



## History of the Cherry Tree and Olney

Olney, a small market town, is situated at the extreme north of Buckinghamshire, and sits on the banks of the Great Ouse. Two miles to the north of the town is Three Shires Wood, which marks the point where the northern most part of Bucks meets Northamptonshire and Bedfordshire.

Evidence of life in the Olney area goes back to Roman times. One of the first written references was in Saxon times, when it was mentioned in a Charter of 979 AD as Ollanega ('ege' was pronounced 'ey' meaning Island. Ollanega probably means 'Ola's Island'). Before the conquest, Olney belonged to Borgret, a descendant of the King of Mercia. Later, the Vikings came down from the north of England as far as the River Ouse which meant that Olney, being north of the river, came under Danelaw.

Following the Conquest in 1066, Olney, or Olnei, was mentioned in the Domesday Book and it was held by Geoffrey, Bishop of Coutances. He was a loyal supporter of King William I (the Conqueror) and was granted lands including Olney. When William died, Geoffrey supported William's son Robert and lost his lands when William's other son, William Rufus was crowned. These lands were subsequently given to the Earl of Chester.

By the 13th century Olney had grown from a large village into a planned borough. It is delineated by the High Street, with long burgage plots laid out at right angles and enveloped by the parallel back streets of East and West Street.



*Battle of Olney Bridge, 4th November 1643*

During the Civil War between the Royalists and Parliamentarians, Olney achieved some minor fame at the Battle of Olney Bridge in 1643. Parliament held Newport Pagnell, and Olney was one of its outposts.

Prince Rupert held Northampton for the King and marched on Olney intending to continue on to Newport. Prince Rupert and his troops took the Olney forces by surprise and the Parliamentarians retreated to the bridge where they made a defiant stand.

The Royalists could have won decisively, had it not been for a rumour that Cromwell's reinforcements were seen coming from Newport. The Royalists retreated and the battle was over.

In the 18th century, Olney became associated with its famous residents, the poet William Cowper who lived in Olney from 1767 to 1786, and John Newton the town's curate from 1764 to 1780 who is accredited with writing the hymn 'Amazing Grace' arguably the most popular hymn ever written. During that time both men collaborated to write the 'Olney Hymns'.



*Olney Market Place in William Cowper's time*

During the 19th century, Olney was always regarded as a relatively poor community and certainly not known for any prosperous enterprises. In particular, during this century it was said to be poor and depressed, and outbreaks of cholera and smallpox did little to improve this image. Townsfolk were mainly employed in the poorly paid farming, shoemaking and lace industries or in local retail and construction trades such as butchery, bakery, brewing, carpentry and building.

In 1872, the opening of the Northampton to Bedford railway line provided a means of transport for those seeking work in the slightly better paid industries and offices sited in the surrounding larger towns.

The industrialisation of the shoe industry during the second half of the nineteenth century resulted in factories being built in the town. The most notable were those of Hinde and Mann, Cowleys, and Drages, which arguably initiated the decline of the cottage shoe industry conducted in the workshops attached to many houses throughout the town.



*Market Place in the 1890s*

Olney was on an early drove road. It became a busy coaching town servicing the Kettering to Newport Pagnell Turnpike. At one point it was reported as having twenty-seven inns in the town, catering for the coaching trade, as well as for the locals. However, we were not one of them...

The Cherry Tree was transformed from a former residential care home and private house into a modern pub and restaurant in only 2018. The beautiful Grade II listed building retains lots of Georgian features such as sash windows, intricate plasterwork, and parquet flooring. As part of the transformation works, a wing of the original care home, which was built in the 1970s, was demolished. This enabled the construction of a new 260m, steel framed extension to house the restaurant, creating the light and airy space you see here today. In a bid to preserve the original aspects of the building, traditional plastering skills were carried out to restore the listed features, such as the cornices and exterior stone wall, which were crumbling, and the lath and plaster ceilings.

It was named in honour of the traditional Olney Cherry Fair.

The Olney Cherry Fair is a historic market event dating back to 1316, when Ralph Basset was granted a license to hold a fair on the vigil, feast, and morrow of St. Peter and St. Paul. Traditionally held on June 29th, it matched the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul's Patronal Festival, which was handy as workers were allowed off work, so was a great opportunity to sell local orchard fruit.



*Market Place 1907*

It's not the only deep-rooted fair in the town's history, the Statute Fair in October was known as a hiring fair, which brought prospective employers and employees together in the Market Place or local inns.

A weekly market has taken place in the town every Thursday for as long as people can remember. Olney was a famous centre for lacemaking. Shopkeepers and dealers would buy finished lace from local workers at the Market Place before selling it at major lace markets in London.

The cattle market was revitalised in the 19th century and held on Mondays. Livestock trading was a staple of Olney's economy for centuries, with the final cattle market occurring in April 1987.



The Olney Pancake Race is another historic and famed occasion. Held annually on Shrove Tuesday the 415-yard sprint dates back to 1445. Local women wearing traditional aprons and headscarves race from the market square to St Peter and St Paul's Church, tossing a pancake in a frying pan at both ends. Legend says it began when a housewife ran to church, still holding her pan, upon hearing the confession bell.

We are so lucky to be part of a community filled with such a wealth of history.

*With thanks to the Olney and District History Society where much of these learnings was taken from. [www.mkheritage.org.uk](http://www.mkheritage.org.uk)*