

Secret Cottage tour went to Stow-on-the-Wold to see the old penal stocks

Today, on our Cotswolds driving tour, we visited the old penal stocks in the square at Stow-on-the-Wold which are now a famous Cotswold landmark.

Ancient and historic Stow on-the Wold is aptly named as it literally means it was built on top of the wolds (the world 'wold' means hill)! It is the highest town in the Cotswolds standing 800 feet above sea level.

But it wasn't always called the same name. Stow on the Wold was originally named after the town's patron Saint and was called Stow St Edward or Edwardstow and was probably founded in the 11th century.

The centre of Stow has a remarkably large and impressive market square. Markets have regularly taken place in Stow since 1107 when King Henry II granted a charter. Stow is an ancient Cotswold Wool Town and the lively market square was built to protect people from prevailing winds and rain while they traded their goods.

Since 1476 there have been two annual trade fairs held every 12 May and 24 October. These coincide with the dates for the feast of Saints Philip and James and the feast of St. Edward the Confessor. Back in the 15th century these fairs allowed people from the surrounding hills to bring their sheep to be sold; with around 20,000 sold on a good day.

Over time, the importance of sheep declined and the fair became a horse fair. The two annual Gypsy horse fairs still take place today – and on the same original days. The Gypsy horse fair is one of the biggest gatherings of its kind in

England. The fair attracts many visitors who love the colourful, atmospheric event and enjoy seeing the horses with their painted wagons.

The market square and green still have the original village penal stocks which we visited today. Stocks have been used since the medieval days to humiliate and punish those who had committed crimes. They were deliberately situated in the most public places within the town such as the market place as humiliation was one of the main aspects of the punishment.

Stocks hold their victim in place by their wrists and / or ankles so they are trapped and at the mercy of the passing crowd. People were allowed to inflict whatever they chose on the victims from insults to throwing rubbish to kicking, spitting and even tickling their feet! As the perpetrators of these crimes were left out all night with little food, they may have died from heat exhaustion, hypothermia or disease.

Our visitors are constantly amazed by the unique things they see on their Cotswolds driving tour with us!