



Dereham Walkers are Welcome and Dereham Heritage Trust

Some Key Buildings of Dereham

A walk prepared for Heritage Open Days
20 September 2025

The walk length is about 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ miles

Go down the path with the church on the right and its separate bell tower on the left.



The Bell Tower was built between 1515 and 1525. Made of flint and dressed stone with four stages interspersed by string courses, the walls are over 3 metres thick to support the weight of the eight bells. The bells are recognised as one of the finest peals in Norfolk. The bells were remounted in a steel frame in 1957: the oldest bell dates from 1753. The clock came to Dereham in 1978 from West Tofts, one of the four churches remaining in the STANTA Army Training area. The Bell Tower was used as a holding prison during the Napoleonic Wars.

St Nicholas' Church has been central to the history of the town. The church is believed to be built on earlier foundations, and some Romanesque architecture has survived around the chancel arch and the south doorway. The present building is principally Decorated and Perpendicular in style, although this glosses over a far more complex architectural history. The church has been a place of worship for over 850 years and is well worth exploring as there are many interesting features including a stained glass window depicting the poet William Cowper and a rare Seven Sacrament Font.

A little way past the church porch you will see St Withburga's Well (photo on next page), the heart of a story depicted on the town sign. Anna, King of East Anglia had four daughters; after his death in 654, the youngest daughter, Withburga, came to Dereham where she founded a small nunnery and with a few nuns settled here. A house was built for the nuns where they cared for the sick and the poor. A church was being erected but there was not enough money to pay the workmen. The story is that the Virgin Mary appeared to Withburga in a dream telling her "to send two of her maids to the stream each morning. There two does will stand and be milked. This will continue for as long as needed." This was done and there was milk, cheese and butter for all - a miracle! When Withburga died she was buried near the church and pilgrims visited. Later, Withburga's coffin was relocated to a shrine in the church. The coffin was opened and astonishingly Withburga appeared 'whole and uncorrupted as on the day she was buried' - another miracle! Eventually the Abbot of Ely decided that Withburga, a Royal Princess, should be buried at Ely Cathedral with her sisters. Realising that Dereham would not want to part with their Saint, the Abbot arranged for her remains to be stolen one night, transported to Brandon and then by boat to Ely. A chase ensued but St Withburga's remains were never recovered. But the empty grave filled with a spring of clear water and pilgrims visited to pray and drink the water - yet another miracle!



Go back up to the porch and take the path to the right to leave the churchyard into Washbridge. Climb up to St Withburga Lane.

On the left is Bishop Bonner's Cottage Museum. The Museum is housed in a row of three cottages which may contain the oldest domestic buildings in Dereham. They were possibly once almshouses for the poor of the parish. In the early 1980s the cottages were saved by Dereham Town Council and are run as a museum by the Dereham Heritage Trust. The involvement of Dereham Heritage Trust predates the Town Council, when as The Dereham and District Archaeological and Antiquarian Society, it leased the southernmost cottage as a museum from the Norfolk Archaeological Trust.



The cottages have a single elaborate plasterwork frieze, or 'pargeting' decoration, thought to be one of the best examples in Norfolk. It was probably the quality of the plasterwork which saved these cottages from demolition. The date of 1502 in Roman numerals (MDII) on the southern gable end reflects a date earlier than the actual date of the plasterwork. It was added when the owner decided to decorate all the cottages in the latter part of the seventeenth century, the so-called 'Golden Age' of pargeting. There is a separate leaflet about the cottages - a booklet can be purchased at the Museum.

Leave the Museum behind and walk along St Withburga Lane, passing the Guildhall on the left.

This is probably the remains of the Guildhall of St Withburga, suppressed and sold to Thomas Wodehouse in 1548. The Georgian era building attached until recently housed the offices of the Mitford and Launditch Rural District Council and more lately the offices of Breckland District Council.



The Guildhall



Wakes Lane

Continue and turn up Wakes Lane (without a name sign) on the left, to reach the High Street. Turn left along the High Street to come to The Bull, a 17th century timber framed building, clad in brick and reroofed around 1730; it continues to operate as a pub.



Carry on along High Street to pass under the town sign. The original was designed and constructed in wood by Harry Carter of Swaffham in 1954 but later replaced with the present lighter structure. It depicts the legend of St Withburga, told earlier. The Trust now owns the original sign and is hoping to secure grants to allow for its restoration.



A little further into the Market Place, on the right is Cowper Memorial Congregational Church, named after William Cowper, Poet and Hymnodist (1731-1800) who lived in Dereham Market Place - part of his house was demolished to build the church. The church dates from 1873-4 and is by the renowned Norwich architect Edward Boardman.



Opposite, set back on the left, you will see the cinema, originally built in February 1857 as a Corn Hall, on the site of what was known as The Shambles, a group of dilapidated market stalls which infilled the Market Place. The following July, the owners were indicted for obstructing Lion Hill and Quebec Street. This was not pursued because it was felt that the new building did in fact improve the area. Lord Coke, hewn in Portland Stone and weighing over 3 tonnes, overlooked the town for nearly 100 years. Originally a decorative panel was below the statue depicting a sheaf of corn and a plough. In June 1950, during a thunderstorm, Lord Coke toppled from his perch: all that remains are the plinths. This building has been a Bingo Hall, Dance Hall and is now a cinema. In the 1960s and 70s local businessman Brian Cross ran the Sunshine Room and Tavern Club. Hosting such bands as Cream, Jimi Hendrix, Geno Washington,

The Small Faces, and Manfred Mann, the venue became a hotspot of pop music; it later became the Plough and Furrow.

Go down the side of the cinema and turn right along Quebec Street, which marks the original line of the Market Place; hidden behind the Georgian facades are many C17 buildings. On reaching Rütthen Place, ahead of you are the Assembly Rooms. Built in 1756 at a cost of £400 on the site of the old Market Cross and Bishop's Prison, this building was used for assemblies and entertainment. A picture of King George III was presented to the



town by Viscount Townshend in 1766 and housed in the main Assembly Room. In 1861 Rev Armstrong records in his diary that his daughter Helen was taken to her first ball at the Assembly. In 1894, Dereham Urban District Council was formed, and the Assembly Rooms became their offices. It was also used as a Court House for many years. The building is owned by the Headborough Estate and is home to Dereham Town Council. A booklet about the Assembly Rooms is on sale at the Museum.



From the front of the Assembly Rooms, cross the road and turn left on the other side. The War Memorial now stands where once there was a monument whose twin still exists in Holt. Showing distances to numerous towns and villages in Norfolk, it was removed during World War II as part of the requirement to deny any invaders knowledge of how to get about the area. Unlike its counterpart in Holt, the Dereham monument was said to have been thrown down a well (close to the Assembly Rooms) and never recovered.

The photo shows the Dereham monument

Continue to the pelican crossing, and cross to Hill House. This elegant dwelling place, built in the 18th century, was the home of Sir John and Lady Ellenor Fenn. Both John Fenn and his wife played a very full part in the welfare of our town. John was a Commissioner of Land Tax, a Magistrate and also Deputy Lieutenant of Norfolk and was very committed to his roles in the community. He campaigned for the setting up of the House of Industry at Gressenhall (now Gressenhall Farm & Workhouse Museum).



John Fenn discovered, translated and published one of the most notable publications of his time: the Paston Letters. Ellenor Fenn was a champion of what subsequently became known as child centred education - her role in Dereham is remembered in the Ellenor Fenn Gardens accessed from High Street and Wrights Walk, or from Norwich Street. Both John and Ellenor were great supporters of St Nicholas' Church and improved the facilities for those who bathed at St Withburga's Well.

Cross back over the road and turn right along the pavement, then turn left up a narrow passage by the bus stops (signposted to public toilets). Follow this through to turn right along Cowper Road. Turn left through Harold Whitby Close and John Bates Close, to emerge on Matsell Way opposite former maltings, now converted for housing.



Turn right here and at the junction by the level crossing, cross ahead (Norwich Street) and then left (Station Road) to reach the Railway Station, noting the unconverted maltings along Norwich Road. The station is currently the northern terminus of what is now known as the Mid-Norfolk Railway. The railway came to East Dereham in 1846. The first stretch of over 11 miles long (Dereham to Wymondham) was built by Grissell & Peto. The railway is now run very successfully by the Mid-Norfolk Railway Preservation Trust and is a very popular tourist attraction (www.midnorfolkrailway.co.uk). An extensive site, Dereham Station was at the hub of our local industry, with many factories (the site of the world famous *Hobbies* is opposite, where Morrisons now stands) and local maltings being located to have easy access to the developing rail network.





Return to the road junction, cross Station Road and turn left along Norwich Street towards the town centre. On the right is Dereham Memorial Hall - originally Elvin Coachworks. Built in 1818, the Memorial Hall is a fine example of late 18th Century/early 19th Century factory architecture. It was originally owned by the Elvin family who were repairers and manufacturers of landaus, broughams, dogcarts, carriages and coaches. Charles Elvin, who inherited the business from his father, was educated at Greshams, Cambridge and then The School of Heraldry. Heraldry was Charles Elvin's great interest and he wrote many books on the subject. Many of his wealthier clients had their own crest emblazoned on their carriages. Charles Elvin also painted the 12 shields in the north aisle of St Nicholas' Church.

In the early 1900s the building was sold and purchased for use as a public hall and has, in the past, been used as a cinema and a swimming pool (which is still there, under the floor!). It was finally sold to Dereham Urban District Council and leased to the Memorial Hall Committee to run events. It is now owned and managed by Dereham Town Council. An extensive refurbishment was carried out in 2010. It is named Dereham Memorial Hall in honour of those local men who lost their lives in the First and Second World Wars - see the panels of names at the entrance.

Continue along Norwich Street. Just before the crossroads on your right is the King's Head, dating from the early 18th century.



Keep ahead. Ellenor Fenn gardens can be reached on the left along Chapel Walk. At the bottom is the High Street, but cross straight over into Aldiss Court (named after H H Aldiss' drapery and millinery shop that stood there on the High Street: the author Brian Aldiss is from the same family). Keep ahead through the covered area, then go diagonally left to leave the car park by a short set of steps and turn right through the car park. (*To avoid the steps, turn left along High Street and take the first entry on the right, opposite the Baptist Church. Bear right then keep going more or less ahead to reach the car park; then turn right and follow the roadway as it turns to the left.) The entrance to the Queen Mothers' Garden, refurbished a couple of years ago, is on your right. Go through here to the exit opposite and down the passage on to Church Street. A left turn here takes you back to the start.*

