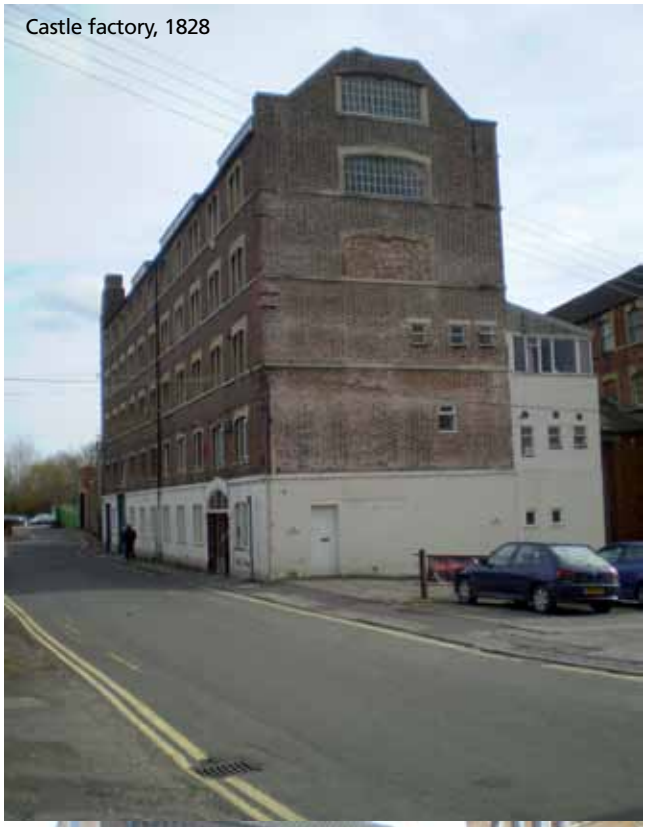
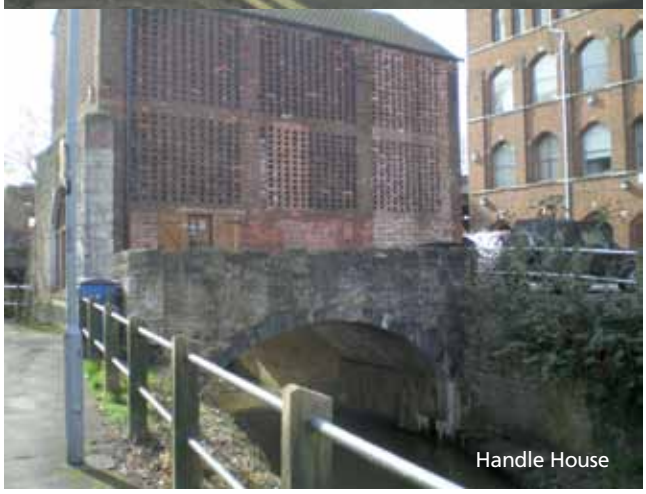
Out and about in Trowbridge

Ken Rogers

This is more than one of our conventional 'Out and About in Local History' items because Ken Rogers introduces us to a process whereby visual architectural and industrial history of Trowbridge has been saved from destruction; and then he gives us some clear guidance as to where to go and to see so as to celebrate and share this remarkable heritage.



Castle factory, 1828



Handle House

Trowbridge is the smallest town with a branch of the Historical Association. It is also a town that quite recently regarded itself as of little historic interest, and indeed knew little of its long and fascinating history. The way in which this has changed is outlined here, and its wide range of buildings briefly described.

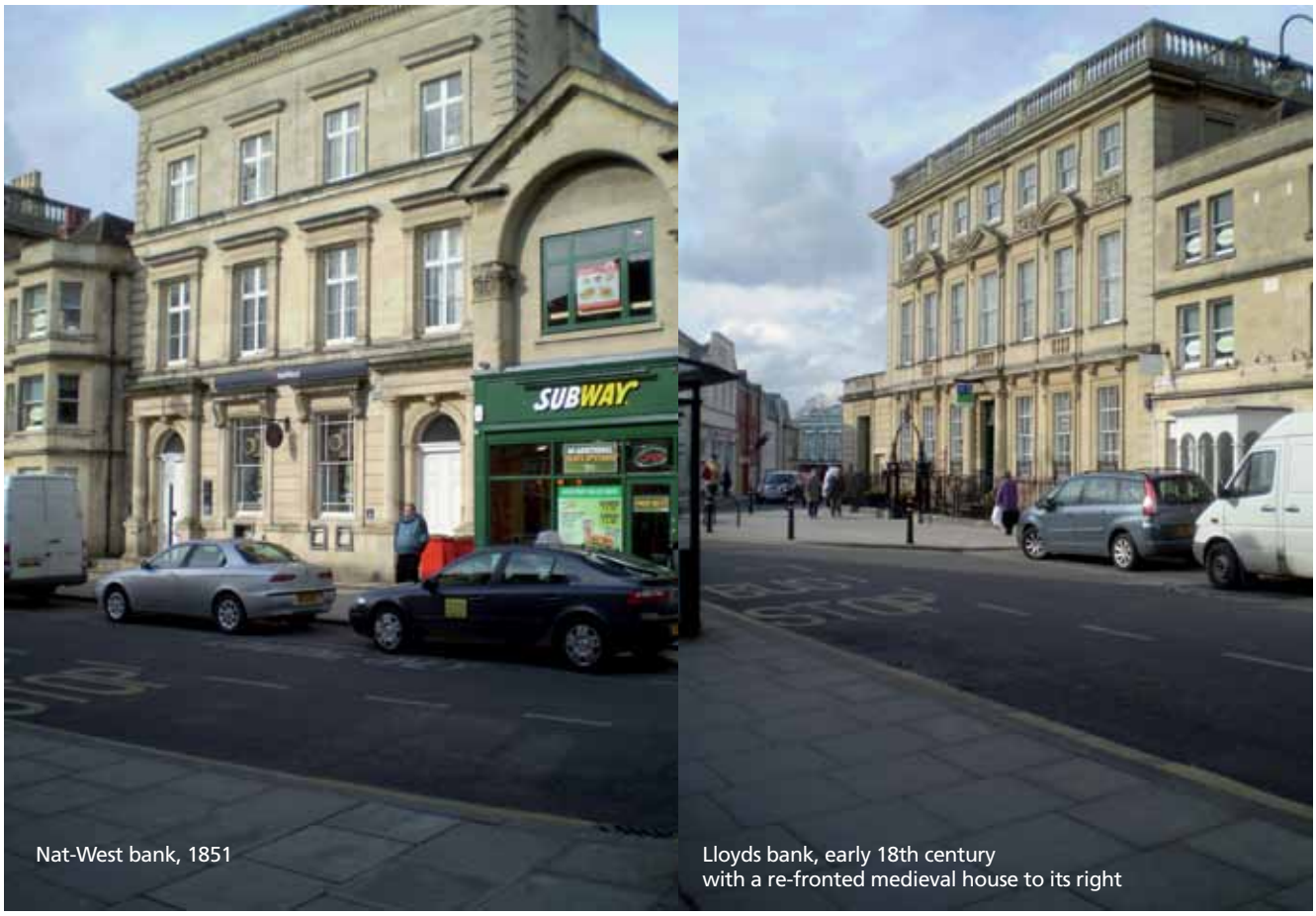
Trowbridge is the county town of Wiltshire. This often causes surprise, as people expect the cathedral city of Salisbury to occupy that position. Until the coming of the railways, Trowbridge had no pretensions to be a county centre but to get by rail from ancient Salisbury to growing Swindon, or from either to central Devizes, the traveller had to go through Trowbridge. Therefore when the county council was set up in 1889 it decided to concentrate most of the county administration at Trowbridge.

When I was a boy, in the 1930s and 1940s, nobody regarded Trowbridge as of any historical interest. A visitor looking for 'history' would have been directed to the road to nearby Bradford-on-Avon, a town only three miles away with a picturesque hillside site, a Saxon church, two medieval bridges, a tithe barn, and a more copious survival of early buildings. We in Trowbridge knew that we had had a castle, but it was gone; that we had an old church, but, we were told, it had been 'ruined by Victorian restoration'. We might timidly mention our Georgian houses, and one or two more perceptive guide books did so. Most either ignored the town or dismissed it. 'If this growing industrial town ever had any charms', wrote Ralph Dutton in 1950, 'they have now been submerged beneath the buildings of progress and prosperity.....the eighteenth century market town.....has been transmogrified into a minor industrial centre'. A wonderful misunderstanding of the town's past. Industrial buildings – how could they be of any interest?

The first listing of buildings did not include any of the woollen factories - only two were listed in Wiltshire. So, in the 1960s, one, begun in 1808, gave way to what then passed for a supermarket, and another, from 1812 onwards, made way for an inner relief road. Nor did the list include any of the several hundred working class houses which were built between 1790 and 1830, when the town doubled in size, and they were rapidly demolished as 'sub-standard'. Other losses included the 16th century rectory, sold for inevitable demolition by the church authorities; parts of the 17th century Duke Street; the 1793 cavalry barracks; and a large and prominently-placed Methodist church of 1835. A few 'modern' structures of this period still disfigure the town centre, the worst of them a Post Office which replaced a fine Victorian hotel in 1964.

But times were changing. When Pevsner's Wiltshire volume came out in 1963, we learned that the Georgian houses on The Parade were 'really a stretch of palaces'; that one further up was 'amazingly stately'; and another 'so grand as to call in mind Genoa'. These had always been valued locally. Now they even began to be mentioned in books on architecture!

Industrial Archaeology came in with the publication of Kenneth Hudson's seminal book [1963]. Locally, my own



Nat-West bank, 1851

Lloyds bank, early 18th century
with a re-fronted medieval house to its right

Wiltshire and Somerset Woollen Mills appeared in 1976. Of the ten Trowbridge factories then still standing, two were already derelict and went shortly afterwards; the major parts of the other eight remain. All but one are in use, and none appear at present to be at any risk of demolition. It would be foolish to pretend that books in themselves can ensure the survival of buildings, but they do fire a warning shot – that those mentioned in them have an interest which might provide successful arguments in favour of their retention.

It was gradually dawning on people that Trowbridge had both historical interest and much that was worthy of preservation. An Historical Association branch was established, with a strong local history content to its activities. In 1972 it organised an exhibition of the collection of prints, drawings, and ephemera which the Urban District Council had acquired, somewhat haphazardly, over the years, and which the chairman in 1967 had described as mostly rubbish. For the exhibition a brief history of the town was produced, and the branch also published three pamphlets on local topics. In 1977 we blossomed forth with a museum to show the material; it was actually one room in the new Civic Hall, run by the new Town Council, and opened a couple of times a week by volunteers.

It was a start, and raised hopes, which seemed at that time incredibly optimistic, that we should eventually have something better. At a time when the last cloth mills were closing, several pieces of machinery were saved and put into store by a rather reluctant county museum service. A pair of fulling stocks, bought from a scrap dealer, remained in my garden.

A Civic Society was formed in 1977, and began to exert influence over the fate of individual buildings. The 1860 façade of the former George Hotel was saved at a public enquiry, taken down stone by stone, and re-erected in front of a new structure. Re-listing on a more generous scale, and the establishment of conservation areas, helped to create a new atmosphere. One Georgian frontage of decaying brickwork was rebuilt with all the original woodwork and new hand-made bricks. A shop of 1692, about to collapse. was rebuilt in exact facsimile.

In 1985 the organization Save Britain's Heritage produced a report called *Trowbridge, the Fastest Disappearing Mill Town in the West* which described it as the Cinderella of west country towns. The writer fully appreciated the town's heritage – 'it is a town of many splendid buildings' – and laid special emphasis on its industrial past. But she also put the blame implicit in her title on the town: 'It is curious that Trowbridge has taken so little interest in its past'. I found this particularly galling, since my *Book of Trowbridge*, based on years of documentary research, had been published in 1984, whereas Bradford-on-Avon, held up to Trowbridge as an example of a town interested in its past, was then, and indeed still is now, without any adequately researched history.

She went on to draw contrasts between active conservation policies pursued, for instance, at Bath and Bradford-on-Avon, and Trowbridge, 'which lags far behind'. The comparison with Bath, a World Heritage Site, seemed a bit unfair, especially considering its horrendous record of conservation in the 50s and 60s. And surely our problems were greater than those of Bradford? Trowbridge is larger and has far more town centre shops, and so more need of car parking and far more commercial pressures.

However, the Save report received some sympathetic local publicity, and perhaps helped on the change of attitudes already well underway. Since its publication virtually no building of historic interest has been lost. Even better, many have been restored. The early 18th century Conigre Parsonage, disgracefully neglected for years, and the neighbouring Westcroft of 1784,

a medieval hall and cross wing house in Church Street, and the former St. James's church hall are examples of many that could be mentioned. One scheme, funded by an appeal, restored the Studley Mill handle house, a building of perforated brickwork used to store the teazles used in the cloth industry, one of very few in existence.

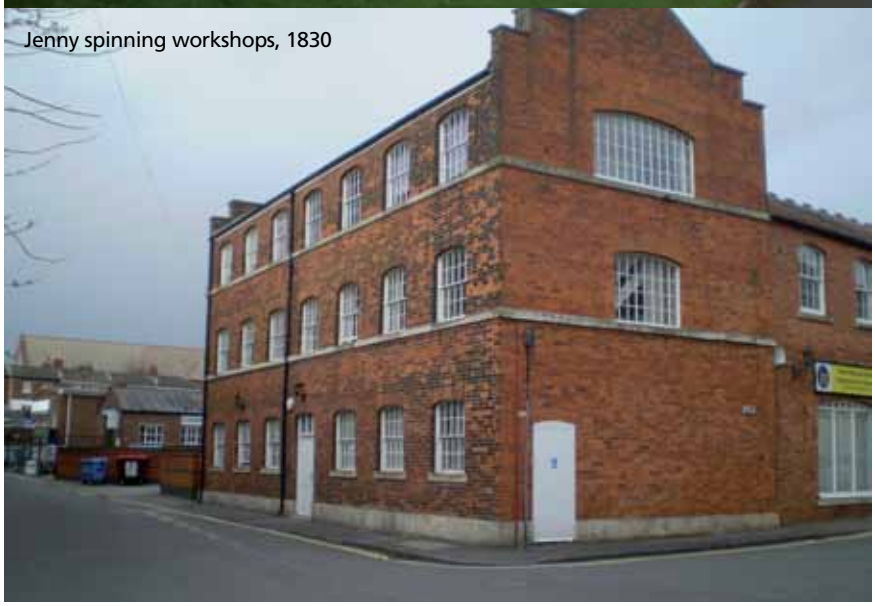
In 1989-90 a new shopping precinct called The Shires was laid out, incorporating the lower floors of the 1862 Home Mill, the town's last woollen factory, which closed in 1982. The developers offered the use of its second floor to the town on favourable terms as a museum. This immediately raised a problem; as we saw, the Town Council had been running the small museum in the Civic Hall without significant expenditure. But as a 'third-tier' authority, a parish council, our council was not, and still is not, a 'museum authority'. Yet it was clear that neither the County Council, whose interest in and expenditure on museums has always been derisory, nor the West Wilts District Council, would be willing to take on a museum. In the end a legal way was found, and the Town Council took on both the setting up and the running of the new museum.

Since it opened in 1990 the Trowbridge Museum has attracted respectable numbers of visitors and has run a professional and highly-praised education service. Although funded by the Town Council, the staff are assisted by a body of Friends of the Museum who run a shop and help in other ways, and who raise money to purchase exhibits. The Friends have an active publication programme in progress, with a series of over a dozen pamphlets and four issues of a periodical, *Trowbridge History.*

It is the only museum in the former West of England textile area with comprehensive displays illustrating the history of the industry. These include material from the time when much of the work was done domestically, with the workshops of a handloom weaver and of a shearman. Machinery from the factory period includes a carding machine, a spinning jenny, a mule, two power looms, a pair of fulling stocks, a rotary fulling machine, and a teazle gig.

The museum also has displays illustrating many aspects of domestic and commercial life in the town and the surrounding villages. Among many are a draper's shop, material from a chemist's shop and a brewery, and a manual fire engine. There are memorabilia of Isaac Pitman, the shorthand man, who was born in the town, and George Crabbe, the poet, who was rector 1814-1832. The late Marjorie Reeves gave the museum

Restored medieval house, Church Street



Jenny spinning workshops, 1830

the wonderful collection of objects from the home of the Whitaker family in Bratton which she described in her book *Sheep Bell and Ploughshare.*

The foundation of the museum has, I hope, been a final step in raising Trowbridge's historical profile from the low base it occupied less than fifty years ago. And it is bringing in visitors. The best starting point is the Museum itself, which is right in the middle of the town. From it various town trails can be obtained. Excavations have shown that the origin of today's Trowbridge was an early Saxon village probably running down to a crossing of the River Biss about where the crossing into The Shires from the car park near ASDA is today. It must have been here that the 'Tree Bridge' which gave Trowbridge its name stood, though the name is not recorded until Domesday Book. Also found were the foundations of a church of about 950.

In 1086 Trowbridge was no more than a village, and still in the possession of a Saxon landowner. Shortly afterwards it passed to the Norman Edward of Salisbury, who gave it and other lands with his daughter in marriage to Humphrey de Bohun. This gift formed the nucleus of the de Bohun barony, the Honour of Trowbridge The head places of the majority of honours were castles, and to conform to this custom a castle was built here, probably in the early 12th century. It fell into decay later in the Middle Ages, and by Leland's time only parts of two towers remained.

Topographically the building of the castle had an effect still to be seen today; it blocked the route down to the river crossing, so that travellers coming from the east had to turn at a right angle and skirt its defensive ditch to a new river crossing where the present Town Bridge is. Fore Street is a quarter circle running from the Town Hall to the Town Bridge.

Like so many landowners of the time, the de Bohuns decided to lay out a new borough outside their castle. A market place with a new church and a series of burgage plots facing the ditch were laid out, and a charter granting the right to hold a weekly market and an annual fair was obtained in 1200. The excavations suggested that the former

church, which was within the castle, fell out of use about this time. Somewhat later, as the castle decayed, its defences were built over, so giving Fore Street its inner side, and an outer street grew at the back end of the burgage plots, also a quarter circle; it was called Back Street until 1860, but now most of it is Church Street.

Apart from the town plan, the main survival of medieval Trowbridge is the parish church of St. James. Of this the tower and tall thin spire are 14th century, the nave and aisles of about 1460, and the chancel of 1846. Inside, notice the fine panelled timber ceiling with angels in the nave, and the stone panelled one in the north east chapel. Standing upright under the tower is one of the finest Norman gravestones in existence, with an inscription to a girl named Acelina. It was found on the castle site. There are many interesting monuments, including one to the poet Crabbe. Opposite the churchyard in Church Street is the only remaining medieval house to retain its outward appearance, with a hall range parallel to the street and a two-storeyed cross wing. A few others remain hidden by later facades.

By the 15th century great fortunes were being made by clothiers, who organised the whole process of manufacture domestically, buying wool, having it carded and spun into yarn, then having the cloth woven, sending it to the fulling mill to be felted and shrunk, having the cloth finished by raising and shearing the nap, and then selling it, usually in London. The wealthiest clothier of his time was James Terumber, who in 1483 left houses and lands in and around the town to found a chantry in the church and an almshouse nearby. A clothier's house of a slightly later period is that of the Langford family, Nos. 66-67 Fore Street (partly at present the Crowing Cock restaurant), hidden by a frontage of about 1700.

The clothier's houses which Pevsner admired are of the 18th century. By this time there is ample evidence that Trowbridge and its neighbour Bradford were using merino wool imported from Spain to make the finest cloth produced in England, and the grandeur of the houses in both towns reflects this. There are about twenty in Trowbridge, seen at their best in The Parade (the lower part of Fore Street), and then by walking up to Roundstone Street. Some of the houses have workshops, in which the clothier would employ people to carry out some work under his own supervision. Some of these are hidden behind, and so of course private and not easy to see. A pamphlet on sale in the museum describes 18 examples still standing and others of which details and illustrations remain. A good example behind 2-3 Fore Street is well seen from the museum, and another is joined to a house at the bottom of Stallard Street. The most extensive group stands behind No. 12 Hill Street. Others which are accessible are best found by using the pamphlet.

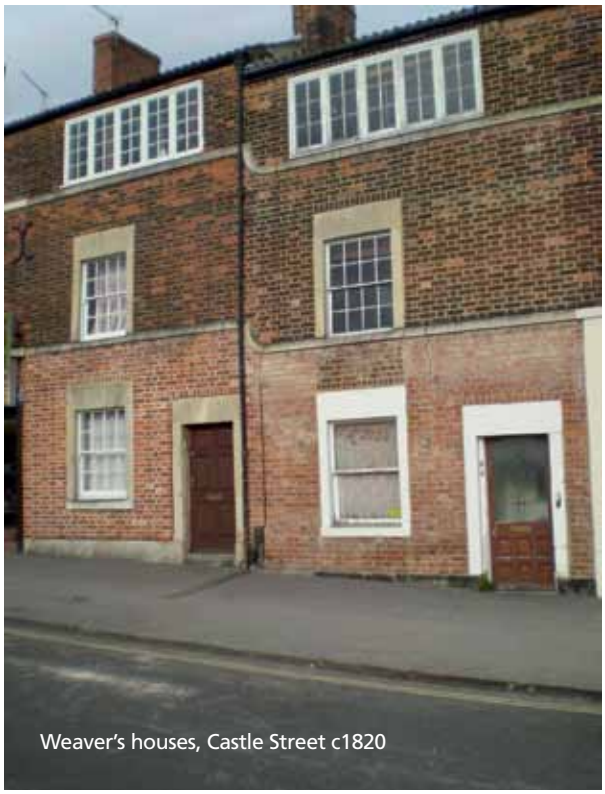
There is still a good deal of minor Georgian building to be seen in the town. A pleasing row of late 18th century houses is in The Halve, a street name recalling the common fields which remained until enclosure in the late 1600s; each strip was conventionally a half acre. The Town Bridge bears the date 1777, and near it is the stone domed blindhouse, a lock-up of 1758.

The introduction of machinery in the cloth manufacture began about 1790 with the introduction of carding and spinning machinery, and was complete by the 1870s, when the last handloom weavers gave way to power looms. Early factories in the area were driven by water power, but the Biss only provided one site in the town centre. The part of the Stone Mill (which adjoins The Shires) nearer to the river probably dates from the 1790s; the taller part dates from 1819, when a steam engine was added. It was steam power that pushed Trowbridge ahead of its rivals. It became possible to bring coal by canal from the Somerset pits in 1805, and the first engine in the area was fitted in the same year. The first steam driven factory was built in 1808; in 1814 the open ground which had once been the outer parts of the castle was sold for building, and a line of factories and dyehouses was built along the river. The town doubled in size, and by 1830 there were about twenty factories at work.

The best early ones remaining are in Court Street, handsomely built of brick with stone window surrounds. Brick Mill dates from 1815, and the three blocks of Castle Factory from 1828-36. Also there is a spinning jenny workshop of 1830. After a period of stagnation, the industry enjoyed a revival from 1850 to 1875, and from that period we have Studley Mill and Innox Mill both near the Town Bridge, Home Mill which houses the museum, and Ashton Mill on West Ashton Road. The latter has the only remaining single storey weaving shed. Studley Mill and Home Mill have impressive Victorian office and warehouse blocks, and in Stallard Street are handsome warehouses used by firms which marketed cloth.

Although so much working class housing has been lost, rows of houses with top-floor workshops from the 1790s remain in Newtown and Yerbury Street, and some rather later ones in Castle Street. Middle class terraces of the Regency period are in Stallard Street, Union Street, and Newtown. Hilperton Road was the preferred address of the wealthy, and has a fine display of opulence, well worth a walk from the plain Bellefield of 1794 to the exuberant Highfield of 1859. And the town is full of enjoyable Victorian buildings – the former Parochial School of 1846, the dignified Nat-West Bank of 1851, galleried almshouses of 1860, the frontage of the Market House of 1861, the United Church of 1884, and the 'wildly Franco-Elizabethan' Town Hall of 1889, to name only a few.

Ken Rogers is a retired County Archivist of Wiltshire, and has written widely on the history of his native Trowbridge and the local woollen industry



Weaver's houses, Castle Street c1820

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