

## **Great Yarmouth Town Wall Walk.**

### **Introduction**

Due to its geographical position Great Yarmouth was of great strategic importance to Henry III in the defence of the Eastern Counties in his struggle with Simon de Montfort and the barons. Accordingly he granted permission to the 'burgesses' of the town in 1261 to enclose the town with a wall and moat. Despite this importance work did not start for over 20 years and it then took upwards of 100 years to complete.

In the early stages the cost of building was met by levying tolls on all ships entering or leaving the harbour, but contributions were also received from a number of patriotically inspired citizens.

The people of the town were themselves the labour force. Each and every one of them was beholden to do a certain number of days work on the wall each year. The wealthier were able to escape this irksome and back aching duty by paying. The money was then used to pay other men to labour in their stead.

With a shortage of building stone in the area, and the prohibitive cost of importing it, the walls and towers were all built of flints and pebbles found lying on the beaches and in the immediate neighbourhood. The construction of square towers was also out of the question, since this would involve the use of dressed stone for the corners. In consequence all are round except King Henry's Tower.

Once completed it was originally 2280 yards long, 23 feet high and 7 feet thick. It had 10 gates, 16 towers, and encircled 133 acres of land; which was the extent of the town for some centuries.

Said to be the second most complete town wall in the country, (after York of course), Great Yarmouth's Town Wall, though damaged by both war and building & road redevelopment in past years, still presents an impressive site.

Much of what remains can be seen, if sometimes from a distance, during this walk. Regrettably, however, with the exception of the Great Yarmouth Potteries, which are well worth a visit in their own right, and which might be thought of as being built into and part of the town wall, none of the towers still standing are open to the public.

Apart from one short section indicated otherwise, the route of about 1 ½ miles is accessible to those in a wheelchair, and should take about an hour to complete (with appropriate pauses for admiration of our forbears work)

### **Route**

The walk begins at the North West Tower, currently occupied by a firm of Building Surveyors.

From the north end of the cobbled Market Place cross over Temple Road towards the entrance to the Minster & Priory Church of St. Nicholas, itself worth a visit, and then turn left. Cross over Northgate Street (slight clue here?) towards the Crystal Inn; but, ignoring the smell of real ale coming from within, continue onwards with some flats to your left (across the road) and a car park to your right. As you crest this slight rise you will see the very tip of the tower ahead of you and slightly to your right, peeping over the top of the Royal Mail sorting office. Follow the path downwards and to the right and for safety's sake use the North Quay underpass to get to the starting point.

With your back to the river and the tower, cross over Lawn Avenue and head up Rampart Road (use of the earlier underpass is advisable). This short section of wall, and one tower, is no

longer with us, having the dubious honour of being the last section to be demolished (in 1902), but we pick it up again when you cross over the next junction with Northgate Street and enter Town Wall Road. Here you can see one of the first examples of the cultural vandalism (by today's standards) of our ancestors. Part of the wall has been incorporated into the house at the head of the road. There is a plaque on this section which informs us that this is the site of the North Gate, demolished in 1807.

Clearly not for nothing is Northgate Street so named, since it is here that one of the two main Gates was located, permitting access to the town from places to the north such as Caister. At this point, and for much of the walk, you are actually outside Great Yarmouth town as it then was.

Bearing right as the road forks and becomes Ferrier Road, past the North East Tower, we get our first good idea how imposing the wall must have originally looked, unencumbered as it is at this point by any buildings. Note the various bricked up archways, doorways and windows in this section (some even with woodwork intact) which give incite into the walls chequered history.

As you follow the wall round, you come to the 3<sup>rd</sup> tower of our walk. Called King Henry's Tower, it is traditionally regarded as the first to be constructed when the walling of the town commenced c1284 AD, and as mentioned earlier, is the only non round tower, being octagonal in shape.

About 25 yards beyond this we come to an entrance to St. Nicholas churchyard which we take and follow the path through this haven of tranquillity until it emerges more or less directly ahead of us into what is now Sainsbury's car park. Before we move on though, why not pause for a moment to admire the view of St. Nicholas Minster, claimed to be the largest Parish Church in England. Should you wish to you can also at this point climb the grass bank at the back of the wall and look into the King Henry's Tower through a locked iron gate. Through parts of this bank stones can often be seen partially protruding, showing how it follows the line of this section of now lost wall. This banking is far from accidental. It is in fact one of the places on our route where we can see how the wall was 'rampired' from 1545 onwards – that is backed with banks of earth to strengthen it to withstand artillery fire. This lost section also included 'St. Nicholas Gate'; blocked up at the reformation and part demolished in 1642, finally cleared in 1800.

As you leave the churchyard into Sainsbury's car park keep to the right and you will be walking alongside part of the wall, heading towards the town centre again. Crossing over the cul-de-sac end of St. Nicholas Road and continuing along we are fact going past the site of another of the now lost gates, 'Pudding Gate', demolished in 1837. (Regrettably all gates were pulled down between 1776 and 1812 as various roads were widened). As you do so you will see how a short section of wall now forms the eastern side of a building occupied by D S Motor Services.

From here on for a while the wall becomes a bit more difficult to see, being obscured in many places by buildings. At this point there is actually a beautiful little grassed area the other side of the wall, the Independent Burial Ground, next to the tower which you can see (The Hospital Tower'), and which was once accessible from the Market Place down a passageway by the side of the former Co-Op store. A little haven of tranquillity amidst the hustle and bustle of the Market Place. Sadly this has now been closed off to the public. Luckily quite a good view of the tower at least can be had across the entrance to Fishers Court as we continue along Temple Road and approach the Market Gates shopping precinct, so called because we are at the site of another Gate, demolished in 1830. Though it would be possible to approach the base of the Hospital Tower here it would involve crossing into what might well be private property. Public access at this point is not certain.

As you approach a set of traffic lights, look up the narrow road leading off diagonally to your right and you will see the continuation of the wall, just beyond the British Heart Foundation shop. The cul-de-sac passageway/road that this section runs parallel with is open to the public and so by all means double back along it for a way at this point (in the direction of the previous tower). Most

of what remains here however is much defaced by the paint and tiles of buildings once using the wall but now mostly demolished.

Returning back the way we came towards the British Heart Foundation shop (the side of which is now on your left), you will see across the road the continuation of the wall disappearing beneath the shopping precinct, and labelled both 'Toilets' and 'Entrance to Conservative Club'

Apart from a potential comfort break you will see here that the Market Gates Shopping Precinct was designed to fit around this section of wall, which at this point is accessible from both sides. Clearly by the time of its construction in the mid 1970's more thought was being given to our town's heritage!

Should you wish to see both sides first follow the 'Conservative Club' signs, but only as far as the metal gate which blocks the passage just a few yards inwards from the road. Access beyond this is not allowed, but a good view can be had from this point of the small tower (The Guard Tower') which we will be seeing again from higher up as we return to the path on the other side of the wall.

On the 'Toilet' side (which is our main route, and which would have been inside the town) you can actually see very clearly how the arrow slots in the wall, though now bricked up, would have given Yarmouth archers the ability to shoot at their enemies in a wide sweep of angle, whilst making it almost impossible for anyone to shoot back at them from outside.

Regrettably we are now at the one part of the walk which is not disabled friendly, since we have a couple of short flights of steps to negotiate. Those who cannot manage them will need to circumnavigate the shopping precinct to rejoin it at the head of the steps.

Continuing along behind the shops with loading bays to our left we come out facing a BHS store. Cross over the road towards it and turn left. Between BHS and Spud U Like you will see the stub end of the wall disappearing away between the buildings. Attached to it is a plaque with the inscription 'Site of Oxney's Gate – demolished 1776'. Continue along and bear right at KFC to find yourself back on the Temple Road which we departed from earlier. St. Georges Park is now on your left which could form a pleasant stop for a picnic or simple break should you wish.

Here we have another partially obscured section of wall, which can be partly seen at the rear of the large houses to our right, including another fine tower ('Pinnacle Tower'), mostly now inhabited it would seem by pigeons. As the road bears right and uphill we come to another tower ('Shave's Tower'), the site of New Gate or Chapel Gate (demolished in 1789). Our route however does not continue in this direction, and requires some careful description to avoid losing our way at this recently realigned junction.

Retrace your steps until you are back on the Temple Road facing the traffic lights you just passed and with St. Georges Park once more on your left. If we now regard the junction ahead as a clock, you are at six o'clock. The road we are after is now blocked off to traffic at this junction, but leads off at 10 o'clock (NOT the main road at 9 o'clock leading to the seafront). Regrettably there are no road signs to be seen to assist you. About 50yds along this road, on your right, is St. Peters Plain, signed high up on the right hand wall. This is where we are heading.

As you walk along the road you will come to a modern block of elderly people's retirement flats – 'Ravelin House'. The town wall can be seen behind this. Limited access is possible to the rear.

Continue past Ravelin House' and then cut down the next road to your right (small and cobbled). This will then enable you to follow the wall.

As you cross over the next road, York Road, you are at the former site of another gate 'Little Mount Gate'. Continue straight ahead and proceed down the roadway / alley. Here we find the stub of a tower 'Harris' Tower' which has been built upon in years past. In front of us is now the side of the former St. Peter's Church (now the Greek Orthodox Church of St. Spiridon) This section of wall was demolished in 1830 to make way for its construction.

Turn right to circumnavigate the church, and as you pass its main entrance on your left you will see a road ahead of you on the opposite side of St. Peters Road (the site of The Ropemakers Gate – demolished in 1785), called Deneside. Continue south along this road.

As you walk along Deneside you will see on your left where the wall continues. To judge from the archways now only partially visible, the ground level has been raised somewhat over the years (even after allowing for ‘rampiring’?). This section can also be seen at its full height and glory by nipping round to the opposite side, now a playground and a car park for the Time and Tide Museum. We are soon to arrive at the longest, relatively unspoilt, section of wall.

*(In passing you may wish to consider paying the Time & Tide a visit. Built into what was an old herring curing works it is a modern and fascinating museum about the history of the town, including the rise of Tourism, its place as a major herring port, and in the North Sea oil boom of the sixties.)*

When you reach the end of Deneside you will be almost facing a public house called ‘The Recruit’. The road to its right as you face it is called Trinity Place, and gives access to the rear of the Great Yarmouth Potteries, themselves well worth a visit (perhaps in conjunction with the Time & Tide?). The potter and his wife, Ernie and Karen Childs, live on site, and claim to be the only people in Gt. Yarmouth to sleep with their heads against the old town wall! Both are very knowledgeable about the town and its history, and should they have time to spare, you could learn more in half an hour’s conversation with them than in a dozen history books. The main entrance to the Pottery is now on the eastern side of the wall (Blackfriars Road).

From this point onwards most of the wall can be viewed from either side, but it is recommended that you begin by continuing along Trinity Place until you reach the South East Tower ‘Erected by the townsfolk in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century’, of which you can get a fantastic and close up view. Passing down the steep cobbled street to its south side we are once again effectively outside the town, and turning to our right can complete the last few hundred yards of this section, passing as we do a spot which would certainly be suitable for a rest if not picnic.

Before we do so however, turn left and retrace the eastern side of the wall at the site of the Potteries. Here we come to an interesting part of the walls history. Standing on the opposite side of the road next to the Time and Tide museum you would clearly be outside Yarmouth, with nothing but the sand, sea and wind buffeting you. Although there would have originally been no buildings on this side of the wall, there would have been graves. Jews were banned from being buried inside the town perimeter up until the 19th century. A relic of this is the cluster of graves with Hebrew and English inscriptions which can still be seen to the left of The Recruit behind an enclosing wall.

Turning our steps south once again, at the end of this picturesque stretch we reach Blackfriars Tower. Something of an oddity, in that in 1807 a passageway was knocked through at ground level so that it is possible to cross from one side of the wall to the other through the tower. It carries the plaque ‘Erected by the Townsfolk C 1340 AD’

At this point Garden Gate becomes Blackfriars Road (signed on low wall to your left). Do not follow this, but rather bear right heading for The Blackfriars Tavern. Just in front of this pub a small road leads off to the right called Mariners Road. We are now reaching the last short stretch of wall.