Welcome to St Ives

A brief history of St Ives

People have lived in the place we now call St Ives for thousands of years, but the history of the present-day town begins with the Saxons, who built a small village beside the Great Ouse in about AD 500. “Slepe”, as it was called, lay near the present-day parish church.

In about AD 980 the village was bequeathed to nearby Ramsey Abbey, and soon afterwards came the event that now know that the discovery was near the site of a Roman charter to hold a fair between Slepe village and the Priory. The Ramsey monks built a small monastery, St Ivo’s Priory, on the banks of the Ouse. It was built in the 12th century, and is one of only a handful of surviving buildings. It was built in the 1420s, replacing the wooden bridge on the far bank is the red-brick former factory and now converted into flats. It was here in 1972 that the bridge on the far bank is the red-brick former factory and now converted into flats. It was here in 1972 that

In the 12th century St Ives fair was one of the biggest in England, with merchants coming here from many parts of Europe to buy the local woollen cloth. In the 13th century the Black Death and the Hundred Years War destroyed that trade, but the annual fair was then replaced by the weekly market, held every Monday with very few breaks since the year 1200.

A large print version is available. Please call the Tourist Information Centre for details.

Huntingdonshire

For details of accommodation vacancies, contact either Huntingdon or St Neots Tourist Information, or call the Huntingdonshire Tourism Association for Tourism’s Vacancy Line on Tel 0870 225458 (national rate call).

Getting Here...

Located 60 miles north of London, 15 miles north-west of Cambridge and 25 miles south of Peterborough, St Ives can be reached by road on the A428 link road to the A1.

There are regular bus services from Huntingdon, Cambridge, and Ely.

The closest rail link is at Huntingdon (6 miles away), which is on the main line route from London to Edinburgh. First Capital Connect links Huntingdon with Kings Cross by a frequent 50 minute service. Huntingdon is well connected to Peterborough by First Capital Connect and on to the North and Scotland by the Great North Eastern Railway (GNER).

Travellite (bus/coach/rail enquiries) Tel: 0870 6926268

Multimap (maps/driver direction) www.multimap.com

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WALK FACTS

Distance 1 mile approx

Time to complete 1 hour approx
On the other side of the Market Hill, the early 18th century WHITE HART (21) is still in business, while the former BELL (22) is now a clothes shop. It was built in 1779 and you can still see a bell carved in the brickwork on the top storey. Its ground floor shop front is modern but above the door is a 16th-century oak beam carved with the arms of Ramsey Abbey.

Leave the Market Hill and go into Crown Street. Woolworth's, on the right, was built on the site of the 18th-century Crown Inn, demolished in 1975. The Crown had a black-painted cross on the front - no-one knows why, or how old it was - and this feature was copied on the new building. Turn left down Bridge Street to see THE OLD CHEMIST'S SHOP (23), now used by Oxfam. It was built in 1728 and still has its Victorian shop front. Eden Lilley next door is equally old, in a range of early 18th-century buildings of mellow red brick.

Go through Merryland into the Broadway. Together with the Market Hill, this wide street was also part of the fairground and market of the Middle Ages. THE VICTORIA MEMORIAL (24) marked the Queen's Diamond Jubilee in 1897, but it wasn't actually put up until 1902. The inscription on the side says it was unveiled on 26th June that year, Edward VII's coronation day – but it wasn't! The coronation was postponed because the King was ill, and the Memorial was unveiled a few days later, but no-one got round to changing the inscription.

The Broadway is lined with grand houses and what were once large inns. THE BROADWAY DENTAL SURGERY (25) was built in the early 19th century for the Osborns, a rich brewing family. A few doors along is WITTON HOUSE (26), now a nightclub but once the home of the Goodmans, prosperous millers. Behind its 19th-century façade, most of the house dates from about 1700. It was also the childhood home of Mavis Wright (1908-70), a famous beauty who became the mistress of the artist Augustus John.

Where the Broadway meets the Waits is THE NORRIS MUSEUM (27) in its picturesque riverside garden. The Museum's contents were collected by Herbert Norris (1859-1931) who left them to the town when he died, with the money to buy the site and build the Museum. The displays include material from all over Huntingdonshire, with archaeology and history, fossils from the dinosaur period and an art gallery.

Beyond it is the PARISH CHURCH OF ALL SAINTS (32). There has probably been a church on this site since the Saxon inhabitants of Slope first embraced Christianity. Most of the present building dates from the late 1400s, but the east window of the south aisle is early 14th century - its carved stone tracery is a different design from all the other windows. Notice that the 15th century builders went to some trouble to keep this old window in their new church, as they had to put a kink in the parapet above it in order to fit it in.

Take a close look at the west doors at the base of the tower. Its carved woodwork matches the 15th century tracery of the windows, but can you spot the rabbits? At the top of the door panels, a rabbit's head can be seen on the left door emerging from its hole, while on the right door its cotton-tailed rump disappears down the hole again. No-one knows why they are there.

The spire was blown down in a violent storm in 1741 and had to be rebuilt and strengthened several times between then and the early 20th century. Then in 1918 an aircraft crashed into it, killing the pilot and destroying the spire again – restoration wasn't completed until 1930. If you're able to go inside the church, its interior is well worth seeing, with an organ, statues and a stained glass window by the famous restorer Sir Ninian Comper.

In front of the free Church is THE OLIVER CROMWELL STATUE (17). The statue was originally intended for Cromwell's native town of Huntingdon, to mark his 300th birthday in 1899. But attempts to raise funds there failed and the idea was taken up by St Ives, which had a strong Nonconformist tradition dating back to when Cromwell lived here in the 1630s, before he became famous. The statue, by Frederick Pomeroy, was unveiled in October 1901.

Notes continued...