



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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GENERAL INFORMATION

Information about accommodation and public transport can be obtained from:
The Wells Tourist Information Centre,
Town Hall, Wells, Somerset, BA5 2RB

DISABLED ACCESS

The route is generally accessible for wheelchair users and the less able, but there are some fairly steep hills, and there are no special facilities provided.

Numbers in text refer to references on map featured in the original fully illustrated leaflet, to which readers are referred.



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(Access from links page on the Westbury Web Site)



INTRODUCTION

Westbury-sub-Mendip lies some four miles north-west of the city of Wells. The parish stretches from the upland of the Mendip plateau, down the steep southern slopes, to the lush, low-lying fields of the Axe valley, the River Axe forming the parish boundary in the south and south-west. Although there are a few outlying farms and dwellings and the hamlet of Hollybrook, most settlement is contained in the charming, quite widely-spread village. Much of the centre of the village has been designated a Conservation Area for its historic and architectural importance.

The parish has an amazing range and number of historic and archaeological sites. From an ancient cave found in the quarry above

Westbury-Sub-Mendip comes evidence of use by men and animals perhaps half a million years

ago, when such exotic animals as sabretoothed tigers, bears, hyaenas, jaguars and wolves ranged the area. High on the slopes above the village are some of the many Bronze Age barrows or burial mounds which are liberally sprinkled across the central Mendip plateau. At

Brimble Pit a swallet in the bed of a former ice-age lake has yielded exciting archaeological finds of the Neolithic and Bronze Age periods, including a human skeleton.

From the time of the earliest documentary records until the 19th century, the manor of Westbury-Sub-Mendip belonged to the bishops of Wells (except for three short periods - a brief spell after the Norman Conquest, an 18-month interlude in the mid-16th century when ownership rested with the Duke of Somerset, and during the Interregnum). It had probably come into the possession of Wells in 909, at the time of Wells's elevation from a small church to a cathedral, which became the centre of a newly-created diocese encompassing the whole of Somerset. The elevation of Wells to cathedral status was probably accompanied by the endowment of a sizeable estate, recorded later in a charter of 1065 by Bishop Giso; Westbury was included.

THE TRAIL

1. The Trail starts at the village cross.

This medieval cross lies some distance from the church, which suggests that it is more likely to be a market cross, than a preaching cross. This is enigmatic, as there is no mention of a medieval market at Westbury. Market crosses were traditionally reserved for the use of women selling small quantities of produce, and they were normally free of market tolls.

Leaving the cross, take care on the busy main road, and make your way towards the church.

On your right, the early 19th century white rendered house set well back from the road is Court House Farm. This was the main manorial centre of Westbury, from which the bishop's local farming operations were run. The manorial court was held in this house; the business of the manor, the administration of the tenements, and the collection of rents and fines were conducted here, and also the annual appointment of the village reeves, moor reeves, and haywards. It is possible that none of the bishops stayed here, as there was a more favoured residence nearby at Wookey. Other visitors, such as stewards and bailiffs, may have used the house.

Just before you reach the church you will pass a gothic 19th century lodge on your right. This was the lodge to Westbury House. Its location inside the area that historically formed part of the churchyard is puzzling; possibly it occupies the site of an earlier building associated with the church, maybe a church house.

2. Enter the churchyard, and explore the church, if there is not a service in progress.

THE CHURCH

The church of St Lawrence at Westbury, its chapel at Priddy, and the church at Banwell, were given to the Augustinian canons of Bruton Priory by Robert, Bishop of Bath, in the 12th century. In a reciprocal arrangement the prior and convent of Bruton agreed to pay 40 shillings a year for the expenses of keeping a candle burning perpetually, before the altar of the cathedral. At the dissolution of Bruton Priory, Westbury church was restored to the see of Wells.

The earliest identifiable architectural features are late Norman – they are the tower arch at the west end of the nave, and the blocked doorway on the north side of the church (only visible from outside). In common with so many churches, it was heavily rebuilt in the late 19th century. On the outside of the tower you will see inscribed the initials TTK and GSK,

together with the date 1887; the inscriptions refer to the rebuilding of the tower at that date, financed by the local family of Knyfton. You will pass Knyfton's Farm later in the trail.

Another local family of importance is commemorated at the east end of the south aisle, where there is a memorial to George Rodney who died in 1586. The main branch of the Rodney family were lords of the adjacent parish of Rodney Stoke. George, who held property and resided both at Pilton and Westbury, was a second son, and never became head of the family. He took the first lease of the bishop's deer park at Westbury, and was also the tenant of the former abbot's park at Pilton, and was evidently making rather a speciality of the exploitation of parkland, perhaps enticed by the valuable timber it contained.

When you leave the church, glance over the churchyard wall to the south to see Westbury House.

Little is known of the early history of this site, but the house itself may have been newly built in the 19th century. In 1875 *Kelly's Directory* lists Westbury House as being inhabited by Frank Isaac Nalder, a well-known textile manufacturer with factory premises in Shepton Mallet.

Note particularly the chest tomb dated 1816 which commemorates John Hardwich. The Hardwichs had been important tenant farmers in the village since the 17th century, and John Hardwich probably lived at Westbury House.

Walk back up the road a short distance, turning right at the little triangular area with the evergreen holm oak tree. Bear right down Duck Lane.

This road was once a major access route into the bishop's deer park and beyond to the low-lying wetlands which lie between Westbury and the Isle of Wedmore. Wander a little way down this quiet road to see several attractive cottages. The last, Stream Cottage, was one of the old 'auster' farms, with a landholding of a 'fardel' (about 30 acres) in Westbury. The holders of auster tenements had special obligations and privileges concerning the pasturing of animals on Mendip and the moors.

At the end of the lane carry on through the gate beside the stream, into a recently developed area, to view the beautiful facade of Lodge Hill House.

3. Turn left and return to the village up Station Road, built about 1870 when the railway was extended from Cheddar to Wells.

Walk back towards the village cross, but before reaching it turn right into Crow Lane. Before turning off the main road you will notice the Westbury Inn, formerly the Railway Hotel.

Looking straight ahead you will find another old auster farm, Crow Lane Farm, which is one of the oldest farmhouses in the village.

4. Follow the road as it bends to the left, and then walk up the footpath ahead of you.

The wall on your left defines the eastern boundary of an interesting block of land. The plots are now occupied by the Old Vicarage and the school. The plots have been altered over time, but they were probably originally large regular areas, perhaps set out in the medieval period.

At the top of the path climb over the large stone stile slab, a common feature around the village and on the Mendip slopes. Turn right and walk a long to the meeting point of five lanes. Walk up Perch Hill ahead of you.

In the small garden on there was once a saw pit, now filled our right, called Townsend, there was once a saw-pit, now filled in. Stop when you reach the building called The Barn, to enjoy the view of the low-lying landscape to the south of the village.

The hills that stand out from the lower ground are Chalcroft (on the left), Windmill Hill (the conical one in the centre), and Lodge Hill (on the right). These areas, together with quite a lot of the lower ground nearby once stood within a medieval deer park. The bishops of Wells had a deer park at Westbury by 1178, and a map of 1759 shows that the Park Manor was still an identifiable area 600 years later. It was over 500 acres in extent, encompassing most of the land to the south-west of the village which lay above the winter flood level. The park boundary was, from at least as early as the 14th century, about one third stone wall and two thirds fence (either hedge or paling). It was maintained annually by the free tenants of the bishop from many far-flung parts of his estates in Somerset.

A parker's lodge sat on the summit of Lodge Hill; it may not have been a dwelling, but more of a look-out post, store, etc. There were closes or compartments within the park, which was used not only for raising and hunting deer, but for timber production and pasture.

Walk up the hill to see the nonconformist chapel, built in 1872, used in the past by a small congregation of Bible Christians. Its situation on the extreme edge of the village suggests that it may have developed from an earlier outdoor meeting tradition. In other places locally, such as Croscombe, outdoor nonconformist meetings are documented. By 1861, in addition to the Bible Christians a group of Plymouth Brethren met in a house in the village, and in 1864 the Wesleyans also built a chapel in Westbury.

This lane was once on the 'coffin path' from Priddy, as the chapel there did not always have burial rights, and coffins were therefore carried down the steep southern slopes of Mendip for burial at St Lawrence's in Westbury.

5. Retrace your steps to enter The Square.

This attractive feature of Westbury-Sub-Mendip is unusual for a Somerset village, and may be connected to the presence of the village cross - perhaps a rectangular market-place once stretched from The Square to the cross. The long building facing on to The Square was The Horse and Groom public house. In the rear garden there is a 'coffin stone', a large rock on which coffins that had been carried down from Priddy could be rested while the funeral party took refreshment at the pub before continuing their journey to the church.

6. Turn right and walk up Free Hill.

The name is meaningful - the tithe map of 1838 shows us that properties in this area were freehold, in contrast to the other land and buildings of the parish, which were the property of the bishop and held from him by tenants. The freeholdings of Free Hill may date back to the 12th century granting of the church and associated property to Bruton Priory. Another possibility is that this land was once held by one or more free tenants during the Middle Ages. A valuation of 1555 mentions two free tenants with land holdings at Quenill, a *place* that cannot now be identified.

There is little evidence for involvement by Westbury folk in the famous Somerset cloth industry, but there may have been some small-scale domestic woollen production. While many of the older houses in the village were clearly farmhouses, the cottages in the Free Hill area may have housed craftsmen, labourers and textile workers. A broom-and basket-making industry was active.

Some way up the hill on your right is a quaint building which was once the Old Red Lion ale house; it has an unusual narrow Tudor doorway. Just past the former ale house is a small yard - notice the attractive stone gateposts.

There are many of these locally, made of Draycott stone, a Dolomitic conglomerate

7. Continue up Free Hill until you reach a fork in the road.

The lane that continues straight on leads to Kites Croft, an outlying group of houses. Look up at the high grassy slopes that lie to the north of the village. The banks and ditches of ancient agricultural activity can be seen here. In the Middle Ages, when the deer park used some of the best land in the parish, the displaced villagers were forced to create new arable fields high on these Mendip slopes. It must have been hard work and highly inconvenient to plough these upper fields.

Turn left, and walk along Back Lane, enjoying the view over the little valley. Follow the road as it swings left near Drappet Farm.

The name is derived from Drop Well, a little spring which rises close to the farm. A little way along on your right you will see a charming dipping well; there are several others in this upper part of the village. Roman coins have been found close to this well. It seems likely that the small outlying cluster of farmsteads in the area now called Old Ditch may be on a site that has seen continuing activity since the Roman period, or even earlier.

When you arrive at the T-junction turn right up the hill.

The farm on the right, now called Lower Old Ditch Farm, was called 'Ballhay, formerly Spratt's tenement' in 1741. The farmhouse is an old building, but, interestingly, its associated farm buildings which also look quite old were built not much more than a hundred years ago. The farmhouse was once thatched, and the roof was raised considerably when it was converted to tiles. On the left as you look at the house, the line of the earlier roof can be seen in the masonry. When the house was thatched the upstairs windows would have been dormers, half set into the thatch.

Walk up the hill a little way to see Poplar Farm and Elm Tree Farm, two more old auster farms.

Note the large rock at the fork in the road. This area of the village has extensive rock outcrops which have been quarried to build local houses. The geology of the parish is carboniferous limestone on the plateau and Dolomitic conglomerate on the slopes; red marl predominates in the lower areas, with deep alluvial deposits on the low ground of the moors.

8. Walk as far as Old Ditch Farm, once one of the largest village tenements, with a virgate of land. Retrace your steps to Lower Old Ditch Farm, and then bear right down the lane known as Old Ditch, formerly 'holdich', meaning 'deep ditch.'

The 'ditch' is the course of a small stream that has cut deeply into the land surface. There are several fine old farmhouses set in this little valley. Ash Tree Farm was bought in 1651 from Sir Edward Rodney by Richard Hardwich. The Rodney family, who gave their name to the adjacent parish of Rodney Stoke, had an interest in Westbury. An *Inquisition Post Mortem* of 1478 into the affairs of Isabella Pawlet, widow of Sir Thomas Rodney, shows that the Rodneys held land in Cheddar and Westbury for a half knight's fee as free tenants.

Knyfton's on the left is another of Westbury's older farms. Notice the two milk chum stands beside the road; once common countryside features, most have been removed in recent years. After Knyfton's you reach the former water-powered smithy, which was in operation by 1886. It may have been the site of a water mill earlier in its history. No mill was mentioned at

Domesday, but John Fyssh paid rent on a mill in 1555. On the grass verge opposite is a bonding stone, used in making the iron rims of cartwheels.

Continue down the road.

Notice Newlyn on your right, with its early 19th century facade. This had a spell of use as a blacksmith's shop.

Further down the road, on your left, is the Old Vicarage.

The Old Vicarage was built in 1832 by the Revd Noblett Ruddock. The builder was John Salmon of Easton. To satisfy the mortgage requirements (£500 pounds was borrowed) Salmon swore a deposition concerning the work to be done. This stated that 'there is not any timber standing on the glebe, or old timber and materials in the building fit to be employed' in the new house. The old house had been demolished, and the materials, which were not good enough to use in the new building, were sold for £10. The detailed plans of the Old Vicarage are in the Somerset Record Office in Taunton.

Next on the right is the school, built shortly after the appointment in 1886 of the Revd Clement Alford as vicar. He organised fund-raising, a i c u t t a s as the church was also in need of repair and renovation. Alford wrote to the National School Society: 'The present school building is also in very bad repair. It was adapted from an old farm house about the year 1860; and though it may have served fairly well at the time, it is utterly unfitted for a school according to present requirements.'

The appeal must have had some success, and the school was described in *Kelly's Directory of 1889* as having the capacity for 100 children, with an average attendance of 78.