

Blue Plaque Trail Around Melksham



Starting from Church Street (there is a public carpark), the first plaque is found on the **Round House**, a circular rubble built two storey building with a conical roof. One of two buildings left from the woollen industry days, the other one is located in Lowbourne and is octagonal. Built in the 18th century, the building was used as a wool and cloth-drying room, after being washed or dyed, then moved onto another processing stage. With the decline of the wool industry in the 19th Century, many of the buildings were demolished; this one survived as an armoury for the Local Volunteer Rifle Corps, then later an animal feed store and more recently as The Tourist Information Centre, Melksham Museum, and now a comic shop.

Turning left from the Round House you will walk past the Post Office, which was built on the site of the Church House, this brings you into one of my favourite parts of Melksham, Cannon Square and the War Memorial, and ahead of you is the old rectory, now residential flats and the church rooms. Turning left will take you to St. Michael and All Angels Church. The earliest mention was in the Domesday Book and Romuld was priest of Melksham, but there is no actual evidence for a Saxon Church. The Chancel dates from 1130 and from then until 1845 the church was enlarged and altered many times, including the tower having been moved from the centre to the west. Many of these improvements had been possible due to the generosity of many local benefactors. Continuing past the church will bring you to the Tithe Barn; this was purchased from the Awdry family in 1876 when Elementary Education became compulsory for all children. I actually attended St. Michaels Church School from 1964 to 1969; it then transferred to Queensway, where I had also attended when it was then the infant's school.

Retracing footsteps back to Cannon Square, you walk straight ahead to Church Walk, a very pretty part of town with houses dating to late 17th and early 18th century cottages, many that remain outwardly similar to when they were built. At the end of Church Walk, turn left into Bath Road. The Bear, now a Wetherspoons Pub was once a thriving Coaching Inn with a yard and stables.

Carrying on down the town you will arrive at The **Red Lion**, which has always been considered as the oldest Public House in Melksham and reputedly, King John frequented it whilst hunting in Melksham Forest. Known fact was at one time it was owned by a carpenter called James Webb, he bequeathed it to his son who had it rebuilt in 1728. It became the Red Lion in the 19th Century and was later purchased by GJ Spencer's Brewery in 1893 and subsequently by Ushers Brewery of Trowbridge. On the demise of Ushers Brewery, it became a free house and continued to serve the local community. It has since ceased trading and a Home Care business operates from the premises.



Walking down The City, one of the older parts of the town and then back onto the old Bath Road you will come to **The Alms Houses** originally called 'The Retreat' and built in 1864. Miss Rachel Fowler, who was member of a prominent Melksham business family, gave them to the town to house poor widows and spinsters. Rachel Fowler was a member of the Society of Friends and was founder of a number of Charities, which still exist today The Rachel Fowler Red Flannel Charity, Melksham Alms Houses and New Hall, Market Place, Melksham.

Heading back up towards the town centre you will pass Cooper Tyres (now owned by Apollo Tyres India), originally The Avon Rubber Company and Avon India Rubber Company and built on land once occupied by woollen mills. Avon House was built in 1738 by a mill owner named Henry Coulthurst during the woollen industry; this building continues to be the offices for the Tire Company. Onwards to the **Town Bridge**, the current was bridge built in 1814 replacing the original wooden one that collapsed during a storm in 1809. The new bridge was built of ashlar stone on four arches with balustrades on both sides. In 1929, it was widened by one path width. Now continue towards the town centre.



It was in 1813 that mineral waters were first noticed at Bowerhill and chalybeate and saline springs were used to promote Melksham as a spa town. A company was formed in 1815 and a pump room and housed for visitors were built and Spa Road was developed. In 1815 a reading room and circulatory library at Mr Ward's printing offices was opened, primarily for visitors to the spa, but they were closed in 1822 after The Spa succumbed to competition from the ones in Bath. Prospect House was built in 1852 to accommodate new **Reading Rooms** for the middle classes as well as use by the Melksham Mutual Improvement Society to give readings to people unable to read.

Turn left just after Prospect House and up the slope in front of you is the building that once housed Melksham's Second Cottage Hospital, which was due to the generosity of Mr George White and opened by Mr Charles Awdry on April 4th 1895. Over the years the hospital was extended and improved, including; a childrens ward and operating theatre. A new hospital on Spa Road replaced this one in 1938, but it remained as a maternity hospital during the Second World War. It subsequently became Melksham Labour Club. Walking on through the car park and turning right into Lowbourne, the first **Cottage Hospital** was established at No.4 Lowbourne (now a newsagents) in 1869 after a meeting held at Melksham Town Hall, the proposal was agreed and Trustees were appointed. The hospital was on three floors, the ground floor comprising of a nurses room and boardroom, the first floor a three-bedded male ward and the second floor three separate rooms for females. The hospital had its first patient November 1869, with the cost of treatment being covered by voluntary contributions.



Crossing the road will bring you to **No.1 Bank Street** the home of Robert Fowler and his family in the 18th Century. As well as being a senior partner in the Bank Fowler and Richards, he was a member of the Society of Friends (Quakers). When he retired, the house was divided into three dwellings, then later four. His daughter Rachel Fowler remained in one part of the property, the bank Moule and Son in another part. Later on Pharmacist Walter Mundy moved in and today it remains as Pharmacy.

Continue walking towards the Market Place, crossing over at Church Street you will come to the building that housed **The Old Police Station**. In 1835, Parliament passed a bill requiring boroughs to set up their own police forces, because of increasing disorder with agricultural riots and later by Chartists. A Chief Constable was appointed in 1839, the first County Constabulary in the country. Melksham's lock-up was built in 1847 adjacent to the Cheese Hall.



Also built in 1847 the **Town Hall** and Cheese Market, by a company of shareholders. The land on which it was built originally belonged to Place House.

Like many other buildings in the town, it was built of Ashlar Stone. The Cheese Market opened in 1859 when it sold 160 tons of cheese. A room on the first floor was used as the Magistrates Court. Melksham Urban District Council purchased the hall and it became their offices and the Town Hall.

Of interest: mounted over the door of the Main Door in the Town Hall, is a part fossil skull and horns of a *Bos Primigenius*, an ox like creature from the Palaeolithic era. It was fished out of the River Avon by some fishermen in 1838.

Crossing the road will bring you to **The New Hall**. Built of Bath stone, the hall opened in 1877 and gifted to the town by Rachel Fowler. It was a place for lectures, a reading room and accomodation for religous & philanthropic meetings and for the general benefit of the townspeople.

The government requisitioned the building during World War for official use.



End your plaque tour of Melksham at The Kings Arms. An old coaching inn, the oldest part is believed to date from the early 18th century. Stage and Post Coaches from London passed through Melksham on their way to Bath, Bristol, Exeter and Devonport.

Note: Moving back to Melksham a few months back I was actually unaware of the Blue Plaques at first, but after taking over as Melksham OPC, thought I should go out and find them and several I must have walked past numerous times in the town, I now keep my eyes open wherever I walk!