

MAYA visit to the town of Dunster

2nd April 2022

A group of about 16 young people met at the Visitor centre in Dunster at 10.30am along with parents and helpers. Barbara Hoffbauer, who led the walk, explained where we would be going and what we would be looking for and at. There were three important things beginning with C - *Castle*, *Church* (Priory) and *Cloth* – to think about in relation to Dunster's medieval history. Added to this later– the *Civil War*.



In the Yarn Market



The group walked round to the Yarn Market and Barbara explained about how in medieval times people measured cloth in *ells*. An ell is about 45 inches, so longer than a yard which is 36 inches.

We also looked at the carpenter's marks on the timber framing of the building.

The group then visited the museum which has an excellent display about the history of Dunster. One item on display is a model of a medieval house by Tony Harding and reconstructed drawing of the house by Lizzie Induni. There were quiz sheets to complete.

Afterwards we walked up to the area of Dunster known as The Ball. From here it is possible to get a good view of the High Street and the Castle. The original Norman castle was built on top of the Tor, which may be partially man-made, built up by people with picks and shovels. The building we see now was originally built about 1580, and altered in the 1870s. The curtain wall around the original keep was demolished during the Civil War, but the gatehouse remains.



At The Ball – a good view of the High Street and the Castle

We walked along Priory Green to the area where the medieval Priory once stood. We looked at the Priory Garden and saw where Time Team had dug a test pit several years ago and discovered foundations of walls where the refectory and dormitory might have been. We learned that after the Reformation, when the Priory was closed, the buildings were used for a farm and the Castle's kitchen garden.



Measuring the Tithe Barn door, part of the old Priory



We also visited the Dovecote, which is across the road from the tithe barn. Looking inside the dovecote it was possible to see the holes where the pigeons roosted and also the revolving ladder which allowed access to the young pigeons and pigeon's eggs. These were a useful source of food for people in medieval Britain.

The group then walked down through the church yard and had an interesting discussion about the differing heights between the interior and exterior of the buildings in the church yard. The reason for the ground being higher on the exterior is because of the bodies buried in the graveyard take up space – a lot of it.

Barbara asked how we decide how old buildings are. We discussed dendrochronology dating – taking a core of wood from the timbers in the building, perhaps a wooden window or a part of the timber framing, from the building and comparing the tree rings on the core with existing data of tree rings. By comparing it is possible to work out the date.

The dendro date for the window next to the churchyard was 1270 – so it is a very old window – nearly 800 years old.



From the church yard we walked along West Street and saw the house at number 11 which the model in the museum is based on.

At the top of Mill Lane we stopped at the Wesleyan School built 1825, said to be the first in the village. Its founder was William Moore, a preacher, who left an £800 bequest. In 1839 It expanded into the adjoining chapel buildings and finally closed in 1903 .



Photograph of children in front of the Wesleyan school, taken about 1900



Our group in front of the same window.

At the top end of Mill Lane we saw the *mill leat*. This is a man-made stream diverted from the river to be used for powering water wheels. We saw where in medieval times there were *fulling mills*, used to clean cloth, along the leat, and also where the cloth was hung out to dry on racks known as *tenters*. Later we saw the present-day flour mill, owned by the National Trust, which is powered by the leat.

We walked down to the Gallox Bridge which crosses the River Avill, was originally the main entrance to the town – the main road running across the hill from Carhampton. Nowadays the main road – which was originally a turnpike road – runs across the flat lands nearer towards sea. The Gallox Bridge is so-called because it is near where *gallows* used to be – placed at the entrance to the town as a warning to all newcomers that they must behave themselves!



Crossing the Gallox Bridge – a medieval packhorse bridge

We crossed the Old Park under the Castle Tor, and learned how in the 18th century Henry Fownes Luttrell made lots of changes to the landscape, such as enclosing the deer park and building Conygar Tower.

Our final port of call was Castle gatehouse built in 1420, and almost the earliest remaining part of the Castle.

We returned tired but happy to the museum to collect parents and carers and have a much needed lunch.

Lizzie Induni and Barbara Hoffbauer

5th April 2022