Sherston Walks

A guide to the village including 10 circular walks with maps in the surrounding countryside

About this guide

The Wiltshire Parish of Sherston lies within the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and this guide is aimed at helping local residents and visitors alike to enjoy its countryside through a series of 10 circular walks. It also includes a fascinating introduction to the Parish, particularly its geology and early history, together with a trail around the village with its many fine and interesting buildings.

This guide has been produced by the Sherston Footpath Group set up by the Parish Council in 2008. Its remit is 'to promote the use by all of the rights of way in the parish, ensuring they are in good condition and free from obstruction'. Its first project has been the publication of this guide which has involved hundreds of hours of work all undertaken on a voluntary basis. We hope you find it useful and the walks themselves as delightful as we do.

Sherston: an introduction

Sherston is situated in the southern Cotswold Hills in the north west corner of Wiltshire. Some of the character of the area, like the rest of the Cotswolds, derives from the underlying Jurassic limestone, and the long history of the ground under the feet of residents and visitors to the village still has an influence today. The rocks of Sherston Parish were laid down in a shallow sea between 165 and 160 million years ago. At this time, 'Sherston' was about 30°N – roughly the latitude the Canary Islands are today – part way through a long journey north from the southern hemisphere, borne by moving tectonic plates. The seas were warm with strong currents – similar to the modern Bahamas. This environment gives rise to ooliths, which are tiny egg-shaped bodies formed by precipitation of lime (calcium carbonate) on a minute nucleus of sand. Deposition of these in the sea, and compression by sediments deposited on top, has given rise to the rock (oolitic limestone), which underlies Sherston.

Oolitic limestone is a good building stone, used extensively in Bath and the Oxford colleges as well as Cotswold villages like Sherston. The old houses in the village are largely built of, and on, a hard oolitic limestone called the Forest Marble. This rock underlies the whole Parish and can be seen in small disused quarries and road cuttings. It is not strictly speaking a marble – it is named after Charnwood Forest in Oxfordshire, where it was once used for making ornamental fireplaces. The name was given in 1799 by William Smith, who made the first national geological map and who started his researches in the Bath area. 'Forest Marble' is thus one of the earliest geological names.

The seas in which the Forest Marble was deposited were inhabited by a variety of creatures, largely shellfish, and you can see some of these preserved as fossils. The most common fossil remains are shell debris, the remains of long-ago beaches and sandbanks. There were larger creatures in the seas of the time, but they stayed further out to sea where there was more to eat – hence their remains are not found here. On the adjacent land masses the dinosaurs held sway, including *Megalosaurus*, the first dinosaur to be named, whose remains have been found in rocks of the same age near Oxford. The first birds (now the only surviving relatives of the dinosaurs) were beginning to take to the air. The vegetation would have looked odd to our eyes – there were no flowering

plants then, but there were swampy forests of such plants as conifers, cycads and the maidenhair fern tree *Ginkgo*. A specimen of this 'living fossil' species, apparently unchanged since the Jurassic, is planted near Sherston Post Office – a living link to the time when its ancestral relatives grew on the islands round about the present site of Sherston.

After the Forest Marble had been deposited, the sea level began to rise, and a succession of other rocks was deposited on top, culminating in a thick layer of chalk in the succeeding Cretaceous Period. All this has gone – eroded away in the succeeding 60 million years of the Tertiary Period when Britain once again rose above the sea. One legacy of the Tertiary Period is the 3° NW-SE slope of the Parish, reflecting the slope of the underlying rocks, which were horizontal when laid down. The rocks may have been tilted by the uplift of the Alps far to the south.

A striking feature of the area is the trench-like valleys which hold the River Avon and its tributaries. The modern river is not large enough to have cut them – almost certainly they date from the end of the last ice age, about 10,000 years ago. The last ice age lasted about 100,000 years, and a large icecap accumulated over most of Britain. Though the main icecap did not quite reach Sherston, the landscape would have been tundra-like, with accumulations of ice and snow on higher ground. We now know that at the end of the ice age the temperature rose remarkably quickly and this would have generated large volumes of meltwater, roaring down the existing valleys and excavating them close to their present depth. The excavated material was deposited on the plains beyond Malmesbury, or swept out to sea.

Another legacy of the ice age is the large amount of broken stone (brash) in the soils which you will see if you cross a ploughed field. This was mostly produced by weathering of the exposed surface rock by frost, freeze-thaw and other similar processes. The soils of the area have benefited, however, by being south of the main icecap. Most areas of Britain are covered in a layer of sticky boulder clay derived from the moving ice – in Sherston Parish the soils are free of this, and thus are relatively well-drained and easy to work. This benefits the predominantly arable agriculture, though there are wetter patches with more clay as you may discover on your walks.

As soon as the ice began to melt at the end of the last ice age, hunters are likely to have moved in, followed by pastoralists. Adjacent areas had significant human populations in the Bronze and Iron Ages. However, no local prehistoric remains have been found, though the area may well have been cultivated in places given the relatively well-drained fertile soils. It was the Romans who first left significant traces on the landscape, most notably with the Fosse Way (the Roman Road from Exeter to Lincoln) which forms the southern boundary of the Parish. In 1987 the remains of a small Romano-British farm house were discovered to the north of the village. The farm apparently grew and prospered until it was attacked and destroyed, possibly in the early 5th century. This may have been the result of a Saxon raid, or a local dispute following the breakdown of law and order after Roman troops were recalled from Britain. The remains of the last owners of the farm were found under the fallen buildings, and a subsequent archaeological investigation suggested that they were murdered.

At some stage after this a Saxon settlement grew up on the flat top of a spur of land formed by tributaries of the River Avon. The first known mention of Sherston in a written document (recorded as 'Scorranston') was in 896AD, but the settlement had clearly then been in existence for some time. Sherston later re-appears in records describing the Battle of Sherston in 1016. This was part of the struggle for the throne of England between the Saxon Edmund Ironside and the Danish King Cnut (Canute). The battle was inconclusive, but Edmund settled the matter by dying later that year, leaving Cnut to become a great early mediaeval king. Local interest centres around a Saxon warrior called John, who was nicknamed Rattlebone because of the lusty blows he gave with his sword. Edmund promised Rattlebone lands in Sherston if he won, and though Rattlebone was mortally wounded he fought on, clutching a tile to his wound to staunch the blood. This image lives on in the Rattlebone Inn (see below) and also the logo of the local primary school. For more history about Sherston take the village walk!

A village walk

The walk starts in the High Street at the Post Office. Stand with the Post Office on your left and look down the High Street. The houses were built wide apart to accommodate the weekly market established when Sherston was given Borough status sometime between 1170 and 1241. Borough status was granted by the King to a local landowner who hoped to make a profit from rents and market tolls. The landowner laid out building plots known as *burgage plots,* with a narrow frontage on the High Street and land stretching behind them to roads running parallel with the High Street. These plots would be let to people who felt it was an advantage to live in the High Street, such as tradesmen, craftsmen and even other landowners. This basic arrangement can still be seen, many of the houses in the High Street having long gardens with boundaries corresponding to the original burgage plots. Smaller houses were subsequently built along the back roads. The core of the modern village is thus based on a piece of mediaeval town planning. Sherston seems to have been a moderately successful small town for a while, but the market died out by the 16th century probably because it was suffering from competition from larger places like Tetbury and Malmesbury. A disastrous fire around 1511 is reputed to have destroyed most of the village, which may have been the coup de grâce. In 1835, Sherston lost its Borough status and became a village.

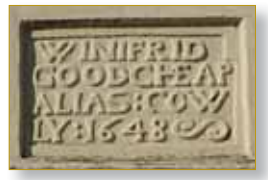
1 On your left is the National School building, built in 1845 on the site of the old tithe barn. This provided primary education to the children of Sherston until 2005, when increasing numbers forced a move to a modern building on the edge of the village. The old school has been re-developed as a community building hosting the post office and other businesses.

2 Walk a few yards down the street. Church House (numbers 13 and 15 on your right) was built in 1511 on a burgage plot given to the Church over 100 years before. The purpose was to raise funds for the Parish Church. After the religious reforms of the 16th century it may have been sold and used as a poorhouse, housing the poor and needy. One way in which funds were raised for this in later years was the annual Ale Feast. The Ale was brewed before Whitsun and while it lasted all ale houses in the village would be closed. As there were around fifteen of these at the time, the Church was guaranteed a sizable profit for the poor. The Feast was accompanied by general merrymaking, showing that combining fundraising and having fun is not a modern invention.

Church House is linked by an arch to a late 17th century building which was once a pub, The Bell. The carved sheep over the archway dates from the 1930s when Mr Herbert Goulding opened his butcher's shop, which continued as a butchers until recently.

3 On the other side of the road note the shell porch on Huntly House, built in the late 16th century. This was also once a pub, the Foresters Arms.

4 The narrow road joining the High Street is Swan Barton, the word 'Barton' indicating a farmstead. The 'Swan' element derives from The Swan, the largest of Sherston's old pubs, which occupied the corner of Swan Barton and the High Street.



Further down the High Street is the Angel Hotel. It was built in the early 16th century and as you can see from the date stone, Mrs Winifred Goodcheap was the owner in 1648.

5 Back on the opposite side of the road is the Old Pharmacy, a most original building. The Neale family lived here from the late 19th century to 1933, carrying on business as chemists, veterinary surgeons and manufacturers of sheep dip and other chemicals. The last Neale, Duncan, is known for having arranged his own funeral 11 years before he died in 1933, buying a coffin which he kept under the bed and inscribing his name on the family tombstone, leaving spaces for the date and age of death.

c1895

c1903

c1905

c1905

c1905

c1915

6 On the west side of the street is Balcony House, reputed to be the oldest in the village. Although the façade dates from the late 1500s, older material is incorporated into the structure, as it is in other village houses. Queen Anne is said to have called in here on the way to take the waters at Bath in 1705. It is rumoured there are tunnels which connect the cellars of Balcony House to the mediaeval quarry under the junction of Cliff Road and Silver Street, or even further afield.

7 At the far end of the High Street is the Tolsey, which was where the market tolls were paid and where the official weights and measures were stored. Since the market ceased it has had many uses, including cottages, a youth hostel and the local HQ of the British Legion. It is now the doctors' surgery.

Turn right along Silver Street, a common name in the West Country, though of unknown significance here.

8 At the corner of Silver Street and Cliff Road (name changed from Back Road in the 1950s) there is a view out over the River Avon towards Badminton. The steep slope below you is known locally as The Cliff, and under your feet are some underground mediaeval quarries, the spoil from which you can see down the slope.

9 Walk along Cliff Road, noting the Congregational Chapel, which dates from the 1820s, and its burial ground. This has now been converted into a house. A little further on is the British School Room, which was opened in 1844. This was part of a national movement which provided primary education independent of the Church of England. There was a system in which a teacher taught the older children and they in turn taught the younger ones, thus enabling a large number of pupils to be taught by one teacher.

10 At the north end of Cliff Road is the old Court House, thought to date from the early 16th century, extending round the corner into Court Street, where a fine shell porch canopy covers the main entrance. This was where local justice, concerned mostly with nuisances or trespass, was administered by the Lord of the Manor or his steward in a 'Court Leet' or 'Court Baron'. Offenders were kept in the village lockups in the cellars.

Turn right and walk down Court Street. On the left is the village recreation ground, Penny Mead. This was once very uneven with huge lumps, clearly an earthwork of some sort. These were cheerfully levelled 'in minutes' as a goodwill gesture in 1944 by the 626th Engineers of the US Army, stationed in the village in preparation for D-day. The loss of historical interest has to be balanced against a much better football pitch!

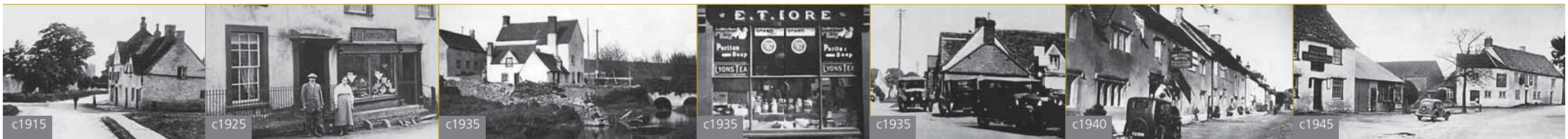
Continue along Court Street. Ahead you can see the Rattlebone Inn, the only survivor of Sherston's 17th century pubs. Note the inn sign depicting the local hero. Unusually for a village, we have the added benefit of having access to an Indian Restaurant and takeaway offering authentic Indian Cuisine - The Bridge (former Carpenters Arms) is located on the main road through the village.

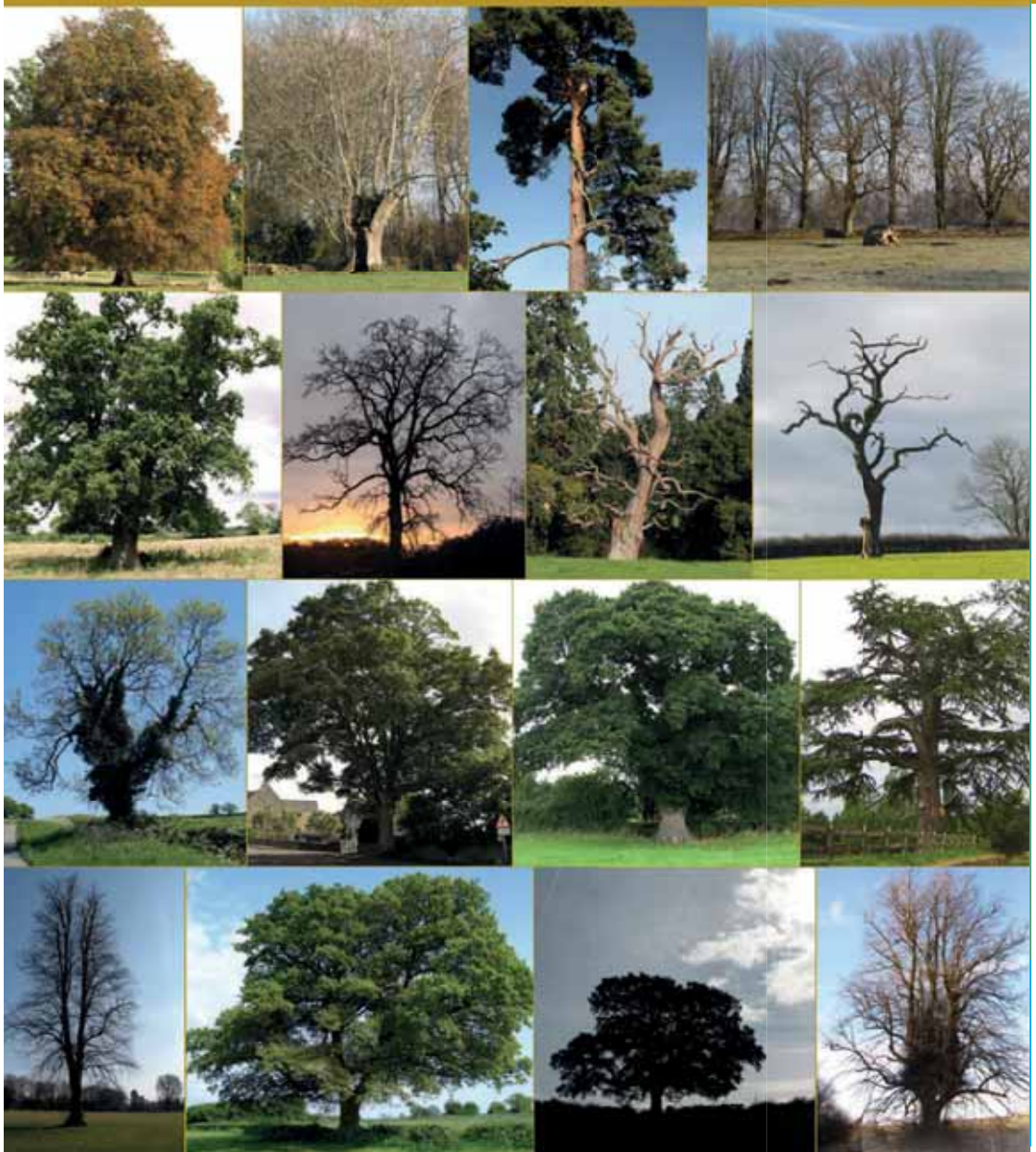
11 Walk round to the Church. The lych gate was built in the17th century and restored as a war memorial. The Church was re-built about 1170 on the site of a Saxon foundation. It has much of interest, and a guide is available for purchase inside. To the right of the porch is an old weathered statue, which locals believe is John Rattlebone holding the tile to his wound. Cynical historians point out it is a priest holding a missal. There are many interesting tombstones, including that of Private George Strong, one of the first recipients of the Victoria Cross for bravery at the Siege of Sebastapol in the Crimean War.

Probably the most famous of Sherston's clergy is Henry Chichele, rector 1400 -1403, who founded All Souls College Oxford and was Archbishop of Canterbury 1414 -1443. Shakespeare gives him a long speech at the beginning of *Henry V,* persuading the King to attack the French. The ambitious Chichele probably spent little time in the village, taking the income and paying a deputy to perform his duties.

Leave the Church by the lych gate and turn right. 12 On a triangle of grass at the road junction is the Jubilee Tree, an acer planted in 1897 by Sir George Holford, founder of Westonbirt Arboretum, to celebrate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. Continue back to the Post Office.

This concludes the walk, though there are many other features of interest visitors can explore for themselves.





General information

Footpaths and the Law

The walks included in this guide all follow Public Rights of Way. As such you have full right to walk along them freely.

Footpaths are typically on private land, please respect this. You and any dog(s) are legally required to keep to the line of the path and not stray onto land on either side.

Please remember that the local area is farmland and it is not uncommon for you to come across horses or other livestock in fields. Dog owners are reminded that they have a legal responsibility to keep their dog under close control.

In fields where crops are growing, follow the footpath line wherever possible. Dogs must be kept on the footpath in fields where there are crops to avoid damage.

Safety

At all times you are expected to use your own judgement regarding personal safety before proceeding along any of the given routes.

Areas are often muddy, even in dry conditions and conditions can change suddenly. So please ensure that you wear appropriate footwear, with good grip and have warm waterproof clothing with you.

In a separate section in the pocket with the maps is an extract from the Countryside Code, which provides general advice on walking in the countryside.

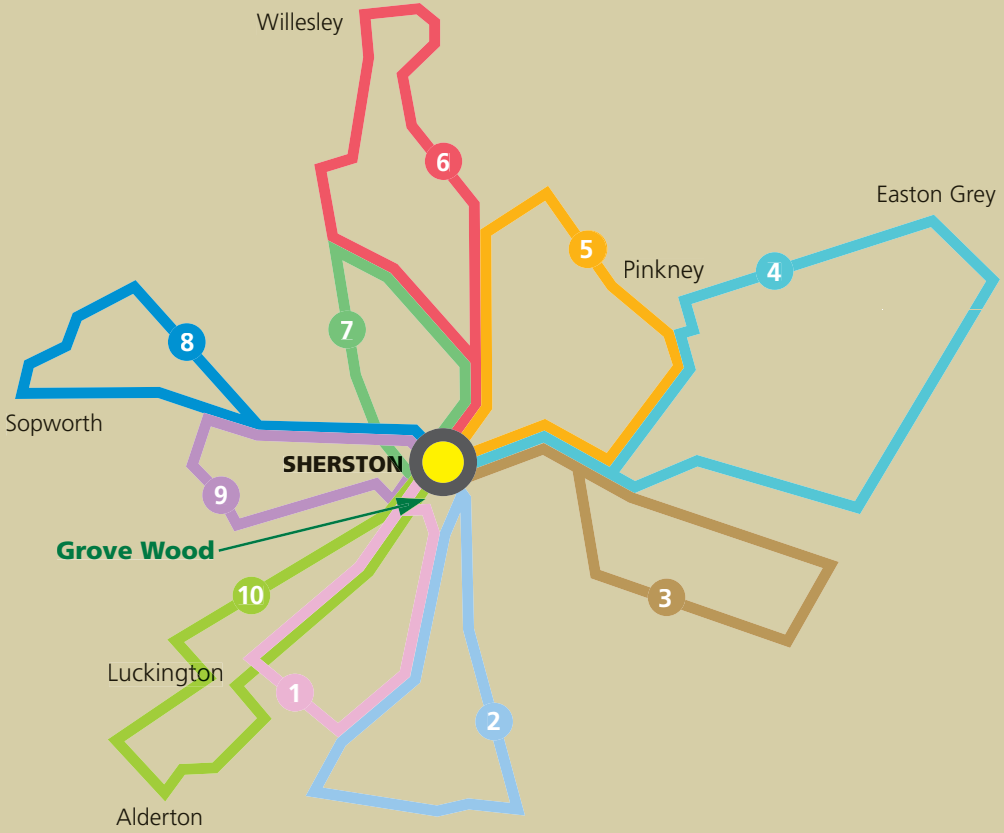
Reporting Problems

Although the footpaths in this guide are all Public Rights of Way, you may occasionally encounter obstructions or consider an area to be unsafe. Should this occur, we would be grateful if you would report the nature and location of the obstruction or hazard, either to:

The Clerk
Sherston Parish Council
E: clerk@sherston.org.uk
or to:
The Public Rights of Way Offi cer
Wiltshire Council
T: 01225 756178
E: rightsofway@wiltshire.gov.uk

10 walks around Sherston & The Countryside Code

1 Brook End Ford
2 Commonwood Lane
3 Ladyswood
4 Easton Grey
5 Pinkney
6 Willesley
7 The Cliff
8 Sopworth
9 Shallowbrook Lane
10 Luckington & Alderton



Each walk map has been labelled in accordance with the Wiltshire Council's official Public Rights of Way Map

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