

WALKING THE RIVER IN SHREWSBURY



A Shrewsbury Civic Society Self-Guided Tour

This information document is intended to allow people in Shrewsbury, whether visitors or locals, to see and perhaps stop at some of the many places along the river in Shrewsbury that are of interest. This document lists its entries in the order that they appear if one walks from Shrewsbury Castle in an anti-clockwise direction. Please note that this list is neither definitive nor exhaustive. Shrewsbury Civic Society also publishes more detailed information about Shrewsbury, which can be purchased at the Bear Steps Shop. We also have printed self-guided tours which can also be bought at our shop.

1: Shrewsbury Castle

The castle was deliberately placed here in the narrow neck of land that provides the only land access to Shrewsbury. The mound where Laura's Tower currently stands is the highest point of the town. During the Anglo-Saxon period an early watchtower existed here, observing those crossing the fords (there were no bridges then) or attending the market. In the Middle Ages Shrewsbury was an important military centre during the Welsh Wars. It is now home to the Soldiers of Shropshire museum.



2: St Mary's Watergate

The gate's purpose was to defend the entrance to the town from the wharf by the river. It once stood at the bottom of a lane that had walls on both sides until it met the main town wall, where a second gate was located. The gate is 13th century and is the only remaining medieval town gate, all the others having been demolished. The house at the bottom of the road was once the warehouse of the Union Wharf Company, and some remnants of the wharf can still be seen.

3: The Railway Station Bridge

Downstream from the Watergate stands the railway station bridge over the river. Unusually, some of the station platforms run over the river. The original stone bridge, which forms the central part of the bridge, was erected in 1849. This can still be seen between the metal extensions, which were added in 1902 to allow for more railway tracks and station platforms. There is a towpath under the bridge that leads to the suburb of Castlefields.





4: Dominican Friary, St Mary's Water Lane

The arches that can be seen in the walls by the river towpath may be the only remains of the former Dominican friary that once stood on the site of the modern-day apartments. It was the first friary in Shrewsbury, founded in 1230, which lasted until the Reformation of Henry VIII. In 1403, after the Battle of Shrewsbury, several badly wounded knights were brought here, some of whom died from their injuries. Several skeletons have been uncovered from the area where the friary once stood,.

5: The English Bridge

This bridge is sited close to the original ford which allowed access to the land that is now known as 'the loop'. The current bridge was built in 1774, later widened in the 1920s. Some of the arches reveal carvings of Neptune (God of the Sea) and Sabrina (Goddess of the Severn). There are also sculptures of dolphins, and it is said that the river was considered to be in flood once the water level reached the mouths of the dolphins.



6: Franciscan Friary, St Julian's Friars

The properties now close to Greyfriars footbridge are the only physical remnants of the former friary that was founded in 1245. The building was positioned on a flood plain and is thought to have been smaller than the Dominican friary. The Franciscan friary was dissolved in 1538. It is said to have originally housed the Jesse Window, which can now be seen in St Mary's Church. However, there is no conclusive evidence of this – though the window is well worth a look..

EXTRA

Looking up from the towpath by the site of the Dominican friary one can see the spire of St. Mary's Church, one of the highest spires in England. From there stuntman Robert Cadman tried to slide down a rope to the opposite riverbank in 1739, but it went wrong and Cadman plunged to his death.

7: Town Walls

The construction of town walls around Shrewsbury was ordered by Henry III. It followed the occupation of Shrewsbury by the Welsh in 1215. The main part of the walls ran from the high ground of the town to the two main bridges, both of which were protected by gatehouses. The length of the wall was 3.2 km. A series of watchtowers was built into the walls to guard the town, though only one of these has survived to the modern day.



8: Catholic Cathedral, Town Walls

Shrewsbury's Catholic Cathedral was consecrated in 1856 and is one of the smallest cathedrals in the country. It was designed by Edward Pugin, the famous Victorian church architect. It is the only cathedral in the whole of Shropshire. Six of the windows were produced by the renowned stained-glass artist, Margaret Rope, who was born in Shrewsbury. Rope also designed the cathedral's war memorial.



9: Kingsland Ferry

Until the late 19th century the only bridges across the river for general use were the English Bridge and the Welsh Bridge. There were several ferries, however, and a ferry post opposite the boathouse for Shrewsbury School, plus steps from the water on the other side of the river, reveals the onetime presence of a ferry before the Kingsland Bridge. There were further ferries at Castlefields, Coleham, in the Quarry and at Frankwell, close to where the modern footbridge stands.



EXTRA

The river flows around the town centre, but the walkway between Greyfriars Bridge and the Welsh Bridge (Victoria Avenue) remains full of fauna and flora. Close to the Welsh Bridge is part of a medieval defensive tower, marked out by an arc of stones set into the tarmac. It was mostly dismantled c.1797 and rediscovered in 1911 during the reconstruction of Victoria Avenue



10: Victoria Quay

Before the construction of the weir in Castlefields, the river here was shallow and once the site of a ford. Unlike the pleasant area of bars and restaurants today, it was once known as the 'Muck Yard', because it was where people used to dispose of their waste into the river, especially from the nearby skinnners and tanneries. This meant the area was once noted for its smell, pollution and garbage.

11: The Welsh Bridge

The current Welsh Bridge was opened in 1795 as a replacement for a former bridge, known as St George's Bridge. The first carriage to cross the new bridge is said to have been on its way to the races. Just upstream from the bridge were Mardol Quay and Frankwell Quay, which is where goods were unloaded at a time when Shrewsbury's river trade was significant. The peak of the river trade occurred in the 18th century.



12: Theatre Severn

Theatre Severn was the replacement building for live performances instead of the Music Hall, which has become the museum and art gallery. The theatre occupies a site where one end of St George's bridge (the former Welsh Bridge) once stood. The Chapel bar is a nod to the Methodist chapel that was once here. The exterior of that chapel, until recently a car repair shop, has been incorporated into the theatre building.



EXTRA: The Boathouse Inn dates back to the late 16th / early 17th century. The taller section of the inn is said to have been a warehouse where once lead was stored for shipment downstream to Bristol. Shrewsbury was once the main storage point for the lead that was mined in the Stiperstones, which was brought to the town by means of horse and cart.

13: Frankwell and Mardol Quays

Shrewsbury was once a major inland port, with quays at Mardol (from 1607) and Frankwell (from 1608). Both areas had wharfs and warehouses where goods were unloaded and stored from many barges and trows. These were dragged by bow hauliers until the towpath became operational in 1809, allowing the use of horses. The river trade declined after 1850 and most of their former presence has been lost to modernisation and road widening schemes.



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14: Mardol Quay Garden

This is located where Mardol Quay, built in 1607, was once situated. Warehouses that once adorned this part of the town were later converted to different uses, such as a car repair shop, and, later still, demolished in order to widen Smithfield Road. The garden was redesigned, and a sculpture inserted in 2009 to mark the bicentennial of Charles Darwin's birth. The garden also marks Shropshire's geological history with a timeline set into the paving.

15: Frankwell Flood Barriers

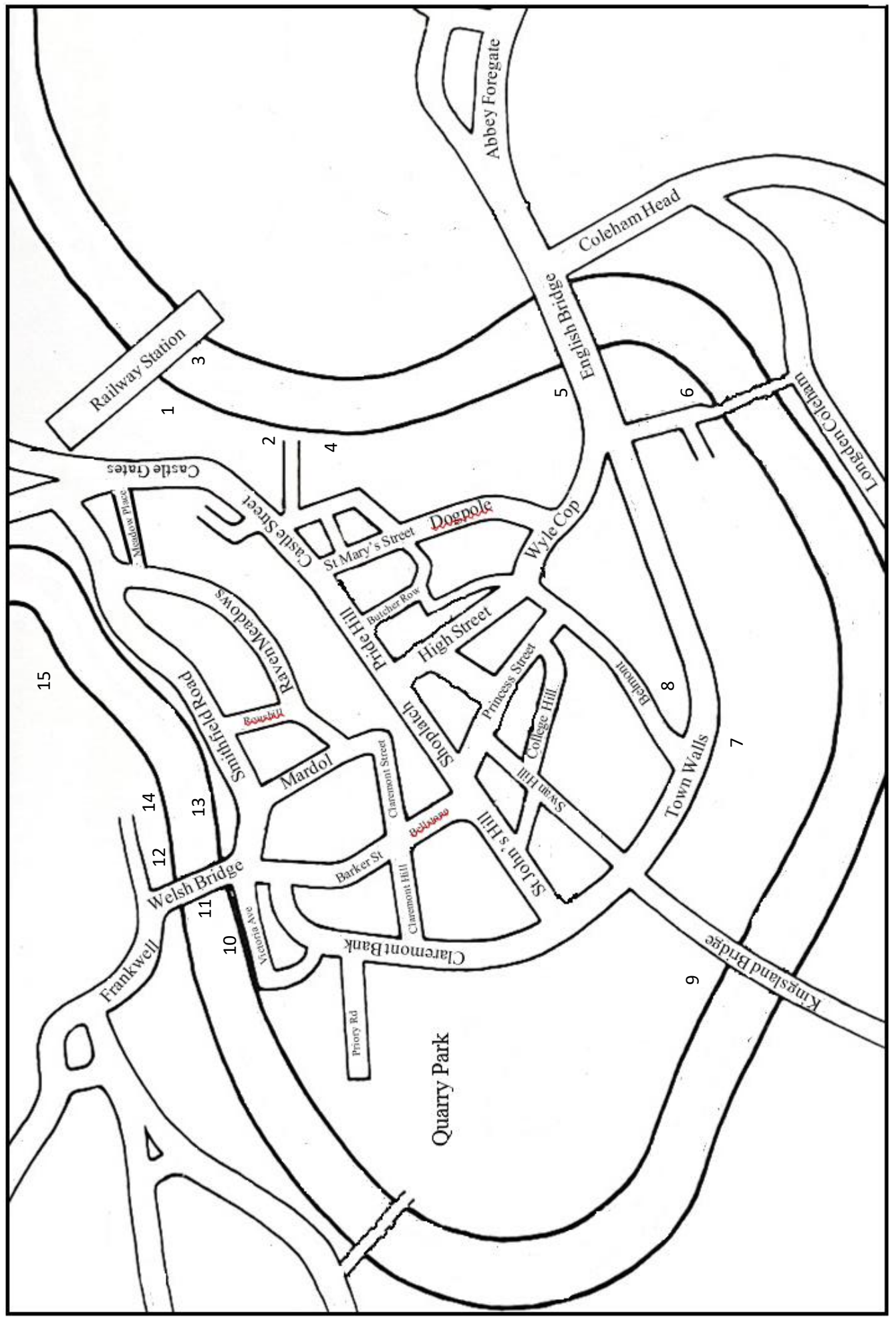
A brass plate by the footbridge shows the height of the exceptional floods that have afflicted Shrewsbury, with the highest level recorded coming in 1795, when the water reached 5.7 metres. In 2000 flood barriers were installed to protect Frankwell. Vertical slots and base plates for the aluminium barriers can be seen, and the barriers come in sections that can reach a maximum height of 3 metres. This would not have prevented the 1795 flood breaking into Frankwell...



EXTRA

The area of land where Frankwell carpark and the cricket ground are now situated was once known as the 'Goose Land'. This name was used for more than 500 years, and may be so named because it was once the site of a goose fair. This land is not protected by the flood barriers, and it is often underwater in times of flood.

Unless otherwise stated, photographs have been provided by Bill Tomaszewski or, occasionally, Russell Game



Railway Station

1

3

2

4

Abbey Foregate

Coleham Head

English Bridge

5

6

London Coleham

Castle Gates

Meadow Place

Castle Street

St Mary's Street

Dogpole

Wyle Cop

Raven Meadows

Market

Smithfield Road

Mardol

High Street

Butcher Row

Shoplatch

Princess Street

College Hill

Balcon

Town Walls

8

7

15

14

13

12

Welsh Bridge

11

10

Frankwell

Victoria Ave

Barker St

Claremont Hill

Claremont Street

Belvedere

St John's Hill

Swan Hill

Claremont Bank

Prory Rd

Quarry Park

9

Kingsland Bridge