

**GREAT MIGRATION TOUR TO ENGLAND
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WINTHROP FLEET**

TOUR TALK

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THE ABBEY OF BURY ST. EDMUNDS

In the second issue of Tour Talk (October 2011) we briefly described the events which led up to the founding of the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds. The abbey grounds and the remaining ruins of the abbey occupy a large plot of ground in the center of town, just across from our hotel. On most days during the tour, either in the morning or the evening, you will have the opportunity to stroll at your leisure through the grounds. On Monday, 20 August, our “quiet day” in Bury St. Edmunds, probably in the afternoon, I will lead an informal and optional walking tour through the abbey grounds.

At the peak of its existence, from the late eleventh to the early sixteenth centuries, the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds was one of the largest and wealthiest in England. Although Bury was not in medieval times a diocesan see, the abbey church itself rivalled in size and splendor the cathedrals at Norwich and Exeter, which were built at the same time. All that remains of the abbey church are the outlines of the foundations and portions of a few pillars.

Most of the other buildings of the abbey suffered the same fate, but a few pieces of the abbey have been maintained and give some indication of the magnitude of the institution. Most of the north and west walls of the abbey have survived, and imbedded in those walls are four major structures. First, there are the two parish churches of Bury St. Edmunds St. James and Bury St. Edmunds St. Mary. The latter exists much as it did centuries ago, but the former has been much expanded and enhanced, as it has been since 1960 the cathedral church for the diocese of St. Edmondsbury.

Immediately to the south of St. James is the Norman Tower, built in the twelfth century. It stands in front of the west façade of the abbey church, and served as the main entrance to the abbey, especially for processions at the times of royal or episcopal visitations. Some distance to the north of St. James is the Great Gate, built in the fourteenth century. Prior to the dissolution of the monasteries, this gate led to the business end of the abbey, where the Almoner and the Cellarer and other abbey officials had their quarters. The gate, which is directly across from our hotel, now leads to a pleasant formal garden.

On our walking tour we will see all these features, and also some of the oddities created by the not-quite-complete destruction of some parts of the abbey. For example, only a portion of the grand west façade of the abbey church survives. However, what does survive has been utilized for a number of modern residences.

THE GREEN MAN

On our tour we will from time to time encounter the Green Man. He comes to us in many shapes and forms, but the most common is as a disembodied head, carved in wood or stone, with either vines and leaves emanating from the mouth, or a full-facial mask of leaves, generally found as a decoration in churches.

The pinnacle for production of this image was at the height of Gothic church building, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The versions created then had grown out of a wide range of pre-Christian myths. In pagan times, the Green Man, or his precursors, symbolized fertility and fecundity, and also the cycle of death, metamorphosis, and rebirth. Rituals of tree worship, as practiced by druids and other priestly cults, also became part of the symbolic mix. These pagan elements were then co-opted by Christianity, and connected with the death and resurrection of Christ and the cult of the Virgin Mary.

Another pre-Christian strand that became associated with the Green Man was the Celtic reverence for the head, and especially for detached talking heads. This was Christianized in the Arthurian story of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

The name “Green Man” was not firmly associated with this iconographic tradition until the publication of some anthropological studies early in the twentieth century. Prior to that time there were many pubs named The Green Man, but the pub signs generally depicted Robin Hood, whose legends were also interwoven with the other strands of mythology relating to the Green Man. There are still many pubs named The Green Man, but they now more often display the disembodied foliate head now connected with that name.

Be on constant lookout for his appearance in unexpected locations.

Recommended Reading

Wikipedia, entry for “Green Man.” Provides a good overview, a brief bibliography, and links to about two dozen other relevant websites.

William Anderson, *Green Man: The Archetype of our Oneness with the Earth* (London, 1990). A historical discussion of the development of the imagery and connotations of the Green Man from paganism and classical religion into Christianity, with a Jungian flavor. More than one hundred photographs of exemplars of the Green Man.

Simon Armitage, translator, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (New York, 2007). There are dozens of good and serviceable translations of this poem, many still in print. The advantage of this edition, aside from being the most recent and readily available, is that it is a parallel edition, with the Middle English and the modern translation on facing pages.

GAINSBOROUGH, CONSTABLE AND SARGENT

During the course of our tour we will be repeatedly crossing the trails of three first-rate artists: Thomas Gainsborough, John Constable and John Singer Sargent.

Thomas Gainsborough was baptized at Sudbury, Suffolk, on 14 May 1727, son of John Gainsborough, a weaver. The family resided in All Saints parish, and there is a large memorial to the parents of the artist in that churchyard. There is also a statue of Thomas Gainsborough at the top of the market square, in front of St. Peters church.

John Constable was born at East Bergholt, Suffolk, on 11 June 1776, son of Golding Constable, a corn merchant. East Bergholt is just across the Stour River from Dedham, Essex, and the entire eastern end of the Stour River valley is often referred to as “Constable Country.” Constable attended grammar school at Lavenham, in the building which may have been the birthplace of Adam Winthrop, grandfather of John Winthrop, three hundred years earlier. Constable produced at least three paintings which were altarpieces at three churches in the area, and we will see one of them at Nayland. He also frequently painted the church and other scenes in Stoke-by-Nayland.

John Singer Sargent was born at Florence, Italy, on 12 January 1856, son of Fitzwilliam Sargent of Gloucester, Massachusetts. He travelled and painted widely in Europe and the United States. One of his important patrons was his third-cousin once-removed, Daniel Sargent Curtis, who was born in Boston in 1825. Curtis owned a palazzo in Venice, which was long his base of operations and where he hosted John Singer Sargent at times. Curtis married Ariana Wormeley, who was born at Dedham, Essex, in 1833. On the exterior of the Dedham church are memorial plaques to Curtis, his wife and their son, and in the interior is a large wall memorial to Ariana’s father, Admiral R. R. Wormeley.

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