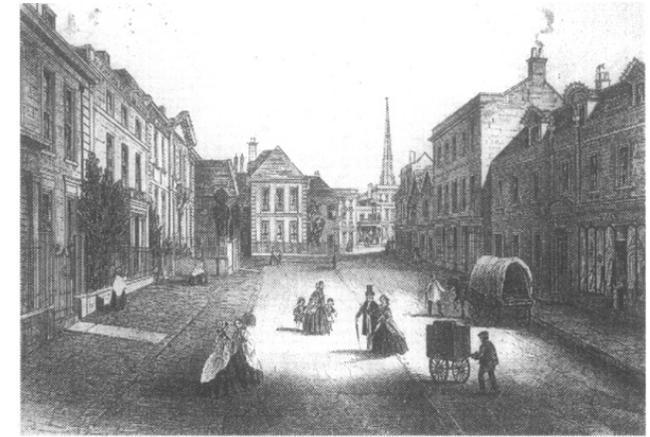




# Trowbridge Town Trail

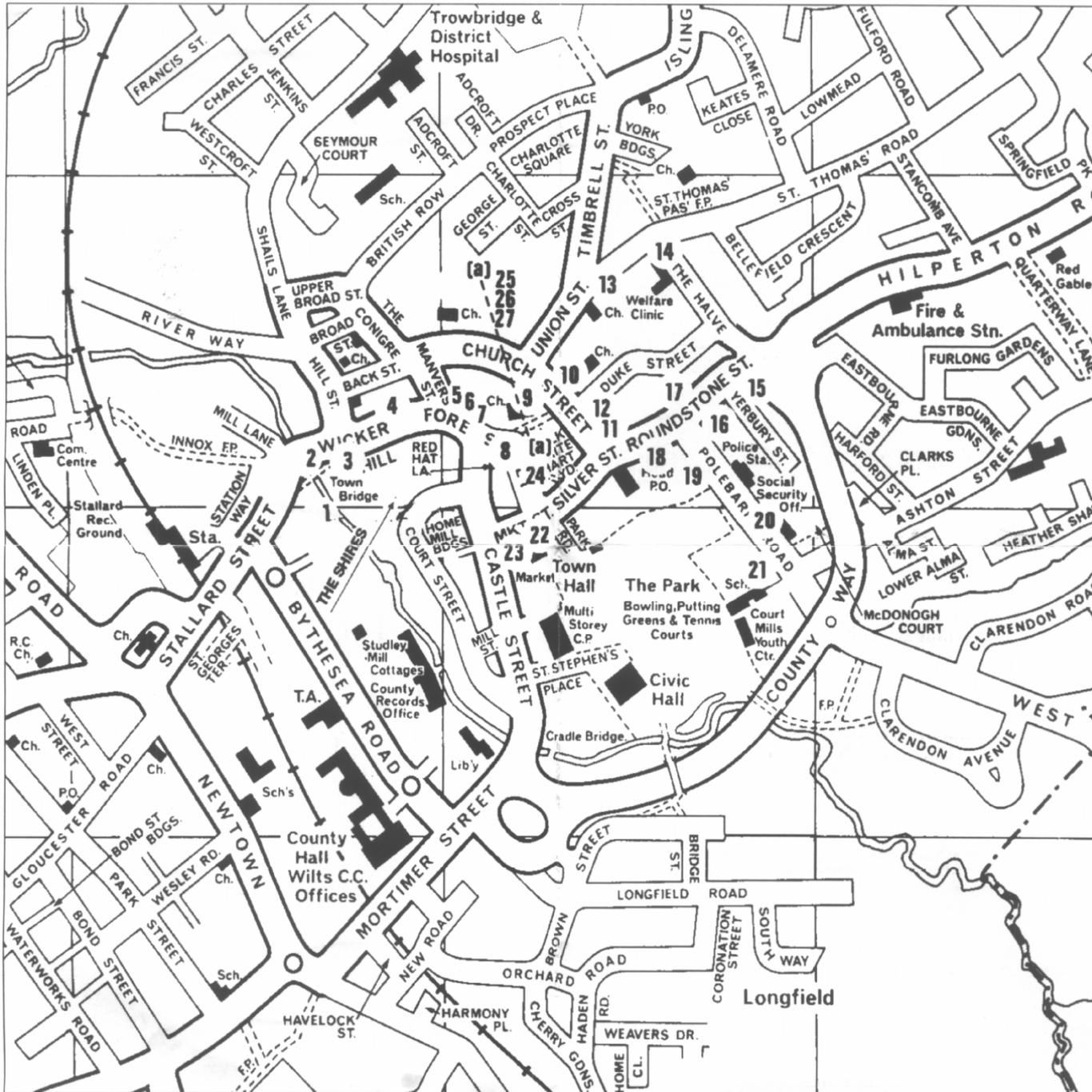


*The Parade c.1860*

The Town Trail should be used in conjunction with the Trowbridge Industrial Trail, also published by the Trowbridge Civic Society, available free at the Museum and T.I.C. etc. The Trowbridge Nature Trail is also available.

Buildings marked with a \* have a Civic Society Blue Plaque attached. These should be read as they may contain more detail than is in this pamphlet.

Trowbridge is first mentioned as a Saxon village in the Domesday Book. At that time the settlement would have consisted of a tenth-century stone church, a mill near the site of the present Stone Mill and a collection of round and long thatched houses. Earlier settlement is indicated by occasional finds, including a Bronze Age arrowhead and Iron Age and Roman pottery. Roman settlements have been identified at Hilperton and Wingfield and the slight Cornbrash ridge running through Trowbridge is also likely to have been cultivated. The name Trowbridge means "tree bridge" or "wooden bridge" and the original would have spanned the River Biss near the bridge that connects the Shires shopping centre to the car park. Here also is the site of the mill (now Stone Mill) mentioned above. After the Norman Conquest, a change of ownership of the manor resulted in the de Bohun family building, in the twelfth century, a castle which became the headquarters of their estates. The castle was built across the main road of the village leading to the "tree bridge" and entailed moving the river crossing further north to where the present Town Bridge now is. Urban development under the Lords of the Manor followed, with the granting of markets and a fair. In the late fourteenth century the Cloth Industry was established and this was to provide the chief source of wealth for more than five centuries. In the fifteenth century this wealth helped rebuild the church and, after a depression in the sixteenth century, the extensive manufacture of medley cloths brought great industrial prosperity and importance. This prosperity is reflected in the fine Georgian houses which are still such a feature of the town. In fact, many of the buildings we will look at are associated with the woollen industry.



Revised edition 2000. © Copyright Trowbridge Civic Society.  
Published jointly by Trowbridge Civic Society and Trowbridge Town Council.

The town grew with the introduction of mechanisation and steam power in the early 1800s and became the largest in Wiltshire and the most heavily industrialised in the south of England. Any prospect of Trowbridge developing into a large industrial town disappeared in the mid-nineteenth century when the West of England Woollen Industry went into its final decline. The last woollen mill, Home Mills (now incorporated in the Shires shopping Centre and the home of Trowbridge Museum), finally ceased weaving in 1982. Other industries are now well established, including Ushers Brewery, Bowyers and Waldens (food processing), Airsprung (beds), Nutricia (baby food) and several light engineering firms while the Wiltshire County Council offices have been based in the town since 1893 and the offices of the West Wiltshire District Council since 1974. Housing developments began in the late seventeenth century and a considerable expansion took place between 1820 and 1900. The greatest expansion has been in the years since 1945 and the present population of the town is 28,000.

We begin our trail on the footbridge, adjacent to the Town Bridge, a fine three-arch structure rebuilt by the Trowbridge architect, Esau Reynolds, and dated 1777 by figures cut into the stonework. Previously, there was also a ford on the site of the present footbridge.



*Blind House*



*Edward Langford's House, The Parade*

From the footbridge, we look upstream to the perforated brickwork of (1) **THE HANDLE HOUSE**, on its stone bridge over the river. Once a common feature of the West of England cloth industry, these structures were used as wind stoves to dry for re-use the handles (frames) of teasels used to raise the nap on damp cloth. Built in 1844, this is one of the very last to survive in England. It has recently been restored. With its arched roof and its knob finial, (2) **THE BLIND HOUSE** (blind = windowless) stands by the river. It was built in 1757 and was the town's lock-up until a police station was opened near the railway station in 1854. "Blind House" is a local term for a lock-up, used in Wiltshire and Somerset. Prisoners included those awaiting trial at Salisbury and those who had just imbibed too freely in the local inns. The interior consists of two cells, popularly believed to be for separating men and women. Each cell has a bench for a bed and a latrine. Stocks and a ducking stool once stood nearby, but had disappeared by 1850. Climbing Wicker Hill (the lower part of Fore Street), we follow the curved line of the outer defences of Trowbridge Castle, now long since disappeared. The houses on the right-hand side occupy sites of the original houses built up against the castle wall. The left hand side of Fore Street was probably the first urban development and consisted of long, narrow "burgage" plots which extended from Fore Street ("Front" Street) to Back Street (much of which has been renamed Church Street). These were let to craftsmen and tradesmen who built on them houses, shops or workshops.

Halfway up the hill on the right, we come to (3) **NUMBER 2 and 3 FORE STREET**, now occupied by Middletons and Barclays Bank. These houses were re-fronted symmetrically as one house in the seventeenth century and traces of the earlier structures include timber framing and an array of wind braces in the roof; note the rare survival of lead fringes to dormer windows.

On the other side of the road is (4) **THE PARADE**. Recognised as the finest group of clothiers' houses in Wiltshire, these were splendidly restored by Ushers Brewery when they were their head-offices. First number 73, a front of 1730 of painted stucco with a stone tiled roof; much of this house is behind another house, number 8 Wicker Hill, which has a stone frontage of about 1820 on an earlier building. Next is Arlington House, the early eighteenth century home of the Singer

family of clothiers. Then number 71, with a late eighteenth century ashlar front and a hipped slate roof. The finest is Parade House, built in 1730 for a member of the Houlton family. The interior has contemporary panelled rooms, an oak staircase and fine plastered ceilings. In front of all these houses is a 250 year old pitched path ("pitched" means that flat stones are set on end). The existing clothiers' houses replaced the original timber-framed houses built on the burgage plots. Set partly forward from Parade House is number 68, a fine example of Vernacular Baroque, built before 1723 for Nathaniel Houlton. Set forward again is a facade of c.1700, hiding an interesting building\* of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The interior is fascinating, one front room having wall panelling of 1700 and a rear room fine sixteenth century panelling and a coffered ceiling. The timber framing visible on the first floor still shows the original carpenters' marks on the joints. This was the home of Edward Langford whose daughter married into the county gentry. His grandson was the Earl of Clarendon, Chief Minister to Charles II, his great grand-daughter was the Duchess of York and two of his great great grand-daughters were queens, Mary II and Anne.

Continuing, we come to (5) **LLOYDS BANK\***, housed in the finest Georgian building in Wiltshire. Erected in the eighteenth century for a wealthy clothier, it has a seven bay facade, similar to and probably copied from (via a contemporary architects' pattern book) the central portion of Dyrham Park to the north of Bath. The fine original plaster ceilings have been faithfully copied by the Bank in successive extensions.

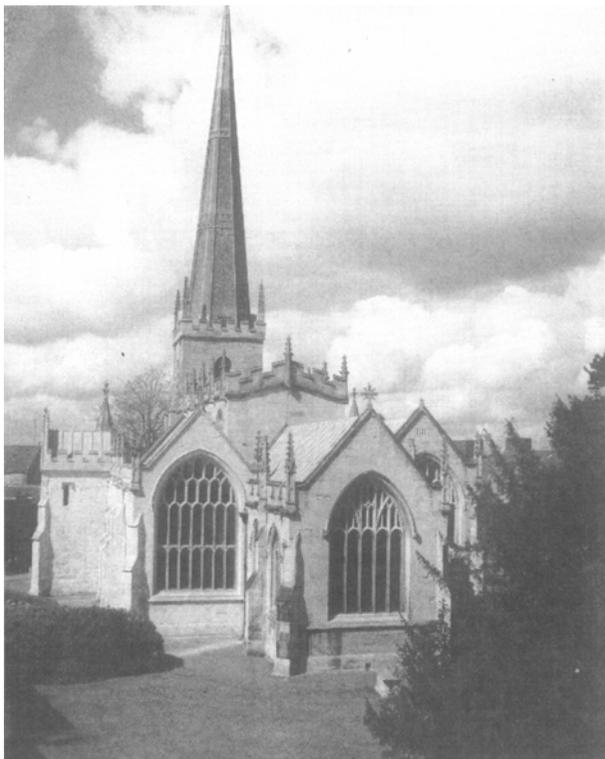
Next door is (6) 63 **FORE STREET**, now the Black Horse Estate Agents. The Georgian stone front hides a late mediaeval timber-framed building, the pointed gable ends of which can be seen above the stone parapet. The interior contains many of the features of the original building, including a well, fireplaces and the Hall (main living room).

The next building is (7) **THE NATIONAL WESTMINSTER BANK**, a good classical building of 1851 in an Italian Renaissance style. It was built as a bank and has always been one. Next door is an unusual facade built in the 1879 as a Music Saloon by Henry Millington. Originally, it possessed an all glass frontage under the stone arch.

A little further on, we come to (8) **THE MARKET PLACE** of the mediaeval town. This developed probably after 1200 outside the main gate of the Castle, which stood where Castle Street joins Fore Street.



*Lloyds Bank*



*Parish Church of St. James*

The market place was originally bounded on the south by Red Hat Lane, but the block of shops between that and the main street shows a typical market place development, where temporary stalls were gradually transformed into permanent shops. A street market was held here until 1862, when the stalls were moved into the new Market Hall. Set into the paving you can see a cross marked out in brickwork; this is approximately where a covered market cross stood until about 1780; the stone ball which once topped its roof can still be seen in the west porch of St. James's Church.

Turning into Church Walk we obtain good views of (9) **THE PARISH CHURCH OF ST. JAMES**, which was founded on the edge of the Market Place about 1200. It was long known as "the New Church" as it replaced an earlier one remains of which were discovered on the site of the Shires shopping centre. The present building dates from the fourteenth century (tower and spire) and the fifteenth century (remainder). However, the Church was restored in 1846 - 1848 when much of the structure was found to be unsafe and the south chapel, arcades and clerestory were rebuilt as exact copies of their predecessors and the chancel modified. The top section of the spire blew off in the gale of 1990 and crashed through the mediaeval wooden ceiling of the nave, causing severe damage. The stonework still looks new. The best known rector was the poet, George Crabbe (Tales of the Hall, Peter Grimes) who held the living from 1814 until his death in 1832; his monument can be seen in the chancel. (The Church is open daily 10-12 and in the summer 10-2; a free guide is available). In the churchyard, the grave of Thomas Hilliker is worth a visit; it tells its own story.



*Almshouses*

Proceed along Church Walk, the shops of which are, once again, the successors of the stalls that formerly stood in the churchyard. Opposite the end of Church Walk stands the oldest secular building in the town (10) **9-11 CHURCH STREET**, a hall house with crosspiece, which probably dates from the fifteenth century, contemporary with the rebuilding of the Church. Here, in Emmanuel Chapel yard we can see the only visible timber framing in Trowbridge.

Turning to the left, we come to (11) **THE FORMER NATIONAL SCHOOLS** which, at the time of writing are being converted from shops into dwellings. Built in 1842, in an early Victorian Tudor Gothic style, they housed the Parochial Junior School until the 1960s. Moving into Union Street, we pass, on our right, (12) **THE ALMSHOUSES**, erected in 1861 by the Reverend John David Hastings, Rector of Trowbridge 1841-1869. Hastings was also responsible for the restoration of the Church, the building of the National Schools and adjoining cottages, the opening up of the churchyard and the widening of Church Street. He is buried in Trowbridge cemetery, in a fine Mausoleum which was restored by the Civic Society. Next to the Almshouses are the former offices of Mann, Rodway and Green in a handsome purpose-built edifice, dating from the mid-nineteenth century. Further into Union Street is (13) **WATERLOO PLACE\***, built, needless to say, in 1815. This terrace, built in Bath Stone, has a hipped slate roof and attractive fanlights above the front doors each of which has a brass lion's head knocker.



*Hall House, Church Street*

Turning right we enter (14) **THE HALVE**, named after the half-acre strips in the old open fields, an interesting survival of mediaeval agriculture. From the late eighteenth century, the houses in this street were the homes of middle ranking clothiers and their employees. First on the left, Trellis Cottage, sole survivor of a terrace of six. Then a mid-nineteenth century ashlar house, with a row of one and a half storey cottages at right angles to the road. Followed by a range of two and three storey houses dating from the 1790s with some fine examples of Trowbridge brick. On the right hand side stands Dorset House, three storeys in brick and of the early nineteenth century. Next is the building occupied by Cousins and Wright, again three storey and dating from the early nineteenth century, but this time in stone.

Turning right at the end of the Halve, we can pause to look into (15) **YERBURY STREET**. On the right is a charming terrace of weavers' houses, each with a wide window on the second floor where the loom stood. Once common in Trowbridge, few now remain; other examples can be seen in Newtown and Castle Street. At the far end of the terrace, are the two best preserved, Nos 1 3 and 1 4; this latter house has been restored and contains a great deal of the original detail, especially in the windows.

At the junction of Polebarn Road are three fine houses. (16) **POLEBARN HOUSE** (now a hotel) was built in 1789 by the Reverend John Clark, a minister and a clothier. It once possessed a miniature country-house garden, with a grotto, a lake and a gazebo, while on the roof was a domed observatory and at the rear a music room (now the Masonic Temple). To the right is (17) **LOVEMEAD HOUSE**, now the West Wiltshire Conservative Club, built c. 1730 by another wealthy clothier. Looking further into the town, we see (18) **RODNEY HOUSE**, in a severe Grecian style of 1790. The parking spaces in front were its garden until 1937. The building was rescued from decay by the firm of Solicitors who now occupy it. Further fine restoration has been carried out around the courtyard to the side.

We can now follow the short route via Roundstone Street and Silver Street and pick up the trail at (22) **THE TOWN HALL**, or turn into Polebarn Road. To the right, in Polebarn Road, are (19) **LADY BROWN'S COTTAGE HOMES**, built in 1900 by the clothier, Sir Roger Brown, as a memorial to his wife. They are by the same architect (A. S. Goodridge) and in the same materials as the Town Hall and in the Tudor Style. Sir Roger and his wife are buried in a fine, pink granite domed mausoleum in the Cemetery. Opposite are (20) **ROSEFIELD HOUSE and HOMEFIELD HOUSE**, both of c.1800 and of Bath Stone. Homefield House has a sympathetic extension dating from the 1950s faced in real stone.

Past the Italianate villas of the 1840s, we turn right opposite Ashton Street (once a fine development of industrial housing of the 1840s and 50s, but now cut in half by the modern Trowbridge ring road, County Way), and we come to (21) **COURTFIELD HOUSE**. The original house, to the rear, was bought by John Cokes, a clothier, in 1752. This house probably dates from the late seventeenth century and the early eighteenth century and has a fine weaver's window in the upper floor. John Cokes remodelled and extended the house, giving it the present Georgian front. The house became the centre of what was the finest industrial complex in the area, owned by Palmer and Mackay when work finally ceased in 1963. Apart from a section of 1848 (now Court Mills Youth Centre), the mill buildings were demolished in 1967. Courtfield House and the Wool Store adjacent to it, now house Roundstone Preparatory School.

A pleasant walk across the People's park, purchased by public subscription in 1887 as a memorial of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee, leads to the back of (22) **THE TOWN HALL**. Occupying the site of a former

manor house, The Limes, this exuberant building was given to the town by Sir Roger Brown in 1889 as a public hall and council offices. It now houses the West Wiltshire Magistrates' Courts. A close inspection of the detail is rewarding, especially on the side facing Park Road, while at the front are some of the reasons for the town's importance, including power looms and a railway engine. An inscription over a door to the far right warns you to "Obey Magistrates", a fitting comment on its present use.



*Town Hall*

Adjoining to the right is (23) **THE MARKET HALL** built in 1861 by William Stancomb, another local clothier, to bring the market stalls out of the old market place and under cover. Around the open arches are carved biblical quotations interlaced with foliage. On the capitals are plough, sheep, woosack and two types of spinning wheel. Now only the facade remains, fronting the Castle Place shopping precinct. Walking into the upper part of Fore Street opposite the Town Hall (the old market place) we pass on the right (24) Nos 39 and 40 FORE STREET. Built as a cooked meat shop in 1893 with open arches, it now houses the offices of a building society. Two early inns that served the market stood here, the Market Tavern, now disappeared, and (25) **THE WHITE HART**, now nicely restored by W. H. Smith.



*Market Hall*

Next is (26) **THE MIDLAND BANK\***, a stately Georgian town house which, in Victorian times, had projecting shop fronts on its ground floor, much of the original stonework having been removed. It has been well restored and now has reverted to its pre-Victorian appearance. The chief inns of Trowbridge stood here, first the Woolpack, opposite the Midland Bank, which was demolished in 1914 for the building of the town's first cinema (now Knee's department store and its main entrance). Next to the Midland Bank was (27) **THE GEORGE HOTEL\*** which, at the time of its closure in 1981, was the oldest surviving licensed house in Wiltshire with a history dating back to the fourteenth century. The whole building was demolished but the facade was accurately rebuilt and now is part occupied by the Midland Bank and part by a shoe-shop.

We now proceed along Red Hat Lane (named after an inn which had as its sign a Cardinal's hat) which, as stated above, once formed the southern boundary of the market place, and cross the road and enter the Shires shopping centre. This was constructed in the 1980s and gave an opportunity to excavate the ground prior to building, which threw much light on



*The George Hotel*

the early history of the town. It became clear that here was the site of the original village of Trowbridge. Traces of timber houses were uncovered and the foundations of a little stone church which had a graveyard containing some 270 burials. Many of the human remains were taken away for examination and later re-buried in Trowbridge cemetery. When the castle was built on the site of the village it blocked the former main road that led to the river crossing and a new main road followed the present line of Fore Street/Wicker Hill, skirting the castle's defences. The castle was originally a motte-and-bailey earthen structure (traces of the motte were still visible in the 1930s) but it seems to have been replaced by a stone structure, as Leland, the early Tudor traveller speaks of the remains of "seven great towers". During the civil wars of King Stephen's reign, the castle was besieged by the King but was successfully defended by its garrison who remained loyal to the rival claimant to the throne the Empress Matilda (Maud). Scanty remains of the castle walls and ditches are said to have been visible until 1812 when the site was sold and covered with cloth mills.

Inside the Shires is the entrance to Trowbridge Museum, opened in July 1990. It occupies the whole first floor of a former cloth factory, Home Mills. Displays illustrate the history of Trowbridge, especially the local cloth industry. There is modern machinery which is largely in working order (cloth is still woven in the museum) and machinery from an older generation, including a hand loom, a gig mill and a rare example of a spinning jenny. We turn right near the former Bethesda Chapel, which became the offices of Salters, owners of Home Mills and is now a cafe. A glance through the windows above will show how Home Mills and the chapel once stood side by side on Court Street before the road was divided into two halves by the Shires. We leave the Shires by the stairs or escalators, pausing to glance through the wide glass window at Stone Mill, built in 1817 on the site of the original village mill. Stone Mill was built as a water mill but soon converted to steam. We emerge into the car park at a spot where the "Tree Bridge" of the Saxon village, that gave Trowbridge its name, formerly crossed the river, and turn right to follow the river past the Handle House to the footbridge adjacent to the Town Bridge from where we started.



*County Hall, Bythesea Road*