

Discover Devon's diversity: past and present



Telling our stories
Finding our roots

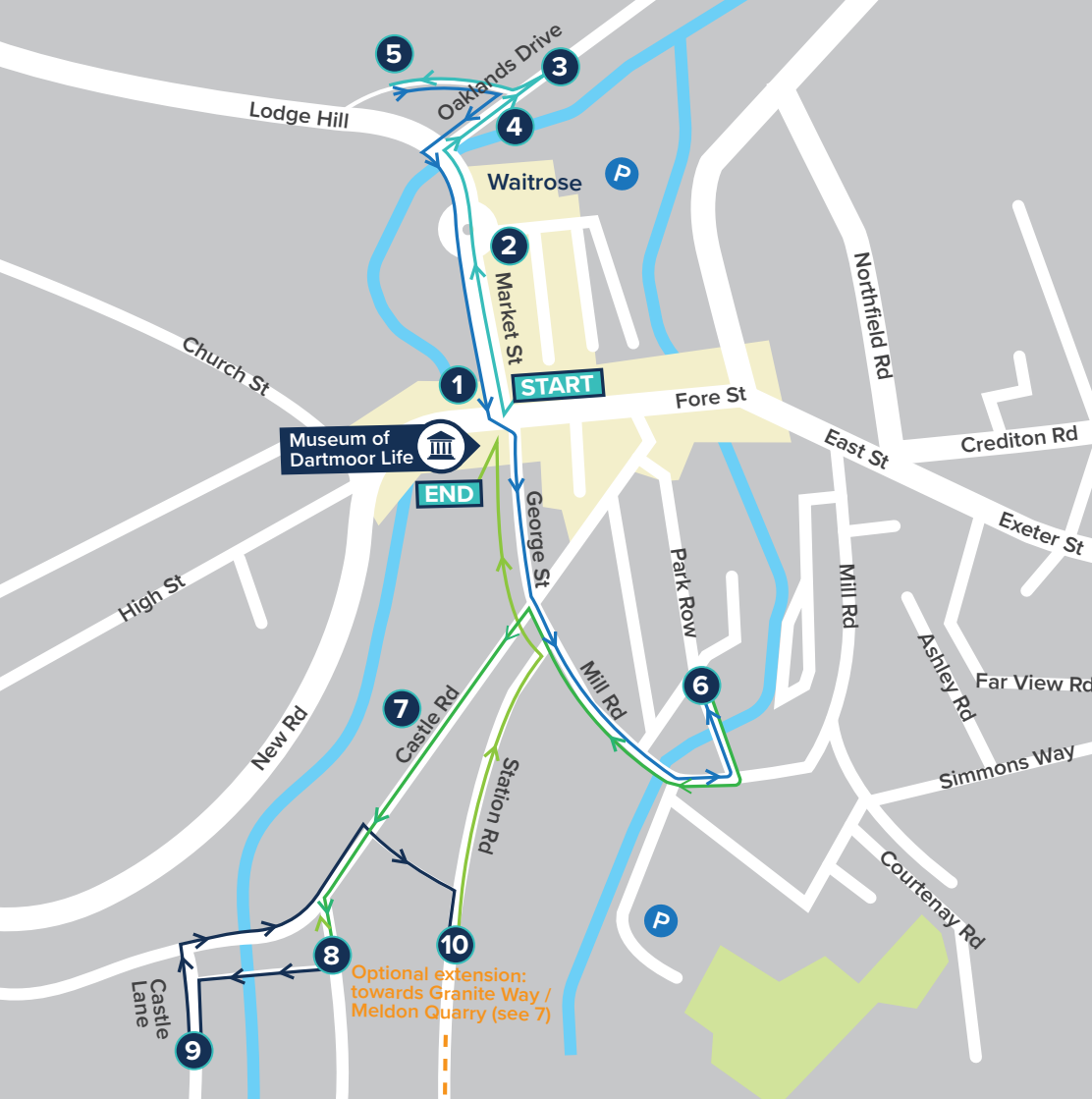
A self-guided walking tour through
Okehampton's multicultural past



Museum of
Dartmoor Life

A Devon Development Education
project, supported by The National
Lottery Heritage Fund.





1. Market Street
2. The Cinema
3. Oaklands House
4. Nissen Huts
5. Rugby Ground
6. The Drill Hall/
Conservative Club
7. About Meldon Quarry
8. The Workhouse
9. Okehampton Castle
10. Catholic Church of
St Boniface

Optional extension:
towards Granite Way /
Meldon Quarry (see 7)

Welcome to the Okehampton Telling Our Stories walking tour.



“History, it’s a big part of who you are whether you know it or not, isn’t it? It’s in your blood, it’s in your genes, it’s in your inheritance - genetically and spiritually.”

Anna Georghiou, British-Cypriot

To hear more of Anna’s story, scan here:



Introduction

The tour will take about 1 hour 30 mins - 1 hour 45 mins to complete. There is also an optional extension of approximately 2 hours (return) to visit Meldon Quarry via the Granite Way.

There is a map on the inside cover. This shows the walking route, and stops. Optional extensions are marked in ----- . After each stop is a set of written directions in a **blue box**, like the one below. These describe the route to the next stop.

Along the way, you will also uncover the experiences and stories of people living in Okehampton today. Look out for **teal quote boxes** like the one on the left. These contain extracts from oral history interviews. Scan the QR code using a smartphone camera to listen to the story.

For the story of the Polish Naval Camp, follow stops 2-5, and 10.

DIRECTIONS:

Begin at The Museum of Dartmoor Life. Proceed onto Fore St along a narrow passageway leading out of the museum courtyard.

1. Fore Street and Market Street

In front of you to the right, Market Street and Fore Street meet.

980 AD: Slaves freed at the crossroads

The ethnic and cultural profile of Anglo-Saxon England was very mixed, and included Angles, Saxons, Vikings and Britons - invaders from mainland and northern Europe and other areas of Britain.

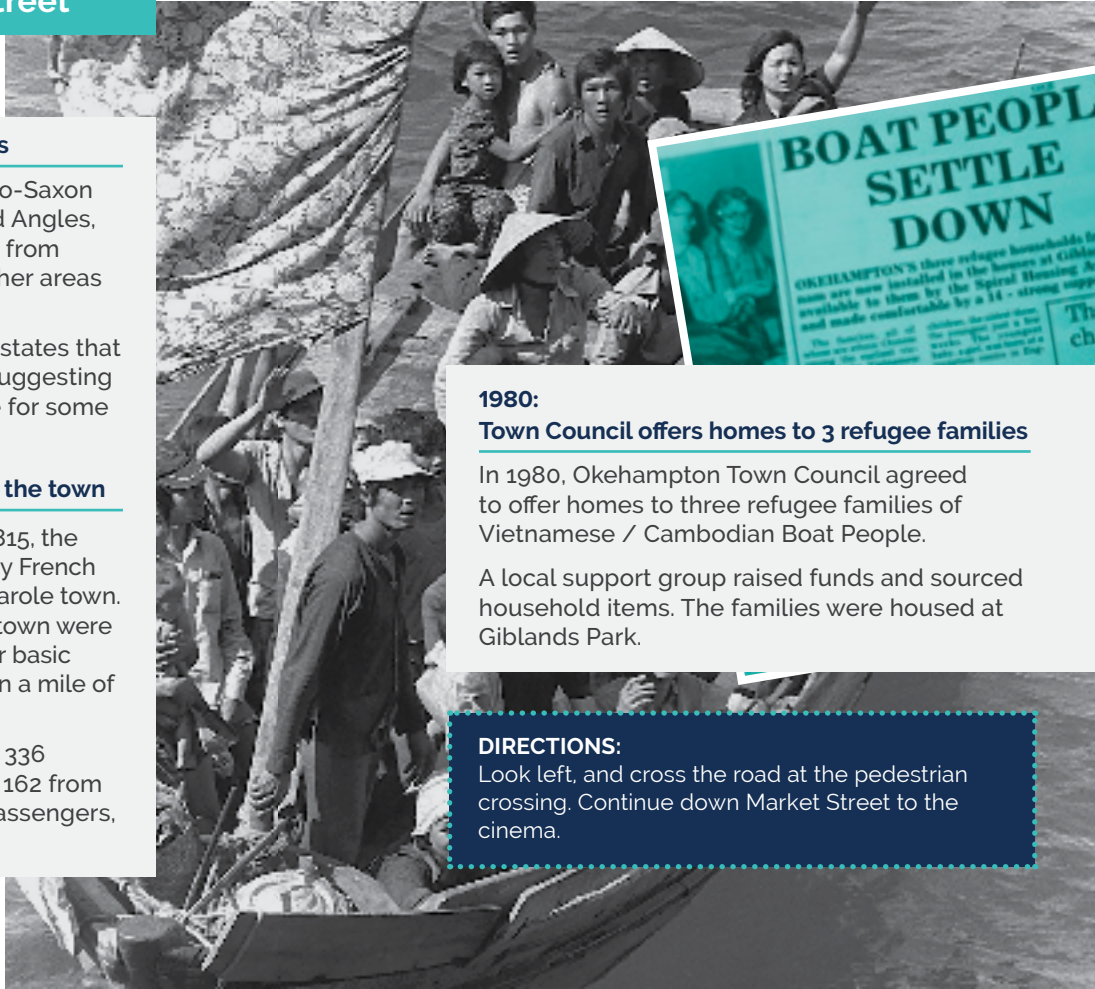
The first record of the town in 980 AD states that slaves were freed at the crossroads, suggesting that Okehampton was a place of hope for some of these early settlers.

1809 - 1812: French Prisoners of War in the town

During the Napoleonic Wars of 1803-1815, the main street would have been walked by French Prisoners of War. Okehampton was a parole town. Officers and gentlemen housed in the town were provided with an allowance to cover basic living costs – but required to stay within a mile of the town's centre.

Between May 1809 and February 1812 336 prisoners were sent to Okehampton – 162 from the French Navy, 131 Army, 31 ship's passengers, 3 ships' boys, 6 wives and 3 children.

Photo (large): Vietnamese refugees 1982 (public domain). Photo (inset): Newspaper article reporting on the arrival of refugee families to Okehampton in 1980 (Museum of Dartmoor Life)



1980:

Town Council offers homes to 3 refugee families

In 1980, Okehampton Town Council agreed to offer homes to three refugee families of Vietnamese / Cambodian Boat People.

A local support group raised funds and sourced household items. The families were housed at Giblands Park.

DIRECTIONS:

Look left, and cross the road at the pedestrian crossing. Continue down Market Street to the cinema.

"I think it was a big challenge as I came to live on what at first seemed to me, a sort of dirty farm, having come from a different lifestyle in Trinidad, living in a large house with lots of servants.

Now I had to learn to cope on my own, and my parents were really worried that I wouldn't be able to manage. But I was quite determined to prove that I could manage both inside and outside!"

Carol Williamson, on settling into life as a farmer's wife

To hear more of Carol's story, scan here:



2. The Cinema

1 September 1945: Fight between Polish seamen and British airborne troops

The cinema was once the Market Hall. During and after WW2, Okehampton hosted members of the Polish Navy, who lived at a base north of the town centre.

Relations between the Polish servicemen and locals were generally calm and harmonious. However, occasional skirmishes did occur, including a fight between Polish and British troops at one infamous Friday night dance.

The local paper reported (with more than a touch of drama):

"Over 400 men were involved and few escaped unscathed. It... continued with a pitched battle with belts and bricks in the street on Saturday night."

DIRECTIONS:

Continue up Market St., passing over a roundabout and the river, until you reach Oaklands Drive on your right.

Walk along Oaklands Drive until you reach some gateposts, from which you can view Oaklands House.

Top photo: The interior of the Market Hall, here hosting a public tea to celebrate the 1953 Coronation, 'enjoyed by 2,500 people'. Bottom photo: Airborne troops marching out of Market Street in 1946, showing the exterior of the Market Hall (both Museum of Dartmoor Life)

3. Oaklands House

1943 – 1949: Estate used as base for American and Polish military

Oaklands House and estate belonged to George Gratton, the wartime Mayor of Okehampton.

During WW2, a large field alongside Oaklands Drive (where the primary school and rugby ground are now) was requisitioned for the war effort. A motor transport depot and Nissen and wooden huts were built for accommodation, storage and operations.

The visiting soldiers became involved in the life of the town, and some even married local women.

American troops occupied the camp from May 1943 till June 1944 in preparation for the D-Day landing.

In December 1944, the Polish Navy moved into the vacated site.



Photo (large): Oaklands, coloured steel engraving 1831, by W. Taylor after T. Allom. Photo (inset): Marriage at Okehampton of Land Girl Margery Webber to American soldier Walter Tillery (both Museum of Dartmoor Life)



"I do feel sometimes I don't feel at home here and in the Philippines. Sometimes I'm sort of trying to fit in there as well. It's just really strange... Home will be where my family is."

Mrs C, an Okehampton resident of Filipino heritage

To hear more of Mrs C's story, scan here:



DIRECTIONS:

Retrace your steps back along Oaklands Drive. Look out for the large corrugated iron huts on your left. Pause here.

4. The Nissen Huts

1944 – 1949:

Polish Navy resident in Okehampton

These Nissen huts are the remains of the WW2 Polish naval camp. They were probably used as stores, communal dining rooms and classrooms.

Between 1944 and 1947 the camp had three functions: a training school for officers; a 'holding camp' for men between ships, and a base for the Polish Women's Naval Auxiliary Service.

The camp was named after the ship ORP Baltyk and jokingly referred to as a 'Stone Frigate'.



"I would like to know what he was, how he spent his time there; did he make any friends there and was he doing any training there? And was he happy there?"

Ann Zielonka, daughter of Polish seaman Antoni Zielonka

To hear more of Ann's story, scan here:



1947 – 1949: Camp becomes home of Polish Resettlement Corps

After the war, the Polish Navy in the West was dissolved, and the Officers school closed.

After the 1945 Yalta Conference, many Poles were unable to return home, fearing for their lives under a new Communist regime.

From 1947 – 1949, the camp operated as a Resettlement Centre, preparing Polish servicemen and women for a new life in the UK. Daily life would have included English lessons, vocational training and placements in industry or agriculture.

At least two Poles made permanent homes in the town: Peter Skrzypczak and Tony Smul, both keen footballers who went on to play for Okehampton Argyle.

DIRECTIONS:

Continue back down Oaklands Drive, walking away from Oaklands House. Look out for a footpath on the right hand side of the road, flanked by school road markings. Take this path, which leads to the school and the rugby ground.

Camp Profile: Aleksander Szytko

Aleksander Szytko was born in 1918 near Glebokie in eastern Poland. A farmer, he was forced into the Russian army in 1941, escaped, and served in the Polish navy during WWII as an Able Seaman, with distinction.

He was based at Okehampton between 1946-1948 before moving to Exeter, where he worked on building sites, married and had two children. He died there in 2010.



"I'm very proud of it. If you think about it, there may be a million people in this country who have Polish connections... And we're a very important fabric of present-day society I think."

Peter Szytko (Aleksander's son),
on his Polish heritage

To hear more of Peter's story, scan here:



Camp Profile: Stanislaw Olszowski

Stanislaw Olszowski was born in 1920 in Sośnica, Upper Silesia. He joined the Polish Navy in 1938 and served throughout WWII as a navigation officer.

During 1944/45 he was based at Okehampton as a course instructor training reserve officer cadets.

He returned to Okehampton Resettlement Camp between 1947-49, before settling in Middlesbrough with his wife and two sons. He lectured in Mechanical Engineering for many years. He died in 2009.



"[My Dad was] the son of a coal mining engineer from Silesia who went and joined the Navy in 1938. When I asked him: 'Why did you join the Navy being so far from the sea?', he said 'Well, it seemed an exciting thing to do'."

Antoni Olszowski (Stanislaw's son)

To hear more of Antoni's story, scan here:



5. Rugby Ground

1944 – 1949: Polish Navy in Okehampton (continued)

The main parade ground for the Polish Naval Camp was situated on the site of Okehampton Rugby Ground.

Nissen huts and living quarters would have stretched out from the parade ground in all directions.

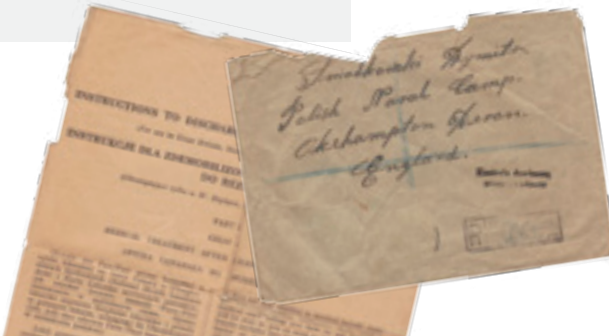
Photographs indicate that the area was used for parades, drills and other gatherings, such as open-air Catholic masses.

The camp also held weddings and a naval band provided entertainment.

It had its own post office, and an officer's mess (a bar) called 'The Lost Weekend' - likely to have been a place of respite for those returning from active service.

Photo (large): Open air mass on the camp parade ground (Museum of Dartmoor Life)

Photo (inset): Mail and discharge papers for Polish servicemen (Sniatkowski family collection)



DIRECTIONS:

Retrace your steps along the footpath, and back down Oaklands Drive, to where it meets Lodge Hill and Market St.

Turn left and head back towards the museum via Market St.

When you reach Fore St., cross the road and go up George St., past the post office.

Continue as George St. turns into Mill Rd.

Turn left down Park Row.

6. The Drill Hall / Conservative Club

"We have another friend who came on a Kindertransport. She's now in her 80s. She and her sister were got out of Holland. They were never told they were Jewish until they were teenagers. Their parents kept the secret from them because of what was happening."

Richard Halsey, President of the Exeter Hebrew Congregation

To hear more of Richard's story, scan here:



Immediately to your right is the Conservative Club, previously the Okehampton Drill Hall.

The hall was opened in 1914 to give volunteer soldiers training facilities. It continued this role through the Second World War, when the Home Guard and Territorial Army met there to practice during the day.

After hours, it was a popular venue for local entertainment and events, including for the multinational troops stationed in and around the town.

Scenic Simmons Park next to the hall provided a further site for romancing local ladies, and a peaceful setting in which to unwind following wartime experiences.

Photo: A page from Alice Clapp's logbook, detailing Belgian refugees in Devon during WW1. (Devon Archives and Local Studies, DHC 9036Z)

1914:

Okehampton supports Belgian refugees

During the First World War, Belgian refugees were housed in the towns and villages surrounding Exeter – including Okehampton's satellite villages. One house in North Tawton is known as Belgium House to this day.

Housing, clothes and food were provided by locals and money was raised to support the refugees.

On the 20th November 1914, it was reported that:

'At the [Okehampton] Drill Hall an enjoyable entertainment has been given in aid of the Belgian Relief Fund. There was a crowded house. The concert realised over £13...' (Devon and Exeter Gazette)

DIRECTIONS:

Retrace your steps, walking back along Mill Road. At the crossroads, turn left by the Post Office, down Castle Road.

Continue past the allotments. You are now heading south west, towards Dartmoor.

Pause here to learn more about Meldon Quarry.

7. Meldon Quarry

1920's: European glassworkers in Okehampton

In the early 20th century, a company was set up to manufacture glass at Meldon Quarry. Before then, glass was made in Europe, so little local knowledge was available.

The solution was to recruit German and Dutch workers, many of whom would have lived in the town and walked this way to the quarry.

Dutch glassworker Engbert Warnder Roosien was employed at the Meldon Glassworks from 1920-1921.

In 1921 Engbert lost his job at the factory and through misfortune ultimately ended up back in the Netherlands, separated from his Devonian wife and children.

Walk on to discover how his story ends...



OPTIONAL EXTENSION:

Meldon Quarry is situated about 1 hour's walk outside Okehampton (a 2hr return journey by foot).

If you would like to view the quarry, there is a clearly signposted walking route starting at Okehampton Station. Follow the signs for the Granite Way / National Cycle Route 27.

"Living in Devon you see the past... I like to know that pubs will still care about things, you know like the copper that horses will carry, the tags, the pictures... it gives you a connection with it."

Daniel Leite, Portuguese national

To hear more of Daniel's story, scan here:



DIRECTIONS:

Continue on Castle Road. As you come to a bend in the road, and before you cross the river, turn left, down a private drive.

This is a footpath, and you will see signs on the driveway. Proceed with the river on your right.

Look for a grey stone building with a triangular façade and white brickwork around the windows.

This is part of the old town Workhouse.

8. The Workhouse



"Be open to people from different places... Focus on yourself through learning from others... Someone who's talking isn't listening and they're not learning anything new... And learn about your surroundings - because it makes us who we are really."

Adam Hassan, British-Egyptian young person

To hear more of Adam's story, scan here:



Engbert Warnder Roosien returned to Okehampton six years later, only to be arrested for entering the country illegally.

On December 30th 1926, Roosien and his family were sent to the Okehampton Poor Law Institution, also known as the 'Workhouse'.

This is the building in front of you. It was built in 1836-7 and housed the poor until it became a hospital in 1948.

Men and women were housed separately. A report of 1894 - 5 describes the wards for women as 'comfortless and bare'.

Image: Architect's sketch view of the Okehampton Workhouse from the 1890s (Devon Archives and Local Studies, DHC PLU/Okehampton/198-207)



DIRECTIONS:

Continue past the old workhouse along a path that leads to a footbridge across the river.

Signs should point to Okehampton Castle.

Cross the river and turn left at the far side of the bridge.

Shortly after, turn right through a gate that will lead you via a short path onto Castle Lane.

On Castle Lane look left and you will see the Castle in front of you.

9. Okehampton Castle

c. 1809: Napoleonic graffiti

Okehampton Castle includes the remains of a medieval Motte and Bailey castle and a 13th century hunting lodge built by the de Courtenays.

The castle features a small reminder of the Napoleonic Prisoners of War stationed in the town: graffiti.

Words can be seen cut into a stone tablet in the Pascina of the Castle. The inscription is not very clear, but reads 'HIC V...T FUIT CAPTIVUS BELLI' (Here V...T was a prisoner of war).

According to local historian the late Dr E. H. Young, 'V...T' is believed to be Gilles Vincent, surgeon on the French ship 'La Rejoirie' who was captured on 10th June 1809.



"There are two things which shocked me a little bit. The one was the food. I was absolutely sure I would starve in this country until they opened Lidl. And the other one - when we together found our first house, I wrote to every one of my German friends: 'we have just moved into a doll's house. And I have to walk sideways to get up the stairs!'"

Christine Star, on moving to England from Germany

To hear more of Christine's story, scan here:

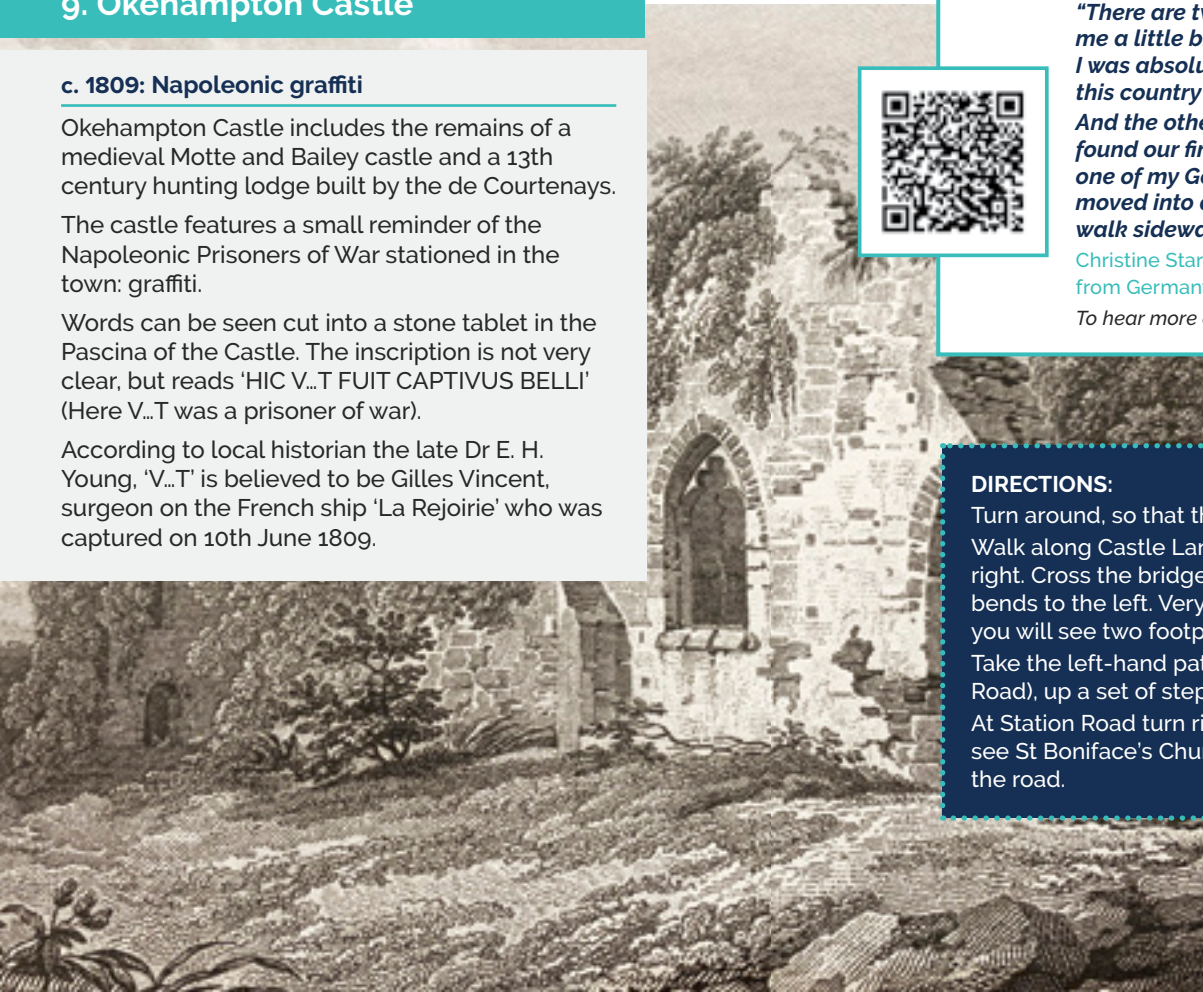
DIRECTIONS:

Turn around, so that the Castle is behind you. Walk along Castle Lane keeping the river to your right. Cross the bridge and follow the road as it bends to the left. Very shortly after, on the right, you will see two footpaths.

Take the left-hand path (signposted to Station Road), up a set of steps and a steep hill.

At Station Road turn right and continue until you see St Boniface's Church, on the left hand side of the road.

Image: Copper engraving of the chapel at Okehampton Castle, by S. Middiman after J.C. Smith, 1808 (Devon Archives and Local Studies, WCSL SC1817-1)



10. Catholic Church of St Boniface



The Catholic Church of St Boniface was built in the 1920's.

The vast majority (around 95%) of the Polish servicemen who lived at the naval camp in the 1940's were Roman Catholic.

This is the church many would have frequented. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the usual congregation would have been swelled considerably by the attendance of devout Catholic Polish servicemen.

Now, the church serves a congregation with a wide range of heritages from other parts of the world, including Poland, South Asia, France, South America, Germany, Israel and the Philippines.

Top Photo: St Boniface RC church, interior 1920s. Main Photo: St Boniface RC Church, exterior 1920s (both Museum of Dartmoor Life)



"I became a Christian 14 years ago. And I've got a very different relationship to my Jewish background now, because obviously, I'm really interested now. Because Jesus was a Jew, and the Old Testament is part of our Bible."

Michal Brandstatter, British-Israeli-Christian

To hear more of Michal's story, scan here:



DIRECTIONS:

To return to the town centre, turn around and retrace your steps back along Station Road. Continue until you meet Mill Rd.

Turn left, and continue until you reach Fore St. and the Museum.

This is the end of the tour.



Walk with us to discover Okehampton's hidden histories: important stories of diversity, multiculturalism, and global connections.

Along the way, you will also uncover the stories of local people living in Okehampton today, recorded through oral history interviews.

Telling Our Stories is a community-led oral history and heritage project. Our aim is to find, share and celebrate the hidden histories of Devon's diverse and multicultural communities – past and present.

Visit our website for a full historical timeline and to listen to the oral history archive.

www.tellingourstoriesdevon.org.uk

Images shared courtesy of the Museum of Dartmoor Life, the Devon Archives and Local Studies and project participants. Graffiti letter art front cover: Jaz Rogers.