

FROME WOOL WALK

(exploring some clothiers' houses and other buildings associated with the wool trade in Frome)

This walk should take about 60 to 90 minutes.
Devised by Miriam and Chris Hare.

BACKGROUND

Wool undoubtedly shaped Frome; the route of the river was changed and Bath Street was built by wool. The cloth industry was well established in Frome from the 15th and 16th centuries. There were sheep on the Mendip Hills, the Wiltshire Downs and the Cotswolds. Frome was a natural collection centre for local cloth production.

Clothiers were middlemen who collected wool, distributed it to weavers to make cloth and then sent the finished cloth to Blackwell Hall in the City of London, to be sold.

John Leyland in the 16th century visited Frome and wrote:

"Divers fayre stone howsys in the town " which standeth most by clothing."

And in a "Tour in the West of England" in the early 19th century R Warner described "All the people of Frome being dyed purple with a manufacture of blue cloth".

It was famous during the Napoleonic times for its blue cloth that had been dyed in woad (known as Blue Gold) and used for army uniforms. The plant was grown in Frome for hundreds of years.

There were several wealthy clothiers in Frome, including the Whitchurch, Olive, Smith and Allen families, but the ones that dominated the town were the Sheppard family, who were the first to introduce machinery in the area, and in the first quarter of the 19th century were the largest employers in the town. Many of the clothier families were non-Conformists.

The decline of the wool trade had occurred in Frome mostly by the end of the 19th century. Cheap labour and industrialisation in northern woollen towns speeded up the decline of the cloth industry here.

WOOL WALK

The walk starts at Cheese and Grain in Market Yard.

Walk across the Market Yard towards the Westway shopping centre, and over the footbridge crossing the River Frome passing the library on your left. Walk past the shops, and straight on into Cork Street, turn left, and Monmouth House, and the Wool House are on the right, opposite the Westway cinema and behind a yew hedge.

MONMOUTH HOUSE and THE WOOL HOUSE

Cork Street

Monmouth House was the home of Thomas Bunn, solicitor and Frome philanthropist, built by his doctor father, also Thomas Bunn, in about 1730. His father, also Thomas Bunn, was a dyer.



THE WOOL HOUSE

Cork Street

On the same site is The Wool House, on the right, originally a cloth workshop; Inside is a surprising Tudor arched doorway.

Retrace your steps up Cork Street and turn left up the path beside Catherine House care home. At the top on the right is Melrose House.

MELROSE HOUSE

Whittox Lane

This is the finest clothier's house in Frome, a Queen Anne House, built by William Whittock, in about 1690. It is typical of the houses that rich clothiers built for themselves. The walls are of local Jurassic limestone.

In the 20th century it became part of a Roman Catholic convent but is now a private home again.



FORMERLY ZION CHAPEL

Whittox Lane



Zion Chapel is opposite Melrose House. It is now known as Rise and the Rye Bakery and Café; it was a United Reformed Chapel, which was attended by many of the mill owners.

Continue up Whittox Lane with the chapel on your left to Catherine Hill, the heart of FROME'S conservation area.

Turn left and then after a couple of shops, turn right onto Sheppards Barton.

SHEPPARDS BARTON

Off Catherine Hill

A close of early 18th century houses erected for John Sheppard's cloth workers. Cottages were on one side and workshops were on the other side. The land was bought from the Champneys of Orchardleigh by John Sheppard, and his family developed land in nearby Wine Street, High Street and South Barton.



At the end of Sheppards Barton, turn sharp right along Wine Street, and then when Wine Street bends left, turn right into a car park, where on the left, is Catherine Hill House.



CATHERINE HILL HOUSE

Off Catherine Hill

This was built in about 1715 by George Whitchurch, a clothier.

Turn right along Wine Street, where 21 Wine Street is on your left.

WINE STREET HOUSE
21 Wine Street

This was built by John Sheppard in about 1650. Wine Street itself was developed by his son, William, in about 1730. John Sheppard leased this house and it stayed in the Sheppard family until 1874 when it was given to Sheppards Barton Chapel next door.



At the end of Wine Street turn left along Christchurch Street West then take the first left along South Parade to Sheppards Barton Chapel on the left.



SHEPPARDS BARTON BAPTIST CHAPEL
South Parade.

The site of Frome's first Baptist chapel built in 1708, and home to Frome's first Sunday School. It was built by the Sheppard family and rebuilt in 1850. There are several tombs of the Sheppard family inside the chapel, which is currently being redeveloped.

The Sheppard family built two Baptist chapels in Frome, this one in 1708 and another in Badcox Lane in 1711.

Return to Christchurch Street West and after about 200 yards Rook Lane House is on your left.

ROOK LANE HOUSE
Christchurch Street West

Robert Smith, a prominent wealthy clothier, who owned Leonard's Mill, built this house in about 1600 and lived in it. His descendants built Rook Lane Chapel, in Bath Street nearby, in their orchard.
Elizabeth Rowe, a poet, lived here until 1737, she was the daughter of Walter Singer, a prosperous wool merchant.



At the mini roundabout, cross over Bath Street carefully, bear left down Christchurch Street East, and then first left down the path known as Gentle Street, just after the bus stop and beside the old brewery. This was the main road out of Frome to the south west, until the construction of Bath Street.

ARGYLL HOUSE

Gentle Street

Mary Jesser had this house built in 1769. She was from a prominent family of clothiers and dyers at Welshmill. It has a beautiful Chinese Chippendale staircase inside.



Walk past St John's Church, down the steps, and continue straight ahead along King Street and as the road turns left Iron Gates is straight ahead

IRON GATES

King Street

It was built by the Sheppard family in about 1696 and was altered in the first half of the 18th century.

Eleanor, William and John Sheppard lived here. It was situated close to the Town Mill and the Dye houses in Willow Vale.



Walk straight on past Iron Gates, along King Street. And when you reach the main road turn right over the River Frome (where the old town mill used to be) and into Willow Vale on your right. You will find Willow Vale House and the Queen Anne Terrace on the left-hand side.



WILLOW VALE HOUSE

Willow Vale was the centre of the dyeing industry in Frome, run by the Sheppard, Allen and Olive families

Willow Vale House was built for Mary Allen in about 1733. The Allens sold it on to other clothiers, the Smiths and then the Olives.

The attached Feather Factory was built by the Sheppard family in the early 19th century. It was used as a workshop for cloth workers. The Dye House nearby, was owned by the Olive family and used by the Sheppard family.

There is a round drying house next to Willow Vale House, in a private

garden.

QUEEN ANNE TERRACE

Willow Vale

It was possibly built about 1720 by the clothier James Smith and was inhabited by several clothiers and dyers into the 20th century.



Retrace your steps to Bath Road. Cross it carefully and walk along Bridge Street opposite, turning left into Justice Lane there you will find the Round Wool Drying Tower.

WOOL DRYING TOWER

Justice Lane



This belonged to the Olive family (clothiers). Wool was dried here before it was carded (disentangled) and dyed. It was one of 12 drying towers in Frome that belonged to the Olive family. It is linked to Black Swan Cafe next door and is sometimes open to the public.

Return to Bath Road, turn left and take the next left along Welsh Mill Road

Mendip House and Welshmill House are on the right-hand side after about 50 yards.

MENDIP HOUSE AND WELSHMILL HOUSE

Welshmill Road

These two were originally built as one house for Joseph Jenner, a clothier, in the style of Adam. They are late 17th century, and were refurbished in about 1790 for Robert Meares, a dyer.



Continuing along Welshmill Road and take a right turn along Spring Road and, just after bollards in the road, you will pass Spring Grove House

SPRING GROVE HOUSE

Spring Road



Built in the 1840s for Miss Susan Sheppard so that she could live close to her parents in Fromefield House.

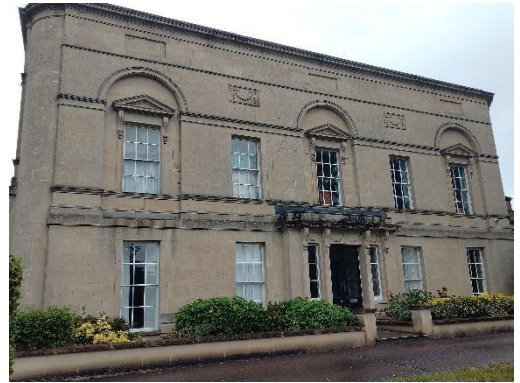
Continue along Spring Road and at the end, Fromefield House is on your left and the Old School is on the other side of the main road

FROMEFIELD HOUSE AND SCHOOL

At the end of Spring Road.

This house was originally in the countryside and was built for George Sheppard and family in about 1797. It originally included an ice house and a bath house. There was a long barrow as well as standing stones in the garden.

The Sheppard family played a major part in the development of woollen cloth in Frome from the mid-17th century until 1878. It is built in the style of Adam and is now flats. Emma Sheppard, a workhouse reformer, lived here.



SCHOOL

Bath Road



This was a Dame school for the children of the estate and domestic servants. It is opposite Fromefield House on Bath Road and was probably founded by Emma Sheppard.

Turn right along Bath Road/North Parade and you will pass North Hill House (now Fromefield Manor School)

NORTH HILL HOUSE

Bath Road

This house was built in the 1760s, designed by William Jesser, (whose family owned the mill and dye house at Welshmill) for Timothy Lacey, a textile dealer, who had married Eleanor Sheppard that year. It is now an independent specialist school.



To complete the walk, continue down Bath Road, turn right after Frome Museum on the right. Then return to the Cheese and Grain.

Many thanks to the many publications of the Frome Local Society, which have helped us in our research.
Miriam and Chris Hare

NB

Most of the buildings included in this walk are listed and are private residences, except for the wool drying tower which is open to the public sometimes, and Holy Trinity Church which is open on most weekday mornings.

OTHER BUILDINGS ASSOCIATED WITH THE WOOL TRADE THAT MAY BE OF INTEREST:

TRINITY AREA



Previously known as Oadground or Woadground, (where woad/ Blue Gold was grown for dyeing purposes), and was then known as New Town, and is now named after Trinity Church in Trinity St. It was built in the latter half of the 17th century and into the first half of the 18th century. It is unparalleled in Somerset and rare elsewhere. Some of these cottages are Grade 2 listed. Blocks of land were owned by various clothing families; the Yerbury, Selwood and Whitchurch families.

Most of the residents of the Trinity area were woollen workers employed by the Sheppard family at Spring Gardens. Holy Trinity Church at the end of Trinity Street was built for cloth workers and their families. It is often open in the mornings on weekdays.



SELWOOD LODGE

The top of Leys Lane



A Cottage Ornee. Built in 1825. Associated with the Sheppard family

COLLEGE PLACE (originally Wallbridge House) In Wallbridge, Frome

This was the home of John Simpkins, a clothier who coowned Hapsford and Staplemead Mills. It was built at the end of the 18th century in the style of Adam. In the 19th century it became a Roman Catholic boys school for a while. It is now a private residence.





THE WORKHOUSE

Weymouth Road

This building is linked with Emma Sheppard, workhouse reformer and writer, and a contemporary of Elizabeth Fry. She was motivated by her Christian faith which was the personal context for her profound humanity.

INNOX HILL



These cottages were built for Sheppards workers who worked at Spring Gardens and in the Jefferies Mill area

WOOLLEN MILLS



JEFFRIES MILL

Jeffries Lane

In the 1840s there were still 3 major woollen mills in Frome:

Vallis Way (Houstons)

Spring Gardens (Sheppards)

Wallbridge (Tuckers Mill), the last fabric mill, which closed in 1965.

*A rhythmic clatter fills the quiet room
The steady shifting of the cottage loom.
Where humble thread transforms to fine array,
And weaves the story of the working day.*

*The Weaver toils beneath the low beamed roof,
With practiced hands entangling warp and weft.
While distant clothiers claim the vibrant spool,
To sell the woven triumphs of the wool.*

*Between the damp stone walls and spinning thread,
They craft the cloth that grants them daily bread.
A quiet life of rhythm, toil, and care,
Within the very homes where beauty's made.
(Author unknown)*