

The History of Axbridge

Originally a fortified Saxon Burgh

On a perfect summer's day a full quota of BACAS excursionists met at Axbridge for a tour led by Robin Goodfellow, from the Axbridge Archaeological and Local History Society.

Les Hayes The town's origins lie in its foundation as a fortified Saxon Burgh established in the AD890s near to the Royal palace at Cheddar. It was important enough to have a Royal mint and continued to prosper as a cloth making centre dependent on the Mendip sheep runs. It was granted a Royal Charter in AD1202 when King John sold it to the Bishop of Bath and Wells and in the reigns of Edward I and Edward III, it sent members to parliament.

The Guild of St Mary governed the town until another Royal Charter transferred control to a Mayor and Corporation. Robin proudly noted that Axbridge still has a Mayor together with a Bailiff, Mace Bearer and that indispensable functionary, a Town Crier.

The Medieval town adopted the emblem of St John the Baptist who is the patron saint of cloth merchants. Many of their houses survive, although we observed that they are often hidden by more modern facades. However, the long narrow burgage plots still determine the layout of present day Axbridge. The picturesque Square was the focus of the market held there since the 10th Century and fairs have been recorded there from the 13th Century. Sadly, the roofed market cross was demolished in AD1756 although its site is marked out. The stocks survive in the Museum although needing some significant restoration before reuse.

The old town wells survive intact to the side of the church steps dominated by the magnificent church of St John the Baptist (*see Figure 1*). The present church dates from the early 15th Century replacing a church built around AD1230. The striking ceiling in the nave is actually Jacobean and dates from AD1636.

Figure 1
St John the Baptist, the old town wells survive to the side of the church steps.



After the Tudor era the town's economy stagnated, which has allowed visitors to admire the many extant Medieval buildings. The most prominent early domestic structure is in the Square, and known as 'King John's Hunting Lodge' (see Figure 2). It was, in reality, a Tudor cloth merchant's house of around AD1500 and now houses the very well presented town Museum where we spent some time educating ourselves. We were shown inside the Williamite town hall and the collection of numerous artefacts gathered over the decades.

Axminster slept until the coming of the railway in 1869 which promoted growth literally in the explosion of the soft fruits industry. Dr Beeching saw to the closure of the 'Strawberry Line' in 1963 and we were conducted to the edge of the bypass where the station and goods shed still stand.

Figure 2
King John's Hunting Lodge now home to the Axbridge Museum.

