

Plymouth's Heritage and History





The origins of Plymouth can be traced back to Saxon times, more than a thousand years ago, and its history very much reflects its maritime location. Farmland on a small peninsula at the mouth of the river Plym, referred to in the Domesday Book in 1086 as Sudtone, meaning South Farm, developed into Sutton Harbour, the hub of medieval Plymouth. The earliest record of cargo leaving Plymouth dates from 1211, and for the next two centuries trade through Plymouth flourished, particularly during the 100 Years War with France.

Plymouth's importance both as a community and a port accelerated during this period. In 1254 its town status was recognised by Royal Charter, and in 1439 Plymouth was the first town in England to be granted a Charter by Parliament. Trade with other English regions, the Baltics and Northern Europe expanded, whilst fortifications were built up to repel repeated French incursions.

During the next three centuries Plymouth established its reputation both as a centre for voyage and discovery, and for its military importance. Transatlantic trade originated with William Hawkins in 1528. His son John laid the foundations of an organised naval force. In 1572 Sir Francis Drake became the first Englishman to sail into the Pacific, and in 1577 he embarked on the first ever circumnavigation of the globe. Back in Plymouth, Drake masterminded the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588. According to popular legend, he played bowls on Plymouth Hoe as the Armada sailed up the Channel. Drake was responsible also for the establishment of England's first colony, at Roanoke in Virginia, an act that may be regarded as the origins of the British Empire.

Perhaps the most celebrated expedition to leave Plymouth was that of the Pilgrim Fathers. Persecuted for their puritan beliefs in eastern England, they set sail for the New World on board the Mayflower in 1620.

visitplymouth.co.uk

 [WhatsOnPlymouth](#)  [@visitplymouth](#)

Contact

barbicantic@plymouth.gov.uk
+44 (0) 1752 306330

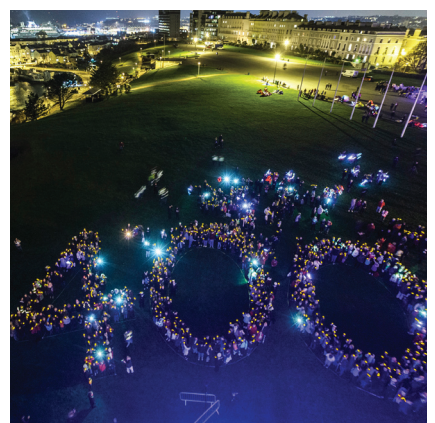
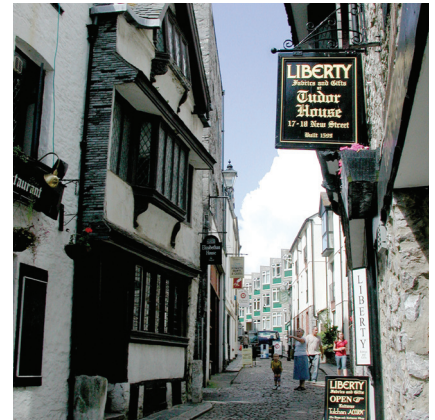
Further explorations that left from Plymouth included three voyages to the southern ocean and the Pacific made by James Cook, the first in 1768. He was the first explorer to set foot on what are now the Hawaiian Islands, where he died in 1779. In 1831 Charles Darwin left Plymouth for the Galapagos Islands, where he formulated his revolutionary theories of natural selection and the Origins of Species. More recently, in 1967 Sir Francis Chichester started and finished at Plymouth the first ever solo circumnavigation of the globe on board his yacht Gypsy Moth IV.

Plymouth's military expansion began in earnest in 1670 when a citadel was built on the highest point above the town, the Hoe, meaning high ground. In 1690 the first Royal Dockyard opened on the banks of the Tamar west of Plymouth. Further docks were built in 1727, 1762 and 1793, and a huge naval complex was later established, including the communities of Plymouth Dock and Stonehouse. The Navy's role during war against Napoleon's France was pivotal, and in 1812 a mile-long breakwater was laid to protect the fleet.

Throughout the nineteenth century the population and physical size of the towns increased dramatically. In 1824 Plymouth Dock was renamed Devonport, and in 1914 the three towns of Plymouth, Devonport and Stonehouse were united as the Borough of Plymouth. In 1928 Plymouth was granted City status, and the first Lord Mayor was appointed in 1935.

Plymouth was heavily bombed during the Second World War. Plymouth's and Devonport's centres were destroyed. Re-built in the 1950s, Plymouth's commercial heart was the first in England to incorporate pedestrian-only shopping avenues. Since the war the city has expanded, with new housing and commercial developments and absorption of what once were neighbouring communities.

In 1967 Plymouth absorbed the towns of Plympton and Plymstock. Plympton pre-dates any development in the Sutton/Plymouth area on the coast. Plympton stands two miles inland on the river Plym, and its origins, which, like that of Sutton, date from the Saxon age, were founded on tin mining and trading. For as long as trading vessels could reach Plympton, the community flourished. However, in the early years of the last millennium the river silted with mining residue, and it was from that time that Sutton / Plymouth grew to pre-eminence. The name Plympton means plum-tree village in Saxon English, and it was from this that the river and later the city of Plymouth itself derived their names.




The whole region is a popular tourist destination, and the city itself attracts large numbers of visitors, who are drawn to the Old Barbican district where they can stroll through streets that date from the sixteenth century and take tea in Elizabethan tearooms. At the Barbican, too, is the Mayflower Steps monument, built in 1934 and a permanent reminder of the Pilgrims' voyage to America. Plymouth's motto is *Turris fortissima est nomen Jehovah* - "the name of Jehovah is the strongest tower", taken from the Proverbs of Solomon.

Plymouth's history on foot

1


Start your walk opposite the Civic Centre at the Guildhall with its distinctive neo-gothic tower. Completed in 1874 the Guildhall was restored after being bombed in the Second World War.



Next door, St Andrew's  minster was at the heart of Sutton Prior, which became known as Plymouth in the 13th century. The oldest part of the church is the south chapel (c.1385), but most of the structure is 15th century. Gutted by fire in the blitz of 1941, the church was restored and re-dedicated in 1957. It has a magnificent window designed by John Piper.



2

From here follow St Andrew's Street into Finewell Street, past the magistrates courts and look at the Prysten house. Built by Thomas Yogge, a wealthy merchant involved in  the French wine trade, in 1498. Yogge supplied a hogshead of claret presented to Katherine of Aragon on her arrival in Plymouth from Spain. The house became incorrectly known as the 'Prysten House' or priest's house in the 19th century.



3

Continue down Finewell Street, follow signposts to the Merchant's house. The 16th century house was modernised in the early 17th century by William Parker, an adventurer who raided the Spanish treasure fleet in the Caribbean in the 1590's, he later became Mayor of Plymouth. The building follows the Elizabethan fashion-moulded oak framed windows set between massive limestone side walls; while inside a pole staircase leads up to three floors of rooms with original details intact.



At the end of St Andrews Street turn left along Notte Street. Cross the road and walk down Notte Street until you reach Basket Ope. Turn right into this street.

The remains of three Tudor fireplaces are set into the wall on your left. Basket Ope brings you to the parade.

Until the 13th century an inlet of Sutton Harbour stretched beyond here up to the junction of Nottle Street and Southside Street. By the 16th century the inlet had been filled and after 1775 was used as a parade ground by the Royal Marines.

4

Across the Parade is a granite building known as the Old Custom House. Until restoration in the 1970's this had a date stone carved 'A1623K'. Diagonally opposite and behind is the present Custom house designed by David Laing in 1820.



5

Walk away from the harbour to the head of the Parade. Turn left and go up Blackfriars Ope. Ahead, in Southside Street is Coates Distillery. This 18th century distillery contains two 19th century stills. In the east end of the buildings first floor is a fine medieval hall (1400-30) with an arch-braced roof and moulded granite door and window frames. In the 17th century this hall belonged to the Hele family, was then used as a debtors' prison and, later, as a congregational meeting house.
www.plymouthgin.com



In medieval times Plymouth had only two friaries. That of the White Friars stood to the north east of Charles church, that of the grey Friars was at the top end of New Street. Walk along Southside Street to Pin Lane, passing on the corner, a Tudor house with overhanging windows. Go up Pin Lane and turn left at the top into New Street. This was known as Grey Friars Street or Rag Lane until the 18th century.

6

Here there are a variety of buildings including 20th century flats, 19th century warehouses and Bonded stores and, near Stokes Lane, a group of Jacobean and Elizabethan houses, some with finely carved wooden door frames.



The Palace Vaults warehouse was built in 1809 as stores for prizes taken by the navy during the Napoleonic Wars. Just beyond it the Elizabethan House is a small late 16th century house which gives an impression of what it was like to live in Plymouth in Drake's time.

7

At the bottom of New Street is Island House where the Pilgrim Fathers are reputed to have lodged before they sailed for America in 1620. A board on the side of the house lists their names.



Cross the road onto Quay road to see Sutton harbour, the centre of Plymouth's seafaring life until the 19th century. This quay was developed in the reign of Elizabeth I. It was widened and the old fish market (now Edinburgh Woollen Mill and Glassblowing House Restaurant) was opened in 1896. The original structure of the building resembles a railway station – it was designed by John Inglis, the engineer of the Great Western railway.



8

Walk towards the harbour entrance past the Mayflower Museum (Tourist Information Centre). The West and East piers were built between 1791-99. The Lock Gate was installed in the 1990's. On the West Pier, memorials mark events in local history; notably famous departures and arrivals, including the sailing of the Mayflower (1620). Some half a million Victorian emigrants left here for new lives in Australia, New Zealand and Canada.

Go past the pier, cross the road and climb a narrow flight of steps up to the remains of a tower wall, once believed to be all that survived of Plymouth's medieval castle. Nearby is Lady Astor Garden. Representing this area, in 1919, Nancy Astor was the first woman to take her seat in parliament.



9

Walk through the arch beside the tower, under the flats and up Lambhay Hill to the Citadel. This is one of the finest star-shaped fortresses in the country. Completed c.1675, the main gate carries the coat of arms of John Grenville, Earl of Bath and the date 1670. A less elaborate gate faces the Hoe. The citadel contains St Katherine Upon the Hoe chapel, which has a fine 17th century doorway. Please check tour availability on 07876 402728.



10

Continue onto the Hoe, reputedly the site of Drake's famous game of bowls, played whilst waiting for the arrival of the Spanish Armada in 1588. Among the monuments are the Drake statue, erected in 1884 and the Armada memorial, erected in 1888.



11

Walk on past the first elegant 19th century terrace – the Esplanade. Overlooking the Hoe is 3 Elliot Terrace, once the home of Viscount and Lady Astor. Elliot Terrace. Two ll. Pre-book tours available.
www.plymouth.gov.uk/aboutcouncil/lordmayor/elliotterrace



12

Double back to Smeaton's Tower. Completed in 1759 this former Eddystone lighthouse set the pattern for all offshore lighthouses. The tower was moved to the Hoe between 1882 -84, because the sea was eroding the rock on which it stood. Look out to sea to the south west horizon. The stump of Smeaton's lighthouse can be seen, beside the present Eddystone light designed by Sir James Douglass and lit in 1882. Almost two miles offshore is the Breakwater. Designed to calm the tides, this massive structure is over a mile long. Completed in 1840, it took twenty – eight years to build and made the Sound a magnificent safe anchorage.

