

This is the first in a series of short Historic Walks around Yeovil. This walk features the beautiful parish church of **St John the Baptist** which has been the focus of the town since it was built, between 1380 and 1400, replacing an earlier church more or less on the same site but a little further to the west.

The walks are designed to be printed and carried with you on your walk. The various walks may be undertaken individually or grouped together. None are of any great distance and times will vary depending on the amount of time looking at each key point. [Walking directions are given in blue.](#)

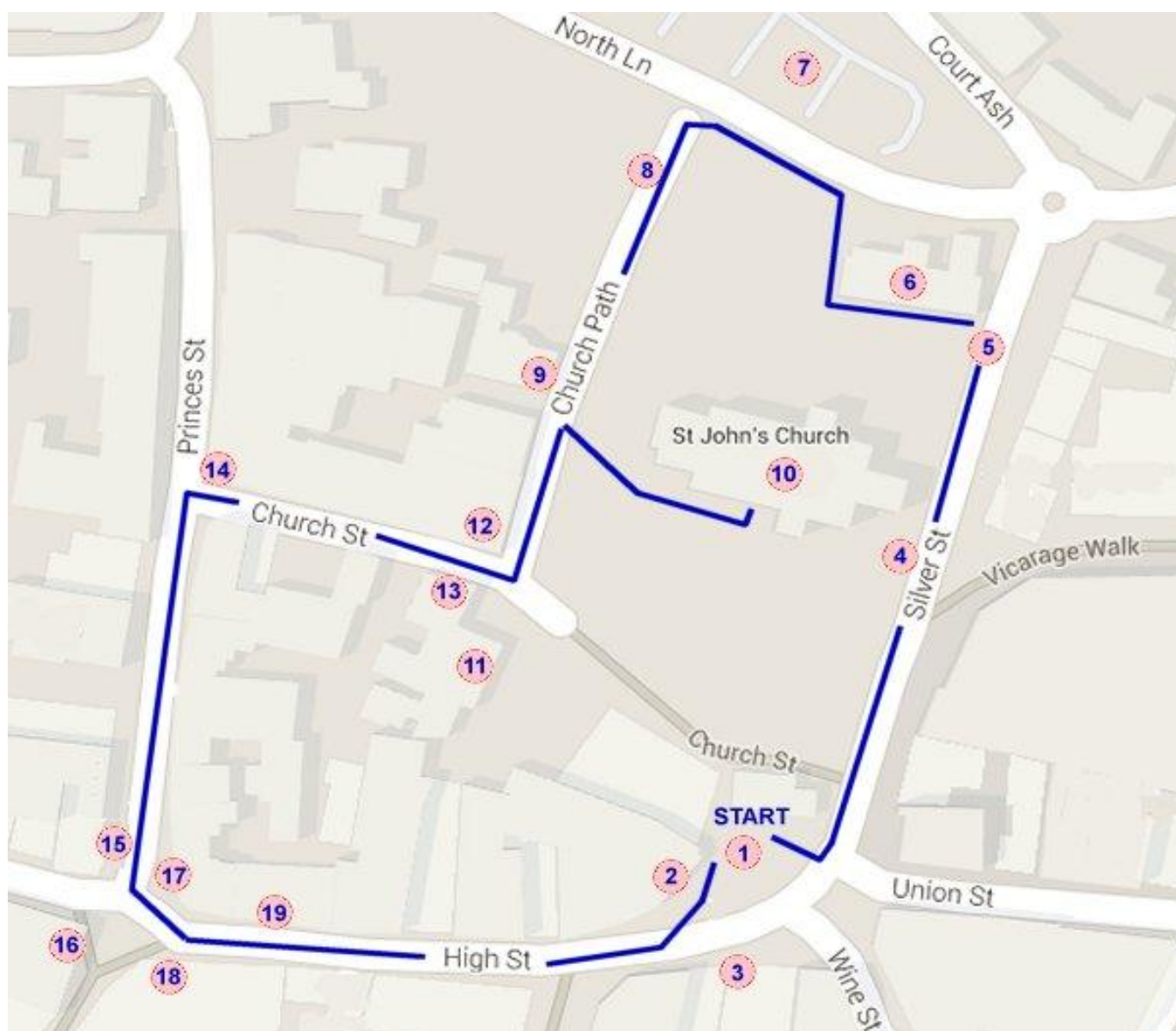
Key points on the walk are highlighted along the route and key facts are included. Most key points may be researched in greater depth on the A-to-Z of Yeovil's History website (www.yeovilhistory.info), either before or after your walk.

Walk 1: The church of St John the Baptist (binoculars would be useful for inside the church).

Distance: Half a mile

Time: 30 to 40 minutes at a slow amble, with an additional 30 minutes to visit St John's church.

Gradient: Mostly flat or downhill but there are steps at key point 5. To miss these use Church Street accessed between the shops, then Church Path, returning via Church Path.



START - The Borough

The traditional market place and heart of Yeovil simply known as 'The Borough' is little more than a widening of High Street. It was, from medieval times, the site of the weekly Friday market. At one time there were two buildings in the wide roadway here - a butcher's 'Shambles' and the 'Market House' that provided a roof for market traders. From here see the following -

Key Point 1 - The War Memorial Seen in the photo at right. The design is based on the 'Eleanor Crosses' erected by King Edward I in memory of his wife Eleanor of Castille. Erected 1921. Height 29 feet (8.84m). Cost £1,250 (about £52,000 in 2016's value).



Key Point 2 - Lloyds Bank Seen at left in the above photograph, this bank building has graced the Borough since the 1850s. Today only the front elevation is original, the fabric behind having been completely rebuilt. A plaque on the front wall commemorates the US servicemen who were stationed in and around Yeovil during the Second World War.



Key Point 3 - Superdrug building This building, in the photo at left, is the oldest surviving building in the Borough. It was built in 1790 for William Edwards, an ironmonger, and remained in continuous use as an ironmongery until the 1970s. The archway on the eastern side is the entrance to Tabernacle Lane, so called after the Tabernacle Meeting House founded in 1804 halfway along it. Originally called Narrow Lane or Little Lane, it was one of only two alleyways connecting High Street and Middle Street (originally Pit Lane) to South Street (originally Back Street) until the 1830s.

Commence Walk - turn east into Silver Street and turn north to walk beside the churchyard wall.

Key Point 4 - Churchyard Wall As you walk down Silver Street (originally called Stairs Hill) try and imagine a row of cottages built against the wall between the main steps and the steps to Church Terrace and then imagine all the buildings on the other side of the road five feet closer (they were all rebuilt around 1835) - now think how narrow this road once was. Try and spot the two dates (1621 over 1886) in the churchyard wall roughly opposite the entrance to the Quedam.

Continue walking as far as the steps to Church Terrace on your left.

Key Point 5 - Nun's Well To the immediate left of the steps was originally one of the town public wells, known as Nun's Well (Yeovil didn't have mains water until the middle of the 19th century) probably named for the nuns of the Convent of Syon, Middlesex, who were Lords of Yeovil from 1450 until the Dissolution in 1536.



Turn left and climb the steps to Church Terrace.

Key Point 6 - Church Terrace Now all offices and earlier known simply as Churchyard, Church Terrace is a short row of six attractive small Regency-style houses dating to the 1830s and originally intended for working class families (over 40 people lived here in the 1840s). By the end of the 19th century more affluent families lived here.

As you walk along the front of the terrace notice the fine obelisk tombstone of Mary Vining who died in childbirth. It was erected by her husband, solicitor James Tally Vining.

At the end of Church Terrace turn right and follow the path, turning left parallel to North Lane.

Key Point 7 - The Fair Ground From your vantage point above North Lane look across the car park before you—this area was known as The Kennels in Medieval times and was the town's archery butts and used for badger-baiting, cock fighting and dog fighting. More recently it was used as the sheep market.

Continue, then turn left into Church Path. Just a few yards along stop by the entrance in the wall.

Key Point 8 - North Lane House gateway As you peer through the entrance to North Street car park, you are looking through the rear entrance to what had been the garden (the whole of the car park) of North Lane House (demolished in the 1970s), the home of the Raymond family and later the Vincent family.

Continue on Church Path until you come to the end of St John's church.



Key Point 9 - The Chantry This building is probably early 14th century and was most likely associated with an earlier church. It was known as the 'Chantry Chapel of St Mary the Virgin without the Church' and was next to St John's church tower.

It was used as a schoolhouse from 1573 as the Charity Grammar School for boys. In 1854 it was moved to its present site and ceased to be used as a school in 1888.

Detour to visit the parish church of St John the Baptist - allow at least half an hour

Key Point 10 - The parish church of St John the Baptist The earliest church on this site was recorded around 950 but was probably rebuilt by the Normans since it is recorded in 1226 as "the great church of Gyvele". The church was completely rebuilt between 1380 and about 1420, most likely designed by the master mason of Wells, William Wynford. Known as 'The Lantern of the West' the present church is an early example of fully developed Perpendicular with the window tracery of the Reticulated Transitional Perpendicular style.



The tower was built slightly later than the church and dates to about 1480. It is 90 feet (28m) high. The west window is exceptionally large for Somerset because of its early Perpendicular style. The tower has a chiming clock (currently not working but plans for restoration are in hand) but no clock face. It has a Sanctus bell and a peal of 10 bells.

Enter the church via the south porch, rebuilt in 1862. The lofty nave has an open barrel roof with notable carved wooden bosses, mostly original. The origin of the 'African' mask bosses in the aisles are unknown. The fine windows of both aisles are the full width of each bay and are of 5-lights terminating in 2-centre arches. (Most of the windows are described and photographed in the website, as are the roof bosses).

Now the Holy Cross Chapel, the north transept was formerly a chantry with its foundations in 1432. The chapel now houses memorials and a hatchment of the Harbin family of nearby Newton Surmaville. In a glass case is a copy of Erasmus' Paraphrase of the Gospels - bought for 16 shillings (80p) in 1561 with a later chain added for 1 shilling (5p). The north choir aisle was formerly the Chantry Chapel of the Name of Jesus, founded in 1480 and maintained by a guild. The organ dates to 1894. Formerly located on the floor of the choir, note the brass memorial to Gyles and Isabell Penne. Of note in the south choir aisle is the exceptional English brass lectern dating to about 1450 and one of only five in the entire country.

On entering the choir, mounted at mid-height, are two carved heads that were either brackets for the medieval Lenten veil or corbels for the rood. The north wall of the chancel contains the entry to the vestry (built 1915) and crypt with a good ogee and crocketed surround. Next to this the former niche of the Easter Sepulchre now contains the figure of Rev Robert Phelps, vicar from 1815 to 1855. The Phelps family held the patronage of St John's for some two and a half centuries. The floor of the sanctuary is tiled with Minton tiles depicting symbols of the Evangelists. The east wall has two good double niches, canopied and pinnacled, containing modern statues of the Evangelists - Mathew, Mark, Luke and John - and their symbols. Also of note is the east window - almost mirroring the west window with its fine early Perpendicular reticulated tracery. On both north and south chancel walls are many good monuments. In a glass case is a James I Bible of 1617 that was donated to the church by Elizabeth Prowse in 1628. The choir stalls are carved with symbols of the Passion and also include the initials 'TM' for Thomas Messiter of nearby Barwick Park who was Lay Rector.

On leaving St John's church, return to Church Path, turn left and continue to Church Street.

Key Point 11 - Church House Church House, facing St John's church, dates to about 1770 and is the finest remaining town house in Yeovil. It is built of stone with a frontage in Yeovil red bricks and Ham stone dressings, cornice and parapet.

It was probably built by the Batten family of solicitors and the house has played a prominent part in the town's legal affairs, being the home of the Battens from the 18th century. The house lost a wing during a Second World War bombing raid.



Key Point 12 - St John's Schoolrooms On the corner of Church Path and Church Street, St John's Schoolrooms were built in 1854 and completely rebuilt in 1897 (see the date stone over the entrance in Church Path). During the whole of the Second World War the building was used as a canteen for servicemen as well as accommodation for fire watchers. In 1984 the ground floor was converted into shop premises, the first floor retained as church rooms at a peppercorn rent.

Continue west along Church Street

Key Point 13 - County Court Attached to Church House as an annex, the old County Court building still retains the inscription 'County Court' above its doorway. It is now offices. To the west of the old Court House (but not always visible if the gates are closed) are two coach houses dating to the 18th century.

Continue west along Church Street as far as Princes Street

Key Point 14 - Old Post Office The building (now an estate agent's) in Princes Street on the corner with Church Street, was Yeovil's General Post Office after it transferred from Silver Street in 1876. In 1901 Henry Cobb was listed as being in charge of the 'Stamp Office'. It ceased to be a Post Office in 1902 when the new purpose-built Post Office opened in Middle Street (now the WH Smith building).



Continue south along Princes Street



Key Point 15 - Porter's Bookshop Originally a private house, this fine 18th century building (note the fine curved Venetian window) was the premises of William Porter, a bookseller, stationer and printer from 1829. Porter was also joint founder of Yeovil's first savings bank (in premises a few doors along). This building was a printers and bookshop into the 1860s. In the early 20th century it was converted to shop premises.

Notice, on the adjoining premises, the small carved faces at about eye-height.

Stand on the traffic island by the Millennium Clock (designed by Leslie Brooke)

Key Point 16 - NatWest Bank building This building, built in Portland stone, opened in 1919 and replaced an earlier bank, Stuckey's Bank, which was the second joint stock bank in the country. This, in turn operated in the old Whitmash & White building that had been built next to the old Angel Inn, Yeovil's premier coaching inn of its day.

Turn around to see the opposite corner





Key Point 17 - The Co-op Bank building This building, on the corner of Princes Street and High Street, was built as the branch bank of the Capital & Counties Bank and opened in the summer of 1897. It was designed by Yeovil architect J Nicholson Johnston. It became a branch of Lloyds Bank in 1918 and in 1928 became the National Provincial Bank. It merged with the Westminster Bank in 1968, trading under its own name until it became the national Westminster Bank in 1970. The building was later occupied by the Bristol & West Building Society which, in 2005, sold its savings and investment business to the Britannia Building Society. The Britannia merged with The Co-operative Banking Group in 2009 and today the building is a branch of the Co-operative Bank.

Turn around

Key Point 18 - The Beales building 25 High Street had originally been built in 1836 for a draper's business, Edwards & Dean. By 1841 it was occupied by draper Peter Edwards. It was later occupied by Hurrell & Berryman. Linsey Denner was born in Honiton in 1845 and came to Yeovil in 1875 and bought the premises at 25 High Street, styling himself a "Silk Mercer, Family Draper, Hosier & Haberdasher".

In the 1881 census Linsey Denner was living above his shop premises with his family, a live-in domestic cook, housemaid and nursemaid. He described his occupation as "Draper, master, employing 12 hands" and it appears that most of these lived on the premises as well including five young lady draper's assistants, a draper's milliner and three young men who were draper's apprentices.

Linsey Denner died in 1917 aged 72. The store was called 'L Denner' until 1926 when the Chapel family bought it and renamed the store as 'Denners'. Beales acquired the store in 1999 but kept the name Denners until 2011 when it was restyled as 'Beales'.

Walk east along High Street



Key Point 19 - The Mermaid Hotel The Mermaid Hotel is the oldest surviving licensed premises in Yeovil, with the earliest mention in the records being 1517. Originally the Mermaid was much smaller than it is today, being only that part from the arch and to the east; that part now the shop premises of Mortimers and Braddicks, to the west of the arch, was originally built as a single town house in the late eighteenth century.

In the 1760s the whole hotel, apart from two rooms at the front, was completely rebuilt including the Assembly Room (now the restaurant), stables and 'all other offices'.

Carry on walking east along High Street to the Borough, the start of this walk.

I hope you enjoyed this walk and don't forget that full details and photographs of all the Key Points mentioned may be seen on the A-to-Z of Yeovil's History website - www.yeovilhistory.info