

# Tavistock HERITAGE TRAILS

## TRAIL 1: Tavistock Abbey Walk

### Strong Foundations...

**Tavistock Abbey was founded between 972 and 975 by Ordulph, the brother in-law of King Edgar who unified separate Anglo Saxon kingdoms to create England. Tavistock was one of 22 new monasteries created in Edgar's reign to control the countryside.**

The location was strategically important because it was close to the border with Cornwall. In 997 the abbey was sacked by Danish raiders and subsequently rebuilt. The site of the Saxon

and Norman buildings, which were probably timber, is not known.

The abbey was part of the Benedictine Order which stressed the need for obedience, communal prayer, daily reading and manual labour. Wealthy patrons gave money and land in the hope of salvation when they died.

The buildings which survive date from the 12th to 16th centuries and reflect how Tavistock became the wealthiest monastery in Devon and Cornwall.



*The walk starts in Bedford Square in front of Court Gate.*

*You will find other walking instructions in italics like this message.*

### 1. Court Gate

This late medieval gatehouse with pointed gothic arches was the abbey's main entrance. It encased a smaller late 12th century gatehouse from which the two rounded Romanesque archways survive. A blocked arch (inside and right of the entrance) may have been where alms were given to the poor. Court Gate was restored in the early 19th century.

The single storey building on the right was added as a Weights and Measures Office for the town's markets in the 1850s. Court Gate and Tavistock's other historic buildings are built with grey/green Hurdwick stone, granite, and slates which are known locally as shillet.



*Walk through the archway into the Guildhall Square car park.*

### 2. Trowte's House

You are standing in what was the abbey courtyard where the monks and their servants would have greeted visitors and unloaded goods for the community's use. Trowte's House was built in the late 15th century. It probably accommodated guests or an abbey officer such as the steward. Trowte's House is named after a clothier, John

Trowte, a late 17th century tenant. During and after the Middle Ages the neighbouring buildings contained workshops, mills, malhouses and stables. The abbey mill stood on the current museum site. In the 1840s the whole range was converted into a Guildhall and police station.



*Walk around the car park and cross the road at the pedestrian crossing.*

*Turn left and stop just before the bridge.*

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### 3. Abbey Bridge

Looking downstream, the wall along the River Tavy's right bank enclosed the abbey precinct and symbolised the monks' spiritual separation from the secular world. Its crenelated parapet was a fashionable display of the abbey's wealth rather than for defence. Near the bridge would have been the site of the Watergate, one of the

abbey's four entrances, where there was probably a small footbridge across the river. The current Abbey Bridge was constructed for a new turnpike road in 1762. It was widened in 1860 to cope with increased traffic from the newly built railway station.



*Turn right and follow the river to The Still House.*

### 4. The Still House

This tower is believed to be the Still House where herbs were distilled to produce medicines. The abbey provided a range of social services for the monks and local community including treating the sick, a leper hospital and a school. The Still House was built in two phases during the 15th

century. It was restored in the 19th century when it was used as a gazebo or summer house. The Still House marks the end of the abbey site and from here the precinct wall runs at a right angle away to the West Gate.



*Continue along the riverside walk until you come to the first entrance on your right which leads into the car park.*

### 5. Tavistock & The River Tavy

Tavistock is named from the River Tavy and the Old English word **stoc** meaning settlement, enclosure or pasture. The place name and a 5th or

6th century inscribed stone found in West Street suggests there was a settlement and/or a Celtic monastery here before the later medieval abbey.



*Go through the entrance, walk around the car park and follow the footpath which crosses the Tavistock Canal.*



*To avoid the steps into the car park, continue along the river. At the Meadowlands Leisure Centre, (which has a raised glass roof), turn right and go straight ahead. Opposite the Leisure Centre sign, take the ramp and footbridge over the canal. Turn right and follow the canal. Cross Canal Road, turn left and continue to the junction with Plymouth Road opposite the bus station. Turn right and continue to stop 6.*



*From the canal follow the footpath to Plymouth Road, turn right and walk towards the town centre. Just after the sign for the Parish Centre, turn right and enter the Vicarage garden.*

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### 6. West Gate

The West Gate probably opened onto meadows and orchards. Built in the 15th century and substantially altered in the 18th and 19th, it is known as Betsy Grimbald's tower. According to Victorian folklorist Anna Eliza Bray, Betsy was murdered by a soldier. Others have suggested the name commemorated a scholarly 9th century

French Benedictine monk, Saint Grimbald. The stone trough was discovered in 1725 and contained the thigh bones of an unusually tall man, who was said to be the abbey's founder, Ordulph. The bones were reburied in the parish church. The left turret contains a garderobe (toilet) chute and drain.



*Return to Plymouth Road. Turn right and walk to the zebra crossing just after the Bedford Hotel. Cross here and enter the parish churchyard.*

### 7. The Cloister

This mid-13th century Early English style arch and wall with doorway are what remain of the abbey cloister. The south range with the Refectory, where the monks ate their meals, was probably on the site of the Bedford Hotel. The octagonal Chapter House, where the monks met and conducted their daily business, stood near the

mini roundabout. In the 18th century it was described as having 'thirty-six Stalls most beautifully arched overhead'. The remains of the cloister and Chapter House were demolished in the 1720s when the Abbey House, which later became the Bedford Hotel, was built.



*Follow the path towards the parish church and stop by the small square marker stone which is to the left of the path.*

### 8. Abbey Church

The abbey church stood between here and the cloisters. Its interior walls were stencilled in black, red and yellow. The floor tiles were red and white with motifs including a lion and a bishop. In 1478 William of Worcester measured the church as 138 paces long and 21 paces wide. It extended into Bedford Square where

archaeologists have discovered three high status monastic graves including two pewter chalices and patens (small plates) which held the wine and wafers for Communion. The abbey was dedicated to the Virgin Mary and to the Cornish saint, Rumon, whose remains were brought here and placed in a shrine.



*The parish church is usually open to visitors.*

### 9. The Parish Church of St Eustachius

A parish church for local people was first built in the mid-13th century. The present building was dedicated in 1318 to Eustachius, a Roman soldier who was martyred in the 2nd century. It was rebuilt in the Perpendicular gothic style in the 15th century. The tower, which was known as

Cemetery Gate or Church Bow, allowed access between the abbey precinct and the town. The interior, which was restored in 1844 and 1845, includes medieval roof bosses, late 16th and early 17th century memorial tablets and a later 19th century stained glass window by Burne Jones.



*Retrace your steps across the churchyard. Cross Plymouth Road using the zebra crossing and turn left. Follow the pavement round to the right as you reach the roundabout and continue on to Abbey Chapel.*

### 10. Abbey Chapel

This building, which originally extended further forward, was the Abbot's Hall. It was entered from the right. A porch with elaborate internal decoration was added in the late 15th or early 16th century, perhaps to celebrate the abbey's growing prestige. The king awarded the abbots mitred status in 1459, which effectively made them equal to bishops, and a seat in parliament in 1514.

The main building has been used as a chapel by various denominations since 1690. Its present doorway came from the abbey's

Watergate which was demolished in 1845. The small porch door was added in the 1960s.

On 3 March 1539 King Henry VIII's commissioners dissolved the abbey. Three months later the King gave most of its property to Lord John Russell, who became the 1st Earl of Bedford in 1550. Russell's heirs, who took the title of Duke of Bedford after 1694, owned most of Tavistock for the next 372 years. Their legacy is explored on **Trail 2: Tavistock and the Dukes of Bedford.**