

Bracknell's High Street

A journey through time



The Lexicon – 2024. Credit: Stewart Turkington

Thank you to The Bracknell Forest Society for their support in creating the content for this self-guided history walk. Andrew Radgick, the Society's History Officer, is the author of **'The Story of Bracknell: Before the New Town'** and leads history walks in Bracknell.

Local history at Bracknell Library

Visit Bracknell Library (next to Fenwick and Easthampstead Works) to explore historical maps, newspapers, books and photographs, along with other resources on the Bracknell Forest's unique history.

For more historical resources, visit the Bracknell Forest libraries website: www.bracknell-forest.gov.uk/libraries/local-and-family-history



Bracknell's High Street – 1950.

A self-guided history walk along the High Street.

A very brief history of Bracknell

Bracknell is not a particularly old settlement. It appeared on a map for the first time in 1607 as a line of buildings built along the High Street.

The building of a turnpike road (now the A329) linked Bracknell to London, although the journey time was about five hours. One of the toll houses stood opposite Lily Hill Park (its position is now marked by Old Tollgate Close).

The arrival of the railway in 1856 had a major effect on the town. A weekly cattle market took place near The Old Manor at the top of the High Street, and several brickworks opened as the rail network allowed for easy transportation of goods throughout the country. Bracknell's bricks were of high quality and much sought after. Westminster Cathedral and Madame Tussaud's museum in London are built of Bracknell bricks, along with Royal Holloway College in Egham. Locally, South Hill Park, the chapel at Larges Lane cemetery, and Brownlow Hall (near The Plough and Harrow in Warfield) contain Bracknell bricks.

The idea of post-war New Towns was put forward in 1943. Rather than rebuild homes and businesses bombed in London, a series of satellite towns around the capital was proposed. White Waltham was initially chosen as the location for one in Berkshire. The high-grade agricultural land and the lack of a railway connection meant it was discarded in favour of Bracknell, then a market town with a population of about 5,000 people. The designation was signed on 17 June 1949, and Bracknell Development Corporation, which would be responsible for its construction, was set up in 1950.

The front cover shows the **High Street** in the 1950s before work began on the town centre. **The Red Lion** is near the bottom of the picture. **The Bull** can be made out partway up, along with the **Post Office** near the top.

What does freedom mean to you?

This leaflet has been produced with the support of the Bracknell Forest Libraries' project '**Our Freedom: Then and Now**'

www.bracknell-forest.gov.uk/libraries/library-events/our-freedom-then-and-now



This national programme, funded by the Arts Council, involves 80 libraries, museums and arts centres across the UK commemorating the end of the Second World War with community events and artistic projects to reflect on the significance of freedom.

The theme of freedom is closely tied to Bracknell's history. For many, moving to the new town represented the freedom to start anew, finding work and securing a home. Bracknell continues to offer these opportunities.

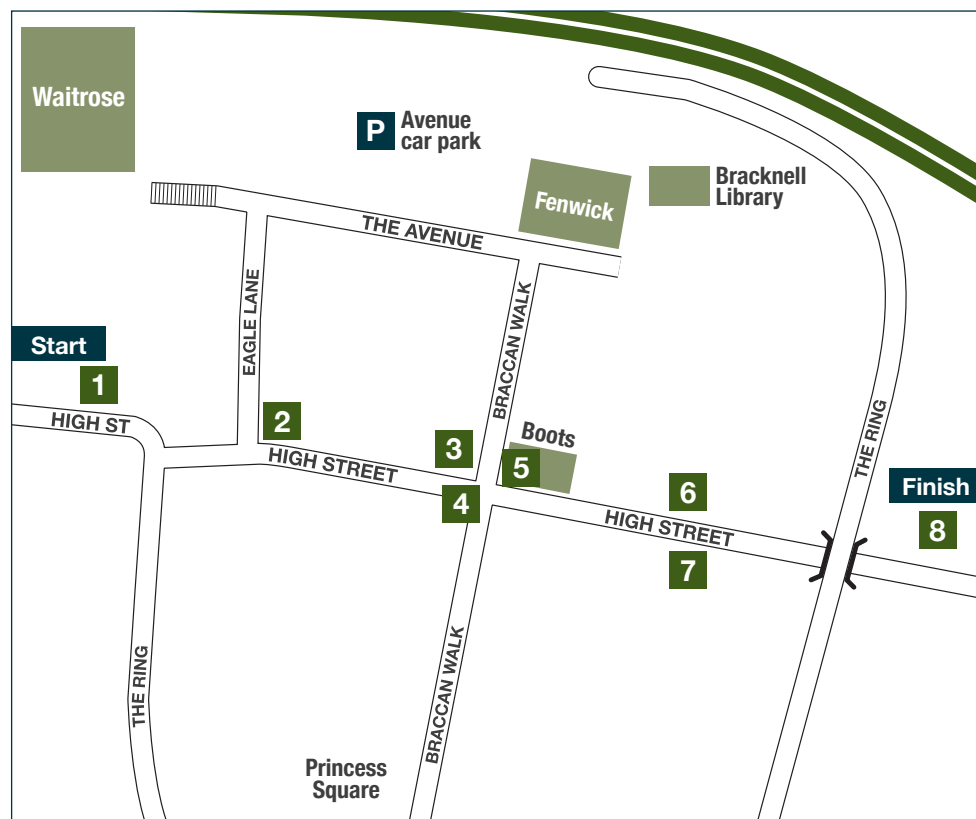
Please tell us what freedom means to you – fill out our quick online form. We'd really appreciate your input for shaping library activities.

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**OUR
FREEDOM:
THEN & NOW**

Route map



- | | |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Blue's Smokehouse | 5. Crossway House and the bandstand |
| 2. The Bull Pub | 6. Lawrence's Stores |
| 3. Prospect's Estate Agent | 7. Congregational Church |
| 4. Charles Square | 8. Whynscar and The Old Manor |

Bracknell's High Street

This self-guided journey through time follows Bracknell's High Street and highlights major changes to the town in the 80 years following the end of the Second World War.

Like most communities in the UK, Bracknell celebrated VE (Victory in Europe) and VJ (Victory in Japan) Days with street parties. The residents looked forward to freedom from the struggles of wartime.

At that time, the 5,000 residents might have expected life to return to how it was before the war. However, a major change was soon to come when Bracknell was selected as a New Town in 1949, and it would provide homes for an additional 20,000 residents.

Initially, there was to be minimal disruption to the High Street. Four properties were demolished on the north side to allow access to a new pedestrianised area of shops named Crossway, and a new road, Broadway, was built parallel to the old High Street. This was open to traffic at first but was later pedestrianised in 1969.

It soon became apparent that 25,000 was too small a population for a successful New Town, and in 1962 the target was increased to 60,000. The town centre would also need to be bigger. Wholesale demolition and rebuilding of much of the High Street ensued. Many of the residents who received compulsory purchase orders will have wondered about the freedoms that they expected at the end of the war.

Initial plans included flattening everything, including The Red Lion, The Bull, and The Old Manor; fortunately, these were saved.

In 2017, the Lexicon shopping centre opened after the demolition of much of the 1960s/70s town centre. Another era for the High Street began.



1. Blue's Smokehouse (formerly The Red Lion)

This building was originally built in the 16th century as an inn and has been much altered and extended since.

To the right of the bay window and central chimney was an opening for a coach and horses to pull into a rear courtyard. The east end of the building became a shop and the West End became a post office at the beginning of the twentieth century. It soon became the most popular inn and dining establishment in Bracknell, although several landlords went bankrupt while attempting to provide a more luxurious establishment than their income permitted. By the 19th century, in addition to travelling coaches, carriers and postal services were running from The Red Lion. Writing in the 1730s, a Binfield resident referred to assembly rooms and a coffee house in Bracknell. Such facilities were usually located in the major public house in the town, so the Bracknell ones were probably at The Red Lion.

Queen Victoria passed through Bracknell on her way to Stratfield Saye in 1845, with her coach changing horses at The Red Lion. Although the residents only learned of her passage a few hours in advance, they managed to display four arches of evergreens over the High Street by the time she arrived.

The Red Lion closed in 2013 but re-opened the following year, renamed as the Blue's Smokehouse.

The building has an English Heritage Grade II listing, as does the milestone marker outside.



Old Manor Hotel – 1960s
Credit: Andrew Radgick



Old Manor Pub and College – 2018
Credit: Colin Bird

For the last stop, continue up the High Street, through the subway with the murals of the shops on the High Street. Climb the steps immediately on the left to Whynscar and The Old Manor.



8. Whynscar and The Old Manor

Whynscar is a 17th-century building which was refaced when the turnpike road arrived. Evidence of the earlier building can be seen inside. It has been a private house for much of its life, although older residents recall a dentist with a dubious medical reputation operating from it.

Originally built in the 15th century, The Old Manor has been much altered since. It was a private house for much of its life, but has also been a boys' school, a country club, a hotel, and a Berni Inn; it is now a Wetherspoons. A priest hole was discovered in 1969, a hiding place for priests when Roman Catholicism was outlawed. There are also rumours of tunnels, although only one under the High Street has ever been found. It may have run to the Hind's Head, another pub on the opposite side of Warfield Road.

The building between them was built to house the Royal Meteorological Society and was opened by Queen Elizabeth in 1978.

Both the older buildings have an English Heritage Grade II listing.



Whynscar – 2018
Credit: Colin Bird



The Red Lion and High Street – 1907
Credit: Andrew Radgick



The Red Lion with 3M tower behind – 2013
Credit: Bracknell Library Collection

When facing the Blue's Smokehouse, turn right, cross the road and head for the modern pedestrianised High Street by the crossing lights (the original line of the High Street is blocked by new buildings). Stop at The Bull Pub.



2. The Bull

Built around 1400, this is the oldest building in Bracknell. The left end is the oldest section, with the main section built a couple of centuries later. The rear extension was added when The Lexicon was built, along with renovations and refurbishment to a building in a poor state of repair.

Bullbaiting is said to have taken place outside the building, with the main match of the year taking place on Good Friday. It has been claimed, without any evidence, that Henry VIII watched the sport in Bracknell. The building comes complete with its own resident ghost of a man about to be hanged in Quelm Lane in Warfield, who can occasionally be seen sipping his last pint.

The building has an English Heritage Grade II listing.



The Bull – Circa 1950
Credit: Vin Miles



Post Office and banks – 1969
Credit: Bracknell Library Collection



Post Office and banks – 1977
Credit: Bracknell Library Collection



7. Congregational Church

Bracknell was mainly located in the parish of Warfield and had no church of its own. Many locals would not make the journey to Warfield church on Sundays, with a visitor in 1800 commenting on “the general depravity” of the inhabitants. There were occasional visits from a Baptist minister and prayer meetings held in Bracknell.

A house was licensed as a place of worship in 1801, and a building was adapted as a meeting house seven years later. The Congregational Church was officially formed in 1813, but by 1820, the building was in a dangerous condition, and a new chapel and schoolroom were built to replace it. These were demolished in 1858, with another new chapel and schoolroom built, opening in February the following year.

The church was demolished in 1968 as part of the redevelopment of the town centre. The contents of its small graveyard were exhumed and reinterred at Larges Lane. This operation was conducted behind white sheeting, and many a child expected to see ghosts rising from the open graves! The former NatWest bank stood on the site of the old church.



Congregational Church – prior to demolition
(undated) Credit: Michael Dumbleton



High Street from outside The Bull – 1974
Credit: Bracknell Library Collection



The Bull with new Lexicon development behind – 2018
Credit: Colin Bird



3. Prospect Estate Agents (formerly Ginger's)

This innocuous building hides a long past. Built in the early 15th century, it had a new frontage added when the turnpike road came through Bracknell three centuries later. Evidence of its ancient origin is visible inside on both the ground and first floors, as well as on the roof. It narrowly survived destruction when the town centre was being developed. Two adjacent properties, both of a similar age, were demolished.

It housed a delicatessen named 'Ginger's' for many years, a name still used by older residents. It later housed Boots Opticians, before being taken over by Prospect Estate Agents.

The building has an English Heritage Grade II listing.



Thomas Lawrence & Sons – looking up the High Street – circa 1910
Credit: Andrew Radgick



Ginger's Delicatessen – 1969
Credit: Vin Miles



Replacement for Lawrence's Stores – 1976
Credit: Martin Jenner



6. Lawrence's Stores

11 May 1861 marked the opening of the Bracknell Supply Stores, also known as Thomas Lawrence & Sons after its owner. Initially offering women's clothing and materials, it rapidly expanded to become a department store offering clothing and footwear, furniture and soft furnishings, hardware, wines and spirits, and a host of other stock. Within 12 months of opening, they were offering deliveries both locally and as far away as Waltham St Lawrence. They even catered for funerals!

Around 130 people worked at the store at its peak, and the enterprise covered three acres of floor space. It closed in 1932, never recovering from the effects of the First World War.

Alongside was The Crown Inn, the oldest pub in Bracknell, which has served beer since 1664. The Bracknell lock-up was adjacent, formed of a single cell to hold prisoners overnight before they faced the local magistrate in Wokingham. Its proximity to The Crown Inn meant many held there came out more drunk than when they went in! There was also a set of stocks outside.

MiFlats now stand on the site of the old Lawrence's Stores.



4. Charles Square

The square had two levels of shops, accessed by escalators, lifts, and a ramp, and was the largest open space in a town centre outside of London.



Charles Square – 1971
Credit: Bracknell Library Collection



Charles Square: Britain in Bloom – 2002
Credit: Dave Norman



5. Crossway House and bandstand

Crossway House, opened in 1957, consisted of two floors of office space. It was located above access to Crossway; a pedestrianised street lined with small shops. Two sculptures mounted on it represented work and leisure in Bracknell (these are now located inside the Waitrose and Met Office roundabouts).

A bandstand was put up in front of Crossway House, too small for much entertainment, but much used by community groups for fund-raising activities and publicity. "I'll meet you at the bandstand" was a common arrangement for meeting up with friends in the town centre.

'Bracknell Beach' was a short-lived attraction for two weeks each summer in the late 1990s. Two hundred tons of sand and rocks were installed along with palm trees, the sound of waves and seagulls were piped over loudspeakers, there was a Punch and Judy Show, ice creams and hot dogs for sale, and Hawaiian music.



High Street before Crossway House – 1907
Credit: Andrew Radgick



Crossway House – 1958
Credit: Bracknell Library Collection

This made a splash in the media both locally and nationally, with newspapers, radio, and television all reporting on Bracknell's imported beach.

Crossway House was demolished in 2013 as part of the redevelopment of Bracknell town centre.



Bracknell Beach – late 1990s
Credit: Bertha Wilson