

Saxon Gloucester

1. St Michael's Tower

General introduction to tour.

Introduction to Saxon period:

Roman army left Britain 410. Roman towns including Gloucester declined, walls and buildings fell into decay, the population went down, and it reverted to an agricultural economy.

Later in the 5th century new settlers, the Angles, Saxon and Jutes started to arrive from what is now northern Germany, southern Denmark, and gradually spread west. 577 battle at Dyrham where Anglo-Saxons defeated local tribal leaders and took over their main towns of Bath, Cirencester and Gloucester.

Gradually the country was divided into kingdoms, some of the names familiar to us today – e.g. Wessex, West Saxons – which covered much of S England south of the Thames. Gloucester was in the kingdom of Mercia, a large area covering the Midlands, stretching from the Thames to the Humber. A-S rule continued until the Norman conquest of 1066.

We'll walk round the city centre looking at traces of Saxon Gloucester, concentrating mainly on the early 900s, when Mercia was ruled by a woman, Aethelflaed, the Lady of the Mercians.

We start down Southgate Street and walk along some Saxon streets.

2. End of Cross Keys Lane

Looking down Southgate Street.

Excavations under current Eastgate Centre, as well as Roman remains, found evidence of Saxon houses – wicker work, rush matting, sword sheath. Further down, St Mary de Crypt church may have Saxon origin, and St Mary's Lane next to it probably of Saxon origin.

Cross Keys Lane: The route of this street dates back to Saxon times.

In the 10th century, this lane was known as Scrudelone or Scrud Lane. Scrud means garment or cloth (related to our word shroud) and this probably indicated as area where cloth was woven.

Walk along lane and right along Mercer's Entry to Westgate Street.

3. Mercer's Entry

We now come to the time of Aethelflaed, the Lady of the Mercians.

She was the wife of Aethelred, ruler of Mercia, and the daughter of Alfred, king of Wessex, known to us as Alfred the Great, renowned for fighting the Vikings and preventing them taking over the whole country.

A few words about the Vikings: -

The country had been suffering raids and invasions by Viking armies from Norway and Denmark throughout 9th century. By the 870s/80s they had taken over much of the country – the east of England, including a large chunk of NE Mercia, the north, parts of Wales and Ireland. In 877 a Viking army camped in Gloucester over the winter. By the late 800s Alfred in Wessex and Aethelred in Mercia were only independent rulers left. They formed an alliance against the common enemy, the Vikings. This was symbolised and cemented by the marriage of Alfred's daughter to Aethelred.

Aethelflaed was very much her father's daughter, educated at his court and much influenced by him. When she married Aethelred she was clearly not content to remain quietly in the background and became in effect a co-ruler with him, acting as his deputy at times when he was ill or incapacitated. Her name appears either jointly with Aethelred or on her own, on several charters.

In 911 Aethelred died and Aethelflaed became ruler in her own right. This was unprecedented, unique in A-S times for a woman to be a ruler. Main criterion for a ruler was to be a military leader, therefore a man. However, Aethelflaed had proved herself an effective military commander and so had the support of her nobles. She continued campaigns against the Vikings in alliance with Wessex, now ruled by her brother Edward.

Her priority was to defend her territory. She set up a network of fortified towns known as burhs. In Gloucester this meant rebuilding the old Roman walls. The town centre was rebuilt on defensive lines – much of the street pattern we have today dates back to her time. It was planned on a grid pattern with long straight streets, easy to defend and leading directly to the city walls so that in case of attack the defenders could reach the walls quickly. Mercer's Entry is a surviving example of this. There would have been others at regular intervals down the street, and off other streets too.

4. Opp Maverdine Lane/Fleece

Though we can't really speak of a capital in the modern sense, Gloucester has been described as the capital for Aethelflaed and Aethelred. It's thought that Aethelred's family and power base was in this area. It was certainly an important centre for them. One sign of its importance is that it had its own mint, dating from the time of Alfred, so possibly founded by his daughter. The location was here in Westgate Street (later site of King's Board). The earliest known coins from the mint is a silver penny of Alfred's reign, and it continued to produce coins until the reign of Henry III, about 1250.

Look up Westgate Street

Route of Westgate Street itself is of Saxon origin. It is slightly to the north of the Roman street and was built through the remains of the colonnade of a significant Roman building. Remains of large columns have been found beneath the buildings in the north side of the street. One of the bases can be seen in the window of HSBC, and the column itself in the museum. Excavations in Westgate Street (nos 1-7 on south side) in the 1970s found traces of Saxon houses ie timber posts and wicker work from wattle and daub buildings. Other items found were fragments of a weaving loom and cloth, as well as fragments of wooden bowls and cups, and off-cuts of leather from shoemaking. Also in the area of the cross was found a carved bull's head, thought to date from the 8th century.

5. Berkeley Street

Berkeley Street – another street which existed in Saxon times, which follows the route of the Roman wall. . Remains of a Saxon round house were found under the Telephone Exchange site, along with Roman remains. Excavations also found a late Saxon scramasax sheath here, a leather sword sheath.

Look towards Bearland at end of street

We're looking towards a well populated part of the late Saxon town. Soon after the Norman conquest, the Normans built a castle (motte and bailey) in this area. Its grounds covered much of the Blackfriars area and the Barbican (now occupied by student flats). It is recorded that they had to demolish 16 Saxon dwellings to build their castle. Excavations during recent building work on the site found evidence of a Saxon building constructed from re-used Roman stone, along with Saxon pottery and items worked from antlers. It is thought that there is a lot more Saxon archaeology to be found in the Commercial Road area.

6. Cathedral

It is thanks to the Saxons that we have a cathedral in this place.

The present building dates back to Norman times but on site of a Saxon religious house. This takes us back over 200 years before Aethelflaed, when Gloucester was part of the kingdom of the Hwicce - a sub tribe of the Mercians. Their area covered present-day Gloucestershire and Worcestershire.

Osric, king of the Hwicce, founded a religious house here in 679 – a community for monks and nuns. There were separate buildings for men and women, and a church. It was common for a rulers to establish a religious house as a symbol of their authority. It wasn't unusual for them to be in the charge of a noble or royal lady. Here Osric appointed his sister Kyneburgh as abbess. She would have been in a position of some power. As well as being in charge of the abbey and its land, she would have acted as his representative in the area. Religious houses were also a type of "retirement home" where aristocratic widows or unmarried women could live out their lives in some comfort and luxury, but they were also centres of learning.

The abbey would have had a beneficial impact on the development of Gloucester, still a sparsely populated post-Roman town. It attracted workmen, craftsmen, tradesmen and servants.

It fell into decline in 8th century. Became house for secular priests. 1022 priests expelled by King Cnut for "ill living" and replaced by Benedictine monks.

Burned down 1058 and rebuilt, but neglected and run down, in a poor financial situation as its lands had been appropriated by the Archbishop of York.

After the Norman Conquest William the Conqueror appointed Serlo, a monk from Normandy, to reform and revive the abbey. He started from scratch with a new building. No traces of the Saxon buildings have been found.

7. St Mary de Lode

Chapel here in Saxon times – on vanished 3rd arm of Severn. Site of small 5th century burial chapel, built on remains of Roman house (mosaics). Likely that other city centre churches had their origins in Saxon chapels, eg St Mary de Crypt, St Michael's, St John's and others. There was a chapel to St Kyneburgh at the south gate, bottom of Southgate Street.

8. St Oswald's minster

Built about 900 by Aethelflaed and Aethelred as a royal chapel, - symbol of royal power, and showed the importance of Gloucester to them.

(Look at plan of chapel on information board or print out. Point out Saxon stones above arches.)

It had a fairly simple design though with a western apse, which was more common on the continent at the time. An eastern extension with a crypt was added slightly later. There was no tower but bell pit found. Richly decorated, - carved and painted stonework, decorated wall plaster, wall hangings, candlesticks and other items in gold and silver. Became known as the golden minster. Also "new minster", originally dedicated to St Peter.

Relics were important. In 909 Aethelflaed (together with king Edward of Mercia) sent an expedition to Bardney in Viking-ruled Lincolnshire to seize the bones of St Oswald and bring them back to Gloucester. Oswald was a 7th century Saxon king of Northumbria and revered Christian saint, so retrieving his bones would have been a great coup. They were placed probably at the east end of church. Brought great prestige and pilgrims to the church.

Aethelflaed died 918 in Tamworth, and was brought here to be buried with her husband. No remains have been found, but part of an elaborately carved tombstone, suitable for a royal grave, has been found and can be seen in the museum.

Walk through arch

The minster was built on the site of a Roman cemetery and Roman tilery. It would also have been at least partially surrounded by water – the third branch of the Severn ran alongside it. It was used as a burial ground in the earlier Saxon period. Intricately carved Saxon cross shafts were found which pre-date the church. (Can be seen in city museum). Excavations found buried skeletons from Roman, through Saxon, Norman, Medieval and later periods.

The building underwent many changes and additions from the Saxon period onwards eg a northern nave and transept were added, and it was enlarged and restructured in Norman times.

Later history: in 12th century became Augustinian abbey and monastic buildings added. At dissolution reduced in size, part of church becoming a parish church. Partially destroyed in Civil War siege. Demolition continued in the 1650s when stones from here were used in rebuilding elsewhere in the city. Arches survived, as outhouses and sheds were built against the ruins.

Excavations took place in 1970s when it was in danger of becoming a traffic island.

Walk along Pitt Street or through cathedral grounds to Hare Lane.

9. Hare Lane

Saxon corner of town: the name Hare Lane name derives from the Saxon word “Here” meaning army, ie it was a military road probably leading to the royal great hall at Kingsholm. This was a timber hall, dating from the 10th century. Used at meeting place by later Saxon kings. Edward the Confessor held 9 great councils here – Witan, assemblies of his nobles.

By his time (11th century). Gloucester had grown and become more prosperous – there is evidence of pottery manufacture and iron industry. The system of local government had become more formalised, and Gloucester had become a shire town, the administrative centre for the region.

Walk up to St John’s on Northgate Street

10. St John’s church

Links to **Aethelstan**, grandson of Alfred, nephew of Aethelflaed. He was brought up at the Mercian court by Aethelflaed and her husband. After Aethelflaed’s death, Edward of Wessex brought Mercia under his control. Aethelstan succeeded in 924 as king of both Wessex and Mercia. He extended his control over other areas and was first to call himself king of all England.

Regular visitor to Gloucester, said to have founded church of St John in 931.

Died at Gloucester, buried at Malmesbury.

Summing up: Aethelflaed is unique in A-S history by being the only woman to rule in her own right. She was a military leader, played an important role in pushing back Viking rule, and so helped to create England as we know it today.