HISTORY OF TROWBRIDGE, WILTSHIRE

The origins of Trowbridge go back to at least the Saxon age; the name comes from the Saxon words treow-brycg, meaning tree-bridge.

We know that weaving took place here as long as 1,000 years ago, as Anglo-Saxon loom weights have been found.

Although there was a settlement here on the River Biss before the coming of the Normans, it was only after the Norman Conquest that Trowbridge began to gain importance.

At the time of the Domesday Book (1086) Trowbridge was a typical settlement with a population of around 120 people.

A Norman nobleman named Humphrey I de Bohun built a castle in Trowbridge the early 12th century. The first records of Trowbridge Castle date to 1139, when it was under siege.

The motte-and-bailey Trowbridge castle no longer exists, but Fore Street follows the original castle ditch and Castle Street and the Castle Place Shopping Centre are named after it..

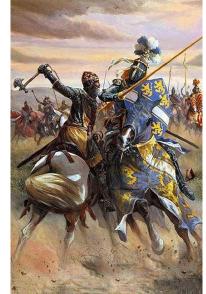


Illustration: 12th century Trowbridge Castle

De Bohun's great-grandson, Henry de Bohun, erected the church of St James in the year 1200 to serve the growing town, obtained a market charter from King John and laid out the town's market place.

Trowbridge has the earliest recorded royal market charter in Wiltshire and among the oldest in England. De Bohun may have been grateful for the charter, but was among the most active barons to force King John to accept the Magna Carta in 1215.





(Left) An engraving of King John signing the Magna Carta on June 15, 1215, at Runnymede. © *Photos.com/Thinkstock.* (*Right*) Sir Henry de Bohun was killed by Robert the Bruce during the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314.

At first Trowbridge was a farming settlement, however, by the 14th century it had become a centre of the British wool industry.



The new 'Great Wheels' enabled yarn to be made much more quickly...

As the weaving industry began to grow, bringing prosperity to the town and throughout the medieval period, Trowbridge gained a reputation for high-quality cloth. In 1540 Trowbridge was said to have 'flourished by drapery'. There was also a thriving leather tanning industry.

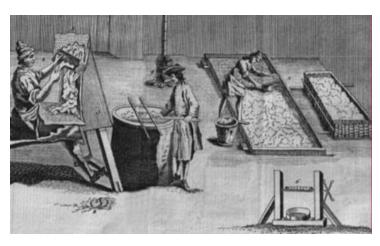


Traditional tanning did not change for hundreds of years.

This engraving shows the inside of a "beamhouse" with a treatment pit and a "Scudder" working on a hide draped over the "beam"

In the late 17th and 18th centuries Trowbridge grew much larger and in 1700 an Act of Parliament set up a body of commissioners to pave, clean and light the streets of Trowbridge.

During the 17th century, the production of woollen cloth became increasingly industrialised, however, mechanisation was resisted by workers in traditional trades and there were riots in 1785, 1792 and in the era of Luddism from 1811–1816.



Wool processing involved 'scribbling', 1770

Trowbridge's wide reputation as a centre for the wool industry drew royals from across Europe who sought out Trowbridge's famous cloth for their special orders.

In 1747 Elizabeth, Empress of Russia sent an agent to Trowbridge to order 'plump cloths and good full colours'. Daniel Defoe recorded that Trowbridge was famed for 'The finest medley Spanish cloths, not in England but in the whole world...'.



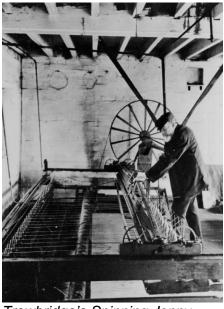
Portrait of Empress Elizabeth Petrovna by Louis Tocqué (1696-1772)

In 1757, the Blind House was built on Trowbridge's town bridge, which used as a lock-up for 'overnight guests' of the law during the 18th and 19th centuries. Serious criminals were held until they could be committed to trial and drunks would be released when they had sobered up in the morning. Sometimes, sympathetic bystanders would fetch beer and feed it to the prisoners..



The Blind House

The spinning jenny, invented in 1764, was the first machine made to spin yarn. The Jenny, pictured here was used in Palmer and Mackay's factory in Trowbridge. It is one of only five remaining in the world and is displayed at the newly renovated Trowbridge Museum.



Trowbridge's Spinning Jenny

The advent of these new mechanised methods for making cloth led to Trowbridge being named 'The Manchester of the West' and brought great wealth to a generation of mill owners.

Trowbridge town centre is full of handsome 18th-century buildings erected by wealthy clothiers.

Architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner famously described the town centre as a 'row of palaces'. Some of the palatial 18th-century exteriors are just facades and cover earlier 16th-17th century houses.



Prominent 18th century buildings include John Cooper's house, built in 1730; Polebarn House built by textile mill owner, brewer and clergyman John Clark in 1789 and the impressive Rodney House, which followed in 1790.



John Cooper's 1730 house in Fore Street is now <u>Lloyds Bank</u>. Pesvner said it was amazingly stately and as grand as the palaces of Genoa.



Polebarn House was an independent hotel for over 30 years



The impressive Rodney House is now home to BLB Solicitors

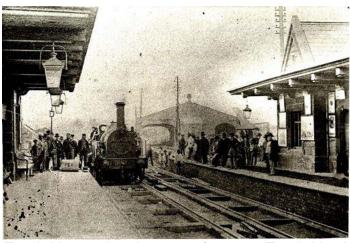


Studley Mill handle house was built around 1843. The perforated brickwork building stored the teazles used in the cloth industry and was built around 1843. It is one of only a few handle houses in the world still standing in its original location.

The wool weavers built cottages around the river and town centre, however, it was during the Industrial Revolution that the townscape of Trowbridge changed drastically.

TRAINS COME TO TROWBRIDGE - On 5th September 1848, the first train steamed through Trowbridge as the Wilts, Somerset and Weymouth Railway was established.

The Kennet and Avon canal, which runs to the north of Trowbridge, played an instrumental part in the town's development, as it enabled coal to be transported from the Somerset Coalfield and so marked the advent of steam powered manufacturing in the woollen cloth mills.



Trowbridge station circa 1870 (courtesy Trowbridge Museum)



Bridge Mill, Wicker Hill in 1873. Photo courtesy of The Trowbridge Museum

During the 19th century the wool industry continued to dominate Trowbridge. Machinery was now powered by steam engines rather than being worked by hand, but the end of the century, the cloth industry began to decline.

In 1868, wealthy cloth merchant, Sir William Roger Brown, funded the building of the Trowbridge Town Hall to celebrate Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. <u>King George V</u> and <u>Queen Mary</u> visited the town hall in 1917 and rock bands such Rod Stewart, <u>The Who</u> and the <u>Small Faces</u> performed at the Town Hall in the 1960's. The impressive Jacobethan-style building is now a thriving community arts centre.



Trowbridge Town Hall is now a vibrant community arts centre

Trowbridge was also famous for its brewing industry and Usher's Wiltshire Brewery was founded in 1824 by the charismatic Thomas Usher. Thomas would start work at 3am each morning wearing breeches, stockings and a top hat to begin the day's brew and would think nothing of walking to Bath for business or riding his horse 35-40 miles to buy hops.

The brewery passed down several generations of the Usher family and Ushers pubs were located across the West Country until it was taken over by a London brewery in 1959.





Another historic Trowbridge industry was the Bowyers sausage factory. Abraham Bowyer established a <u>grocers</u> shop in Trowbridge in 1805. Over the years it was merged with larger businesses and it eventually moved to Innox Mill alongside Trowbridge station in 1954. When it was bought again in 2008, Bowyers moved to Nottingham, with the loss of 400 jobs, ending over 200 years of Trowbridge sausage-making history.



Bowyers sausage & pie factory (courtesy of Trowbridge Museum)

The historic Innox Mills have been bought by a London property developer with exciting plans. These include transforming the buildings into an indoor food &drink market, co-working space, a boutique cinema, independent businesses and 300 new homes. Innox Mills currently hosts regular events including monthly food and drink markets, drive-in cinemas and classic car shows.





Innox Mills on the River Biss - an exciting new development for Trowbridge

MILLS – Other mills in Trowbridge include Clarks Mill near Trowbridge Town Bridge, which is being developed into 22 apartments and houses. There are several exciting mill development opportunities.





Studley Mill, built in 1860 for Clarks

Ashton Mill by Biss Meadows Nature Park

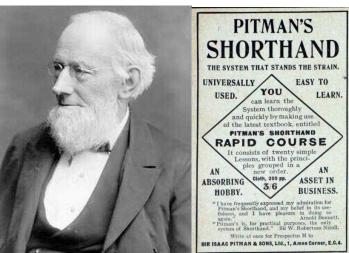




Salters Home Mill in Court Street

Brick Mill

NOTABLE TROWBRIDGE RESIDENTS include Sir Isaac Pitman, inventor of Pitman shorthand, born in Nash Yard in Trowbridge in 1813, and George Crabbe the poet, rector of Trowbridge from 1814 to 1832.



Sir Isaac Pitman, born in Trowbridge



Portrait of George Crabbe by <u>Henry William Pickersgill</u>, circa 1818

In the 19th century amenities in Trowbridge improved. A gas supply (for lighting) was introduced in 1824, the railway reached Trowbridge in 1848 and Market House was built in 1861. The first hospital in Trowbridge opened in 1870, a piped water supply arrived in 1874 and the People's Park opened in 1884.

In the 20th century the old wool industry in Trowbridge began to decline and ended altogether in 1982. The impressive County Hall was built in 1940 and in the late 20th century Trowbridge grew rapidly. By 1981 its population was 23,000 which increased to 45,000 in 2018.



Trowbridge County Hall

TROWBRIDGE MUSEUM - The legacy of Trowbridge's industrial and social heritage can be explored in the Trowbridge Museum, which traces the history of the town and its industrial past and has just undergone a £2.4m renovation.

Exhibits include the rare Spinning Jenny weaving machine (one of only 5 in the world), woollen cloth samples, tools and other material related to the West of England woollen cloth industry as well as objects that reveal the social and cultural history of the people of Trowbridge, including poet George Crabbe and Sir Isaac Pitman.

The museum publishes town trails, including an Industrial Trail, Isaac Pitman Trail, Natural History Trail and Pevsner's Palaces, which focuses on the houses of wealthy cloth merchants.



For further information see https://www.trowbridge.gov.uk/discover-trowbridge/