

Chesham – Thomas Harding

Distance: 3.4 miles

Chesham Walks
14

Start Point – The Clock Tower, Market Square, Chesham HP5 1HG

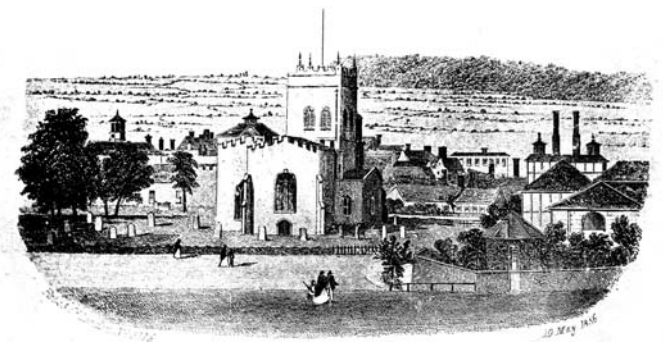
Introduction

Thomas Harding (c1470 -1532) The Last Lollard Martyr



This walk celebrates the life of Chesham's religious martyr, Thomas Harding, who fought for the right to read the scriptures in English. He became the last of the Lollards to die for his beliefs.

Thomas Harding was born around 1470 in Amersham, and lived in that town for over 50 years. He probably worked on the land, first as a labourer and then, perhaps, as a smallholder, but there is no known record



The old town of Amersham

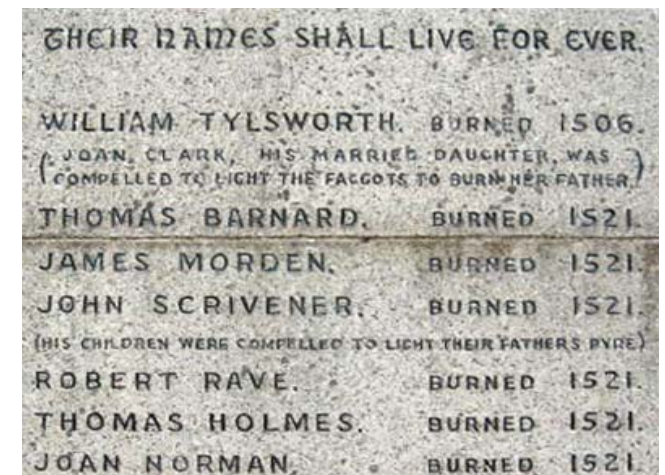
of his existence until 1511, when he and his wife Alice were in trouble with the Church, suspected of being Lollards. The Lollard movement had been founded by John Wyclif, an Oxford priest and academic, who attacked the power of the Roman Catholic Church over people's lives. He and his followers believed that Christian people should be able to pray to God and read the Bible in English without the need for (sometimes corrupt) priests, Latin scriptures and elaborate rituals. These beliefs threatened the power and wealth of the Church, and in 1401 Henry IV enacted a statute requiring that Lollards who refused to recant their beliefs should "before the people in a high place be burnt, that such punishment may strike fear into the minds of others".

Amersham had a sizeable community of Lollards, referred to amongst themselves as 'known' or 'justfast' men. They held secret meetings or 'conventicles', where they prayed and read the Bible in English, and in church they mumbled their prayers in English, quietly to avoid trouble. Since the town was then in the Diocese of Lincoln and 110 miles from the Bishop's seat, they lived relatively unmolested for many years.

In 1511, however, Bishop William Smyth of Lincoln resolved to seek out and punish heresy in Amersham. He held an enquiry lasting several weeks, questioning suspects and encouraging townsfolk to accuse their neighbours and others. As a result William Tylesworth, a leading Lollard and a prominent member of the community, was sentenced to be burned. Sixty others, including the Hardings, who had admitted their errors but abjured, were forced to carry bundles of wooden faggots to the fire and were given penances. Thomas and Alice must, "under pain of relapse, wear a sign of a faggot of diverse colours upon their outer garments throughout their lives, and to fast on bread and ale

every Corpus Christi eve." In April 1515 the new Bishop, William Attwater, relaxed this penance; they need no longer wear badges, but must not move from Amersham, and must go in procession each Corpus Christi day at the College of Precious Blood at Ashridge, barefoot and barelegged, bearing wax tapers.

Attwater died in 1521, and was replaced by John Longland, who was Henry VIII's personal confessor and a dedicated enemy of Lollards. One of his first acts as Bishop was to visit Amersham and examine those who had abjured in 1511, and any others suspected of heresy. Of the population of around 900, some 200 townspeople were questioned and made to accuse others. Five men and one woman were convicted of heresy and burned at the stake on the hill, and many others abjured and received penances. Accused by others, Thomas Harding was examined under oath by Longland but said nothing to incriminate himself, and was convicted of perjury "in failing to detect others". He was obliged to wear patches of green cloth, embroidered with a faggot, on his front and back. We know little of Thomas' life for the next ten years until his move to Chesham and the rest of the story is told on the next page.



Amersham's martyr's memorial

Front the front of the Clock Tower walk towards the pedestrian crossing, turn left into Red Lion Street and left again into East Street. Turn immediately right into Townfield, keep straight and take the steps on the left up to a crossing path. Go straight over the path and the railway bridge and climb up the steep hill to emerge through a gate into a field.

A) Dungrove Field

By 1522, the Hardings had moved to 'Chessam Waterside' where they owned and farmed 4 acres of land at Dungrove Field.

Go straight up the field to a double kissing gate. Go through the first, straight ahead through the second and walk along to the right of the fence. Go through the next gate, Dungrove Farm is to the left.



B) Dungrove Farm

Traditionally associated with Harding but there is no evidence for this.

After the gate turn immediately right on Harding's Path. Keep to the left of the fence.

C) Harding's Path

This public footpath is known locally as Harding's Path. He may well have used it to walk between his house in Waterside and his land on Dungrove Field.

Follow the path as it drops down through a gate and past houses to the top of Hospital Hill. Continue to descend to meet Waterside at the bottom and turn left along it.

D) Waterside

The exact location of his house is not known. Thomas was one of the ten wealthiest men in the parish, with land in Chesham and Great Missenden. The house in Waterside

was allegedly frequented by 'many known men'. Alice was apparently more devout than her husband, and disapproved of his worldliness. One Lollard woman sent her young daughter to be a servant in the Harding's house, believing that Alice "could instruct her better than many others."



Turn right into Moor Road. The waterfall on the right was the site of Lords Mill.



E) Lord's Mill

This was the site of the chief manorial mill of the Manor of Chesham Higham. Any grain grown by Harding would have been milled here, with the lord of the manor taking a proportion in payment.

Continue along Moor Road and directly ahead into Bois Moor Road. Where that bends to the left, turn right into Hodds Wood Road and follow round to the left up towards the railway bridge. Go under the bridge on a wide footpath and continue uphill. After 130m turn left through a kissing gate into a field. Follow the path uphill to a gate on the edge of Hodds Wood.

F) Hodd's Wood



On 3rd April 1532 Harding was arrested at this spot after being found reading a forbidden and heretical religious book, Tyndale's "Obedience of a Christian Man".

A search of his house uncovered three more illegal books by Tyndale, including *The New Testament in English*. On 6th April he appeared before Bishop Longland in his palace

at Wooburn, and was questioned for three days about his books and his religious beliefs. He was then confined in the Bishop's prison, 'Little Ease', a tiny cramped dungeon where he could neither stand upright nor lie down at full length, remaining there until Monday 28th May, when he was brought back to Chesham.

Return back down the path under the railway bridge to the bottom of Hodds Wood Road. Turn left into Millfields, and, after passing underneath the railway bridge follow the path to the right and then immediately left to reach the A416 Amersham Road. Turn right and at the roundabout, cross it and turn right over Amy Lane. Just past the red brickwork of Friedrichdorf Corner and its millennium artwork, turn left over a wooden bridge into Meades Water Gardens. Follow



the riverside path through the Gardens to emerge into Germain Street. Turn left over the bridge and then right down Water Lane. At the end turn right past the Queens Head and then right again along

Church Street. After 150 metres, cross the road and take the path to the right of the entrance to The Bury. Go through a set of iron gates and turn left up to St Mary's Church.

G) St Mary's Church

Harding was brought here on 28th May 1532, after seven weeks in the dungeon of the Bishop of Lincoln's palace at Wooburn. He was held overnight in the 'parvise', a small room over the south porch of the church, its windows visible above the porch door. This room is reached by a steep, narrow spiral staircase, whose external wall and windows can be seen on the left side of the porch. The official trial was held in the church the next day, led by the Vicar-General, John Rayne, in the presence of numerous other local clergy, including the vicars of Wycombe and Chesham. The court heard details of Harding's previous confessions and abjurations in 1511 and 1521, his possession and



concealment of four forbidden books, and his recent examination by Longland. He was sentenced to burn for heresy but absolved, at his request, from excommunication.

Return to the path and turn left through the next set of iron gates into Lowndes Park. Take the main path ahead and turn right downhill just before the end to leave by the park



The Thomas Harding memorial in St Mary's churchyard, Chesham



entrance, over the pedestrian crossing and along Blucher Street into the Broadway shopping area. Just past the bus stops on the right is the entrance to Sills Yard.

H) Sills Yard

After his trial, Harding is said to have spent the last night of his life in prayer and meditation at a house in the vicinity of Sills Yard, set back from The Broadway 'with the infant Chess flowing past'.

He emerged the house at around 10am the next morning, Corpus Christi Eve, carrying a simple wooden cross, to meet a troupe of armed men who would escort him to the stake in White Hill.

From The Broadway turn left into the Upper High Street and walk along to the last building on the left; the former Waggon & Horses pub.

I) No.152, formerly the Waggon & Horses pub

There was a smithy in the yard next door from where burning embers were taken to light the pyre.

Turn right to White Hill, go over the pedestrian crossing and continue uphill. Go over Victoria Road to a headstone in the grass on the right.



The old Waggon & Horses pub with the smithy to the right

J) White Hill Memorial Stone

On the grassed area there is a stone commemorating the martyrdom of Thomas Harding, erected in 1982 for the 450th anniversary. The site is near **K) Martyr's Dell**, a chalkpit 'on the road going to Botley' where the stake had been set up. On arrival at the site, Harding asked "Shall I

mount?", and was chained to the stake, asking the onlookers to pray for him, forgiving his enemies, and commending his soul to God. Then he raised his arms to heaven, crying "Jesus, receive my spirit!" As the pyre was lit, a log of



wood thrown by a bystander struck Thomas on the head, rendering him unconscious or perhaps killing him, and so sparing him the agony of the fire. Afterwards Rowland Messenger, Vicar of Wycombe, said to the crowd: "Good people, when you come home, do not say that you have been at the burning of a heretic, but of a true Christian man." By 1532 Henry VIII had already decided to produce an English version of the Bible. If Thomas Harding had lived for a couple more years he might have had a fairer trial.

Return to the Upper High Street and walk all the way along to the Market Square to finish the walk.



An old postcard superimposing the Thomas Harding memorial on the actual spot where he is purported to have died, on the corner of White Hill

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Route Map

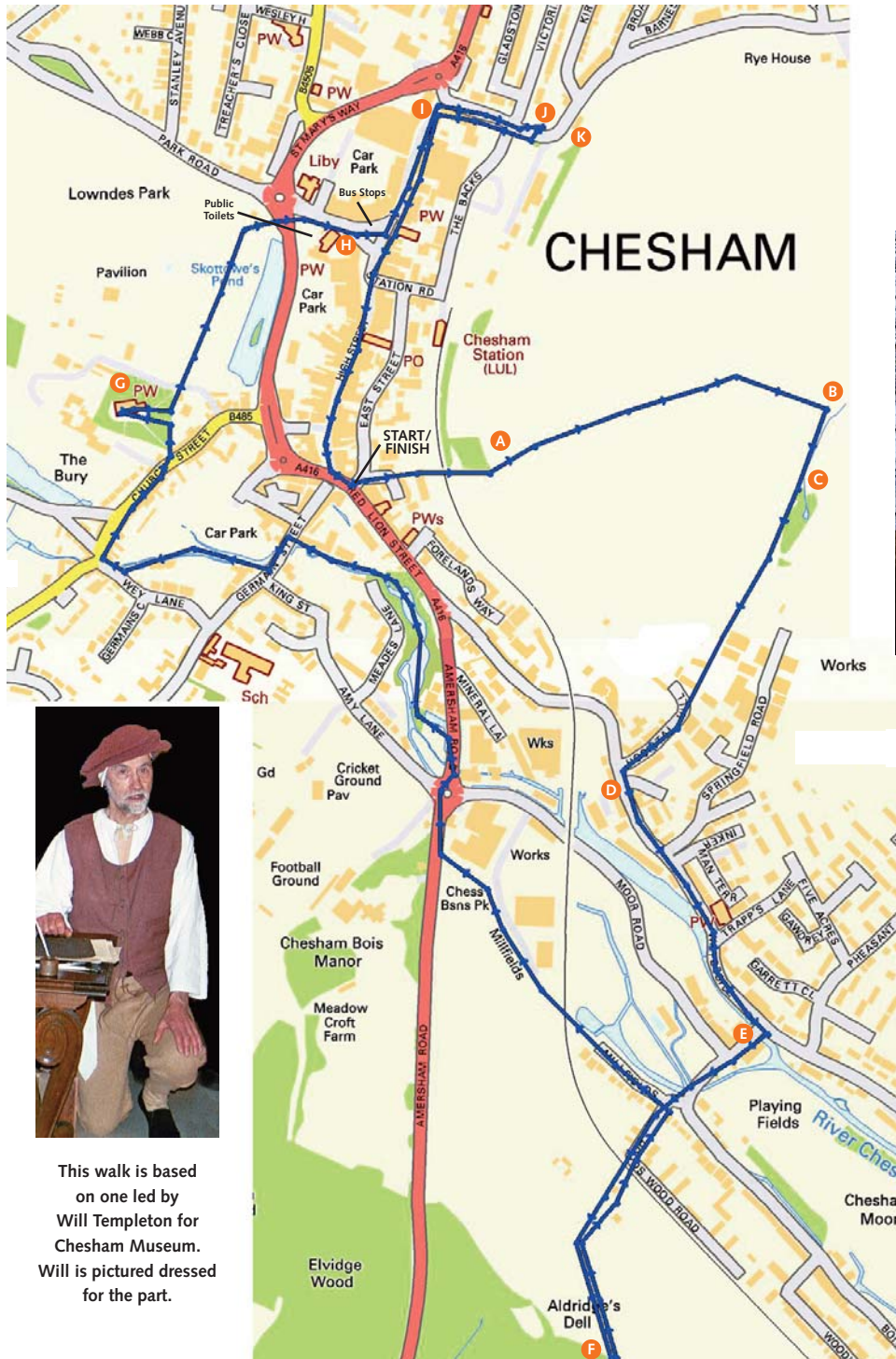
This series of history walks have been produced in conjunction with Chesham Museum and their walk leaders - www.cheshammuseum.org.uk

Current Chesham Walkers are Welcome walking routes:

- 1 The Chesham Heritage Trail (2 miles)
- 2 The Chesham Outer Ring (7.5 miles)
- 3 Tylers Hill, Ley Hill and the Chess (5 miles)
- 4 Chesham Bois and the Beech Hangers (4 miles)
- 5 Chartridge 'Hills and Vales' (8 miles)
- 6 Ashley Green 'Farms, Forts and Fighters' (8.5 miles)
- 7 Little Chalfont to Chesham (6 miles)
- 8 Chorleywood to Chesham (8.5 miles)
- 9 Great Missenden to Chesham (6.1 miles)
- 10 Amersham to Chesham (4.5 miles)
- 11 Chesham – Waterside (Historical)
- 12 Chesham – Old Town (Historical)
- 13 Chesham – Town Centre (Historical)
- 14 Chesham – Thomas Harding (Historical)

Visit www.chesham.gov.uk (click on the Walkers are Welcome tab) and www.chilternsaonb.org

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This walk is based on one led by Will Templeton for Chesham Museum. Will is pictured dressed for the part.

