's naval connections are mostly due to its close proximity to the port of Portsmouth. Here we take a look at four particularly fascinating characters connected with the town.

Admiral Edward Vernon 'Old Grog' (1684 -1757)



Admiral Vernon's best-known naval victory came during the War of Jenkins' Ear, a conflict between Great Britain and Spain that lasted from 1739 to 1742. He captured Porto Bello, a key port in the silver trade situated on the coast of Panama. This considerably damaged Spain's finances and weakened its naval capabilities. In the British Navy he is perhaps better known for the introduction of 'grog'. Concerned with the amount of drunkenness, he ordered the customary rum ration to be diluted with water ($\frac{1}{2}$ pint rum to $\frac{1}{4}$ quart water). The drink's name came from the grogram cloak that the admiral used to wear.

Admiral Edward Vernon as depicted by Thomas Gainsborough

Admiral Villeneuve (1763-1806)



During the Napoleonic Wars, Bishop's Waltham served as a 'parole town' for up to 200 captured French and Spanish naval officers. The best known was Admiral Pierre-Charles Villeneuve, commander of the French fleet defeated at the Battle of Trafalgar (pictured left). He was first accommodated in The Crown Inn, but was then moved to Vernon Hill House. He was later exchanged for four British captains and returned to France. While staying in Rennes, he was discovered murdered with five stab wounds in his chest. The authorities declared his death a suicide but it is probable that he was assassinated on the orders of Napoleon due to the defeat at Trafalgar.

Admiral Lord Andrew Cunningham (1883-1963)



Before the Second World War, Admiral Andrew Cunningham purchased Palace House, 'a little house in the country'. Between late 1942 and early 1943, he went on to serve as Supreme commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force, commanding the fleet that covered the North African landings. In 1943 he became First Sea Lord of the Admiralty and chief of the Naval Staff responsible for the overall strategic direction of the navy for the remainder of the war. After the war he retired to Palace House and was buried at sea off Portsmouth in 1963.

Sir William Edward Parry (1790 -1855)



Naval Officer and Arctic Explorer. Parry sailed westward through Lancaster Sound and discovered and named Melville Island and Barrow Strait. Two other unsuccessful attempts were made to find the Northwest Passage, in the course of which Fury and Hecla Strait was discovered and new information about the Arctic was disclosed. By discovering the entrance to the passage and the way to the north magnetic pole, Parry had also found important whaling grounds. On 4 June 1852 Parry was promoted to rear-admiral and retired to Northbrook House, Bishop's Waltham, Hampshire. In January 1854, however, he was appointed Lieutenant.