

# THE BOOK OF SWAFFHAM

The Story of a Norfolk Market Town

Swaffham History Group

For a market town like Swaffham with over 900 years of recorded history, the compilation of its definitive history is a formidable task. In fact, it may be likened to attempting a 1,000 piece jigsaw puzzle but with 10,000 pieces to choose from! *The Book of Swaffham* was never intended to be a complete history but to serve as an accurate record of some of the more important and interesting 'bits' which have helped form the whole during nearly one millennium.

The book concentrates upon photographs which help give a clearer picture of some of the people and events in the town from the time photography made its debut in the 1850s. Although iconic images like the Pedlar sign or the Market/Butter Cross are synonymous with Swaffham, you will soon discover that these are really quite a small part of the town's fascinating past. We are going to show you the real people, at their work or at their leisure, as well as some of the buildings which no longer stand, going back nearly two hundred years. Wherever possible we have named individuals known to appear in pictures and great efforts have been made to provide as much information as possible about the photographs included.

All these and many other aspects of the past are included, making *The Book of Swaffham* a 'must read' book for all who love this county.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

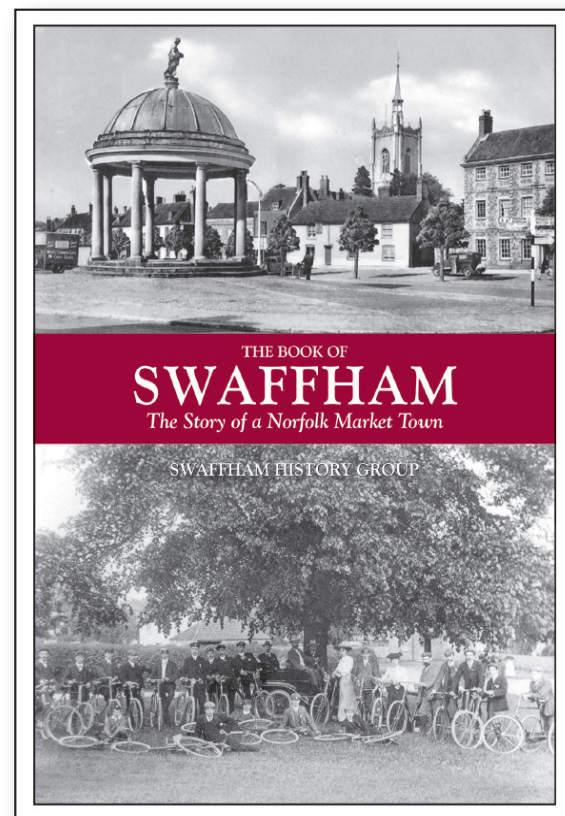
The book has been compiled by members of the Swaffham History Group which meets monthly in the museum. In 2009 we were asked by Swaffham Museum to undertake the book on their behalf and, despite many difficulties, we hope we have achieved our aims. Everyone in the history group has contributed in some way; perhaps just by their memories and our two oldest members have recollections going back to well before the onset of WWII! The museum kindly gave us unlimited access to their extensive archives in order to begin to unravel the past.

## HALSGROVE CATALOGUE

The full Halsgrove catalogue  
is available free or visit  
[www.halsgrove.com](http://www.halsgrove.com)  
for regional and category  
listings of available titles.

Halsgrove Publishing  
Halsgrove House,  
Ryelands Business Park,  
Bagley Road, Wellington,  
Somerset TA21 9PZ  
Tel: 01823 653777  
Fax: 01823 216796  
[www.halsgrove.com](http://www.halsgrove.com)  
e-mail: [sales@halsgrove.com](mailto:sales@halsgrove.com)

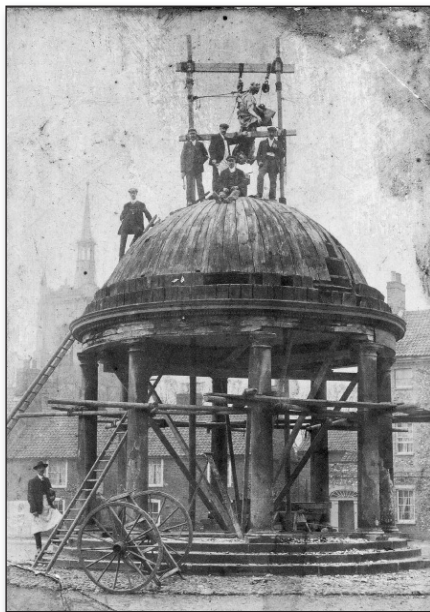
## HALSGROVE TITLE INFORMATION



**Format:** Hardback, 160 pages, 297x210mm,  
containing over 300 black & white photographs.  
**Price:** £24.99  
**ISBN:** 978 0 85704 164 7  
**Imprint:** Halsgrove  
**Published:** October 2012



# Great Books from your Local Bookseller



Left: Repairing the dome of the Market Cross c.1910.

Below: Mr Joe Pearce was a familiar figure around the town in the 1930s and known as 'the modern pedlar'. He sold a variety of small articles and was said to knit socks on a machine in the front room of his home in Lynn Road



A bad accident in 1894 when the locomotive No.567 ran down the embankment at the Northwell Pool, adjacent to the small loco depot, at around 9.15pm after working the last train from Thetford.

◆ THE BOOK OF SWAFFHAM ◆

### THE PEDLAR OF SWAFFHAM - THE LEGEND REVISITED

The earliest reference to the story of the Pedlar of Swaffham comes from Sir Nathaniel Brent, the Vicar General in 1635. On inspecting the church in Swaffham he reported that 'The Church is very fair and very well kept. Half of it was built by one Chapman, a pedlar'. This was the version recorded in Francis Roundell's History of Norfolk, 1860. Historian Roger Twyden (1907-1972) said the Pedlar story was 'most true', which Blountfield takes to mean 'very true', a usual interpretation of Twyden's comment. Later, the antiquarian William Dagdale (1803-1860) does not say whether or not he thought the story was true, he simply repeated it.

The fact is there are several different accounts of this famous story (see the Appendix to this chapter). Here we look carefully at the legend and attempt to unravel something of the truth behind it.

**The Bode Roll in the Black Book of Swaffham**  
The Black Book of Swaffham is one of the oldest church Terriers still in existence. It lists all those who contributed to the rebuilding of the church, the church land and possessions, as well those people who contributed towards the costs of the old church and the enlargement of a new church. It also lists the kind of donations made by the wealthy parishioners, in particular Robert Pary who gave 20 tons of free stone for the steeple.

John Chapman and his wife Catherine gave money for the north aisle 'with glazing, seating and paving of the same with marble and later gave £120 towards 'the making of the new steeple'.

It is likely therefore that Chapman was a man of some importance and education in the town. We know he was a churchwarden in 1462, possibly even earlier. The Black Book records, in the time before the church was rebuilt, John Chapman and Jacobus Norman guardians of the church of Swaffham Market. At this time, the church was a powerful institution and consequently the churchwardens were very important people, responsible for the fabric of the church and the valuable contents, as well as ensuring that the church accounts were correct.

Beside duties in the church the churchwardens had considerable authority in the parish as a whole. This was not a position occupied by a poor or unimportant person, such as John Chapman is sometimes purported to have been. The carved pedlar is, as Blountfield says above, a ruse (that is, an allusion device) relating to the name 'Chapman'.

We cannot even be absolutely certain that Chapman was a churchwarden, as the page in the Black Book referring to him is not original. It is a copy, written by the Revd C. Roachey in 1760, to replace a loose page in a copy made by Tom Martin.

◆ FAITH ◆

Later, fines and imprisonment were normal punishments. This was still one of the more serious crimes: 'a serious act of presumption against the King, his dignity, and Crown, which is as it were a crime of death, to wit, the fraudulent concealment of treasure trove.'

The tale of the Pedlar tells us that when he found the first large pot of money, he 'prudently concealed' the contents but put the pot on sale, complete with curious legend. After discovering the contents of the second pot, 'twice as big', full of 'old coins', was also concealed. Not only that, he lied about the second pot (which might have originally been a very large Roman wine vessel) after someone had translated the words on the first pot, knowing that if word were to reach the ear of the relevant authorities, he would lose all of the treasure, and be severely punished for concealing it, according to the law.

The important part of the story regarding the discover of the treasure is quite believable. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle states that when the Romans left, half their gold was buried and half was taken with them to Gaul. Chapman's discovery could easily have been a hoard of buried Roman treasure, or from any other period for that matter. As long as the original owner could not be traced, and the antiquity of the coins would suggest that the original owner would not be around to reclaim his hoard, it would be treasure trove. If so, it is likely that the money and 'old coins' were made of gold or silver.

If John Chapman found only base-metal (bronze) coins, he would not have needed to conceal his find, because no matter how rare or in what quantity the bronze coins were, they would not come under the treasure trove laws. It is reasonable to assume therefore that he found precious metal, and a lot of it. It would be interesting to know if the total value of the finds was anything like the money he spent on the church, over and above that asked of him in the first place. That is probably something we will never know. Also we may never know if the worldly-wise and clever rector encouraging Chapman to part with more money, suspecting the truth after seeing a big Roman pot in Chapman's window, or as a result of Chapman's confession.

It is becoming more likely that our John Chapman was a clever and astute businessman who found treasure in his own garden. The absence of the Lord of the Manor from this tale might be another indicator that Chapman owned his house and garden and was not a poor man.

We should also consider the laws regarding his clothes, because the Sumptuary Laws of 1483 and 1534 contrived to ensure that the social status of men could be recognized from the clothes they wore. No labourer was allowed to wear cloth worth more than 2 shillings a yard. No one below the rank of gentleman was allowed to wear a doublet padded with wool; no one below the rank of lord was to wear any jacket, gown or cloak which did not 'cover his privy members and buttocks'. Such acts were strictly enforced, but they do show the types of status-indicators that were seen as most significant.

The familiar figures of the Pedlar and his dog (bear) today are recent additions. The pew ends are 19th century and the Pedlar sign in the town is a creation of

Carving of the Pedlar in Swaffham parish church

Lithograph of the Pedlar, from 1907



Station Street, 1930s. Displayed on the awning over the pavement is 'Fred Lane – Ideal Restaurant'.

Example of a double-page spread.