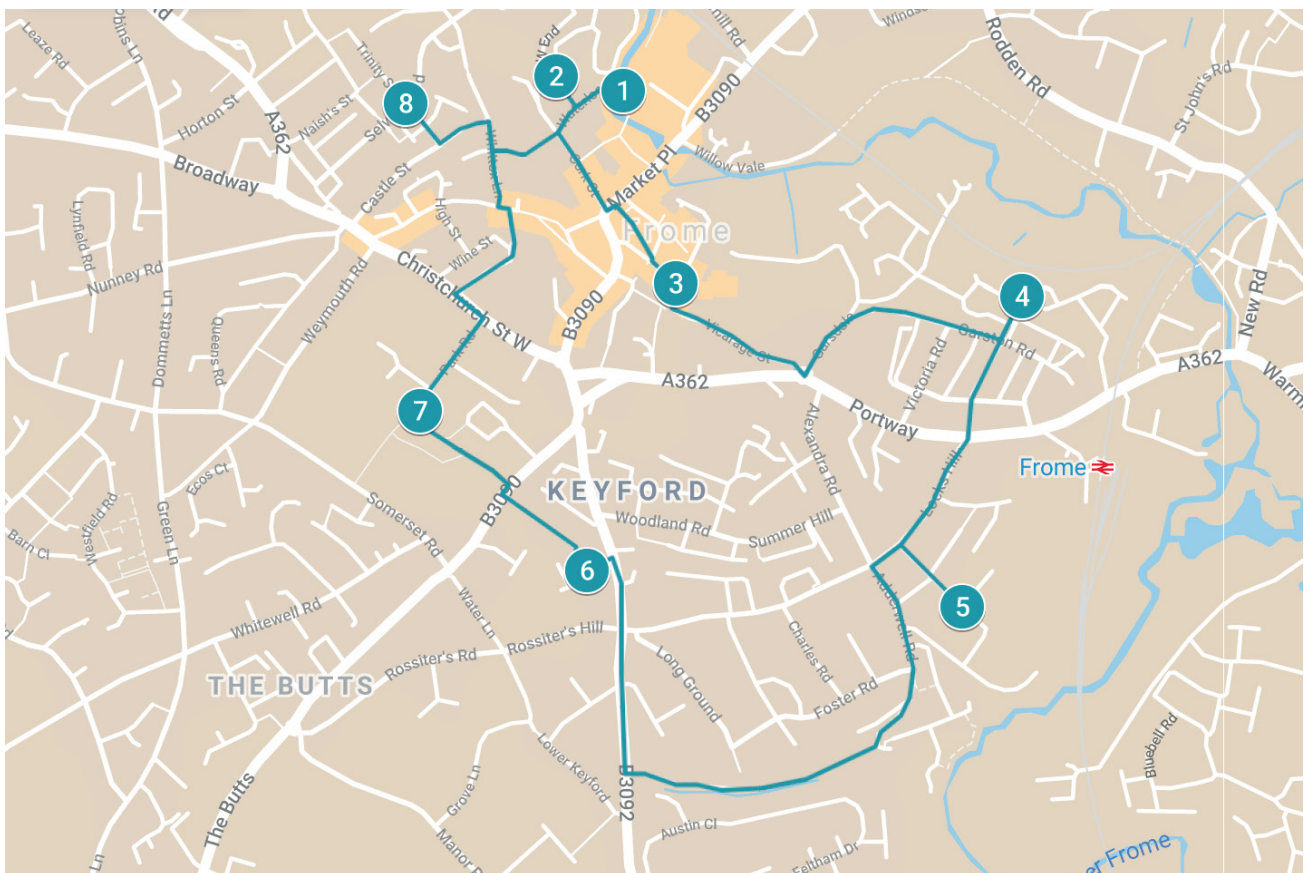


Discover Frome

Frome Industrial Walk

4 Miles



The Frome Industrial Walk

An easy 4-mile walk around town with plenty of stops, prepared by Poetry in Motion and Home in Frome in conjunction with Frome Town Council.

numbers to be marked on map; (most) italics are walking instructions - the ones in red on this version

The walk begins at the Jenson Button Bridge in the Market Yard car-park.

1. Singer's.

The main site of Singer's foundry work was Waterloo, the area immediately across the River Frome from the Market Yard. It is now occupied by housing. Only the office building on the corner of Cork Street has been retained, with shops on the ground floor and flats above (where the drawing office was once).

In 2000 Singer's moved to a new building on the Marston Trading Estate. They are a wholly owned subsidiary of a vast USA-owned corporation called Johnson Controls. The main product now is sprinklers for fire alarm systems.

For some years the Singer's Social Club on the Cork Street site was a focus for social life in the town. The Jenson Button Bridge with its unfinished metal is designed to make a link between Frome as a market town and Frome as a manufacturing centre, and also between past and present.

Turn left after crossing bridge and then after 30 yards right up between the houses where cars are parked, and then up the steps. The small square here contains the 'Singer's Camel' statue.

2. The Singer's Camel

The Singer's brass foundry in Frome was responsible for a number of the most famous landmarks in London, for example the statue of Boudicca at Westminster Bridge and the figure of Justice on the Old Bailey courts. This Camel was made in 2000 to mark the location of the 'Camel Shed' where the mounted statue of General Gordon at Brompton Barracks, Chatham was cast.

Steve Francis began at Singer's as an apprentice and became senior design engineer with the firm. He was a key person in saving the photographic plates which formed a major part of the Singers exhibition held at Rook Lane Arts in 2019.

I had already done some work at the Technical College with lathes and that sort of thing but the moment we entered the press shops it was just another world. The noise was horrendous, the smell was amazing because I didn't really know what they were doing at the time but they were forging glass components in steel dies and virtual presses. I mean they had no friction and hydraulic presses in the press shops and every time the two dies came down and made a casting they took the brass casting out and swabbed it with a greasy rag. These operators were just swabbing it top and bottom and these dies were hot and there was all that greasy lubricant on it, so that was steamed off as well.

So, you had this hot greasy smell of the lubricant and also the hot smell of the glass because they were heating the glass until it was cherry red in small furnaces next to the presses. And then the presses were hammering down, operated by a foot pedal, and it would come hammering down, bang! Then up again and you had all this noise and it was really dark. You walked into this place and it seemed pitch black with just the furnaces glowing next to each of the presses and I just thought, whatever have I walked into?

Steve Francis

Return to Waterloo, turn right and then left into Cork Street, noticing the Drawing Office block of Singer's (cycle and sofa shops). Go to the Market Place, where the building opposite you, now Eye Tech, was the Singer family home. Cross the Market Place, heading for the Market Cross, and then up Cheap Street (with the spring water flowing down in a leat) to King Street. Turn right and then immediately left into Church Street. You are now opposite the industrial area known as Saxonvale. This is due for redevelopment at the time of writing. Facing you is a building known as the Silk Mill, now used as an Arts Centre. In the twentieth century this site was used by a number of manufacturing industries, notably Beswicks (fuses), Wessex Engineering and Nott's Industries (Carley floats)

3. The Silk Mill

Beswick's were a major producer of electrical fuses before the whole factory was sold lock, stock and barrel to China in 2001.

We were on bonus working, doing the fuses, and of course the more fuses you could push out, the more money you earned. It was quite nice. I worked with a lot of Italian girls at the time. They had music playing which was good. In those days you could take your own records in and the office girls would play them through the loudspeakers so that it came through to the factory. We used to play Elvis, the old Fifties music, the old Sixties music, rock-and-roll music. If it was somebody's birthday we'd all go to the pub and have a drink of a lunchtime. Our daughter Debbie was born in September 1962. I didn't go to work straightaway but I started down Beswick's in that very bad winter, 1962/63. Because Tony was off work, he couldn't get to work on building sites because of the bad weather, so I took a job at Beswick's. Some friends of Tony's from Batcombe moved to Frome, they were lovely people. Every morning, I used to get up, put Debbie in the pram and push her in all that ice and snow up to Sheppard's Barton, drop her off, and then go on to work at Beswick's. And the same in the evening.

Sylvia Austin

Bill Ellis began his working life at his father's firm, Wessex Engineering. The family came to Frome when Nott's Industries relocated to the old Silk Mill in Merchants Barton. Bill's father was a foreman at Nott's but in the 1930s he set up a separate business known as Wessex Engineering, with initially just three employees.

My father used to go out putting electric lights in for people. Father was able to wire them up an electric light which was something special for a lot of people. And I know as a kid I used to be taken along if he wanted a hand. That was my apprenticeship, I suppose. During that period I was always encouraged to come down and watch what was being done. I became a Saturday boy. If there was any odd jobs to be done, I was the one to do it. Even as a kid I was always up to my neck in oil and grease.

Bill Ellis

Jim Wykes was born in Whatley in 1937 and still lives in the village. He spent his whole working life at Nott's Industries, a small private firm at Merchants Barton, next door to Wessex Engineering and Beswick's. It employed some 60 people in its heyday.

I was 15 when I left school. The Youth Employment people sent me to Nott's who took me on six months' trial to become a toolmaker. I was successful in the trial and then I started a five-year apprenticeship. I worked in the tool and the press shop because we had to service the tools on the presses sometimes. We went to the Technical College one day a week at the top of Park Road. After I'd finished my apprenticeship, I had to do two years' National Service in the Royal Engineers and then I went back to Nott's and stayed there until 1998 when I retired. Most of the other firms you had to stay on one machine, but at Nott's you could work all the machines and work in the press shop and do almost everything yourself. There was more variety in the job.

In the early days their main product was the Carley floats, which were used extensively during the war. As the demand for the floats died down, they went more into producing metal pressings, which were mostly in those days car parts, because there was a big boom in the car industry in the 1960s.

Jim Wykes

It is unlikely that you will be able to cross the Saxonvale site on foot. So we advise you to head up Vicarage Street which swings sharply to the left between the church, auction rooms and church hall (The Bennett Centre). You will come to a roundabout and turn sharp left again into Garsdale, with Lidl on the left. Just past Lidl, take the track on the right leading past Minty's Nurseries and between high stone walls into Garston Road. Opposite the turn into Avenue Road, take a footpath on the left leading you to a large green open space surrounded by new brick housing.

4. Cockey's

On this site, Cockey's produced a wide range of products, including enormous gas-holders, assembled on site, here where you are standing, and then dismantled to be transported to the customer. The railings in Willow Vale and Palmer Street are typical of the firm's production.

The best known and loved items from Cockey's foundry are the 'Cockey's lamps', cast iron lamp-posts with decorative art nouveau patterns. These were introduced from 1903 when electric lighting was first used for street lamps. Some 20 survive in the town. We do not know whether the design was produced in the town or was copied from one of the many 'pattern books' available to industrial designers at the time.

John Stocker left school and went to work at Cockey's in 1946. His father, Bill Stocker, drove the overhead crane in the foundry, tipping red hot metal into the casts. Cockey's is famous for its cast iron lamp-posts in Frome, but products in 1946 included complete gas-holders and other items for the gas industry.

My Dad always used to take a short cut, up the railway line – that was the Frome-Radstock line – scamper up over the bank, and go in. Of course he didn't have to go all the way up the yard and clock in. And a neighbour of ours, Mr. Webley, he had a wonky leg and they had to be in by six, so he'd start off about five o'clock, and he was always there on time. So he'd clock my father in, save my father walking all the way up through the yard. But they came unstuck when my father didn't turn up one day. They went through his clock card and he was clocked in. They said, 'How did you get clocked in when you're not there?' So that upset the apple-cart.

John Stocker

Walk back up the footpath and cross Garston Road into Avenue Road, noting the Cockey's lamp-post! Cross Portway with great care at the pedestrian crossing and walk up Lock's Hill. Now turn left into Caxton Road. Ahead of you is an area which at the time of writing was being developed for housing. This site was once used by the famous printing firm of Butler and Tanner.

5. Butler and Tanner

In 2008 B&T became Butler, Tanner and Dennis, with a reduced workforce. It closed completely in 2014, but a small section has survived printing Ordnance Survey maps in Grove Lane (Marston Trading Estate) under the flag of Dennis Maps.

During the Second World War the Butler and Tanner factory was used by a Portsmouth firm called Evans Engineering making aeroplane parts for the war effort. (For more details, buy the Home in Frome Working Memories book, or look at the web-site: www.workingmemoriesfrome.co.uk)

Pete Stone worked at Butler and Tanner.

I tried for a job, an apprenticeship, and got one so I thought, 'Oh, I'll take it' because it had a good reputation, B and T's, good pay and all that, and you thought it was a job for life then. I liked the people, work-mates, we always had a good laugh. The work I enjoyed, because it was kind of physical but not too physical! I disliked working nights. Not a lot I disliked really, up until the last couple of months it was brilliant. In 2007 another firm took over Butler and Tanner, and we knew it didn't look like it was going to last. It was pretty depressing then.
Pete Stone

The print works employed only men, but many women worked in the bindery section and in the offices. Dorothy Hawker was one of the binders.

I left school at 15 and went to Butler and Tanner, and worked till I was 20. Of course we got married just after, and then I left to bring up our son. I done several jobs, on the gathering machine in the bindery, and that was your general thing, in the bindery. We had a man overseeing the machinery, and there was about four or five of us on this gathering machine. There were good times and bad, like all jobs, but on the whole it was pretty good. It was nice, all the girls together. We had quite a lot of fun. We used to go on days out with the firm. They used to have Christmas dances, and different things we used to all go to.

Dorothy Hawker

Return briefly to Locks Hill, and turn left into Adderwell Road. From here you can see what a large site Butler and Tanner occupied. Walk right down to the bottom, then pass through the gate on the right and walk up the footpath / cycle track to Culver Hill. This area is known as The Dippy, for obvious reasons! Turn right along Culver Hill and cross straight over when you reach the traffic lights at the top of the rise. This is the area known as Keyford. After 50 yards, turn left into The Cooperage.

6. Wilson and Scotchman

The Cooperage houses occupy the site of Wilson and Scotchman. They had begun making wooden vats, and this side of the business was still in place, especially for cider-making, in the middle of the twentieth century. They had also made metal vats both for brewing and for jam-making.

One particular memory of Trevor Biggs concerns the transportation of a boiling copper from Frome to Wetherhead's Brewery in Marlow.

Wilson and Scotchman were a brewery engineering company. The department that I went into was the coppersmith's. The job involved going out on site quite a bit, and I think after only about a month I went over to Usher's in Trowbridge. That was my first introduction to a brewery. Although I lived next door to the United Brewery in Horton Street, I'd not been inside one. I travelled all over the place and I was there for 18 years. This copper was built in the yard at Keyford, and when it was finished it was lifted up on a lorry. The copper was 17 foot across. Reading was the only town on the route to Marlow and the police had to be notified. The lorry picked up a police escort outside Reading and the police took them through Reading, up an avenue of trees, and he had to weave in and out. We were up there when the boiling copper arrived, you see, and it came into the yard with all the branches of the trees, and the twigs and all the leaves sticking out. And they parked up in the yard and Sparrows Cranes of Bath, who had the biggest crane in Europe at the time, called Lorraine, they were there. They slung it right up over the buildings, and there was a guy on the top of the roof just signalling to the chap on the crane, and he brought it over and he dropped it through the roof absolutely spot on.

Now continue down Park Road to Frome Town Hall on Christchurch Street West. On your right you will see the War Memorial. This was cast at Singer's and the model was Charlie Robbins, a Singer's employee who fought in and survived the First World War. Cross the pedestrian crossing and follow the map carefully for the next stage, down along South Parade and Sheppard's Barton to Catherine Hill. At the top of Catherine Hill, turn right into Whittox Lane, and where this begins to rise, turn sharp left into Castle Street. At the Lamb and Fountain pub take a sharp right into Trinity Street and stop at the old Butler and Tanner print works on the corner of Selwood Road.

8. Butler and Tanner Print Works

I went on working because I was involved with the 'leisure and pleasure' (community education) classes, organising in the villages and village halls. If people asked for a class, I would find a tutor for things like upholstery, art, sewing, dressmaking, things like that. It was very much a full-time job, and you had to go round and collect the money in the evenings. Quite a number of evening classes, especially the language classes, were held at the grammar school, which is now Frome College. And in the village schools – we had a keep fit class going in the club-room of the pub in Beckington. It was a very interesting job.

Isabel George

As at Singer's, it was common for several generations of the same family to work at the firm. Ron Stone was born in 1919, but his father had also worked there. We have already heard from Ron's son Pete. When I got demobbed in 1946 I went to work at Butler and Tanner's, at the Selwood Road works. I worked on the printing press, doing the proof copies to be sent out rough to the publisher, before they were actually put on the machine and printed in book form. I was happy as a sandboy down there. But I really got in down there because my dad had worked down there after the First World War, so that helped a bit. We had two daughters worked down there as well, Jenny and Jill, a sister-in-law worked down there, and I had one, two aunties worked down there. My wife Eileen had an aunty, so it was a family affair at the time!

Ron Stone

Gerald Franks completed an apprenticeship as a compositor, setting up metal type. Mistakes were costly, and an army of 'readers' would pore over draft copies of books. Last-minute corrections had to be done on the actual printing machines.

I started work at Butler and Tanner in 1945 when I was 14, at Frome Selwood Printing Works in Selwood Road, which is now flats. There used to be metal stairs outside to go into the works. You didn't clock in, you had a disc with a number on and you dropped that in when you were going in in the morning. If you were late, the desk was closed and they'd collect tuppence off you for being late.

The Second World War caused considerable disruption at Butler and Tanner.

The bindery and other machines went to Bath because they used Butler and Tanner's premises at Adderwell for manufacturing aeroplanes in the war. When they eventually moved all the big machines back down to Adderwell after the war, we used to have to cycle to do a machine revise from Selwood down to Adderwell. You had to pick up the type you wanted, make sure you had enough, and then cycle down to Adderwell and do the revise, and then come all the way back again!

Gerald Franks

The walk is now nearly complete! And it's downhill all the way back to the Market Yard. Go back long Trinity Street and left down Castle Street, then right into Whittox Lane. Turn left on the footpath called Zion Walk (immediately before the old United Reform Church, now RISE, home of the Rye Bakery Cafe) and in a few minutes you will be back at Waterloo and the Jenson Button Bridge. We hope you have enjoyed the walk.

Our thanks go to: Poetry in Motion, who devised the walk; to Home in Frome for permission to reproduce extracts from Working Memories; to Standbrook Guides for permission to adapt their map of Frome; to Frome Town Council for supporting this printed guide to the walk.