

## A Short History of Saxmundham

Due to the scarcity of early written records, very little is known of the early history of this East Suffolk town. The name itself is alluring, giving the presumption of a Saxon foundation. More prosaically, Ekwall in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names* gives the origin of the name as Seismund's-ham, being the settlement of an otherwise unrecorded Saxon thegn or war lord. Despite the frustrating lack of further evidence, there is no better explanation.

Saxmundham is duly recorded in the Little Domesday Book of 1086. In the same set of entries the town is spelt variously as Samundeham, Sasmundeham, Sasmundesham and Saxmondeham. The main part of the entry, translated into modern English, reads:

*HUNDRED OF PLUMESGATE. Northmann held Saxmundham...with 140 acres as a manor. Then as now 2 villans and 3 bordars. 2 ploughs in demesne and 2 ploughs belonging to the men. 3 acres of meadow. A church with 15 acres. It is worth 30s. The same Northmann has the soke and he holds this from Roger. This [is] one of three manors which the king gave back to Northmann and now he holds it from Roger.*

*Algar, a thegn of King Edward, held Saxmundham as a manor...with 2 carucates of land and 40 acres. Then as now 5 villans and 10 borders. Then 3 slaves, now 1. Then as now 3 ploughs in demesne. Then 3 ploughs belonging to the men, afterwards and now 2 1/2; 5 acres of meadow. 2 churches with 24 acres and half a plough. Then as now 2 horses. Then 3 head of cattle. Then 16 pigs, now 30. Then as now 80 sheep. Then the whole was worth £7 and afterwards it was at farm for £9 10s.; now it is assessed for £7. Ralph holds it from Roger. The soke is the abbot's. In the same place 7 free men, commended to Algar, have been added to this manor with 48 acres. One, Wulfnoth by name, was commended to Malet's predecessor. Now the same Ranulf holds it. Then and afterwards 3 [...], now 2; 4 acres of meadow. Then it was worth 10s. 4d., now 10s. The soke is the abbot's.*

*[Other references refer to 80 acres in Knodishall and 60 acres in Peasenhall belonging to the manor of Saxmundham, and 30 acres in the manor which belong in the demesne of Kelsale.]*

It can be surmised that the different parts of the entry refer to the two ancient Manors of the town - Swann and Hurts.

Geographically, the town lies in the valley of and mainly westward of a minor watercourse, the River Fromus, which flows south into the Alde. It consists of a principal High Street, with its extensions called North and South Entrance, an encroached Market Place (the Charter dates back to 1272, in the reign of Edward II) and successive extensions west and north-westwards.

The present parish church, dedicated to St. John the Baptist, is a distinguished building, but not in the first rank of Suffolk wool churches. It stands on a hill east of the Fromus and consists of west tower with clock and six bells, a nave with clerestory, chancel, and aisles, set in a large churchyard (now closed for burials) containing a unique tombstone incorporating a sunken sundial, which gives accurate readings. The church has a fine perpendicular octagonal font, some Flemish painted-glass roundels, and minor monuments by the great sculptors Nollekens and Westmacott. Other monuments include some carved by the skilled mason Thomas Thurlow who lived and worked in the town in Victorian times. His tombchest is on the right along the path to the church entrance. A fuller description of the church can be found [here](#). Its present style of worship is somewhat charismatic.

Other ancient buildings exist in the town, notably in South Entrance and Chantry Road. Development in Albion Street and Rendham Road began in 1848 and includes a substantial Congregational (now URC) chapel of 1850, with a small burial ground at the rear. The Fairfield Road development began in Edwardian times. A Salvation Army hall is in use for worship opposite the bus station. The former Baptist Chapel in Albion Street now serves as the Saxmundham Ex-Service and Social Club! A Masonic Hall is in joint use by two Lodges in Rendham Road, but the Oddfellows Hall in the lower part of Fairfield Road is now a private dwelling.

Much of the building and development history of the town has yet to be researched, but an interesting Town Trail is also included [here](#). It is a pleasant walk taking about one hour, enabling the historic core of the town to be viewed, including the original railway station buildings, and the remains of Saxmundham's windmill which last worked in 1907. Large parts of the High Street and some parts of the Market Place remain little changed when compared to photographs of more than a century ago.

The market was held on Thursdays until 1854, until Woodbridge changed its market day to that day from Wednesday, following falling trade and increased competition from Bury St. Edmunds when both towns became accessible by railway. Since then market day in Saxmundham is Wednesday. Livestock markets took place on the second and fourth Wednesdays each month until 1977.

There were also ancient fairs in the town for pedlary each Maundy Thursday and August 10th, and a lamb fair on August 18th. The latter is commemorated at Lambsale Meadow, the site of a 1980s development including the present doctor's surgery. None of these fairs survive today.

The railway reached Saxmundham in 1859 with through services to London and Yarmouth Southtown (then still in Suffolk) and Lowestoft, and a branch line off to Leiston and Aldeburgh. There was a very substantial goods traffic, mainly of agricultural produce, brought to the station from surrounding villages. The Beeching axe was responsible for the closure of the northern end of the main line from Beccles to Yarmouth and the branch line closed in 1966. Thankfully, the line from Lowestoft via Saxmundham to Ipswich and London survives, to the immense benefit of the town and surrounding communities. The bus station still functions as the hub of good services to surrounding communities as well as other more distant towns, and some coach services pick up here.

Saxmundham has always been an important centre of local communications. It was a staging post on the London to Yarmouth toll turnpike. The Bell Hotel in the High Street was rebuilt in 1842-3 and is thus the last coaching inn built in England. A Corn Exchange (now the Market Hall) was built in 1846 on an adjoining site set back from the road, with three blank arches and a decorated parapet bearing the arms of the Long family formerly of Hurts Hall. The motif of the blank arches is carried forward to the end wall of the Bell Hotel and the other property adjoining so to stress the little place in front. It was fronted by substantial iron railings until the salvage drive of 1940.

Saxmundham was the chief town and administrative centre of the Plomesgate Hundred and Union. The Union workhouse was built in 1837 at Wickham Market (and it survives in part today as a care home). More recently in local government terms the town became an Urban District Council and is now a Town Council, within Suffolk Coastal District Council. A County Court was held in alternate months in the Market Hall; this was superseded by a Magistrate's Court which held weekly sessions and closed as recently as 1999. There is no surviving Town Lock-up, but the original police station, now a private dwelling at No. 2 Albion Street, was built in 1864 purposefully

adjacent to the new railway station, and contained a residence for one officer, a cell, and a room for the magistrates. The old fire station building in Rendham Road is dated 1910.

There is an early and rare large VR wall post box of 1861 built into the fabric of the railway station, one of very few extant examples with a flap behind the posting aperture. The Town Pump of 1838 has recently been restored and returned to a site (not the original) in the Market Place. Town Gas works, built in 1848 in Gas Hill, now renamed New Cut, lasted until the 1960s, and there was a substantial floor maltings complex in what is now the Market Place car park.

Hurts Hall, unscreened to the south east of the town, is a neo-Elizabethan mansion of 1893, rebuilt after the elegant 1803 bow-fronted house by Samuel Wyatt was destroyed by fire in 1890. It was lately the home of the Long family, plantation and slave owners in Jamaica, who were nevertheless squires and benefactors to the town. They were linked by descent to the powerful North family of nearby Glemham Hall. Other significant residences in the town were The Elms, Fairfield House and Park House. Carlton Hall, just outside the town boundary, was built as the home of the Garrett family, but was gutted by fire in the Second World War.

Now, Saxmundham describes itself as 'The Hub of the Heritage Coast', but this marketing speak aside, it is otherwise a pleasant and unassuming town with around 4,000 friendly inhabitants, who enjoy an excellent rural quality of life, a good range of shops and facilities, many thriving local societies, and good transport links via the A12 and rail and bus services.

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