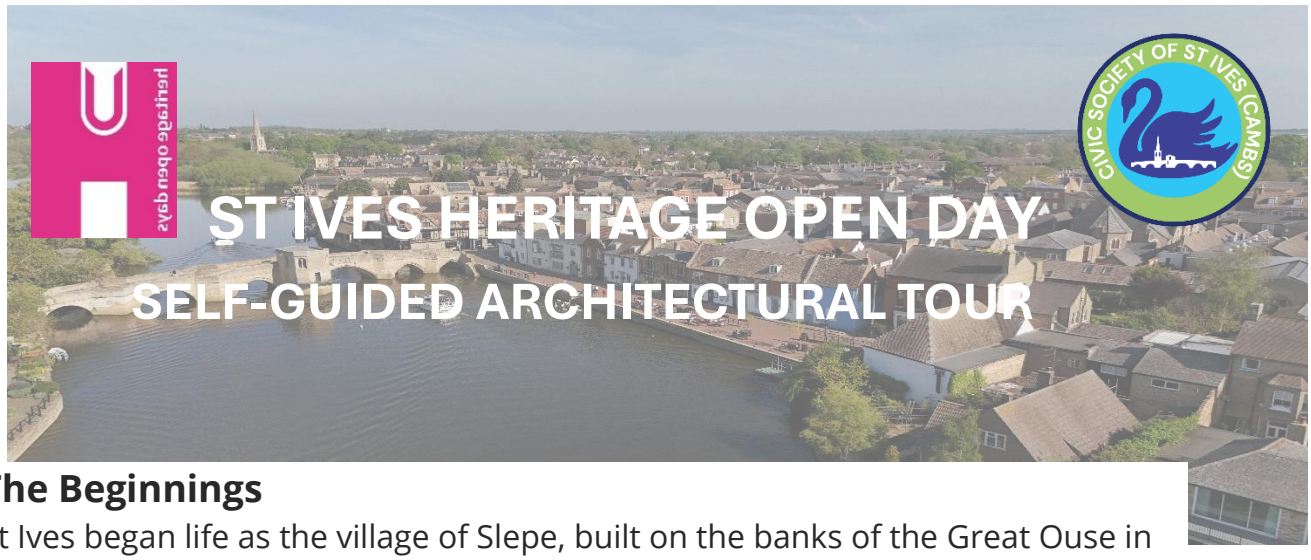


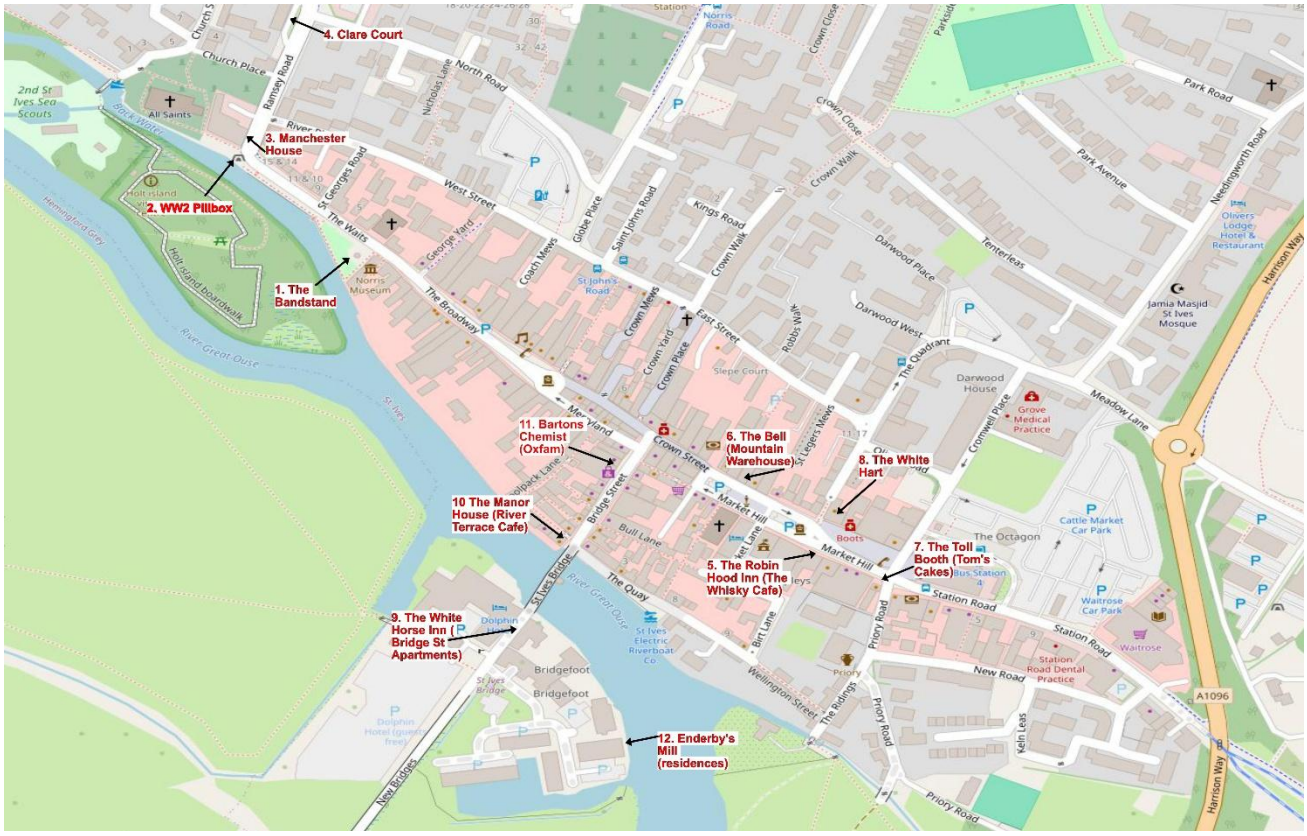
The Beginnings

St Ives began life as the village of Slepe, built on the banks of the Great Ouse in about AD 500. Its rise to fame and fortune began with the discovery of the bones of 'St Ivo'. According to legend, it was on 24th April 1001 that a ploughman from Slepe dug up a stone coffin containing a skeleton. It was claimed the bones were those of Saint Ivo, said to be a Persian bishop who had come to this country to convert local people to Christianity. The bones were taken to a shrine at nearby Ramsey Abbey, and a small monastery, called St Ivo's Priory, was built on the spot where they were found.

The Bridge, Markets and Fairs

A town began to grow up in the area between the old Saxon village and the new Priory. The town took its name from St. Ivo, although it was later discovered that the bones were more likely to have belonged to a wealthy Roman farmer.
The monks of Ramsey Abbey, who owned the new town, took steps to increase its prosperity. They built a bridge over the river and received royal charters that permitted them to hold markets and fairs. The original wooden bridge was replaced by a stone one in the 1400s, which still stands. It is famous for its bridge chapel, built onto the bridge in the middle of the river.
The fairs and markets continue to this day. Every Monday and Friday, Market Hill is filled with a bustling street market, with especially big markets held on Bank Holiday Mondays. We also now enjoy a Farmers' Market every first and third Saturday of the month. Every October, the town centre is transformed into a bustling hub of activity for the Michaelmas Fair, a tradition that dates back hundreds of years.

Here are three short self-guided tours that you can take around the town. There is no requirement to take any particular order; feel free to dip in and out as you wish. The entire tour should take a leisurely 90 minutes. Please refer to the map and the descriptions below to find your way around.



THE WAITS

Picturesque and on a pretty backwater of the River Great Ouse, the name The Waits probably dates back to Saxon times as the Saxon word 'wiht' means 'a bend in the river'.

1. The Bandstand: Next to the Norris Museum is the ornate black and gold 'Victorian' (actually brand new!) Bandstand.

2. WWII Pillbox: At the other end of The Waits, hidden under heavy overgrowth, is a WWII Pillbox. Of brick and concrete construction, this was one of the War Office's seven basic designs situated at defensive locations.

3. Manchester House (private property): Just around the bend on Ramsey Road,

this lovely Grade II-listed 18th-century building was originally built as a private residence. Its elegant Regency design is of gault brick with red brick dressings and a tiled mansard roof. From 1858-1939 it became St Ives Grammar School but later was used for offices and doctors' surgeries. It is now in private ownership.

4. Clare Court (Private Property): Further down Ramsey Road, on the left, is the

20th-century development called Clare Court, consisting of private dwellings situated around a central communal garden. Built in the 1960s, this architectural style was known as Span Construction and was designed by Eric Lyons, a visionary architect who aimed to create homes that were not only aesthetically pleasing but also functional and community oriented. The design of these homes reflects the modernist architectural trends of the time, having clean lines, open spaces, and an emphasis on natural light.

MARKET HILL, CROMWELL'S STATUE

As a result of the St Ives 'Great Fire' in 1689, most of the buildings in Market Hill are 18th-century architecture and later. Many of the new buildings were elegant and fashionable, and St Ives became a prosperous community, showing off its wealth in bricks and mortar.

5. The Robin Hood Inn (now The Whisky Café): A rare timber-framed survivor of the

fire, this building connects us directly to pre-1689 St Ives. Its preserved beams are witness to the town's past, and its sympathetic restoration shows how heritage can be honoured in our modern times.

6.The Bell (now Mountain Warehouse): Built in 1719, this building reflects the post-

fire drive to rebuild with a sense of style and permanence. Note the bell motif preserved in the frontage brickwork.

7.The Tollbooth (now Tom's Cakes): Dating from the mid-19th century, this quaint

building served as the heart of the local livestock trade. Originally the livestock market's office, it later became a store for sheep pen hurdles and then a bookmaker! Its repurposing shows how infrastructure has adapted, from agricultural markets to small-town charm.

8. The White Hart: Rebuilt in early Regency style after the fire originated in its

namesake lane, it played a central role as a coaching inn, a crucial hub in 19th-century travel and communication. Even today, existing remnants like the stable block behind it offer a tangible link to the age of horse-drawn journeys.

The Bridge

Our beautiful medieval Barnack stone bridge leads to Bridge Street to the north, London Road to the south, and to The Quay alongside the river.

9. The White Horse Inn (now Private Bridge House Apartments): Adjoining the

Bridge on London Road this building now consists of handsome private dwellings. The Inn originally consisted of two large houses dating from 1690-1700, their architecture being typical for that period having steeply pitched roofs, with the gables rising above the line of the roof tiles.

10. The Manor House (now the delightful River Terrace Restaurant): To the left on Bridge Street and built around 1609, this lovely building was a survivor of the

Great Fire. It was a timber-framed house of two storeys with attics and a tiled roof and would once have been richly decorated inside with carved ceiling beams, stone fireplaces and panelled walls.

11.Bartons the Chemist (now an Oxfam charity shop): Further down Bridge

Street on the left was Bartons, which remains a good example of one of the fine old houses that once graced St Ives. Built in 1728, it is a large and solidly built 3-storey red-brick building. The current shop front, the oldest in St Ives, dates from 1820.

12. Enderby's Mill (now residential properties): Turn into The Quay, and across the river you can see the impressive steam-powered mill building known as Enderby's Mill. When built in 1854, it was one of only two fully automated corn mills in the country, but it ceased milling in 1888. In 1901, it became Enderby's Printing Mill and later housed various companies, including, in the 1970s, Sir Clive Sinclair's famous 'Sinclair Radionics'. Today, the site is residential.

Together, these structures, along with many others, help chart the transformation of St Ives from the 17th century onwards. More than bricks and beams, they are storytelling walls.