

Chipping Norton Heritage Trails - Town Centre (West)

Start your walk at the top of Church Street, facing down the hill. Although this may well be one of the earliest crossroads in the town, much has changed. The site of the garage on your right was once a spring-fed pond called the Horse Pool. The town pump was beside it.



Question 1: When was No 3. Church Street built? Hint: Look for a date-stone.

The almshouses just below were given in 1640 by Henry Cornish for “eight poor widows ... of godly life and conversation”. There are now only four dwellings, but the eight front doors and eight gables remain. There is also a puzzle



Question 2: How many chimneys are there?

Further down the street, on the left, Redrobe House was once the town workhouse, which was replaced in 1836 by the large complex between Banbury and London Roads. On its wall is a memorial to a serious air accident of 1942 resulting in the tragic loss of eight lives.

IN MEMORY OF THE AIRCREWS WHO DIED HERE
& NEARBY AFTER A NIGHT FLYING ACCIDENT
21 ST. AUGUST 1942
P/O A.W. STILLWELL R.A.F. V.R. P/O A.M. HENDERSON R.A.F. V.R.
SGT. E. DOWNS R.A.F. V.R. SGT. J.M. RANKIN R.A.A.F.
SGT. M. HAYNES R.A.F. V.R. SGT. P. O'BRIEN R.A.F. V.R.
SGT. F. GILLARD R.A.F. V.R. SGT. N.F. BOXWELL R.A.F.
PER ARDUA AD ASTRA

Question 3: What is the Latin motto of the Royal Air Force? It means “Through struggle to the stars”. Hint: Look at the bottom of the blue plaque.

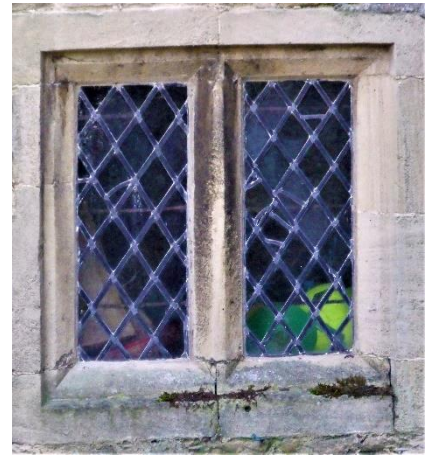
The rather grand house opposite was once the vicarage. It dates from 1880 but replaced an earlier house on the same site in which one vicar ran a private school. Charles Stuart Parnell, leader of the Irish Nationalist party, was educated there in the 1860s.





The present vicarage, below Redrobe House, is a 1960s conversion of the former church boys' school. This was built in 1859 on the site of the ancient town

grammar school. Its successor is St Marys' School which 'inherited' some of the old buildings near the churchyard. Can you spot this ancient window



which contains much medieval glass?



Church Cottage, on the corner, was also once a school property. The blocked windows in the end wall incorporate four 16th-century arched heads.

Question 4: How many *more* arched window heads can you spot in Church Cottage?



Continue through the churchyard toward Distons Lane, passing the Parish Rooms. Many of the primary school pupils in the town once came here for their lunches.



Most of the picturesque cottages in Distons Lane were built by William Bliss for his workers at the mill (see Heritage Trail: New Street), but some others are conversions of barns.



Question 5: What is the street number of the cottage with these barn features?



Distons Lane was once very smelly. It contained both a gasworks and a tannery. The smell of untreated animal hides was bad enough, but the process required them to be steeped in water tanks full of dog poo! The dog poo came in carts from the Heythrop Hunt kennels off Worcester Road.



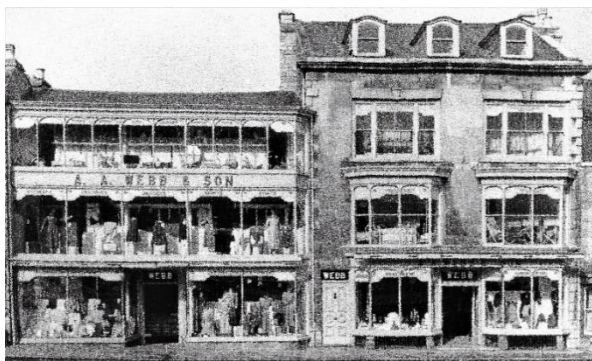
Question 6: When was the Presbyterian chapel built that once stood in Distons Lane? Hint: Look on the oval plaque at the end of the street.

Walk under the archway and take a few steps to the right. The farmhouse to which the barns belonged faces New Street. The Diston family lived in it throughout the 1700s, but can you spot the name of an earlier owner, Thomas Frayne, on a datestone between the present Nos 63 and 65? It also reads “ANO:DOMINI 1635” but the Ns are all back-to-front!

Walk back up New Street toward the marketplace. You will pass an imposing house with a stone porch on columns. This was the home of Austin Webb who owned a large number of houses in the town at his death in 1944.



Photo courtesy of Chipping Norton Museum



Question 7: What is the street number of his house?

Webb's department store stood just round the corner in the marketplace. Although a wonderfully old-fashioned business, part of its frontage was a pioneering Victorian structure in cast-iron and glass. Along with fine old buildings on either side, it was a

casualty of the 1969 road widening of the top of New Street. The whole site then lay empty for fifteen years before being redeveloped as the supermarket and car park that is now Sainsburys. Fortunately, the two fine town houses next in the row survived. No 16, the former NatWest bank, has now become 'The Branch' and has been refurbished by St Mary's Church for its outreach work.





Further still is the magnificent, purpose-built bank that became the HSBC. Its frontage is richly ornamented with carving.

Question 8: How many fiery-headed dragons can you count on the carved panels under the windows?

Once you reach Market Street the buildings become much less grand, but some are also much older. No 8 has the remains of an elaborate 15th-century oak roof that retains smoke blackening from an open hall with a central fire.



Nos 1 and 5 Spring Street, just past the point where you started your walk, are equally old and contain a rare 'cruck' truss, where the timbers extend partly down the walls in a curve. This is the only example in the town.

The Theatre, by contrast, was built in 1888 as a Salvation Army 'citadel'. It lay empty for thirteen years before being converted to a theatre in 1975.



Question 9: How many inscribed foundation stones are there beside the doorways?



Before the development of the council estates, much of the poorer housing in the town was contained in yards and alleys behind the street frontages. A few of the better cottages have survived to be refurbished.

Question 10: How many houses are accessed through this fine old doorway?
Hint: Count the street numbers on it.

Spring Street was once known as Tite End. The tite was a public water tank supplied by a nearby spring (see Heritage Trail: Town Centre (East)). The



water probably flowed down Church Lane (formerly called Clay Lane) and may still be running under your feet as you turn left and walk down the lane.

The large house called 'The Elm', which backs onto Church Lane, has long been one of the town's few 'gentlemen's houses', but it has a smaller early-18th century house at its core. The large garden was once another tannery which would have utilised the handy fresh water supply. A massive elm tree used to stand close to a corner of the house.

At the bottom of the lane and to the right of the brick cottage you can see the very extensive earthworks of the castle, which are older even than the earliest parts of St Mary's church. The



motte-and-bailey castle was probably started by Ernulf de Hesdin. The manor was one of the most important of more than fifty he was granted after the Norman conquest. It passed to his daughter, Avelina "Lady of Norton" and her husband, Alan fitzFlaad, who probably extended the castle. Their sons sired two notable dynasties: the Fitzalans of Arundel Castle (Dukes of Norfolk), and what became the Scottish Royal House of Stuart.

Question 11: What initials are on the datestone of the brick cottage?



From this point, enticing tracks lead to Over Norton (The Cleeves) or down the hill to Pool Meadow (medieval fish pond) and on to Salford. Today we will just enter the churchyard and walk anticlockwise around the church. In the bottom corner of the churchyard, close to the lane to Pool Meadow, try to find a tall pink granite obelisk commemorating two brothers called Kingdon. The Kingdon family traded as wine merchants at the Bunch of Grapes (Bitter and Twisted) for much of the 19th century.

Question 12: How old was the youngest Kingdon son when he died?

To the Egyptians, the obelisk was a symbol of Ra, their god of all creation and the giver of life. It was a popular form of memorial in Victorian times.



Continue past the tower to the church porch.

Question 13: How many sides has the church porch got?

There are only two other medieval church porches of this shape in England: St Laurence, Ludlow and St Mary Redcliffe, Bristol – both very grand churches! The vaulted roof of our porch has some fascinating carvings. The ‘Green

Man’, looking down as you enter, is an ancient, probably pagan, symbol of rebirth, widely adopted in Christian churches. Ours has his leaves



sprouting from his nose! Opposite him is a curious carving that has



been interpreted as a sheep overpowering a wolf. This could just be a joke, appealing to medieval parishioners whose lives were dominated by the production and sale of wool, or it may have been read as an analogy of Jesus Christ, “The Lamb of God”, overcoming the Devil and the power of death. The bat wings either side support the second interpretation!

Walk inside and marvel at the soaring arches of the nave and the great band of clerestory windows above them. This outstanding work, dating from around 1450, is thought to be by the master mason John Smyth of Canterbury who also designed much of Eton College chapel. The form of the pillars and arches is based on those in the nave of Canterbury Cathedral.

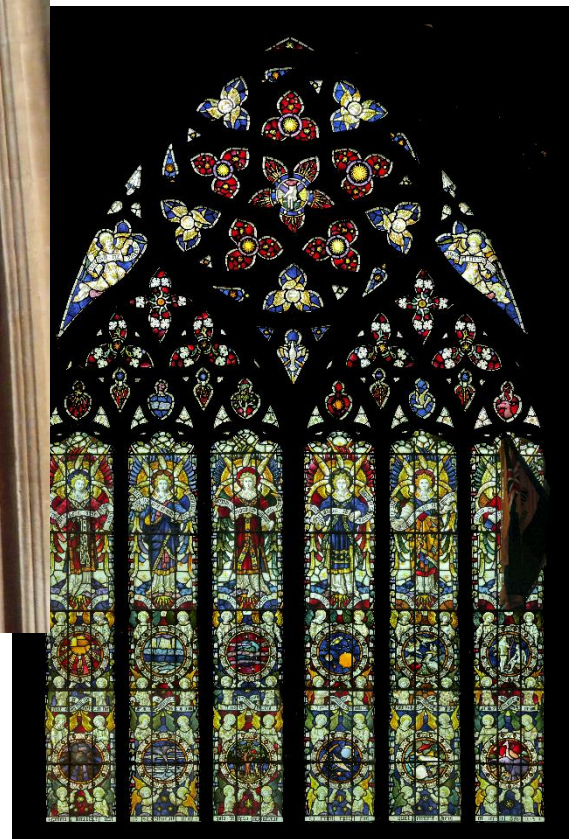


Photo courtesy of Paul Danaher

Turn right and look at the magnificent window filled with stained glass in about 100 compartments framed by its beautiful tracery. This displays the biblical story of the six 'days' of Creation in its six lights. One of the roundels on the extreme right represents the animal kingdom. It includes an elephant, a kangaroo and a giraffe. **Question 14:** What other animal can you spot with them?



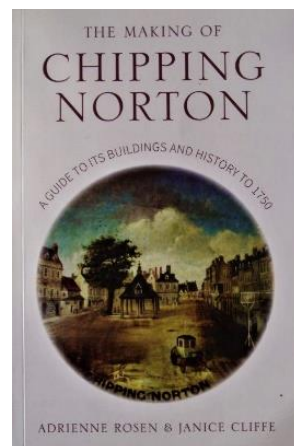
Cross the church and walk into the dark corner containing large tombs with effigies (the lights will come on as you enter). Find the lady with her feet on a little dog. **Question 15:** What was her surname before she married her two husbands? Hint: Look at the inscription panel on the end of the tomb. The name is the same as the actor who played Voldemort in the Harry Potter film series. This is because they are related.

Walk round the rest of the church and enjoy the most important historical building in Chipping Norton. A laminated guide sheet is available.

Would you like to learn more about Chipping Norton's history? Much of the historical information in the trail leaflets came from two excellent books which can be bought at Jaffe & Neale or T G Jones (formerly W H Smiths):

David Eddershaw, *Chipping Norton, The Story of a Market Town*, 2006 Poundstone Press

Adrienne Rosen and Janice Cliffe, *The Making of Chipping Norton, A Guide to its Buildings and History to 1750*, 2017 Phillimore



You can also discover a mass of fascinating details of the town's past in our excellent town museum which is housed on the first floor of the old Coop building (entrance next to QD).

<https://www.chippingnortonmuseum.co.uk/Mar2026.htm>

Chipping Norton Museum & Local History Society

Museum Opening Times: Monday to Saturday 2pm to 4pm from the 28th March 2026 until the last Saturday in October (31st October 2026).

Admission £1.50 Children under 16 free (accompanied by an adult).

These and other local Heritage Trails can be found on the website of The Arts Society Cotswolds <https://theartsocietycotswolds.org.uk/heritage.php>

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Answers: 1. 1824 2. Nine 3. Per ardua ad astra 4. Three 5. No 18
6. 1694 7. No 35 8. Four 9. Six 10. Four 11. T.S. 12. Eighteen 13. Six
14. A camel. 15. Fynes (Fiennes)