

Somerton Village Trail

A walk through nine hundred years of an Oxfordshire village



Somerton is small, quiet and easy to explore on foot. In an hour or two you can walk past a Norman church, the earthworks of a medieval castle and its fishponds, the last wall of a Tudor manor house, a canal wharf, a lock nearly twelve feet deep and a pair of wartime pillboxes.

Before you set off

People live here, and much of what you will pass is private. Please keep to the public footpaths, close gates, keep dogs on leads near livestock, and enjoy the private houses from the path or the road only.

Parking: considerably along Church Street, or by the canal bridge on the road to North Aston. **Boots:** the field paths and towpath are often muddy.

The village trail

From the church, down through Castle Yard to the canal and the river: about an hour there and back.

1 St James's church and the churchyard cross

Here since soon after the Norman Conquest. Look for the blocked Norman doorway in the south wall, the Fermor chapel with its monuments, and the Whall window. North of the church stands the old preaching cross, clearly medieval.

2 Down Church Street

Near the bottom is a cottage, thatched until the 1970s, where Miss Jennings and her sister once ran a small school. A private home.

3 The fishpond field

Through the kissing gate a public footpath runs downhill. The bumps and hollows are the lanes and house plots of the medieval village. On your right are the coach house and the Old Rectory. Near the bottom the path runs along the causeway between two of the castle's fishponds, probably those listed in 1295.

4 Castle Yard and the Old School House

Somerton's "castle" was a defended manor house, a walled yard with a hall, a dovecote and a chapel. In 1580 Thomas Fermor left the chapel to become the village school; the Old School House is said to stand on the spot. The path comes out on Water Street beside the old Railway Inn.

Down to the canal and the river

From Water Street, follow the road towards North Aston.

5 The railway bridge and the old station

Just before the bridge, look up to your left: Somerton's station stood here from 1854. Renamed Fritwell & Somerton in 1907, it saw its last train in 1964.

6 The old wharf and the canal bridge

Somerton Wharf, now houses, was the village's road to the wider world after the Oxford Canal opened in 1787. The road climbs over the canal on a humpbacked bridge.

7 Wartime pillboxes

A concrete pillbox on either side of the road, built in 1940 to guard the canal and river crossings against invasion.

8 Somerton Deep Lock

Turn right along the towpath for about two-thirds of a mile. Lock 34 rises about twelve feet, one of the deepest on any English canal. Lock Cottage beside it can only be reached along the towpath.

9 The river bridge and North Aston Mill

An iron bridge crosses the Cherwell beside the old watermill, now a private house. The river is the parish boundary, so the mill belongs to North Aston.

Along the Heyford Road

10 The Fermor arch

In the field east of the Heyford Road a footpath passes the last wall of the Fermor family's Tudor manor house, with its great window. The family held Somerton for three centuries.

11 The back path to Church Street

From beside Jersey Manor Farm a footpath runs behind the village hall and past the churchyard to Church Street.

12 Down to Somerton Mill

South along the Heyford Road, a lane leads down the hill and across the railway to Somerton Mill on the river. The houses are private.

Further afield

13 The view from Middle Aston

For the best view of Somerton, go up to the viewpoint by Middle Aston House, across the valley.

14 Heyford Park

A footpath from the top of Aston View leads towards the former RAF Upper Heyford, the Cold War airbase, now Heyford Park.



Scan for the trail map, with the 1900 Ordnance Survey map you can fade in, and for the full history of every stop: somertonoxon.co.uk