WARWICK IN THE DARK AGES

A WALK THROUGH MYTH & HISTORY

British History Timelines

AD 43 – AD 410:	Roman Britain/Romano-British
AD 410 – 1066:	Dark Ages (sometimes called Early Medieval; includes Anglo-Saxon and Viking England)
1066 – 1485:	Medieval/Middle Ages (includes Norman England)

Aethelflaed, Lady of the Mercians, built the fortress late in the autumn at Warwick.

Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for AD 914

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle states that in AD 914 Aethelflaed, Lady of the Mercians, founded a fortress at Warwick ('Waeringwicum' in Old English). This entry reflects one of two versions of the Dark Age origins of the town; one is based on historical sources like the Chronicle, the other is drawn from myth and legend. Traces of both can be found embedded in modern Warwick.

This walk takes you around the town's Medieval heart, highlighting links to mythical and historical characters from the Dark Ages and earlier. The full length of the trail is about 1.2 miles (2 kilometres) and it can be completed on foot in around 45 minutes.

Key Characters & Events

Aethelflaed, Lady of the Mercians

Aethelflaed (or 'Ethelfleda') ruled Mercia, an Anglo-Saxon kingdom in the West Midlands, from AD 911 to AD 918. Sometimes called a 'Warrior Queen', she built a fortress at Warwick as part of her campaign to reconquer Mercian territory in the East Midlands lost half a century earlier to the Danish Vikings. [1]

King Cymbeline

The 17th century historian Sir William Dugdale recorded the myth that Cymbeline founded Warwick in around 5 BC. Perhaps with tongue-in-cheek, the 19th century American author Nathaniel Hawthorne suggested that the West Gate 'may well have been one of King Cymbeline's original gateways'. Warwick Pageant in 1906 included an episode when, shortly before the Roman Conquest, Cymbeline crowns his son Caradoc as King of Britain. [2]

Guy of Warwick

Sir Guy was a mythical hero who married the heiress to the earldom of Warwick after he had proved his courage by slaying dragons, giants and the fearsome Dun Cow. In old age he retired to a hermitage at Guy's Cliffe, where he is commemorated by a Medieval statue in the chapel of St Mary Magdalen. [3] The legend of Guy seems to have originated in the 13th century as a romance for the Earls of Warwick.

The Bear & Ragged Staff

Sir William Dugdale recorded the mythical origins of the Bear and Ragged Staff coat of arms. Arthgal, the first Earl of Warwick, thought his name came from the Welsh for 'bear'. His successor, Earl Morvidus, killed a giant armed with the broken branch of a tree. By the 15th century the Earls of Warwick had paired the bear with the branch (or 'ragged staff') to form the Bear and Ragged Staff badge. The legendary Earls Arthgal and Morvidus featured in an episode in the Warwick Pageant (1906). [4]

The Warwick Pageant, 1906

This community celebration of the town's mythical and real history was in 'Commemoration of the Thousandth Anniversary of the Conquest of Mercia by Queen Ethelfleda'. [5] The pageant took place in the castle grounds, using costumes and scenery made at a mansion on Jury Street which was later renamed Pageant House.

John Rous (c 1420 - 1492), antiquary and compiler of the *Rous Roll*, an early history of Warwick and its Earls.

Sir William Dugdale (1605 - 1686), author of the *Antiquities of Warwickshire*, 1656.

Louis Napoleon Parker (1852 – 1944), Master of the Warwick Pageant.

Church Street & St Mary's Church ①

Church Street, with St Mary's Church at the top, seen in a mid-19th century print. In the foreground is the crossing point for Warwick's two principal historic roads: Castle Street/Church Street and High Street/Jury Street. The crossing probably originated when a track along the north bank of the Avon met another which crossed the river at a ford. It is likely that they were already present when Aethelflaed founded her fortress at Warwick in AD 914.

Guy's Tower, Warwick Castle ②

The castle was founded by the Normans in 1068 during their conquest of the Midlands. It was built over part of the Anglo-Saxon town, destroying at least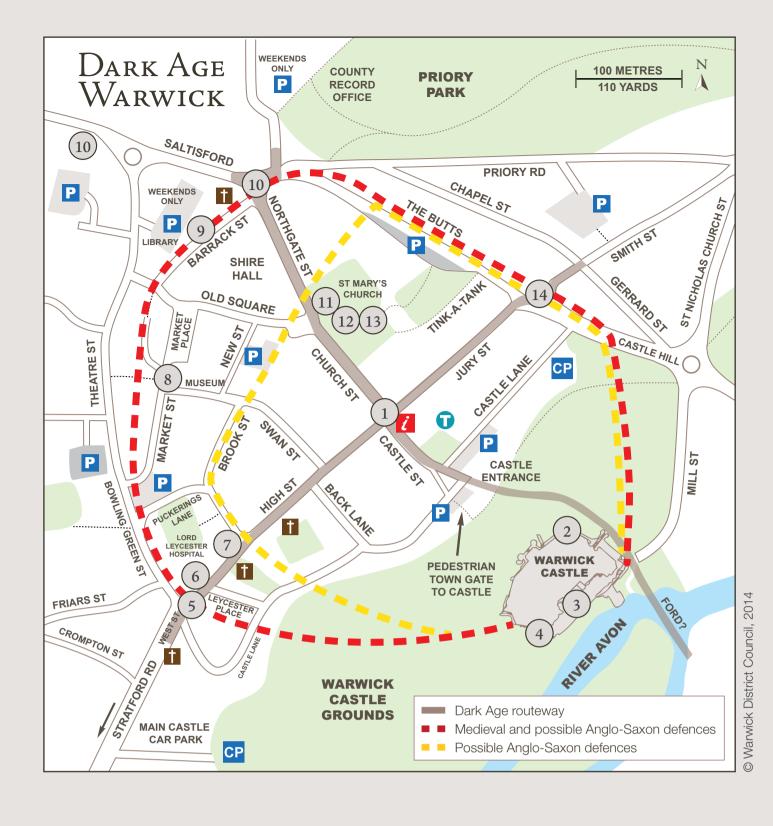 four houses and All Saints' Church. Guy's Tower was added to the castle in the 14th century, by which time the earls had adopted Guy as a family name.

Guy's 'accoutrements', Warwick Castle ③

'Guy's Porridge Pot' (actually a Medieval bronze cooking cauldron) is displayed in the Castle's Great Hall. It is one of a number of unusually large items, including a two-handed sword, said to have belonged to the mighty Guy.

DARK AGE WARWICK

Map legend:
- —— Dark Age routeway
- ▪▪▪ Medieval and possible Anglo-Saxon defences
- ▪▪▪ Possible Anglo-Saxon defences

100 METRES / 110 YARDS

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'Ethelfleda's Mound', Warwick Castle ④

Early historians thought that 'Ethelfleda's Mound' was part of the defences constructed at Warwick by Aethelflaed in AD 914. In fact it is a 'motte' (artificial hill) erected by the Normans as part of the castle they built in 1068.
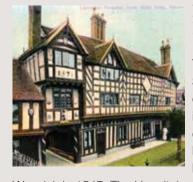
West Gate, High Street ⑤

The gate is cut through the rock of the hill on which Warwick stands. It is Medieval in origin and may be on the site of the west gateway to Aethelflaed's fortress.
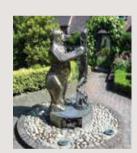
Lord Leycester Hospital ⑥

The Bear and Ragged Staff over the main entrance to the Hospital is a reference to the coat of arms adopted by John Dudley when he was made Earl of Warwick in 1547. The Hospital was founded in 1571 by John's son, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, as a retirement home for military veterans. This remains its main purpose today.

Bear & Ragged Staff Sculpture ⑦

This sculpture is made from perforated steel. It was commissioned from Rachel Higgins for the opening of the Lord Leycester Hospital's Knot Garden in 2000.

Dark Age carved stone, Market Hall Museum ⑧

Dated to the ninth century by the carved decoration, this fragment is on show in the archaeology gallery in the museum. Originally part of a shaft topped by a Christian cross-head, it was found at Bridge End, on the opposite side of the river to the castle.

Barrack Street ⑨

The course of the Anglo-Saxon defences may have followed Barrack Street, as did the later, Medieval, town walls. However, excavations in 1972 on the north side of Barrack Street raised the possibility that the Anglo-Saxon defences lay a little further south. The photograph shows reconstructed Anglo-Saxon defences at Hereford.

Northgate ⑩

This was the site of a Medieval town gate, now long gone. It is likely that the north gateway to Aethelflaed's fortress was at much the same place.

St Mary's Church ⑪

The antiquary John Rous, who recorded much of the mixture of myth and authentic history about Dark Age Warwick, kept his library in a room over the south porch of St Mary's Church. This and much of the rest of the Medieval church shown in this reconstruction was destroyed in the Great Fire of Warwick in 1694. The present church is largely a creation of the rebuilding completed in 1706.

Beauchamp Chapel ⑫

The Beauchamp Chapel in St Mary's Church survived the Great Fire of 1694. The chapel was built in the mid-15th century to house the body of Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick. The Bear and Ragged Staff can be found in a number of places in the chapel.

Churchyard ⑬

According to John Rous, an Anglo-Saxon mint 'was in earlier times at a place towards the East of the churchyard'.

East Gate ⑭

This is Medieval in origin; it is likely that the east gateway to Aethelflaed's fortress was at much the same place.