

HITCHIN AND SURROUNDING VILLAGES

Did Henry VIII really try to pole vault over the River Hiz?

Hitchin is a town in Hertfordshire, just beyond the northern boundary of the Chilterns AONB. A story



Offa of Mercia

dating from the 15th century, states that St Mary's church in Hitchin was founded by Offa, King of Mercia (757 – 796), however, archaeological analysis of the foundations, suggest a basilican church of 7th century type, (i.e. pre-dating Offa).

Great Offley (just south-west of Hitchin) is where Offa is said to have built a palace, thus giving the village its name (Offa's Lea). Some records suggest he died at Offley, but he was buried 15 miles away in Bedford.

It is known that King Henry VIII hunted in the area around Hitchin. The Butts Close Park in Hitchin is said to take its name from the Medieval archery range that used to be there, and it is believed that Henry VIII used it when visiting the town.

It is also alleged that when he was fitter, he thought he was able to pole vault over the local river, the River Hiz. However, he had grown somewhat fatter than he knew, and the pole snapped from underneath him. He fell into the river, much to the amusement of his servants.

Another slightly different story claims that he came to be in the water because he fell off his horse, which was startled by a deer, and landed in a pond. The man who helped him was granted the generous sum of 6d a year for life by the grateful monarch. Whichever version of events you believe, his falling in the water was until recently commemorated on the sign of the Buck's Head pub in nearby Little Wymondley. It is also locally reputed that Henry nearly died in a fire in Hitchin.



Buck's Head Sign

To the south of Hitchin lies the village of St Paul's Walden. Here, the stately home St Paul's Walden Bury belonged to the Bowes-Lyon family. It is best known for



Sun Street, Hitchin

its connection to the late Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother. She was (inaccurately) recorded as having been born in the village by her father, who was fined 7s 6d for his tardiness in completing the register. However she did spend much of her childhood here. She was christened on 23 September 1900, in the local parish church. St Paul's Walden Bury was also the location at which she finally accepted Prince Albert's proposal of marriage in January 1923.



Prince Albert (later George VI) and Elizabeth (1920's)

A large oak can be seen to the right of the public footpath as it turns off the drive down towards Whitwell. This tree was planted by Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother in 1938 to commemorate her coronation the previous year. A memorial dedicated to the Queen Mother stands in the graveyard of All Saints Church in St Pauls Walden. The tablets around the base refer to the four titles the Queen Mother had over her life. Queen Elizabeth II attended a private dedication ceremony at the church in April 2005.

Further information

www.hitchin.net

www.stpaulswaldenbury.co.uk

Memorial to Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother St Paul's Walden

