

Hussey Tower and Medieval Boston



A 2.5km (1.5 miles) trail around Boston to explore some of the town's important late medieval remains, including the 15th century Hussey Tower.

Allow 1½ hours at a leisurely pace.

During the medieval period, especially in the late 13th and early 14th centuries, Boston was an important and wealthy sea port. Wool from the religious houses and private estates of Lincolnshire and the East Midlands was the major export, and luxury goods were imported from Europe and Scandinavia. Many European merchants lived and worked in the town, and its bustling markets and fairs attracted people from all over the country.

But this prosperity did not last. In the 16th century the town declined with the demise of the wool trade and the silting up of the river, but the effect of its medieval wealth and importance did not disappear altogether. This trail explores the evidence that can still be seen in the town today.

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Hussey Tower

Hussey Tower was built in about 1450 - 1460 by Richard Benyngton who was a wealthy and prominent Lincolnshire man during the mid 15th century.

He knew Ralph Lord Cromwell who built Tattershall Castle and it is thought that he deliberately built Hussey Tower in the same style. Richard Benyngton died in about 1475.



Hussey Tower is part of what was originally a much larger complex of buildings that made up a late medieval manor house. This computer-generated image shows what it may have looked like.

There would have been a series of other buildings as well as Hussey Tower itself, all arranged around and facing into a courtyard. Beyond the courtyard there would have been gardens and grounds, and a gatehouse facing towards the west.

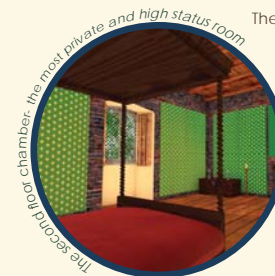


The tower is built of brick and is three storeys tall. At the time that it was built brick was an expensive and prestigious material that only the wealthiest people could afford to use. The bricks are laid mainly in a pattern known as English Bond, with alternate courses of headers (short sides) and stretchers (long sides). On the external north wall there is a diamond-shaped pattern of darker bricks (diaper pattern).

The other buildings were probably mostly timber-framed. No trace of them

survives today. They would have included a great hall, kitchens and service building, and lodgings for the household and visitors.

After the manor house passed to Boston Corporation most of its buildings were gradually demolished, the building materials most probably being reused elsewhere. Only Hussey Tower remained. It had a number of other uses, including as a sailmaker's workshop, but we know from historic engravings that it was already a ruin in the 18th century.



The tower contained the high-status private rooms of the Lord of the manor (Richard Benyngton and afterwards John Hussey). The ground floor room, which had a vaulted brick ceiling, was a service room, and there were two private chambers on the floors above. The most important, and most private of these would have been on the top floor.

The upper rooms were reached by a spiral staircase that still survives today within the octagonal turret at the north-east corner. The staircase is particularly fine. It is made entirely of brick, with the stairs radiating off a central newel, and with a moulded brick hand rail which runs the full height of the staircase.



The brick staircase with ornate brick handrail

The external east wall of the tower (the wall with the entrance door in it) still has evidence of an adjoining building having been attached. An inverted V shape high up on the wall shows where a pitched roof once joined. There is a blocked doorway that connected the first floor tower room with the upper floor room of the attached building. There are also two stone corbels which once supported the upstairs floor of this building.



Hussey Tower takes its name from Sir John Hussey who owned the house after Benyngton's death. Sir John lived from 1465 - 1537 and was a privileged member of society. He came from a wealthy family and was an important member of the courts of both Henry VII and Henry VIII. He was given influential positions, land and money that made him a very powerful man.

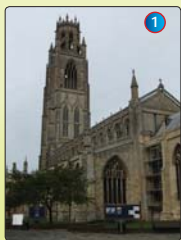
Sir John owned Hussey Tower for about 60 years. In 1537 he fell out of favour with King Henry VIII at the time of Henry's break with Rome and the Dissolution of the monasteries. Henry blamed Sir John for not acting forcefully enough to quell the Lincolnshire Rising, the rebellion that took place against the changes being made. He was found guilty of treason and executed, and his lands and property were confiscated. The ownership of Hussey Tower subsequently passed to Boston Corporation. Boston Borough Council still owns the tower to this day. It is managed on their behalf by Heritage Lincolnshire.



The trail starts and finishes at St Botolph's church at the north of the market place

1. The church of St Botolph

Among England's largest and grandest parish churches, building began in 1309 at the east end. The church was complete by c. 1390 except for the tower (the Stump) which was begun 40 years later and completed by c. 1520. The people of Boston were obviously still able to invest heavily in their church at that time. At 272 ft high it is a major landmark. Why not make time to step inside to explore the church and its treasures further, and perhaps climb the tower to get a birds' eye view of Boston? Leave the north end of the market place and walk along Strait Bargate until it widens out into Wide Bargate at the end of the pedestrian area.



2. Wide Bargate

The broad space that makes up Wide Bargate would have been a very different place in the late 15th century. Animal markets were held here and they continued here right up until the 1960s. Take away the modern landscaping and imagine instead the sights, sounds and smells of a busy medieval beast market day. Turn right into Pescod Square shopping precinct. Pescod Hall stands in the middle of the precinct.

3. Pescod Hall

Pescod Hall originated in the 15th century when it was built as the home of the wealthy Pescod family of wool merchants. It has been dismantled and moved as part of new developments around it. Very few of its original timbers survive and the infill of its walls is made of later bricks, but it gives an idea of what Boston's houses looked like in the 1400s. It would originally have been bigger - a medieval hall was attached to its west side: the most important part of the house, open to the roof and the hub of the medieval household. Carry on down Petticoat Lane towards the market place.



4. The Barditch

In the earlier medieval period Boston was enclosed by a man-made drain called the Barditch which ran down the eastern side of the main part of the town and joined with the river to the north and the south. It was used as an open sewer and must have been very smelly, especially in summer. As the town's population grew building took place outside it. Although nothing can be seen above ground today, as you walk back towards the Market Place along Petticoat Lane you cross the Barditch onto the 'island' that it created. You will cross it again further on in this trail. Back in the market place.

5. The market place

The market place has been the commercial heart of the town for nearly a thousand years. The space was smaller in the medieval period - the Georgians opened it up by demolishing buildings in the centre and on the west side. Many of the goods for sale in the medieval market would be familiar to us today - bread and vegetables, meat and fish, spices, cheese and eggs, pots and pans, shoes and cloth. But imagine the vegetables just as they had come out of the ground, the meat being butchered and the fish gutted before your eyes. Imagine too a host of people who do not have a stall but have come to town to peddle their wares straight from the baskets that they have brought them in. Turn left and walk down the eastern side of the market place.

6. Burgage plots

Boston's market place and streets were lined with shops and workshops. The buildings stood close together facing the street with regular passageways giving access to long narrow pieces of land behind them. These 'burgage plots' can still easily be spotted on the east side of the market place where narrow lanes run between the buildings at frequent intervals. The market place narrows at its southern end and becomes South Street. Stop where Sibsey Lane joins from the left. The black and white building in front of you is Shodfriars Hall.

7. Shodfriars Hall

Although much altered, especially by the Victorians in the 1870s, this building dates back to about 1400. It may have been the hall of the guild of Corpus Christi which had many wealthy and influential members including important clergy and the nobility. Notice how each of the upper storeys is 'jettied out' beyond the one below it - a feature that was common in timber-framed buildings. At Shodfriars Hall, turn left into Sibsey Lane and walk as far as the end of the long building behind Shodfriars Hall.

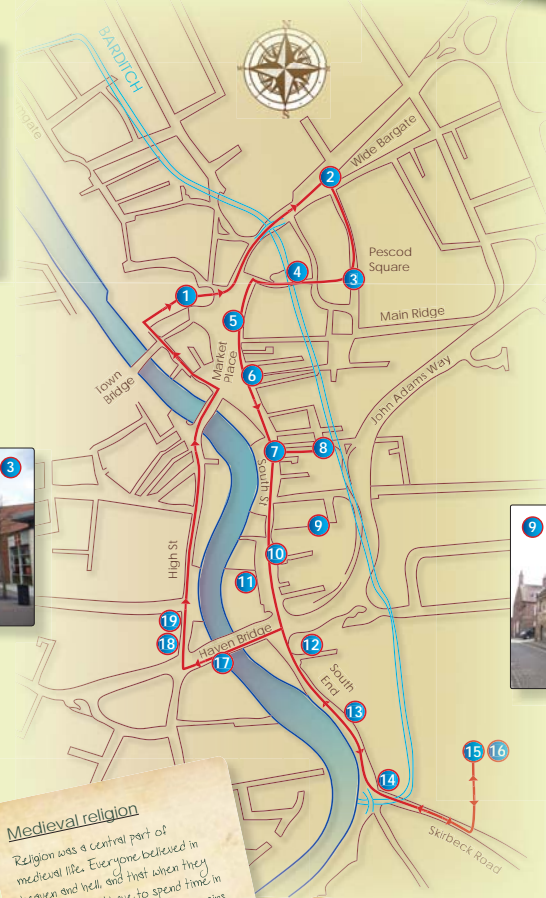


Medieval religion

Religion was a central part of medieval life. Everyone believed in heaven and hell, and that when they died they would have to spend time in purgatory being cleansed of their sins before they could go to heaven. They also believed that if prayers were said for their souls their time in purgatory would be less and they would get to heaven sooner. They therefore paid for prayers to be said for them and their family members after they died.

Medieval guilds

Guilds were an important part of medieval life, especially in towns. They were groups of merchants or craftspeople who joined together to support each other and protect each other's interests. Only guild members were allowed to trade with foreign merchants coming to the town. Guilds were fundamental to the commercial life of the town but they also served an important religious function: they employed priests to say prayers for the souls of their members. By joining a guild you were therefore looking after yourself in life and in death.



8. Green Man stone fragment

Set in the brickwork above the doorway of this building is a carved 'Green man' stone - a head with foliage sprouting out of the mouth. The top of his head is flat showing that he was originally made to act as a supporting stone (a corbel). The stone is much older than the building it is now part of. It dates from the late 13th or early 14th century and is thought to have come from the Dominican (Blackfriars) friary that stood nearby. You may be able to spot more architectural fragments from the friary in other buildings near here. Retrace your steps back along Sibsey Lane and turn left at South Street. Continue along South Street until you reach Spain Lane. Turn left into Spain Lane and walk along to the Blackfriars Arts Centre.

The Green Man motif has been commonly used as an architectural ornament for hundreds of years, and appears in both secular and religious buildings. Nobody knows for certain why artists would appear to be a pagan symbol is found so often in Christian buildings.

9. Blackfriars Arts Centre

Blackfriars is one of Boston's earliest surviving medieval buildings. Dating from the 13th century, it was part of a Dominican friary.



The friary buildings were arranged around a cloister and this building formed the south side of it. It was most probably the refectory where the friars ate their meals. The name Blackfriars came from the black robes that the Dominican friars wore. Turn to South Street, turn left and continue as far as St Mary's Guildhall.

Friaries were communities of urban monks. The friars went out into the towns to preach directly to the people. Boston had four different orders of friars: Dominicans, Franciscans, Augustinians and Carmelites. You will pass the sites of other friaries later on in this trail.

10. St Mary's Guildhall

Built for the wealthy religious guild of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Guildhall dates from the late 14th century. It is one of the earliest brick buildings in the county and was built at a time when brick was an expensive and prestigious material. Its street facade with enormous church-style window was certainly designed to impress! From the front gates of the building you can see how long and narrow the building is and how far back from the street it extends. The guildhall was handed to Boston Corporation in 1545 and was used as the town hall until the 19th century. It is now Boston's museum and Tourist Information Centre and is regularly open to the public. It is well worth taking time to explore the museum to find out more about medieval life in Boston. Across the road in South Square.

11. Gysor's Hall

A medieval warehouse known as Gysor's Hall stood on the site of the building immediately to the south of the Magnet Tavern. It was demolished in the early 19th century by William Fydeall to make way for the current building, which was a warehouse (lettingly Hunt's seed store) until its conversion to flats in the 1990s. William Fydeall was a member of the wealthy family of merchants who owned the very grand Fydeall House opposite. He incorporated some of the stone from the medieval Gysor's Hall into the ground floor walls of his new warehouse. Its position on the riverside shows how crucial the River Witham has been to Boston's economic life throughout its history. Continue south and cross over John Adams Way at the pedestrian crossing.

At this point you are still inside the Barditch - it lies about 100m to your left as you cross the road.

Walk along South End until you come to Grey Friars Lane and the entrance to the Grammar School.

12. Franciscan friary

The street name Grey Friars Lane gives a clue to the medieval use of this area. Just as the Dominicans were often called Blackfriars because of their black robes, the Franciscans were commonly known as the Greyfriars after the colour of their habits. The Franciscan friary stood on the site of the Grammar School. Archaeologists have discovered evidence of the friary and of a cemetery where many foreign merchants and wealthy families were

buried. The old Grammar School building is an important early brick building in its own right. It dates from 1567, about 30 years after the Reformation and the closure of all the monasteries and friaries. Continue along South End until you reach the point where Skirbeck Road joins from the left.

13. An Augustinian friary is thought to have been located somewhere near here, although its exact site is not certain. Turn left into Skirbeck Road

14. As you turn into Skirbeck Road you cross over the southern end of the Barditch where it turns to rejoin the River Witham and off the 'island' that it created. Walk along Skirbeck Road until you reach the gates to Hussey Tower on your left, immediately before the Little Acorns nursery and the start of Boston College's car park.

15. Hussey Tower

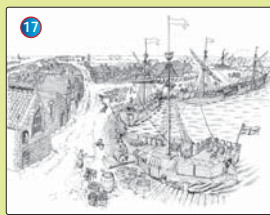
You have now arrived at one of Boston's most important surviving medieval buildings. Hussey Tower formed part of an extensive manor house and was home to one of the town's wealthiest and most influential men. Turn the leaflet over to discover more about this fascinating building and its owner. When you have finished exploring Hussey Tower, return to the Skirbeck Road entrance. Directly opposite you can see an open space and children's play area.

16. St John's church

St John's church stood to the south of Skirbeck Road in the vicinity of what is now the children's play area. The church was in existence by 1281 and it is thought that it was once more important than the church of St Botolph's itself. As its name suggests, it belonged to the Knights Hospitaller (Order of St John), and it had almshouses attached to it. However, it is clear that by the later part of the medieval period investment was being channelled into St Botolph's, and the Knights themselves moved to a site near here. By the mid 16th century (after the Dissolution of the monasteries) St John's was in need of repair, and in 1584 was largely demolished. It had been removed completely by 1626. Turn and retrace your steps along Skirbeck Road and South End towards the town centre. When you reach John Adams Way cross the river at Haven Bridge.

17. John Adams Way and Haven Bridge are later 20th century additions to the town. Before the road was built there was no bridge crossing in this part of the town and the only way to get across to the other side of the river here was by ferry. A ferry operated in this more southerly part of the town until the early 20th century, linking it with the High Street area. During the medieval period quays for loading and unloading boats would have extended along this part of the river. Turn right into High Street.

18. High Street has now been sliced in two by John Adams Way. This area was well developed in medieval times and the remains of some buildings from that period are still here, hidden inside later shops and houses. 25, 33 and 35 High Street all date back to the 15th century. It is thought that they were made up of a shop fronting the street with a medieval open hall behind, which was the main living room of the house. No 35 is made up of a timber-framed front building and a brick section to the rear. Continue along High Street and cross back over the river at Town Bridge.



19. There have been a number of bridges across the river in this part of the town in the past. The present Town Bridge was built in 1913 on the base of an early 13th century bridge. Before that, the medieval and later bridges were a few yards north of this point (nearer the modern footbridge). The first reference to a bridge was in 1305: this was a wooden bridge.

Imagine how different this river scene would have been in the medieval period, with sea-going ships and river barges loading and unloading on the quaysides, and horses and carts crowding the quaysides. It is quite possible that the remains of some of the wooden quays are still there in the river mud. And who knows what else has found its way into the river during nearly 1000 years of history in Boston?

As you re-enter the market place you reach the end of the trail. We hope you have enjoyed this tour of late medieval Boston.

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