

A Short History of King's Lynn

1100 Years of King's Lynn History

Before 1100 - Saxon Beginnings

- Coastal community formed around tidal lagoons between the Millfleet and River Nar, c. 9th–11th centuries.
- Main activities: fishing, salt-making, and small-scale trade.
- Area close to the Wash, before later silting.

1100–1150 - Founding of the Medieval Town

- 1100: Bishop Herbert de Losinga (of Norwich) establishes a new town north of the Saxon site.
- Begins Priory Church of St Margaret (now King's Lynn Minster).
- Finds the Saturday Market Place as the main market area.
- Lenne Episcopi, later Bishop's Lynn, set between the Millfleet and Purfleet.

1150–1300 - Expansion Under Episcopal Patronage

- c. 1150: Bishop Turbe extends town northward — creation of “newe lands” between Purfleet and Fisherfleet.
- Establishment of the Tuesday Market Place and St Nicholas's Chapel.
- 1204: King John's Charter grants the town more independence.
- Major diversion of the River Great Ouse.
- Arrival of five orders of friars (1230–1293).
- Late 1200s: Town walls of brick and flint built.
- The port flourishes, with lively trade in wool exports and Gascon wine imports.

1300–1500 - Hanseatic Era

- Late 14th century: Lynn becomes England's third largest port.
- Merchant halls and warehouses built: Hampton Court, Clifton House, Thoresby College, Hanseatic Warehouse.
- St George's Guildhall constructed (1422–28).
- Expansion westwards as the river shifts, opening up new streets.

1500–1600 - Reformation and Growing Autonomy

- 1530s–40s: Dissolution of monasteries; St Margaret's Priory and friaries suppressed.
- Merchant governance grows, led from Trinity Guildhall.
- Now Lynn Regis or King's Lynn (no longer Bishop's Lynn).
- Elegant brick houses built along the riverfront.

1600–1750 - Prosperity and Georgian Refinement

- 1643: Siege of Lynn during the English Civil War.
- 1670s: Henry Bell's plan records the town; Bell builds Custom House and Duke's Head.
- 1741–46: St Margaret's Church nave rebuilt after storm damage.
- 1750s–60s: The Walks created as early municipal park.
- 18th century: King's Lynn and Yarmouth become England's main grain ports.
- Addition of Georgian façades on riverfront houses.

1800–1880 - Industrialisation and Railways

- 1774–1821: Development of a small whaling industry.
- 1803–06: London Road opened to southern suburbs.
- 1844: Railway arrives, shifting trade patterns.
- 1869: Alexandra Dock built, with Bentinck Dock following in 1883.
- Growth in engineering and shipyards.

- Town Wall Walk (1800–27), St James's Park (1903), and St John's Walk (1906) extend public green space.

1880–1914 - Late Victorian & Edwardian Era

- Civic buildings constructed (e.g., Carnegie Library, rebuilt South Quay).
- Housing expansion east of old town; sanitation improvements.

1914–1945 - World Wars & Interwar Years

- Declining maritime trade; move toward food processing and light industry.
- 1921: Tower Gardens War Memorial erected.
- 1938: New Head Post Office built.
- Persistent urban housing shortages; overcrowding in terraces and yards.

1945–1970 - Redevelopment and Overspill Growth

- 1958: Campbell's Soup Factory opens.
- 1962: London Overspill Scheme; major population and housing increase.
- 1960s: Redevelopment removes one-fifth of historic town.
- 1969: Conservation Area established; preservation and archaeological projects begin.

1970–2000 - Conservation and Regeneration

- 1979: Further Conservation Area expansion.
- 1983: Article 4 direction restricts unsympathetic alterations.
- 1980–2000: Regeneration of warehouses; public realm improvements (Caisson bridge, Staithe Square).

Further Resources

- Borough Council of King's Lynn and West Norfolk, Conservation Area Statement (2003)
- A Short History of King's Lynn <https://circato.co.uk/a-shorter-history-of-kings-lynn>
- Rye, J. (2025). www.circato.co.uk