

A walk around ancient Baldock

Start at the War Memorial, High Street

Baldock is a town with a curious history. Today, it is a small market town with a population of just over 9,000 people, choked by traffic and in commercial decline. Its character is overwhelmingly Georgian. Yet in the fourteenth century, it was one of the wealthiest towns in all of Hertfordshire and in the first century BC, it was the first town to develop in the region. This walk explores some of these aspects of the town's history.

The placename: a controversial topic

The name of the town looks thoroughly English, with the -ock ending seeming to suggest a connection with the word 'oak'. Many people have suggested that it derives from Middle English *Baldoke*, meaning 'bare oak'. This ignores the evidence of all the early spellings, which show that the name originally ended with -ac. The early spellings include *Baudac* and *Baldac*, which are the same as the Medieval French name of Baghdad; in Italian, it is still *Baldacco*. This has long been connected with the foundation of the town by the Knights Templar c 1142. The change to Baldock must be to do with early attempts to Anglicise the name by people who had forgotten its true origin.

The medieval 'New Town'

Around 1142, the Knights Templar were granted a part of Gilbert de Clare's manor of Weston, towards its northern extremity. Later, in 1199, they were granted a charter giving the town the right to hold a market and an annual fair. Even so, the town was slow to develop as it seems to have had little luck in attracting settlers. Nevertheless, by the early fourteenth century, it was almost as wealthy as St Albans, a remarkable achievement. It was hit badly by the plagues of the mid fourteenth century and the town contracted to an area around the crossroads by the church. It did not recover until the eighteenth century, when a new prosperity based around malting brought wealth into the town and it was able to expand again.

High Street: east side (opposite)

No 1 on the corner with Whitehorse Street is Late Georgian.

No 9 is Early Georgian: five bays with a segmental pediment to the door.

No 11 has an early Georgian front.

No 21 (Manor House) is later C18 and is set back from the frontage: seven bays, with the central three projecting slightly and carrying a pediment encased in a (later?) parapet.

No 23 is the brewer's house of the now demolished Simpson's Brewery (pulled down in 1967). On the opposite side of Simpson's drive, the community centre incorporates a late fourteenth-century timber-framed outbuilding of the brewery.

The brewing industry was important in early modern Baldock. Its malts were considered to be amongst England's finest and were exported to London in considerable quantities. Numerous breweries also sprang up in the town to serve not only the local population, but also the growing volume of traffic on the Great North Road. This created much of the wealth that enabled the many Georgian buildings of the town to be built.

High Street: west side (this side)

Nos 10-14a are early Georgian: 14a is the most impressive, with six bays and a rainwater head dated 1728. Nos 16-18 were originally a sixteenth-/seventeenth-century building with eighteenth-century additions. No 24 is an eighteenth-century building with a nineteenth-century imitation timber-framed façade has been added, incorporating a fifteenth-century gateway with overhanging upper storey. Wynne's Almshouses (Nos 32-42) date from 1621. The bargeboards on the porches and dormers are Victorian.

Cross High Street by the pedestrian crossing near Mansfield Road and turn back on yourself to turn right into Simpson's Drive.

Walk along Simpson's Drive to The Twitchell.

The Twitchell is a medieval back lane for properties fronting the north-western end of the High Street and the southern side of White Horse Street. It appears to mark the boundary of the Roman town, which lay to the east.

From The Twitchell, walk into Baker's Close, the town's football ground.

In an exceptionally dry summer, it is possible to trace the walls of Roman buildings and boundaries that lie just below the surface of the grass. These buildings lay beside the main road that ran from *Verulamium* (St Albans) to Baldock, where it joins the Icknield Way, passing to the north of the Roman town. The buildings include a large town house and a Romano-Celtic temple. It has been suggested that some of the buildings next to the temple may have been guesthouses for visitors to a regionally important shrine; other buildings may have been additional shrines and temples. We appear to be at the religious heart of the ancient town.

Cross the field to enter The Tene, where there are some modern blocks of flats. At the T-junction, turn to your left and walk for short distance to the next T-junction.

It was the discovery of a rich Iron Age burial here in 1967 that prompted a series of excavations that continued on and off into the 1990s. The burial was deposited in a circular pit about 1.6 m across that contained a large bronze cauldron, a pair of bronze dishes, a pair of wooden buckets with bronze fittings, an amphora, two iron firedogs and part of a pig carcass. There was only a little cremated bone left in one of the buckets, but amongst the burnt bone were three brown bear phalanges, so it seems that the body had been wrapped in a bearskin for the cremation ritual.

This type of burial is known as a Welwyn-type burial, because the first to be recognised was discovered there in the early twentieth century. These burials are found across south-eastern England and are generally made in rectangular grave pits containing a large selection of pottery vessels. The fact that there was only one amphora in the Baldock burial and that the grave pit was circular makes it unusual. The type of amphora is also unusual: it is very early. While most Welwyn-type burials date from after 50 BC, this one seems to date from about 100 BC.

There is a myth that the name The Tene is mysterious: it was applied to the lane (formerly known as Periwinkle Lane) in 1948, long before the discovery of the burial in 1967, yet the burial is of a style archaeologists call La Tène III. Astounding coincidence? No. The committee of the Urban District Council debated a number of names for the road that was to be the site for aluminium prefabs and came up with The Tene because the curator of Letchworth Museum had suggested it. One of the councillors wrongly thought it to be a name applied by archaeologists to Roman remains and he knew that Roman burials (which he mistakenly thought was of soldiers) had recently been found in Pinnock's Lane. So the right name was adopted, but for the wrong reasons!

Go back along The Tene in the direction you came, but instead of returning to Bakers Close, turn right and continue along The Tene.

You are walking through what was once a large Roman cemetery, in use from the late third to the fifth century. All the burials were inhumations (skeletons), aligned east to west in orderly rows. This sort of arrangement is thought to have been Christian; the cemetery certainly dates from the time when Christianity became first the state religion and later, the only permitted religion in the Empire (not that such regulations meant much in faraway Britain!).

At the end of The Tene, turn right into Pinnocks Lane.

As you come towards the High Street, the Tesco superstore faces you. Its impressive façade was built as a film processing laboratory (although there is a persistent local myth that it was a silent film studio constructed just as 'talkies' were becoming the norm and so went almost instantly bankrupt). It later became the Kayser Bondor hosiery factory, to be taken over by Tesco in the 1980s. To the right stood the manor house of Baldock, demolished following a fire in 1928.

Turn left and pass along the High Street to the roundabout and turn into South Road.

Here lay another of Baldock's many Roman cemeteries. This time, it contained only cremations, dating from the first and early second centuries AD.

Walk along South Road.

This was the southern edge of the medieval New Town established in the 1140s and originated as a trackway in the Iron Age. In the Roman period it led south-west towards the Roman villa at Purwell Meadows, Hitchin, and north-east towards a palatial villa at Wallington.

At the roundabout, turn left into Clothall Road.

Until the early twentieth century, this was known as Pesthouse Lane, which referred to the Leper Hospital established in Clothall parish. Although it was once believed that the Hospital lay close to Clothall (or Quickswood), we now know that it first established on the Royston Road, east of Baldock and after a century or so, moved closer to the town. We will pass the site of the newer Hospital later on this walk.

After about 180 m, cross Clothall Road to enter the footpath that crosses Walls Field.

To your right lay the first Roman cemetery to be discovered in Baldock, in 1925. This was in use from the Late Iron Age through to at least the end of the third century AD. The main road from Braughing – the next Roman town to the south-east – came into Walls Field at an angle, passing underneath the roundabout. The cemetery seems to have been established in the angle between this road and another approaching from the direction of Bird Hill.

To your left lay the core of the Iron Age and Roman towns. The settlement developed from around 100 BC in an area that had been occupied for thousands of years by small numbers of people. By about 200 BC, the bowl in which Baldock lies had become the focus for some rather interesting construction work. The landscape was being divided up by long ditched boundaries, some of them consisting of two or three parallel banks and ditches and, most interestingly, by a long line of pits that stretched from the Ivel Springs to the north west, passing directly in front of us towards the top of the ridge, to turn past the Clothall Common estate towards Wallington.

In the years after 100 BC, the area defined by these earthworks began to take on urban characteristics. The western side of Walls Field became the focus for a settlement that eventually grew to cover the whole field and further north-west towards Royston Road, north-east beyond the pit alignment into what is now the Clothall Common estate and south-west towards the High Street. At its maximum extent, in the second century, the town covered 48 ha (120 acres), making it a large town for Roman Britain. Even so, its population remained small, as the properties making up the town were not densely packed, but set within spacious enclosures, sometimes separated by paddocks (and probably orchards and gardens). During the third century, the town seems to have gone into a long, slow decline for reasons that are not fully understood. Clothall Common was gradually abandoned, the old house plots becoming farmland and waste.

As we approach the housing estate, we come close to the pit alignment. During the first century BC, this formed a boundary between the town and a zone reserved for burials. To our right lay a long ditched enclosure crossing the alignment. By the time it was built, the pits had been filled in and contained tall, thick poles, with a bank of chalk on the far side. This enclosure was the only gap through this boundary. At its top end lay a circular shrine surrounded by cremation deposits. This seems to have been the route connecting the living with the dead. Beyond it, beneath Westell Close to the right, lay a scatter of inhumations. Over the next fifty years or so, the posts were removed and the boundary went out of use. As this happened, the area at Westell Close developed into a formal cemetery, which was used exclusively for cremations by around AD 70. It continued in use until about 310.

At the housing estate, turn left to follow the path around the edge of the estate. After about 200 m, turn right into Downlands.

This area was investigated by Ian Stead in the 1970s, where he documented the expansion of the settlement onto this part of Clothall Common after about 20 BC.

Turn right into Downlands and follow it round to Yeomanry Drive.

In front of you are the houses of Wynn Close. Underneath these houses lay another temple site, built late in the second century. It consisted of a circular shrine set in a large enclosure with a massive gateway forming an entrance on the south-eastern side. Along one edge of the enclosure was a series of pits used for the ritual deposition of objects that may have been 'sacrifices': they include the largest collection of third-century spearheads from Roman Britain, a bronze model antler and a sistrum (a rattle used in religious ceremonies). In the ditch, a cosmetic grinder was found: these grinders are usually associated with temple sites. Perhaps this was the shrine of a hunting god or goddess.

Turn left into Yeomanry Drive. After about 50 m, turn left onto a short path to the path at the back of Hartsfield School.

The area to your right was the site of yet more burials. The earliest date from the fifth century BC, long before the settlement grew up. They were made in a natural dell that silted up centuries later. Over the next few centuries, people were occasionally buried in this dell and their bones subsequently disinterred. During the first century BC, a building was put up next to these graves. It may have been a mortuary house – a building used in religious ceremonies for the dead. Next to it, around 50 BC, a massive square ditched enclosure was dug. At its centre lay the burial of another chieftain. This time, he was buried with one bucket, at least three joints of pork (or wild boar) and several pottery vessels. The grave had been disturbed in the Roman period, so there may have been other objects; the bone seems to have been at the disturbed end. Next to the grave lay a pit containing the remains of the funeral pyre and a few human remains belonging to an adult. The animal bone included parts of horse foot bones, the only horse bones from the collection: it is possible that the body was cremated wrapped in a horse skin in which the feet had been left on. There was also burnt chain mail. This burial is later in date than the Welwyn-type burial discovered in The Tene in 1967; it dates from somewhere between 50 and 20 BC. The material removed from the ditch was piled up to form a low square mound covering the burial. A number of further burials were inserted into the top of the mound.

To the north-west of the mound lay a trackway, beyond which a smaller enclosure was made around the same time or a little later. The burials deposited in this were very badly disturbed and were nowhere near as rich; a similar enclosure also lay beneath Downlands, to the south-east.

Towards the end of the third century, the area on the north-western side of the trackway – now a metalled road – began to be used as a cemetery. This was used uniquely for inhumations, of which 150 were found. This cemetery is characterised by some very unusual practices: there are several decapitated burials and many of the graves were re-used, with the bones of earlier occupants being carefully replaced around the new body. One of the burials was of a young woman who seems to have been murdered with a sharp instrument; another was a young man who seems to have been the victim of a violent assault by several people; another had died from the infection of broken lower legs, plausibly caused by a road traffic accident! Several of the graves contain post-Roman pottery, one type of which seems to date from the sixth century. Some of the people buried here were probably among the last Romano-Britons of Baldock, living with new Anglo-Saxon neighbours at Blackhorse Farm to the north.

Turn right onto the path to pass behind the back of Hartsfield School.

There have been three excavations at the school: in 1982, 1982 and 1991. Part of the pit alignment crosses the site; an Iron Age shrine lay to its south and dates from the period when the pits had been filled and posts put in them. Towards Walls Field, there were houses. One of them had a cellar with a shaft inside it. The cellar had been filled with debris from the house above, which appeared to have burned down in the fourth century. Underneath the debris were four bodies: an old man, a middle aged man, a youth and a child. It is tempting to see them as members of a single family, although how they came to be here is a mystery.

Walk along California.

The curious name of the road gives away its date, c 1850, around the time of the California Gold Rush.

At the junction with Royston Road, you are in a nineteenth-century chalk quarry that extended across the road, where it disturbed part of yet another Iron Age and Roman cemetery. This one started out as a cremation cemetery in the first century BC and by the third century AD had become an inhumation cemetery. This may have lasted until the fifth century. One of the burials was of a child of about 18 months old, who had been buried with a pipeclay goddess figurine over a hundred years old and whose grave was covered with a wooden shrine.

Turn left into Royston Road and go downhill.

Past the junction with Grosvenor Road, where some tall yellow brick flats can now be seen, is where the Leper Hospital was moved.

At the traffic lights, on the opposite side of Royston Road, is a large seventeenth-century courtyard house, Raban House, with its main range fronting this street and a lower wing along Station Road. There is a carriageway leading into the yard and a projecting porch carrying a room above it.

Cross over Clothall Road into Whitehorse Street.

Whitehorse Street (south side)

On the left is a former malthouse. It was built in the eighteenth century and restored in the 1990s when it was converted into apartments.

Number 40 was originally a toll gatehouse, built in the early nineteenth century.

Next door, no 38 is a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century L-shaped house.

No 22 (Oak House) is late eighteenth-century.

Whitehorse Street (north side)

No 35 is a late eighteenth-century brick-built house. Nos 31 and 33 are of similar date and construction.

On the way, the Methodist Chapel dates from 1853 and no 13 is another late eighteenth-century house.

Cross Whitehorse Street at the pedestrian crossing and proceed into Sun Street.

On the corner with Church Street is a late eighteenth-century range of brick buildings.

Cross Church Street.

Before entering the churchyard, nos 1-3 Church Street are a large sixteenth-century plastered half-timber house refronted in the eighteenth century.

St Mary's church

The church was established as a preceptory by the Knights Templar some time after they built their new town in the parish of Weston. The earliest parts of the building date from the thirteenth century in the lower part of the chancel. Most of the rest of the fabric dates from the early fourteenth century and is very similar in style to Ashwell church. Inside, there is a complete fifteenth-century rood screen. The stained glass is all nineteenth century. Inside, there is a thirteenth-century Purbeck marble tombstone and a set of fifteenth-century brasses.

Return to Church Street and cross Hitchin Street by the pedestrian crossing. Turn into the High Street.

On the corner is the former Town Hall, built in 1897.

Carry on past the former Town Hall to return to the War Memorial.

This archaeological walk has been produced by the North Hertfordshire District Council Archaeology Officer, who can be contacted on (01462) 434896 and keith.matthews@north-herts.gov.uk