



Lechlade-on-Thames Heritage Trail Historic Market Town and Inland Port

The unique location of Lechlade, where the Cotswolds meet the highest navigable point on the River Thames, led to its growth as a thriving market town and one of the most important inland ports in the country. The river could be crossed at St John's Bridge, the Free Wharf and later Ha'penny Bridge. Lechlade also stood on a major road from the West to London. So river and canal, packhorse and drovers' trails, coach and turnpike roads all passed through the town, connecting it to the Bristol Channel, the Midlands, London and the south coast.

There is archaeological evidence of settlement from prehistoric times on the fertile and well-drained gravel terraces between the rivers Thames, Leach and Coln. There is an extensive Romano-British villa site to the north of the town and a large Anglo-Saxon cemetery to the west which included the grave of a woman nicknamed 'Mrs Getty' in which over 500 precious objects were found, some from the Continent and the Middle East.

1. **The walk starts at the Riverside pub car park. Please note there are no barriers at the water's edge.**

This is the site of Parkend Wharf. Lechlade was an inland port with a thriving river trade since the earliest settlements and this reached its peak after the opening of the Thames & Severn Canal in 1789. Goods were brought by wagon or packhorse to the wharves at Lechlade for onward transport along the river or canal. The canal joined the Thames at Inglesham Lock, a short distance upstream, and in 1813 the canal company moved its headquarters from Inglesham Roundhouse to Parkend Wharf as overland access was better. Heavy goods including coal, timber, stone, metal goods, corn, cheese and salt could be carried directly from Bristol, Gloucester and the Midlands to London and on to the Continent. The Riverside pub was originally a C18 warehouse and the canal agent's house still stands next to it. There is an information board on the left wall of the pub.

Ha'penny Bridge was constructed in 1792 to carry the turnpike road from Burford and the Midlands across the river to Highworth and the south coast ports. It has a particularly high arch to enable the passage of barges with masts. A halfpenny toll was levied on pedestrians until 1839 and the toll house still stands on the bridge.

2. Walk though the car park to Bell Lane. Turn left to the Free Wharf with its stunning view of Ha'penny Bridge. **Please note there are no barriers at the water's edge.** This is where the townspeople had free access to the river which could be crossed by ford or the Tidford Ferry before the building of Ha'penny Bridge. The cottages to the right were converted from a C17 storage barn.

3. Retrace your steps and continue up to the top of Bell Lane. Several houses near here used to be inns or alehouses catering for the numerous river workers, traders and travellers. To the right is High Street where the ancient Welsh Way drovers' road from Wales to London via St John's Bridge entered Lechlade. It became a coach road and Royal Mail stage coaches were running through Lechlade by late C17. The road was turnpiked in 1727 and until 1774 it used to run behind the buildings on the north side of the street. Several coaching inns with their carriage arches can still be seen in the town. The houses on the south side of High Street have long burgage plots formerly linking them to the wharves and river.

4. Turn to the left, cross the road with care and turn right into Sherborne Street. Walk along to Sherborne House on the left which has a fine C17 William and Mary facade. Notice the gazebo (there are four more in Lechlade) and stables with pigeon holes. Gazebos were built to allow rich ladies to view the life of the street in comfort and seclusion!

A little further along is C17 Stonecroft with lattice windows and a sundial. The adjacent Baptist Chapel was built in 1817 by William Fox, a wealthy merchant and founder of the Sunday School Society.

5. Turn right into Burford Street. Livestock markets were held here until the early C20 and there are still tethering rings fixed to the stone wall of Lechlade Manor just beyond the public toilets.

Walk along to The Swan Inn. This coaching inn is the oldest recorded building in Lechlade, originally built around 1520. The present building is C17 and linked by a carriage arch to the C18 building on the right which has an unusual two-storey bay window designed by local architect and mason Richard Pace.

Look across the road and notice a blocked-up gazebo at the end of the manor wall and several distinguished houses. Arch Cottage has a C16 Tudor doorway. Ryton House was the C18 home of a wealthy textile merchant. Look at the C19 fire station with its rooftop bell still visible between Arch Cottage and Ryton House. This might also have been a temporary lock-up (handy for the Swan Inn opposite!). Next door is C18 Lime Tree House.

St John's Street was the continuation of the drovers' road and turnpike road to London and leads to St John's Bridge. On the left is a building with another two-storey bay window by Richard Pace.

6. Look at the information board just past the Londis supermarket and **then cross the road carefully to the Market Place.** A charter of 1st May 1210 permitted the lord of the manor to hold weekly markets and an annual fair lasting three days from St Lawrence Day, 10th August. It is likely that the market place at one time extended along High Street. The market traded mainly in cheese, cattle, sheep and other agricultural products from the surrounding rich pastureland. In C15 Lechlade prospered as a trading centre for Cotswold wool.

To your right is the New Inn. This coaching inn, built of brick rather than stone, opened in 1754 and became the principal inn in the town. An annual water carnival was held on the river behind the New Inn in the early C20.

On your left is C18 Grenville House, the former vicarage, remodelled by Pace in C19. Notice the Venetian and bullseye windows. It also has a 6-panelled door, one of several in the town. The adjoining Maple House was its service wing and a former coaching inn, the White Hart.

Further to the right along High Street are two more coaching inns – The Red Lion (now Pino's restaurant), which had its own wharf, and The Crown.

7. Visit the 'wool' church of St Lawrence. The present building dates from 1476 and was financed by benefactors in the town and with money transferred from the recently dissolved St John's Priory. It is constructed in the Perpendicular style with stone from Taynton quarry, near Burford. The spire, north porch, east window and clerestory windows were added in 1510 when Catherine of Aragon held the manor of Lechlade. Some Tudor roses can still be seen carved into the stonework.

If you wish to return to the Riverside pub car park, walk straight ahead from the church and continue to the traffic lights. Turn left into Thames Street. Cross the road carefully into the Riverside pub car park.

Alternatively, if you would like to extend your walk by an hour or so through some of the water meadows and along the river:

1. Walk to the left of the church along Shelley's Walk taking care on the uneven path. The poet Shelley came to Lechlade by boat in 1815 and composed 'A Summer Evening Churchyard' here. Continue through the churchyard and notice the small figure of St Lawrence with his gridiron above the chancel gable of the church. On the right, C17 Church House, remodelled in C18, was the home of the Ainge family of wharfingers (wharf owners) who traded from the Old Wharf at the end of the garden (no public access). There is a gazebo built into the churchyard wall.

2. At the end of the churchyard path, cross the road and go through a gate. Continue across a field, through another gate, then along a tree-lined path to the Trout Inn, formerly called St John the Baptist Head, near the site of St John's Priory. **Be aware that there is a busy main road at the end of the path.** You have just walked along the ancient Monks Walk which connected the parish church and the priory. There are information boards at the Trout and St John's Lock.

St John's Bridge, constructed in 1228 to replace a wooden bridge, was the first stone bridge over the Thames outside London. Two ancient long-distance routes converged here. Salt from Droitwich was brought by packhorse along the Saltway to wharves here for transport by river to London. These medieval wharves were eventually superseded by those in the centre of Lechlade. Cattle were driven along the Welsh Way from Wales and the West Country and over the bridge to Faringdon and London.

The priory was granted the right to levy tolls (pontage) on goods and passengers passing over or under the bridge in return for keeping it in good repair. The monks frequently neglected their responsibilities and the priory was dissolved in 1472. Pontage rights then reverted to the manor.

From 1234 an annual fair was held near the bridge in a field known as the Lade for five days from 29th August (Decollation of St John the Baptist). The River Leach joins the Thames nearby, and thus perhaps Lechlade gets its name. This had become a major cheese fair by the late C17. The fair moved to the town in C18 as the meadows at St John's were frequently flooded.

3. Go down the steps on the right-hand side of the bridge to St John's Lock and return to Ha'penny Bridge along the towpath on the south bank of the river. There are fine views of the church from the towpath. **Pass under the bridge and then climb the uneven stone steps on your left to the road. Be aware of traffic passing close by. Turn left and walk over the bridge to the Riverside pub and car park.**