

Turpin's Trail Historical Notes

Dick Turpin was born around 1706 in the village of Hempstead, near Saffron Walden, and was raised in the Bluebell Inn. He was baptised in St Andrew's church where William Harvey, Chief Physician to Charles I and discoverer of the circulation of the blood, is buried. Not much is known of Turpin's early years. Local legend has it that he became an apprentice butcher in Thaxted with Ducketts, opposite the parish church and that when he married he moved into a cottage in Stoney Lane which may be the one that is called to this day "Turpin's Cottage".

After a fairly ordinary childhood and early years, his criminal career started with cattle stealing, and he had to flee into the countryside to avoid being captured. He then associated with other unsavoury characters and formed a gang with whom he proceeded to terrorise the areas in north of London, around Loughton and Epping Forest, robbing anyone that passed their hiding place. His exploits eventually led him to flee to Yorkshire where he lived under an assumed identity, calling himself John Palmer. The King offered a hefty reward of £50 for his capture. Eventually the la caught up with him after his former schoolmaster in Thaxted recognised his handwriting and identified him as Dick Turpin. He was hanged in April 1739 in York.

The historic town of Thaxted, which prospered due to the cutlery industry, contains many interesting features. The magnificent Church of St. John the Baptist, Our Lady and St. Lawrence is of cathedral proportions and the exterior contains a large number of interesting gargoyles and other figures. It is the home of the annual Thaxted Festival held in June and July. The windmill and Guildhall both house small museums.

Great Sampford was a Saxon settlement on the rising ground above the River Pant which flows from its source near Wimbish and was referred to as Sandfort or Sandforda in the Domesday Book and means the "sandy ford". Great Sampford is an attractive rural village with a number of interesting buildings including pretty pargetted cottages and the Church of St. Michael the Archangel, which was re-built in the 14th century and boasts some handsome features.

West Wood is an ancient woodland, once owned in medieval times by the Knights Templar. Now it is a nature reserve and a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) owned by the Essex Wildlife Trust and is being restored to its ancient coppice cycle. In spring the wood has oxslips, early purple and greater butterfly orchids and a wonderful variety of nesting birds. There is much to see throughout the year and more information can be found at <https://www.essexwt.org.uk/nature-reserves/west-wood>