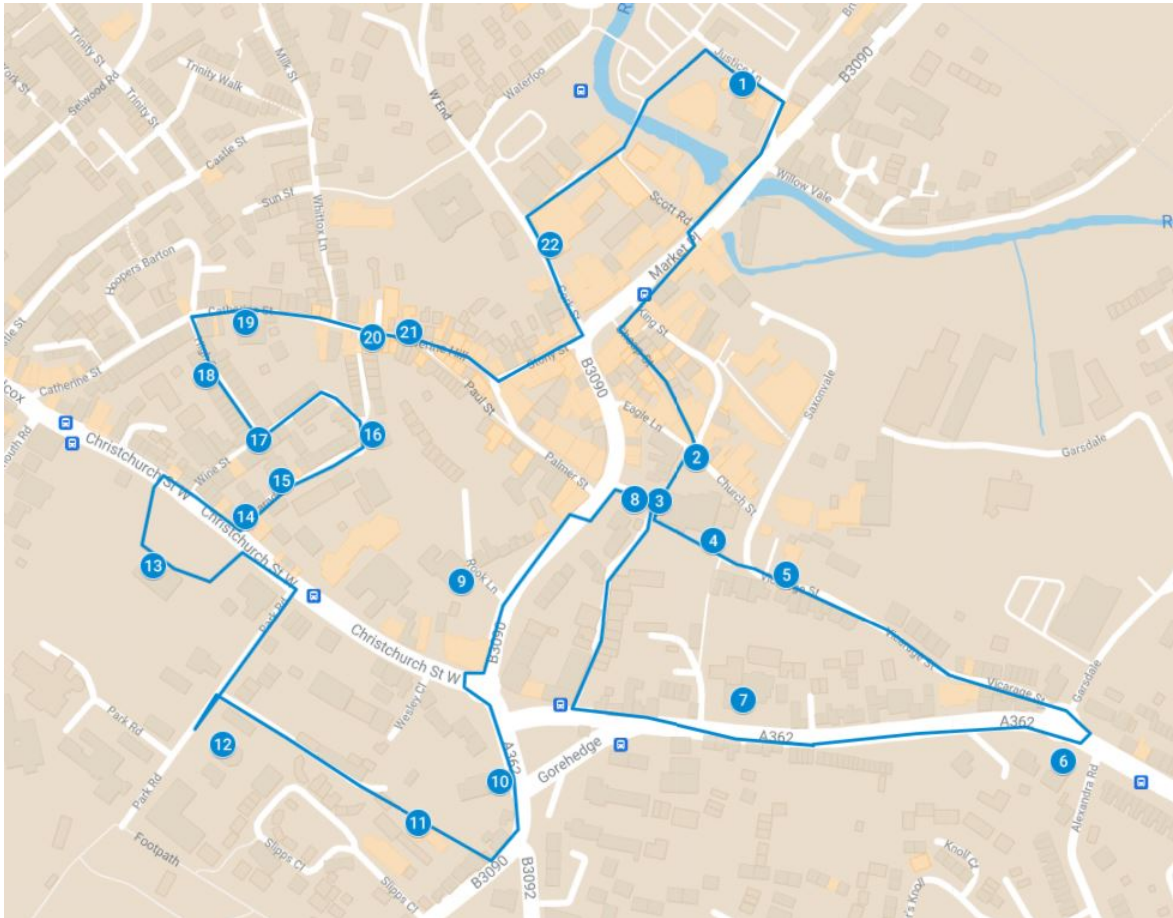


Discover Frome

Frome's Religious Buildings (East)

Approx. 2 miles



Frome dates from around the 7th century when the Abbot of Malmesbury, St Aldhelm, founded a monastery here. The monastery has long since disappeared, however interesting religious buildings continue to dominate the skyline.

When the Book of Common Prayer was imposed on the nation in 1662, Nonconformity flourished in Frome, with congregations frequently quarrelling and splitting. In the 18th and 19th centuries, most of the town's clothiers – the mainstay of the commercial side of the town – were Nonconformists. Their employees were 'encouraged' to follow suit and thus the Anglican congregation was outnumbered by Nonconformists to a factor of 4 to 1. Methodist John Wesley noted that there were Anabaptists, Quakers, Presbyterians, Arians, Antinonians, Moravians, etc.

Frome lays claim to over 350 listed buildings, many of which were built for religious purpose. This walk winds through the east section of town taking in several of them.

Information comes from a number of publications and sources and in the case of contradictions we have attempted to clarify this where possible.

Many of the featured buildings on the route are now houses - please respect the privacy of residents and owners of properties mentioned.

With the exception of Portway Methodist Church, the route is accessible (with the help of two diversions) but steep in places.

START

1 *Start at the Discover Frome Information Point. Turn right into Justice Lane, right into Bridge Street and right again into the centre of town. Cross the road at the pedestrian crossing and continue in the same direction, turning left into Cheap Street at Boyle's Cross Fountain. Turn right at the top of Cheap Street and you will see St Aldhelm Well.*

2 St. Aldhelm Well, Grade II listed. Here is the formalised Victorian framework for the spring outlet that is dressed annually, on the nearest Saturday to the feast day of St Aldhelm (May 25th). It is considered that this spring is one of the reasons for building the original monastery by St. Aldhelm in c. 685 AD on this site.

To the right of the well is Church Steps, sometimes known as Church Slope. It is one of two of the earliest named thoroughfares in Frome, the other being Hunger Lane (now Gentle Street). Alongside on the left is the Grade II listed Via Crucis (or 'Way of the Cross') which depicts six episodes of Jesus on the road to Calvary starting with Jesus' condemnation by Pilate and ending in his crucifixion. This processional entrance route to the church was created by James Forsyth in the 1860s restoration period of the church and is a rare sight in English ecclesiastical architecture.

Opposite is Church House, first mentioned in 1300. It has a pre-1600 timber frame and once housed the town's Fire Engine within the arch in the undercroft. It is Grade II listed.

Ascend the steps, or to avoid the steps, turn right into Eagle Lane, left into Bath Street, then up the hill a short distance to turn left through the church screen to St John's Church.

3 St. John's Church, the Parish Church. The Monastery of St. John was built in Saxon times (c. 685AD) on the site of the current church, then replaced by a larger building, followed by a Norman church which was extended to the current footprint by c. 1420. Internal changes to the Grade II* listed building also took place over the years, from Puritan simplicity to Victorian decoration. Step inside to see two Saxon stones, Singer's ironwork screen and much more.

Continue round to the left of the church and along Church Walls/Walk, originally part of the main east-west route across this part of town.

4 Bishop Ken's tomb, dated 1711, with a later stone canopy is outside at the east end of the church. Both this and the gate pier at this corner of the churchyard are Grade II listed.

It may be that the original Vicarage and associated Church School were at or near the bottom of Blindhouse Lane, at the end of the churchyard, see point 7 for more on this.

Walk down the steps, or continue to the end of the railings, into Vicarage Street. Cross the road with care over to St. John's Church Hall, now known as the Bennett Centre.

5 St. John's Church Hall was built on the site of the Frome Grammar School (1744 to 1855). It has recently received a new turret housing the bell which strikes the hours. Fundraising continues for the installation of a lift.

Next door is St. John's 2nd Vicarage, built 1744-49 and Grade II* listed. It is now a private house and is quite difficult to see, hidden as it is behind the fence and street wall.

Across the road is an arch which may have led to the Tithe Barn and first Vicarage (see 7). The two properties here are Grade II listed.

Continue up Vicarage Street. At the top, cross Garsdale and then cross Portway to Portway Methodist Church.

6 Portway Methodist Church was built in 1910 for the United Methodists. Services ceased in September 2021 and the future of this site is uncertain. Level access requires a lengthy trip along Alexandra Road, right up Summerhill and right again into Singer's Knoll. A footpath leads from there to the side of the Chapel.

With your back to the Chapel, turn left along Christchurch Street East and cross the road carefully at the dropped kerb after ETB Autocentre. Continue, passing Vicarage Close at the end of which is St. John's 3rd Vicarage (c. 2001), until you reach St. John's C of E First School.

7 St John's C of E First School. This site was known as Abbots' Court in the 13th century. St. John's 1st Vicarage, in use prior to 1744, Rectory House and the Medieval Tithe Barn were all replaced in 1875 by the first St. John's School on this site. This itself was partially replaced by the current school in 1932 and the remainder in 1965.

Continue along, passing the pedestrian crossing. Immediately after is number 9, Fairlawn House – a Grade II listed building formerly the home for the Jehovah's Witness movement in Frome pre-1950s. Continue and turn right down Gentle Street, previously known as Hunger Lane and at the bottom turn left to the area in front of the church.

[To avoid the cobbled street, before you reach the pedestrian crossing (shortly after St John's School) turn right down Blindhouse Lane and then left again back along church walls/walk to the front of St. John's].

8 Church House (which later became the Bell Inn) stood on the left of the churchyard, where the Grade II listed War Memorial (crucifixion) of 1920 now is. The Church Screen on the roadside is Grade II listed and was erected 1815. Designed by architect Sir Jeffry Wyatt to be an imposing entrance to the new space in front of St John's Church, it was created by demolishing the Bell Inn and several cottages.

Turn left uphill, cross at the pedestrian crossing and continue uphill to Rook Lane Chapel.

9 Rook Lane Congregational Chapel, (Grade I listed) was completed in 1707 and is considered to be one of the finest surviving Nonconformist chapels in England, despite the fact that it was modelled on a heathen temple.

In 1968 the congregation joined with that of the Zion United Reformed Church in Whittox. The building is now used as an arts centre and home to an architectural practice. Prior to the building of Bath Street in 1810, the original route from the south into Frome passed close to the entrance, in line with the fronts of the cottages down the hill. The railings, gates and entrance piers, built c.1862, are Grade II listed.

Continue uphill to the junction and cross Christchurch Street West carefully and walk left uphill into Wesley Slope, originally known as Clay Batch. Note the range of buildings above you on the right.

10 Wesley Methodist Church. Enter the church grounds by steps or, a little further up, a slope. To the right of the church front are two Wesley Methodist Ministers' houses, a schoolroom and a Headmaster's house, built in 1863 in a semi-Gothic style. This collection of buildings is on a site known as Golden Knoll and are also Grade II listed. This is the site of the original Wesley Methodist Church built in 1779. The current church was built in 1812 to replace this. An imposing Georgian church, split into two levels in the 1980s, with the lower mostly being a thriving community resource and the upper being the active church. The building, the surrounding walls and the gate pillars are Grade II listed.

If the gate is open, take the Private path through the graveyard; please note that permission to use this path has been sought and is granted by the Trustees of the Wesley Methodist Church. If the gate is closed, see alternative route in 11 below. The path leads to Wesley Methodist Church Hall.

11 Wesley Methodist Church Hall, then school (Grade II listed) was built about 1858 and is now used as start-up work space.

Turn right at the school and continue ahead into a lane. Turn left up Park Road.

Alternative route: If the path is closed, return to Wesley Slope and go downhill, turning left into Christchurch Street West and then take the second left into Park Road. Continue uphill until you reach St. Catherine Roman Catholic Parish Hall.

12 St. Catherine Roman Catholic Parish Hall, was built as a 'temporary' tin-clad church in 1928 and in use as such until the building of St. Catherine Roman Catholic Church was erected in 1967/8.

Return down Park Road and left into Christchurch Street West, known historically as 'Behind Town'. Turn left into the grounds of Christ Church through the Grade II listed piers.

13 Christ Church (Grade II* listed), was the first daughter church of St. John's, built in 1818 to accommodate the dramatic increase in the population (some 50%) in the early years of the 19th century. One of the principle aims was to provide "free seats" for the poorer members of the town and was thus first known as "Frome Free Church".

The site was previously the Pack Horse orchards, where John Wesley often preached. These orchards were where the pack horses would graze after delivering coal from the Radstock area mines.

Leave the churchyard by the other gateway (also with Grade II listed piers). Opposite the gateway is the Packhorse Inn. The first Methodist preacher spoke in a field behind this building in 1746 or 1747.

Cross the road carefully, turn right and then second left into South Parade. A short distance down on the left is Moore and Sons Corn and Seed Merchants.

14 Moore and Sons Corn and Seed Merchants is on the site of one end of the property owned by miller Samuel Richards and offered for the use of John Wesley for preaching and overnight accommodation. This was the third property used by Methodists after Milk Street, and another unidentified in Broadway. It extended behind those on the main road back to the site of the current 26/27 Wine Street. It was said to be a large house made into one room, with galleries around it and seating for up to 200 people.

The next building down on the left is the old Quaker Meeting House. The Quakers were the first Nonconformists to build a place of worship here in Frome in 1675. This was rebuilt in 1723 and was in use until 1956. The building was then offices and is now being converted to residential use. Their graveyard exists as an open space between their building and Sheppards Barton Baptist Church.

15 Sheppards Barton Baptist Church was erected in 1707 and demolished in 1849. The current building came into use the following year. It is now under prolonged conversion to a private residence. The Church, forecourt, railings, gates and piers are all Grade II listed.

Continue down South Parade, facing you is The Old Manse.

16 The Old Manse (Grade II listed), was built c.1790 for the Baptist minister.

Turn left and follow the road (Wine Street) round to the left. Opposite High Street is the rear of the Baptist Church, which housed the School Room and Church Hall.

17 The School Room and Church Hall, was added to the church in 1852, Italianate style and Grade II listed.

Go down High Street and on the left is Gospel Hall.

18 Gospel Hall, belonging to the Plymouth Brethren, is currently used by the Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes (RAOB).

Continue down and turn right into Catherine Street. A short way down on your right you will come to the Grade II listed Badcox Lane Baptist Chapel.

19 Badcox Lane Baptist Chapel and Rectory, was built originally in 1711 as an unusual trapezoidal building, due to a restricted site. It was replaced by the current building with a fine Doric portico in 1814. A beautiful set of art nouveau stained glass windows was installed in 1894 and can be glimpsed from just beyond the building now converted to flats.

Head down Catherine Street. To the right of the small car park on the right are the remains of the Temperance Hall, built in 1875. Continue down into Catherine Hill.

20 St. Catherine's Chapel was thought to be part of the Manor House of St. Catherine, which embraced the Grade II listed 15, 14 and 13 Catherine Hill (now the shops Mary Kilvert, Frome Hardware and Solsken). It was known to exist in 1279 and was closed in 1548. It was licensed in 1672 for use by Baptists (but see 21). This site was also considered to be known as the Old Nunnery (but see 22).

Opposite number 13 is the Zion United Reformed Church entrance screen. The entrance has the dates of the first church, 1810 and the screen, 1893. The screen, gates and railings are Grade II listed. The associated Grade II listed hexagonal Sunday School of 1875 can be seen on the left down the now-private path. This was the site of the original Zion Chapel and was used by a group of Moravians in the 1770s until the 1810 church was built.

A little further down on the same side is 23 Catherine Hill.

21 23 Catherine Hill, now Poot Emporium, was said to be used by Baptists prior to Sheppards Barton and may be an alternative site for St Catherine's Chapel (see 15 and 20).

Carry on down Catherine Hill and turn left into Stony Street. Continue ahead into the Market Place, turn left into Cork Street, over the pedestrian crossing. Turn left towards Westway Cinema.

22 The Westway Cinema building has been thought to be an alternative site for St. Catherine's Chapel (see 20).

Continue along Cork Street and turn right into The Westway Shopping Centre. Walk straight through and cross the river footbridge on the other side. Walk through the car park and turn right past the public toilets back into Justice Lane and the starting point at the Discover Frome Information Point.

FINISH

Walk compiled by Steve Ehrlicher

Further reading:

The Buildings of Frome – R. D. Goodall

The Book of Frome – M. McGarvie

The Making of Frome – Peter Belham

Frome Society for Local Studies Yearbooks.

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