

SAFFRON WALDEN HISTORICAL JOURNAL

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NW Essex c.1600 Camden's *Britannia*

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Among the treasures of Saffron Walden Town Library are various editions of the first-ever topographical survey of the whole country, by William Camden (1551-1623), *Britannia* (subject of a recent BBC programme by Nicholas Crane). Observations of early antiquarians such as Camden need to be treated with caution in terms of historical accuracy, but his descriptions retain a picturesque charm and offer insights into the impressions of 16th century travellers. This extract comes from his final edition 1607, considerably altered from earlier editions.*

'A little below standeth upon an hill Walden of Saffron, called Saffron Walden, among the fields looking merily with most lovely Saffron. A very good Mercat town incorporated by King Edward the Sixth with a Treasurer, two Chamberlaines and the Commonalty. Famous it was in times past for a Castell of the Magnavilles (which now is almost vanished out of sight) and an Abbay adjoyning, founded in a place very commodious in the yeere 1136, wherein the Magnavilles, founders thereof, were buried. Geffrey de Magnavilla was the first that gave light and life (as it were) to this place. For Mawde the Emprise in these words (out of her very Patent I copy them) gave unto him Newport (a good bigge towne that is hard by). *For so much as he was wont to pay that day whereon (as her words are) my father King Henry was alive and dead, and to remove the mercat from Newport into his Castell of Walden, with all the customes that beforetime in better maner appertained to that Mercat, to wit in Toll, passage and other customes, and that the waies of Newport neere unto the water banke be directed streight according to the old custome into Waldon, upon the ground forfeited to me, and that the Mercat of Walden be kept upon Sunday and Thursday, and that a Faire be holden at Walden to begin on Whitsondy even and to last all the Whitson week.* (And from that time, by occasion of this Mercat, for a great while it was called Cheping Walden). Also, as it is in the *Booke of Walden Abbay*, He the said Geffrey appointed Walden to be the principal place and seat of his Honour and Earledom for him and his successours. The place were he built the Abbay had plenty of waters, which rising their continually doe run and never faile. Late it is

*Camden's *Britannia* – *Saffron Walden Historical Journal* No 17 (2009)

eere the sunne riseth and shineth there, and with the soonest he doth set
and carry away his light, for that the hilles on both sides stand against it.
That place they now call Audley End, of Sir Thomas Audley Lord
Chancellor of England, who changed the Abbay into his owne dwelling
house. This Thomas, created by King Henry the Eight Baron Audley of
Walden, left one sole daughter and heire, Margaret, second wife to
Thomas Howard Duke of Norfolke, of whom he begat Lord Thomas, Lord
William, Lady Elizabeth, and Lady Margaret. The said Thomas, employed in
sundry sea-services with commendation, Queene Elizabeth summoned by
writ unto the High Court of Parliament among other Barons of the Realme
by the name of Lord Howard of Walden. And King James of late girded him
with the sword of the Earledome of Suffolke, and made him his
Chamberlain; who in this place hath begunne a magnificent building.
Neere to another house of his at Chesterford, there was a towne of far
greater antiquity hard by Icaldun, in the very border of the shire, which
now of the old Burgh the rusticall people use to call Burrow Banke, where
remaine the footings onely of a towne lying in maner dead, and the
manifest tract of the very walles. Yet will I not say that it was the *Villa
Faustini* which Antonine the Emperour placeth in this tract, and albeit,
It takes not up large ground that yeelds no gaine,
But, country-like, is homely rude and plaine,

Yet dare not I once dreame that this is the Villa Faustini which in these
and other verses is by that pleasant and conceited Poet Martiall
depainted in his *Epigrams*. The fieldes heere on every side (as I said)
smell sweetly and smile pleasantly with Saffron, a commodity brought into
England in the time of King Edward the Third. This in the moneth of July
every third yeare, when the heads thereof have beene plucked up and
after twenty daies spitted or set againe under mould, about the end of
September they put forth a whitish blew flower, out of the middle
whereof there hange three red fillets of Safron (which we call Chives),
which are gathered very early in the morning before the sunne rising, and,
being plucked out of the flower, are dried in a soft fire. And so great
increase commeth heereof that out of every acre of ground there are
made fourescore or an hundred pounds weight of saffran while it is moist,
which being dried yeeld some twenty pound in weight. And that which a
man would marvell more at, the ground which three yeeres together hath
borne Saffran will beare abundance of Barly eightene yeeres together
without any dunging or manuring, and then againe beare Saffran as
before, if the inhabitants there hath not misinformed me, or I
misconceived them.'

**Note: this transcription is taken from P. Holland's 1610 translation of
Camden's final edition 1607, considerably altered from his original in 1586. The
full translation by Prof. D. Sutton can be read online at:
<http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk>**

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