A Tudor walk around Old Amersham

Start
Start at the Amersham Museum (49 High Street). Look around you at this medieval town, Tudor point A.

A planned town
Amersham (Amersham) is a planned town, dating back to a charter of 1200 when King John sold the right to hold a market to the Lord of the Manor. The wide High Street allowed for a profitable market. In 1544 John Leland described Amersham as: “A pretty right Market Towne on Fryday of one Street well built with Tymber …”. The museum is situated in a 15th century hall house (see picture on introductory page). Glancing up and down the street you may think most of the buildings look more Georgian than Tudor. Don’t be deceived! Most are older but were ‘improved’ by having a brick front put on them in Georgian times. Look down the sides, under archways - the timber frame is still visible in many cases.

Turn right out of the Museum and walk west along the High Street. Which houses do you think were built in Tudor times? Look for the clues, eg. timber frames possibly hidden except down the sides. Stop when you reach Mill Lane, Tudor Point B.

Sibley’s Mill (Town Mill)
In the Domesday Book, Amersham had three mills, including one here. The Mill’s painting of the mill is probably mid-18th century.

Cross the High Street and head back 100 m to Cherry Lane, turn right (south) up the lane. This is believed to be a drover’s road, used to take cattle to their summer pasture on Wycombe Heath. Go uphill until you reach a cross-path (The Platt) at the end of the houses. The distance (about 150m) from the High Street to The Platt is the length of a barge load; the land behind each merchant’s house for keeping animals and growing food.

Turn left (east) along The Platt. On your right-hand side is Bury Field, Upper Bury Field and Lower Bury Field, comprising three of the great fields. These were divided into strips, with each family having strips in each field. Crops were rotated in successive years, grains (eg. barley) one year, then legumes (peas, beans) and fallow (no crops). This great field stretches to the hill top from Cherry Lane all the way to where you will leave The Platt.

The path widens near the cemetery. Continue until you pass Chimney Cottage then Sunnybank on the left, there turn left. Pass Crown Meadow on the right and turn right and then left into the car park of The Crown. The Crown Inn is Tudor, one of its bedrooms has Tudor wall paintings. Keep straight ahead into the courtyard and through 2 arches to emerge onto Market Square, Tudor Point C.

Market Square / Fraternity of St Katherine
There was a regular market in Tudor times, when townspeople sold their produce. There would be pedlars and travelling merchants with packhorses, selling wool, cloth, hats, gloves, candles, feathers, salt, fish, etc. The Market Viewer opened/closed the market at set times, checked weights, measures and quality. It was illegal to sell goods except at the market; that was ‘forestalling’ (before it came to the stall). A Parish Constable kept law and order, watching out for drunks, vagrants and cutpurses. Some of the trials of those accused of heresy are believed to have been held in The White Hart Inn, on the site of The Crown. Heretics were often required to do their penance in the market place. The Fraternity of St Katherine was a charity set up ca. 1450 by the town’s burgheers to support its members during hard times. It paid the salary of a priest to say masses for their souls when they died and probably teach boys to read. The building was erected in about 1490-1500 and comprised a first-floor thatched hall with an open under-croft. A large part of it survives within nos. 1-9 Market Square.
St Mary’s Church and graveyard

The church was built in the 13th century and the inside looks much as it did in Tudor times, except you can now see the source of truth, not the Pope. Amongst other things, they wanted to say prayers and read the Bible in English. They were followers of John Wycliffe (ca. 1320 – 1384), an Oxford scholar. They were feared by the King and Church, and were persecuted throughout the 15th century and well into Tudor times (see later).

When you reach a T-junction, turn right along a level path. When the path reaches a hedge round to the right. Ignore the crossing path (the Bishop’s road or old Roman road to Verulamium) and follow the hedge on the left with houses behind it. At the bottom you reach A T-junction. Beside the path is a small-holding next to the river, usually with chickens, pigs and various vegetables. This is pretty much the same size as the burgage plots behind the High Street but Tudor crops would not have included potatoes or tomatoes - they had not yet arrived from the Americas. You can take a short cut back by turning right. Otherwise, turn left and continue beside the small-holding until you reach the main road. Turn left and in 3 metres use the pedestrian-controlled lights to cross, then turn right for a few metres. Next to the shop, take the footpath which is enclosed between a wall and fences for a few metres before opening out into a car park. Go between buildings to emerge into the car park of The Chequers Inn and Ambers, Tudor Point.

The Martyrs’ Memorial

The Museum’s Curator, in 2006, found a document in Lincoln Cathedral archives excommunicating William Tillesworth in 1511, so we now think he was burnt in 1511, not 1506 as stated on the Memorial. About 60 townspeople were charged with heresy at this time. By 1521 a new Bishop was in post, John Longland, confessor to Henry VIII. He was a staunch traditionalist who suspected back-sliding amongst those who had recanted in 1511 and set up a fresh enquiry. In all, about 200 people were charged, perhaps a third of the population. The Memorial names six people who were condemned to be burnt but for only John Scrivener and Robert Rave do we know the sentences were definitely carried out. It is said that Bishop Longland came to the burning and preached a vehement sermon on the dangers of reading the Bible in English. Those attending a burning would bring a bundle of faggots (sticks) for the fire; the church gave them 40 days off purgatory for doing so. Hilary Mantel, in Wolf Hall, gives a graphic account of a ‘loller’ burning. Other punishments included branding on the cheek, going on a pilgrimage (e.g. to the College of the Precious Blood at Ashridge or to Lincoln Cathedral), or wearing a badge. The 1534 Act of Supremacy made Henry VIII head of the Church, and many Lollard beliefs became doctrine. In 1538 the Great Bible (in English) was put into every church. Were they heretics, justly punished for threatening church and state, or martyrs who wanted freedom to worship God in their own way?

When you leave the Memorial turn left and follow the hedge round the corner to the right. Ignore the crossing path (the Bishop’s road or old Roman road to Verulamium) and follow the hedge on the left with houses behind it. At the bottom you reach a T-junction. Beside the path is a small-holding next to the river, usually with chickens, pigs and various vegetables. This is pretty much the same size as the burgage plots behind the High Street but Tudor crops would not have included potatoes or tomatoes - they had not yet arrived from the Americas. You can take a short cut back by turning right. Otherwise, turn left and continue beside the small-holding until you reach the main road. Turn left and in 3 metres use the pedestrian-controlled lights to cross, then turn right for a few metres. Next to the shop, take the footpath which is enclosed between a wall and fences for a few metres before opening out into a car park. Go between buildings to emerge into the car park of The Chequers Inn and Ambers, Tudor Point.

The Haunted Inn

You are in the hamlet of Bury End, almost a kilometre outside Amersham. On the night before they were burnt, martyrs were imprisoned in a house here, much more secure being well outside the town. The Chequers Inn is said to be haunted by a man (one of the guards?) or by a woman in white (Joan Clarke who lit her father’s pyre?).

Ambers was once one of Amersham’s three mills. In Tudor times, it belonged to the Lord of the Manor. You can still see water flowing in the mill race through the window at the righthand side of the door.

From the car park turn right along the busy road. Cross the road at the bollards just before the roundabout and turn right again, to continue in the same direction for about 400 m. Just past no. 6 London Road step into the gravel driveway of Bury Farm, Tudor Point.

The Bury (Bury Farm)

On the left (east) side is Bury Farm Cottage (6 London Road West) where Lollards held their conventicles – secret meetings to read the Bible and say prayers in English. On the right side (west) is the Manor House of the Manor of the Borough (Bury) of Amersham. From ca. 1450 to ca. 1630 The Bury was occupied by members of the Saunders family, who rented it (for 84 bushels of malt) from the Lord of the Manor. They were prominent Lollards. Richard Saunders, who had a dyeeworks in Uxbridge, was the richest man in Amersham according to tax records and paid a large fine (or bribe?) to be allowed to ‘wear’ his badge in his purse! Despite outward appearances this is a Tudor building, being rebuilt in the mid- to late 16th century.

This marks the end of the walk. Turn left (west) out of the driveway to return to the town.