

- THE BRINKS TRAIL
- THE TOWN TRAIL



Walk
town
TRAIL

Wisbech

Town
Trail &
Brinks
Trail





Wisbech, the capital of the Fens, is a market town of great character and historical importance. It was first mentioned in the charter of the Saxon King Wulphere in the year 664, when it was called Visebec. The first Wisbech Castle was erected by William I in 1086. King John slept there when he visited Wisbech in 1216 and stories of his lost jewels still abound.

The draining of the Fens brought prosperity to Wisbech when the produce of the rich agricultural land flowed through the port. Wisbech landowners and merchants grew wealthy and built their rows of elegant houses along the banks of the River Nene. Facing each other across the water, North Brink and South Brink are among the finest Georgian streets in England.

The Town Trail leaflet is divided into two walks. The Town Trail and The Brinks Trail. Both of which highlight the older and most interesting buildings in Wisbech and the stories behind them. The two trails can be linked to form a single walk.

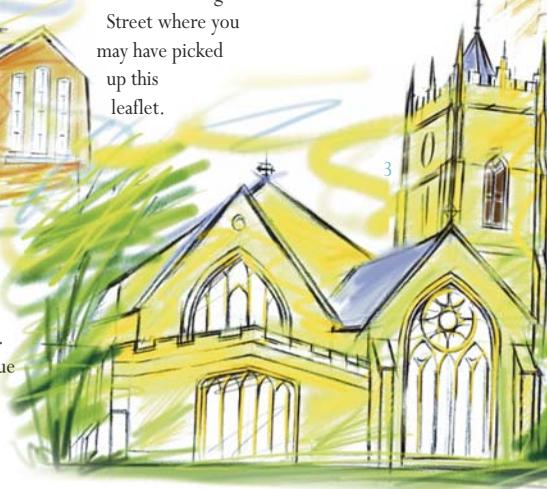
The Town Trail

The Town Trail starts at the Tourist Information Centre in Bridge Street where you may have picked up this leaflet.



1 Ahead of you is the Clarkson Memorial designed by Sir George Gilbert Scott in 1880. The 68ft high limestone monument has a statue of Thomas Clarkson, who played a leading role in the anti-slavery movement. The sandstone panels depict his fellow campaigners Wilberforce and Sharp and a chained African. Clarkson's house is at 8 York Row and is marked by a blue commemorative plaque.

2 Continue past the Post Office, an attractive building in French Gothic style, turn into Post Office Lane and then left into Alexandra Road, passing a blue plaque - the site of the birthplace of William Godwin, radical thinker and novelist. A short distance along on the left hand side is the Angles Theatre. This arts complex includes the third oldest Georgian Theatre in the country still in use. It was built in 1793. The building at the front of the theatre, now used as a bar and gallery was built in 1837 by James Hill, Father of Octavia, as a Hall of the People.



A disciple of Robert Owen, the early socialist and co-operative thinker, Hill became a charismatic leader of a working class socialist movement in Wisbech, providing numerous facilities for use by the working classes. Eventually, his socialist views so incensed his fellow businessmen that he was forced into bankruptcy.

Continue along Alexandra Road and turn left into Love Lane, originally known as Deadman's Lane. Continue to the Parish Church of St Peter & St Paul.

3 The Churchyard was converted into a garden by volunteers to mark the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. Some fine headstones still remain. The Church is the oldest building in Wisbech. The earliest work is in the north arcade which has the typical columns and round arcades of the Norman period. In the 14th century the church was expanded to its present size, with two naves spanned by a single roof and ceiling, believed to be unique. The early 16th century tower was built following the collapse of the old west tower into the nave and was probably sited in its unusual position to obtain a firm foundation.

The church is open for visitors most days

and a good guide book is available.

Leaving the church

Museum Square

is to your

right.



4 As you approach the steps to the Square, The Castle is in front of you. The Wisbech and Fenland Museum to your right and Castle Lodge to the left.

The Museum (open Tues-Sat all year), built in 1846-47 was one of the first purpose built museums in the country. Its late Georgian style (note the door cases and cornices above the windows) fits in well with the earlier buildings in Museum Square.

The Museum is well worth a visit for its collections of porcelain, local history and archaeology. The Museum Library is open the first Saturday of each month with a programme of exhibitions. The original manuscript of Dickens 'Great Expectations' is also on display.

Both the Museum and Castle Lodge are distorted due to settlement, having been built on the moat of the Norman Castle.



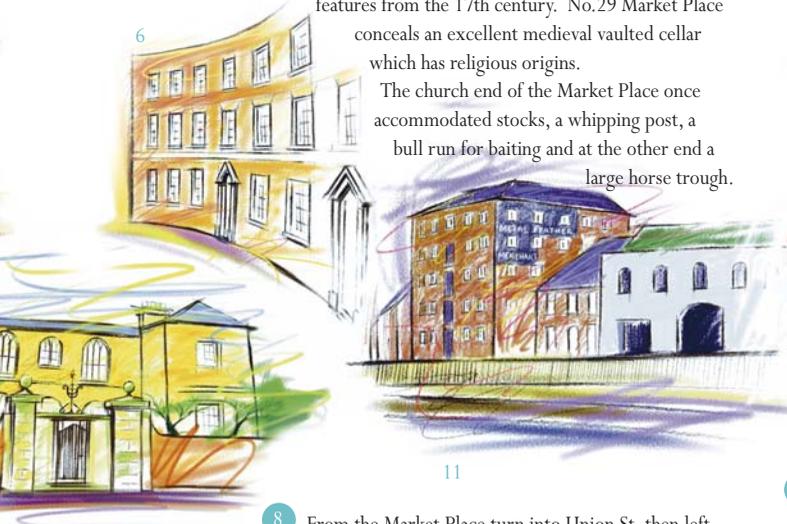
5 The Castle site has been occupied at least since the Conquest. Firstly by a Norman Castle which was replaced by a palace of the Bishops of Ely and in the 17th century by a fine mansion built for John Thurloe who was Oliver Cromwell's Secretary of State.

The present 'Castle' was built in 1816 by Joseph Medworth. It is an odd mix of Regency with many architectural features of Thurloe's mansion. The gate piers (three sets in all) survive from the 17th century and stand as attractive features around The Crescent. Guided tours of the Castle & 'dungeons' are available during the summer.

6 Turn left into The Crescent which was the result of planned speculative development by Medworth. It lies within the Norman Castle moat. Medworth developed The Crescent, Union Place and Ely Place as an almost complete circus between 1793 and 1835. Continue past Castle Square and the United Reformed Church into Union Place, then turn left into Market Street which leads into the Market Place.

7 The Market Place superseded the Old Market from about the 12th century as the focal point of commercial activity. The west end is dominated by the Rose & Crown. Its courtyard retains evidence of an open gallery and there are other early features from the 17th century. No. 29 Market Place conceals an excellent medieval vaulted cellar which has religious origins.

The church end of the Market Place once accommodated stocks, a whipping post, a bull run for baiting and at the other end a large horse trough.



8 From the Market Place turn into Union St. then left into New Inn Yard. On the left can be seen one of the oldest timber framed buildings in Wisbech, dating from around 1500. It is often described as a barn, but it may have once been a boathouse or warehouse.

9 Retrace your steps to Union Street and then on to Hill Street. Almost ahead of you at the junction of the two streets is an interesting building, now a Conservative Club which was the Grammar School from 1549 to 1898. It was here that Thomas Clarkson, the anti slavery campaigner was educated at a time when his father was the Headmaster. It was also once a town hall and possibly a guildhall. *Note its stepped crow gables.*

10 Head along Hill Street towards the river. To your right is the Social Club and Institute which was provided for the people of Wisbech and the surrounding villages by the Peckover Family. The imposing clock tower contains a carillon which plays tunes on the hour.

11 At the end of Hill Street the tidal River Nene comes in view. Some fine 18th and 19th century warehouses can be seen on both banks. Once ships berthed here in the centre of town, off loading their cargoes directly into the warehouses and granaries. As many as forty sailing ships could be seen in the port at any one time. The main port area which incorporates a Yacht Harbour is now beyond the Freedom Bridge. The warehouse of H Friend & Co, Skin and Feather Merchants, on Nene Quay has been converted into flats but the traditional painted sign on its west side remains.

12 Turn to your left and head towards the Town Bridge. As you approach you will see the large stone abutment of an earlier bridge.



13 Cross the bridge into Old Market, a triangular space surrounded by fine Georgian buildings which testify to the golden days of the river trade.

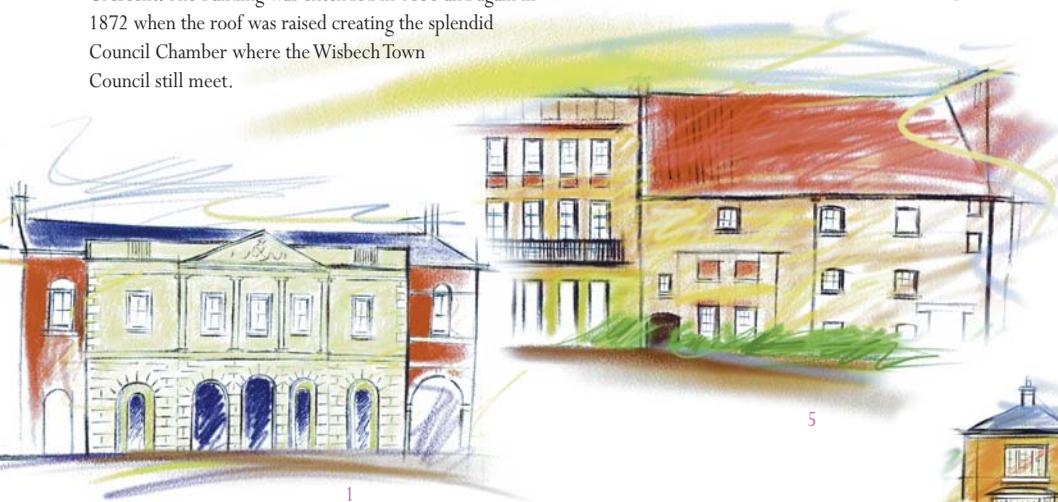
Architectural details to look out for are; cast iron work on Barclays Bank and Nos. 8 & 9 Old Market, the sumptuous door cases and fanlights on Numbers 1 & 2 and a medieval door at No.10. On the north side of Old Market, No.33 is a good 18th century building, while the neighbouring property, Sulehay House, is one of the most important Georgian buildings in the town. It is a Grade II* Listed Building which has been restored through a partnership between the District Council, English Heritage and the Cambridgeshire Historic Buildings Trust. Next door is the former corn merchants Counting House with glazed pantiles, usually associated with Norfolk.

The Brinks Trail

North Brink and South Brink face each other across the tidal River Nene. North Brink is considered by many to be the most outstanding feature of Wisbech. In his 'Buildings of England' Nikolaus Pevsner described it as one of the finest Georgian brick streets in England. It has been the backdrop of several television period dramas including Dean Spanley, Martin Chuzzlewit, David Copperfield and Vanity Fair.

As you proceed along North Brink there are many interesting properties to look at.

- 1 The Town Hall was originally built as a Corn Exchange and Reading Rooms in 1811 by Joseph Medworth who was responsible for developing the Castle and Crescent. The building was extended in 1858 and again in 1872 when the roof was raised creating the splendid Council Chamber where the Wisbech Town Council still meet.



- 2 Lloyds Bank was built in the 1920s in a Baroque revival style. Because of the architects meticulous attention to detail it sits comfortably into the street scene alongside much earlier buildings.
- 3 The Phoenix Hotel was previously known as the White Hart and was one of several coaching inns in the town. The main entrance has been built into the original archway through which coaches entered the yard.
- 4 Numbers 7, 8 and 9 are now the North Brink Doctors Surgery. No.7 dates back to 1662. The stone façade which was added later is an attractive contrast to the more prevalent brick. Records show that buildings to the rear included an oil mill and granary and later a brewing office. The house itself has a long connection with the medical profession.

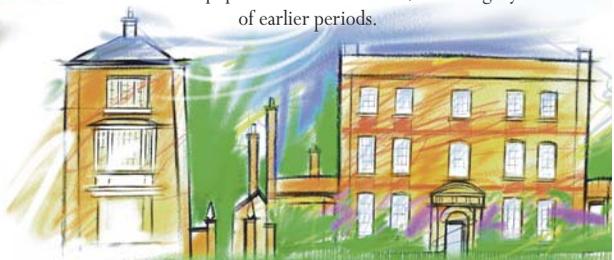
- 5 No.12 and its adjacent warehouses testify to the commercial origins of Georgian wealth. The simplicity of the warehouse is a perfect foil to the house fronts of the Brink.

- 6 The next two houses are the finest in the town, both are Grade I listed and are part of the Peckover Estate which is now in the care of the National Trust. The Peckovers were a Quaker banking family who had a great influence on the history of Wisbech.

Peckover House was built in 1722 and the low wings added in 1878. The house has a finely proportioned façade with arched sash windows and a grand stone door case raised on steps. The interior has panelled rooms and ornate plasterwork. Behind the house is a 2 acre Victorian style walled garden with many attractive features including summer houses, an orangery and a reed barn. The House and Garden are open to the public from April to October.

- 7 Continuing along North Brink, No.21 is the Friends Meeting House, opened in 1854 and designed by Algernon Peckover. The small graveyard behind the Meeting House is where the remains of many of the Peckover family lie.

- 8 Numbers 22 to 25 were also designed and built by the Peckovers. They have a fascinating array of architectural features. The gables are crow stepped, there are mock Tudor chimneys, fish scale tiles, hexagonal slates and fleur-de-lys ridge tiles. These types of embellishments were very popular in Victorian times, reflecting styles of earlier periods.



- 9 To the west of No.27 North Brink there is a later 19th century gazebo, probably based on the earlier one at No.54. These gazebos or summerhouses were built by members of the Peckover family as view points to overlook the busy river.

- 10 The Red Lion Inn at No.32 was built as a hostelry around 1764 and remains a popular riverside pub serving the locally brewed Elgoods ale. The Rose Tavern, a little further along the Brink also serves real ale.

11 Wisbech Grammar School now occupies Harecroft House (Nos.47 & 48) which was built in 1844 in the style of an Italian villa by Algernon Peckover for his son Alexander.

12 Sibalds Holme, a large house along the North Brink beyond the Barton Road turn was also built by Algernon Peckover at the time of his marriage in 1828. It was lived in continuously by his family for almost a hundred years before being divided into two, possibly prior to being sold.

13 Elgoods Brewery is the final stopping off point on the North Brink Trail. The Brewery - one of the first classic Georgian breweries to be built outside London - was established in 1795 from a converted oil mill and granary. Over the years it changed hands a number of times until in 1877

it was purchased along with 70 tied houses by John Elgood, a maltster of Godmanchester and Peterborough. The first brew of Elgoods ale was mashed here on an autumn morning in 1878 and the family have continued to brew fine traditional ales ever since.



The brewery is open for garden visits and brewery tours during the summer. The visitor centre is an ideal place to stop for refreshment before continuing the trail back to town.

14 Returning along North Brink, South Brink can now be viewed from across the river. Opposite the gazebo at No.27 North Brink is Ede's Terrace where Georgian Wisbech ends and modern industry begins. Ede's Terrace consists of seven Regency period houses with mansard roof, shallow bows at the ends and simple fanlights.

15 In contrast, No.15, formerly part of Wisbech Grammar School, is much grander in style. It has a charming cupola and a widows walk, so called because it formed a look out post for ships returning from sea.

16 Further along, No.12 formally the Queens Hotel has a grand stone door case. It was built as a residence around the same time as Peckover House and has many similar internal features.

17 Nos.7 - 8 South Brink was the birthplace of Octavia Hill, a crusader for heritage and housing and a founder member of the National Trust. The house is now a museum which commemorates her life and work and is open from mid March to October.

The principal message of the Brinks is harmony in architecture. Each building is different but they blend together. Many kinds of architectural detail are visible, for example urns, freezes, pilasters and columns. Such details are not considered necessary today, but they enrich the historic landscape of Wisbech and help make it an interesting and attractive town.