An Introduction

Swindon and its surrounding area have a long and rich history. There is much to learn about the first settlers in the area and how its population changed over time. In this study, children will gain an understanding of how Swindon became the place we know and love today.

What you need to know

Tracing its history back to the Palaeolithic period, the Swindon area offers a rich tapestry of human activity. Early inhabitants left tangible marks, with discoveries such as a large mammoth graveyard and various Neanderthal tools attesting to life in prehistoric times. In the Neolithic era, sites like Coate Stone Circle— a similar age to structures such as Stonehenge—suggest a community engaged in spiritual or ceremonial endeavours. The Iron Age arrived, bringing with it constructions like Liddington Castle, one of Britain's earliest hillforts. A Roman presence is also evident, with findings at Groundwell Ridge indicating that affluent villas were built, and the surrounding lands were used for agriculture.

Moving into the later medieval period, Swindon's development was profoundly shaped by the influential Goddard family. Their considerable manor in the heart of the town and control of vast tracts of surrounding land facilitated the growth of the settlement into a market town. Although debates persist regarding aspects of their governance—especially concerning their treatment of local residents—the family's legacy is undeniable. Their financial support led to the construction of essential facilities, including schools and hospitals, which in turn attracted new settlers and bolstered Swindon's reputation as a desirable place to live and work.

By the early 19th century, Swindon was a modest market town of 2,459 inhabitants, well-connected by the Wilts and Berks Canal (1810) and the North Wilts Canal (1819). These vital waterways played a significant role in the transport of heavy materials such as stone, iron and coal. In the early 1820s, the creation of Coate Water—a man-made reservoir built by the Wilts & Berks Canal Company—further supported the canal's operations. However, the real turning point for Swindon came in 1841 with the establishment of the Great Western Railway (GWR) Works. This development stemmed from the 1833 plan to link London and Bristol and was complemented by the region's flat terrain, ideally suited to building an engine shed and repair works where trains could change engines before tackling the nearby steeper lands.

Within a few decades, Swindon evolved into one of England's most prominent railway towns. By 1901 the population had surged to 45,006, fuelled not only by industrial growth but also by the formation of a new community around the GWR Works. Between 1842 and 1855, around 300 cottages were constructed in the nascent Railway Village, complete with a school, St Mark's Church, a cricket ground, a public park and local social venues. Institutions such as the Mechanics' Institute and the Medical Fund Society, founded in 1847, played a key role in nurturing a sense of community and providing much-needed support for workers' welfare.

The onset of World War 1 in 1914 marked another significant chapter in Swindon's history. At 7:49 pm on 4th August, the distinctive sound of ten

blasts from the GWR Works hooter signalled the start of the conflict. The call to arms was met with immediate local mobilisation; crowds gathered at New Town Park and the Old Town Drill Hall, and men from the community enlisted with hopes of a swift victory.

By October 1914, over 2,600 Swindon men had joined various military branches, and ultimately more than 5,300 served, predominantly within the Wiltshire Regiment and the Royal Engineers. Swindon became a strategic hub, with troops being stationed locally, large camps established at locations such as Chiseldon, and even 350 Belgian refugees finding shelter. Local industries, notably the GWR Works, adapted rapidly, producing ambulance trains and assisting in the creation of hospitals for the wounded.

During World War 2, Swindon again demonstrated its strategic importance. The GWR Works shifted its focus from railway production to manufacturing war materials—ranging from munitions and aircraft parts to repairs for tanks and planes. Air raid preparations were robust, with the famed hooter serving a dual purpose as an air raid siren. The town endured several bombing raids, the first in August 1940, and later tragic attacks in October claimed lives. Concurrently, Swindon contributed to the war effort by producing Supermarine Spitfire components near South Marston and by mobilising a large number of women who filled crucial roles despite unequal pay.

After World War 2, the town underwent extensive redevelopment. Transitioning from a railway-dominated community to a modern urban centre, new council housing schemes—initially in areas such as Pinehurst and Rodbourne Cheney, and later in Moredon and the Penhill Estate—laid the groundwork for rapid expansion. Designated as a London overspill town in 1952, Swindon witnessed the creation of estates such as Walcot East and West, followed by further developments in Dorcan, Eldene, Covingham, Liden, Nythe, Toothill and Priory Vale. As the GWR Works declined from its peak in the early 1950s, new industries emerged, including car manufacturing and technology sectors. Iconic landmarks like the Magic Roundabout and the Brunel Centre symbolise Swindon's modernisation, reinforcing its status as a hub for innovation, logistics and retail.

Resources

Our key enquiry questions, sources, PowerPoints, activities, and other resources will help to build children's understanding of their local area of Swindon and answer the question 'How has Swindon changed over time?'

Get in touch

Is there an area of local history you'd love to see on our Local History Hub? Get in touch to learn how we can work together! Email LocalHistory@tpet.co.uk

Teacher's Pet | Historic England

Wiltshire Swindon

Local History

Historic England and Teacher's Pet have come together to bring you a collection of free resources that you can use in your local history teaching.

Historic England | Teacher's Pet

Who are Teacher's Pet?

Teacher's Pet have been providing downloadable and playable educational content to early years and primary school teachers for over 14 years. We cover all areas of the curriculum and use a team of in-house teachers and designers to create engaging and memorable concepts, that the children will love.

Why local history?

At Teacher's Pet we want to empower primary school teachers by giving them the tools they need to deliver inspiring and thoughtful lessons about the local area and its history. We believe local history teaching has such an important part to play in a child's wellbeing – helping to give children a sense of pride in where they live.

Our Local History project is designed to provide teachers across the UK with everything they need to successfully carry out a full scheme of teaching about their local area, through key enquiry questions and source led activities.

Working with Historic England gives us access to archived maps and photos for resources and information from knowledgeable local historians, as well helping us to provide the content to you free of charge.

For more information about our Local History project or to find out more about Teacher's Pet Classroom Resources, please visit our website.

www.tpet.co.uk