

# Witney Wool & Blanket Trail



[www.witneyblanketstory.org.uk/wbp.asp](http://www.witneyblanketstory.org.uk/wbp.asp)

*On 19th July 2002 the looms fell silent for the last time and the woollen industry in Witney was consigned to history.*

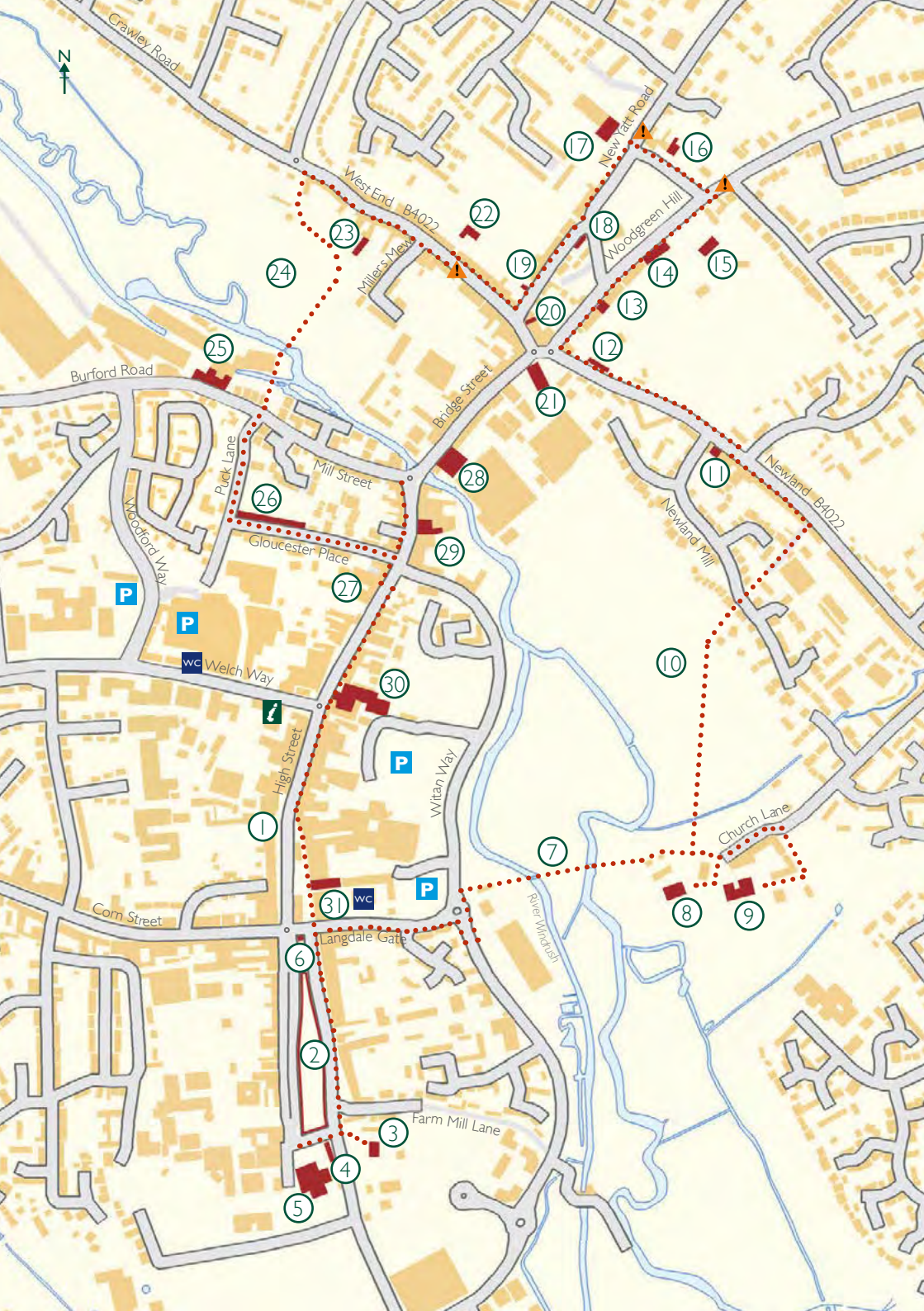
The industry had lasted almost a thousand years, dominating the economic and social life of the town. For centuries Witney was famous all over the world for woollen cloth in general and good quality blankets in particular, a product in which the town began to specialise in the 17th century. The blanket industry successfully survived many of the great changes of history – industrialisation, the introductions of steam and of electricity - but in the early 1970s finally met what was to prove its nemesis: the humble duvet!

Unsurprisingly, such a long and illustrious history has left its marks...

*Cover photograph courtesy of Stanley C Jenkins*

## Key:

-  Woollen Trail
  -  Crossing requiring extra caution
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  -  Public conveniences
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# Trail Information

## Length

Starting from the Market Place in the centre of Witney, the trail is a 2¾ mile (4½ km) circular walk. The basic walk, looking only at the exterior of the buildings, should take approximately 1½ hours. A number of the buildings are open to the public, some requiring an admission fee, and visits to these will lengthen the time needed for the trail considerably.

## Accessibility

The whole of the trail is tarmacked with one short exception, where for 50 yards the path follows an unsurfaced track with a fairly compact and even surface. Most of the trail is level with two short, but sharp inclines on the sections up to and down from Woodgreen (references 12-13 and 18-20). There are three gates on Langel Common\* (10), which should be passable for most manual wheelchairs and single pushchairs. In a number of places the pavements/footpaths are narrow and not all the crossing points marked on the map have lowered kerbs, though there are alternative crossings close by. Wheelchair users may need assistance.

\* {These can be avoided by continuing straight on past Cogges Manor Farm (9) up Church Lane and turning left onto Newland, rejoining the trail at the site of Newland House (11)}

## Refreshments

In addition to the numerous possibilities available in Witney town centre, including Cogges Manor Farm (9) and The Blanket Hall (29), there is also a cafe open to the public at the District Council's Elmfield offices just up the New Yatt Road from Springfield (17).

## Toilets

There are toilets at Langdale Gate and in Welch Way; both have adapted toilets (entered via the use of a radar key) and baby changing facilities. Accessible facilities can also be found at the District Council offices.

## Parking

There are three town centre car parks in Witney (Marriotts Walk, Woodford Way, and the Woolgate Centre) and all of them have designated disabled parking bays.

## | Market Place & 2 Church Green



*Accessible all hours.*




*Accessible all hours.*

Why did the wool trade develop and prosper in Witney? One major factor was the interest of the Bishops of Winchester, who owned large estates in the area. In the 13th century, Bishop Peter des Roches laid out a large wedge-shaped market place and the house plots on either side – the whole area of the present Market Place and Church Green. From this time on, Witney had a weekly market and two annual fairs.

Later on temporary stalls were erected on market days but during the medieval period rows of permanent ‘shambles’, or shops, were built here. Many of them were for butchers – the wool trade used not only ‘fleece’ wool (shorn from live animals) but ‘fell’ wool (taken from the skins of butchered sheep). Indeed, in the late 17th century, Dr Plot noted that the Witney blanket makers used mainly fell wool and that the local fellmongers made the stripped skins into breeches and trousers, sold at nearby Bampton.

Inns and taverns were often the place people met to do business and many of them, unsurprisingly, were sited around the market. Most no longer exist but you will still pass The Fleece on the east side of Church Green.

### **Trail Description**

*The trail starts in the centre of Witney, at the northern end of the Market Place(1), beside the entrance to a modern shopping centre, fittingly called The Woolgate. From here head down towards the church, over Langdale Gate at the zebra crossing and straight on along the edge of Church Green(2)...* 

### 3 Bishop's Palace & Mount House



Monday to Friday 10am - 5pm

The remains of the 'Bishop's Palace' are situated in the grounds of Mount House, just east of St Mary's Church. In reality the 'palace' was a manor house, one of the earliest and largest of its type, the working centre of the estates owned by the Bishops of Winchester. Archaeological excavations have revealed a series of stone buildings arranged around a courtyard and surrounded by a wall and moat.

Bishops and royalty frequently visited the manor house in the early 13th century, with King John's visit in 1208-9 even prompting the building of new garderobes (medieval toilets), but these visits gradually petered out. By 1453, the bishops had largely given up their interests in sheep farming allowing local farmers and merchants to enter the trade.

Just as their earlier interest had stimulated the wool trade in Witney, it seems that their later disinterest may also have proved of long-term benefit. Free from manorial control and the limited trade restrictions found in many other areas, many master weavers seem to have chosen to practise their business in Witney.

The surviving medieval buildings of the Bishop's Palace were demolished and replaced by a new house, probably just after 1757. This in turn was replaced by the existing Mount House, in about 1905, probably for J.F. Marriott, owner of the Mount Mills blanket factory which once stood behind the house.

...turn left into Mount House's drive, just after Farm Mill Lane. The canopy covering the remains of the Bishop's Palace(3) is visible to the right of the house. Exiting the drive cross straight over towards the church...☞

## 4 Holloway's Almshouses

## 5 St Mary's Church, Witney



Private property but can be seen from the road.



Open in the day, check for services before entering.

John Holloway, a wealthy cloth merchant, willed this row of almshouses to Witney town in 1723. The endowment was for six blanket makers' widows and each was to have 'a lower and an upper room, together with a little garden, and other things necessary'.

The following qualifications were required of the widows: 'Such as are no busybodies, nor proud, nor idle persons...being of a good life and godly conversation...They shall keep sensible hours and be of a loving, sober, and good behaviour'.

The almshouses that can be seen today are not the original ones but a rebuilt version, erected in their place, to a Gothic design by William Wilkinson in 1868.

*...the Holloway's Almshouses(4) are on the left in the corner of the churchyard. Having looked around St Mary's Church(5) retrace your steps back around Church Green...👉*

Standing at one end of Church Green, the imposing 156ft spire and impressive size of St Mary's reflects the wealth and importance of Witney in the Middle Ages; much of this wealth came from the wool trade. It is likely that the Bishops of Winchester were responsible for the founding of the current church some time between 1070 and 1100, though a Saxon church may have stood on the site before this.

By the 18th and 19th centuries many of the blanket makers were non-conformist but St Mary's still contains the graves of many of those in the trade: some of the headstones bear images of shuttles and other symbols relating to cloth making. The church also incorporates the mortuary chapel of the Wenman family: brasses show Richard Wenman in a fur trimmed gown, a purse hanging from his belt, his two wives standing either side of him. Richard Wenman was a wealthy wool merchant, so wealthy that in 1524 he paid 80% of all the tax due in Witney!

## 6 The Buttercross



*Accessible all hours.*

Standing at the heart of Witney, the Buttercross was probably, in origin, a simple market cross, although differing local traditions suggest that it was the site of an ancient preaching cross, a shrine, or a statue of the Virgin Mary. The central stone pillar, raised on a bed of steps, is certainly older than the twelve pillars that surround it and may be the remains of the original market cross or shrine.

In 1606 Richard Ashcombe left £50 to build a house or roof 'over and above' the cross and it then became a place where people sold perishable goods, such as butter. William Blake, a draper and wool merchant, added the clock turret in 1683.

*...from the Buttercross(6) go down Langdale Gate. Turn right at the end, over the pelican crossing. Go left, back up Witan Way, and then right (by the next pelican crossing) onto the bridleway towards Cogges. Crossing the Windrush (7) to a kissing gate and footpath heading off across the fields to your left...👉*

## 7 Windrush



*Accessible all hours.*

The River Windrush was another factor in Witney's success: it provided large volumes of clean water for many cloth-making processes and a good millstream to power fulling mills.

Straight from the loom a piece of woollen cloth is a coarse material with little substance: after it has been fullled, dried, stretched and raised it is transformed into a softer, thicker and fluffier cloth. In the fulling process the cloth was repeatedly pounded in water with fuller's earth to scour and shrink the wool; the beating action matted the fibres until the cloth looked like felt. Urine was another essential ingredient to the process and Witney inns had large tanks for its convenient collection.

In the very early days the fullers used to trample the cloth by foot in vats but fulling was the first process to be 'industrialised'. By 1277 there were three fulling mills in the manor of Witney. Water power was used to alternately raise and drop pairs of heavy wooden hammers in a trough called a stock.



## 8 St Mary's Church, Cogges

## 9 Cogges Manor Farm



*Open summer afternoons subject to staffing.*



*For opening details call 01993 772602.*

The church at Cogges dates from the 12th century but was extended and remodelled in the 14th century.

It has a curious tower that is square at the base but octagonal further up, with a pyramidal roof. The church also contains a memorial to William Blake, his wife Sarah and son Francis, who lived at Cogges Manor Farm next door.

The Blakes were wool merchants and founded three schools in Witney as well as the clock on the Buttercross. John White, the first Master of the Blanket Weavers Company, is also buried at Cogges.

*...ignore them, for now, if you wish to visit Cogges church! Instead head straight on: the entrance to St Mary's Church(8) is the next turning on the right. After visiting the church turn right, back onto Church Lane. To reach the entrance to Cogges Manor Farm, follow the buildings round to the right...👉*

The first manor at Cogges was established by the River Windrush in the 11th century, though the current Manor House dates back to the 13th century and sits next to a perfectly preserved farmyard with a variety of historic farm buildings. Latterly the site has become famous as the location of Downton Abbey's Yew Tree Farm.

In 1667 Francis Blake, a woollen draper, purchased Cogges for £8,000; either he or his son William rebuilt part of the house at about this time. After William's death the house passed eventually to a cousin, Daniel Blake, who was also a woollen merchant.

The house was lived in until the 1970s, when the farm was sold to Oxfordshire County Council. Cogges today is now run by a charitable trust, ensuring public access through a team of volunteers. The site now measures about 20 acres of historic buildings and farmyard, walled garden, grounds and grazing land.

## 10 Langel Common

## 11 Newland House



Common, accessible all hours.



Private property but can be seen from the road.

Meadow land, like this, was essential to the medieval farming economy. Not only did it provide grazing but especially hay to keep animals over the winter. Here you would have found the local breed of sheep, another important factor in Witney's success. The 'Cotswold Lions' had developed over the centuries from animals that were a cross between native Iron Age sheep and a breed that the Romans introduced to Britain. They had a distinctive woolly 'topknot' on their heads but more importantly they produced a long, fine wool that was much in demand from the early medieval period, especially for export.

*...retrace your steps to the gate and follow the footpath over Langel Common(10) - note the WWII pillbox, a rare prototype design known as the 'Norcon'. Continue straight ahead until you reach a road. Go straight over and follow the footpath through the housing to the main road. Turn left and walk until you reach the pelican crossing. Newland House(11) is the building on your left...👉*

This large stone house was built or renovated in 1825 for John Early (1783-1862) and his wife Betsy, near the family business, as the warehouse and weaving shops were in premises next door. After their deaths in the 1860s it passed to their son Charles and his wife Sarah. His office was next door, reached by some wooden steps leading up from the yard. Every payday Charles stood at the top of the steps and rang a handbell to let the workers know their wages were ready, and it was Sarah who took the unusual hygienic precaution of washing all the coins beforehand!

Newland House was also a place for entertaining business visitors and its kitchen was on occasion used to feed the shift workers in the factory next door: in 1908 an earthquake in Sicily created a sudden need for blankets and to keep the workers going through the many extra night shifts, sausages, mashed potatoes and coffee were prepared.

## 12 Townsend's Almshouses



*Private property but can be seen from the road.*

## 13 Old Farmhouse




*Private property but can be seen from the road.*

There are three sets of almshouses in Witney; these particular ones at Newland were intended for 'six aged, unmarried women'. They consisted of a single upstairs room with a living room and scullery downstairs and outdoor privies. They were paid for by William Townsend, who was born in Witney, a descendant of Ursula and William Townsend who kept the Staple Hall Inn during the 17th century. He went on to become a very successful haberdasher (a seller of items of clothing and dress) in Holborn, London.

In the 19th century the local wool trade became increasingly centralised and industrialised, with a handful of families controlling the industry and the number of sites involved in the trade steadily falling. Before this the local blanket industry was far more dispersed, with Defoe writing that 'you see the wheel going in almost every door, the wool and yarn hanging up at every window...'

This transformation can be traced around Woodgreen. During the 18th century this area was a hive of industry. There were farms on each side of Woodgreen, of which Old Farmhouse (now called Old Housing) was one.

The Shuffreys, a cloth weaving family of Huguenot origin from Flanders, first moved to Woodgreen in 1713. Already owning a farm on the other side of the green (No 7 Woodgreen), John Shuffrey bought this house for his youngest son, Samuel in 1795. You can see the initial JS and the date on the hopper on the front of the house.

*...use the crossing and turn left. Passing Townsend's Almshouses (12), set just back from the road on the right, turn right at the roundabout and head up Woodgreen Hill. Old Farmhouse (13), now called Old Housing (65 Woodgreen), is 100yds up on the right hand side... *

## 14 Woodgreen Blanket Factory



*Private property but can be seen from the road.*

This three-storey Cotswold stone structure was probably built around 1830. The building has uniform rows of stone arch-headed windows and loading doors on each floor. A map of 1840 shows a long range of buildings here including weaving shops, outbuildings, a house, yard and gardens.

Owned and occupied by the Early blanket making family, this factory was probably intended largely for handloom weaving, with storage and warehousing on upper floors. It was not a mill in the full sense as only certain parts of the blanket making process seem to have been carried out here: having no water source meant that fulling must have been carried out at other locations in the town. The factory here ended its working life as a joinery and has since been converted into housing.

John Wesley preached to the workers on Woodgreen in 1761. Thereafter this became an annual event, until his death in 1789. It is recorded that in bad weather he would hold his meetings indoors.


## 15 Woodlands



*Private property but can be seen from the road.*

This grand Victorian house was built in 1860 for Richard Early, then owner of Worsham Mill. His initials and the date were carved into one of the beams of the house on completion. On his rather premature death his younger brother Henry took over the house and made blankets in the Woodgreen factory next door. His blanket business failed and after this he was forced to move to a smaller house on the other side of Woodgreen.

The Early family, one of the pre-eminent Witney wool families, had a long and complicated involvement in the blanket industry: there were several branches of the family involved in the business, sometimes in partnership and sometimes as rivals. The family's tendency to use the same Christian names through many generations doesn't help in identifying individuals!

*...continue straight on and a few doors further down on the right you will come to Woodgreen Blanket Factory(14) and next door, set back from the road, is Woodlands(15)...* 

## 16 Woodgreen House



*Private property but can be seen from the road.*

This was the home of the Smith family. William Smith (1815-1875) was one of the great characters of the Witney wool trade. Starting work aged nine as a bobbin weaver for the Earlys, he proved to be a great entrepreneur.

Despite being a member of the Temperance Society, William, in partnership with Joseph Early, set up a small brewery and became a successful beer seller and maltster.

He then sold off his brewing assets to buy and set up the first steam engine for the woollen industry in Witney. After one or two setbacks his business thrived.

William wrote an autobiography ('My Heart Was Among The Wool') and in it he records that his wife, Ann Godfrey, brought up their fifteen children without help: 'no servant or nurse girl was ever permitted to share the honour'!

## 17 Springfield



*Council property but can be seen from the road.*

'Springfield' on Woodgreen was yet another home for the Early blanket making family. James Vanner Early had it built in 1887 as his family outgrew their former home.

This house, as well as Woodlands and Newland House, was frequently used for entertaining important clients who came to Witney. Many of the blanket makers were involved in the Temperance Movement and some clients, we are told, were disappointed to be served 'cyrax', a non-alcoholic alternative, instead of the expected cider!

Today Springfield houses offices of West Oxfordshire District Council.

*...cross the road, taking great care (if necessary continue up Woodstock Road, use the pelican crossing and double back) and then walk along the top end of Woodgreen. Woodgreen House(16) is on the right and 50 yards further on, as you cross the road, Springfield(17) is straight in front of you...☞*

## 18 Weavers Cottage

## 19 Bluecoat School



*Private property but can be seen from the road.*



*Private property but can be seen from the road.*

Weavers Cottage dates back to the 18th century and was originally a group of three weavers' cottages. Each cottage would have had a loom set up in the lightest room which was operated by the weaver, who lived there with his family.

Before the industrial revolution concentrated production in one large building, the wool trade was a cottage industry involving the whole family. The men and boys of the house, especially in the winter months when agricultural work was limited, would often do the carding - where the short, fine wool is worked between two hairbrush like mats to make it into a soft, fluffy mass ready for spinning. The women and young girls would do the spinning - where the loose slivers of wool are drawn out and twisted until strong enough to use as thread. This yarn, in turn, was supplied to the weaver - paid for at a piecework rate such as one penny for every pound in weight of yarn produced. The weaver then wove the yarn into blankets.

In 1723, John Holloway, a wealthy clothier born in Witney but then living in London, founded the Bluecoat School.

Actually a house that John Holloway had originally had built for himself, the schoolhouse provided was divided up so that the master of the school could live in one part and the boys in the other.

It was set up to educate sons of journeymen weavers in reading, writing and accounting with a view to them becoming apprenticed when they left. In the terms of John Holloway's will ten boys from Witney and five from Hailey were to be educated at the school and were given blue coats to wear.

*...head along past the Three Pigeons pub. At the fork in the road, you will see Weavers Cottage(18) across the road. Head down the hill and towards the bottom, you will pass Bluecoat School(19) - No1 Woodgreen - on the right...👉*

## 20 Jolly Tucker



*Private property but can be seen from the road.*

This was formerly the site of the 'Jolly Tucker' alehouse, a favourite haunt of the local tuckers and one of the places that the Witney Tuckers' Feast was held. Until the 19th century tuckers were the gangs of men employed by master weavers to carry out the finishing processes involved in making blankets. They were paid twice yearly, in May and November, at the 'Tuckers Reckonings': the master weavers were invited to a feast in order to pay the tuckers for all the work they had done in the last six months.

Even after blankets began to be made in factories, the workers in the finishing departments were still known as 'tuckers' and the tradition of having a Tuckers' Feast every Shrove Tuesday persisted until the late 1960s. It was now the mill owners who laid on the feast for the tuckers.


## 21 The Staple Hall Inn



*Private property but can be seen from the road.*

The original Staple Hall is said to have been erected by Sir Roger de Stapleton in the 14th century. The building that stands here today is mainly 17th century having been almost totally rebuilt, following a fire, by Ursula Marriott (of the Marriott blanket making family) and her husband William Townsend in 1668.

William was killed by a falling tree in 1686 but his widow, Ursula, presided over the inn for many years; she died in 1731 at the impressive age of 106. The Staple Hall Inn became popular with local wool merchants and fellmongers and it was here that the Witney Blanket Weavers' Company held some of their meetings before the Blanket Hall was built. Dinner was provided by the Townsends at sixpence a head, paid for out of the Blanket Company's funds.

*...turn left at the bottom of the hill and you will see the Jolly Tucker(20) on your left and straight ahead, on the other side of the mini roundabout, Staple Hall Inn(21)...* 

## 22 Captain's Mill

## 23 West End Woollen Factory



Private property but can be seen from the road.



Private property but can be seen from the road.

A three-storey L-shaped building of coursed limestone with red-brick arches to the window heads (each with stone keystones) and a slate roof. An iron crane is still fixed to the top storey of the gable end wall facing the street. 'Captains' probably dates from the early or mid-19th century. Initially it was used as a handloom weaving establishment, with storage and warehousing on the upper floors. It was still shown as a 'Blanket Factory' on the 1899 Ordnance Survey map, but it was later used as a warehouse. It has now been converted into housing.

The origin of the name is not known, although a Captain G.N. Nowell was recorded as living next door at 34 West End in the 1901 census.

*...turn around and head along West End. Between numbers 34A & 36 you will reach the entrance to Captain's Mill(22). Carefully cross West End and continue along it. Just before 57 you will see West End Woollen Factory(23), now called Spinners Court...👉*

A group of traditional buildings for cloth production, one of the largest and most complete to survive in Witney, which grew up over time between the late 17th and early 19th centuries. Most are made of stone with stone or Welsh slate roofs; there are a few brick buildings within the complex. Around 1910 we know that the site consisted of yarn rooms, offices, wool stores, weaving shops, a mop room, a stable and a cart shed. None of the buildings at West End seem to have been equipped with any form of power for operating spinning or weaving machinery.

The West End factory produced blankets, mops, wadmill (fabric for lining horse collars) and tilts (coarse, heavy cloths with water resistant qualities). In 1957 a weaver, Sydney Taylor, was still making traditional horse collar checks on a handloom at West End. The buildings were sold in the 1960s as production was concentrated at Witney Mill.



## 24 Upper Windrush



*Accessible all hours.*

In the past it would have been a familiar sight to see row upon row of blanket-drying racks in the fields around Witney. Blankets were not woven individually but in stockfuls, the amount that would fit into the fulling mill's stocks. This was usually equivalent to about twenty four blankets in one piece.

On leaving the fulling mills the cloth would be wet and gangs of tuckers were employed to hang it out on tentering racks – wooden frames with tenterhooks driven into a wooden frame to hang the cloth from. These hooks made holes in the blankets but this seems to have been an accepted feature of the product and the holes were not disguised.

All the tenter racks at Witney Mill had names given to them by the tuckers, such as 'Middleside', 'Workus' (near the workhouse), 'Over-the-stile', 'Dryneck' (near the bleach houses) and 'Harry's' (which was the largest). This was no doubt necessary when you consider that if the weather was fine it was possible to dry over a mile of blankets outside each day. When it started to rain every available tucker was needed to get the cloth in quickly.

In the 20th century indoor tentering lines began to take their place but a few outdoor tenter racks were still in use in Witney up until the 1950s.

*...continue along West End and just before the mini roundabout (after 75 West End) turn left down the lane. After a few yards fork left and follow the footpath across the cattle grid into the water meadow. At the footbridge you are crossing the Upper Windrush(24)...*

## 25 Witney Mill



*Private property but a public footpath runs across the site and a permissive footpath around areas of the site*


The extensive area of the Witney Mill complex was based around the site of Woodford Mill, a medieval fulling mill and one of the oldest wool related sites in Witney. The earliest structures still standing today are the former mill offices by the entrance on Mill Street, dating from around 1750. The 110ft chimney stack was built in 1895.

From the 1820s the Early family began to acquire land piece by piece around this area. Charles Early bought Woodford Mill in 1888 and now the whole site, known as Witney Mill, was under single ownership. It gradually became a centralised unit for blanket making, where all processes could take place.

A serious fire in 1905 destroyed the original central building of Witney Mill, in a blaze so fierce that it was reportedly seen as far away as Reading, over 30 miles away! The story goes that Charles Early, by now an elderly man, is said to have asked the Fire Chief 'Is everybody safe?', 'Yes, Mr Early', 'Can anything be done to save the Mill?', 'No, I'm afraid not' came the reply. 'Then let us enjoy the spectacle'.

The buildings were rebuilt and extended. In the 1960s, following the merger of Early's and Marriott's, a large warehouse and office block were built as the new centre for operations.

Still trading under the name of Early until its closure in 2002, Witney Mill was the town's last working blanket factory.

*...cross the footbridge and follow the footpath through the housing built on the site of Witney Mill(25)...* 



*Private property but can be seen from the road.*



*For opening details call 01993 775915.*

Unlike the northern mill towns, characterised by large groups of back to back brick terraced housing, most workers continued to live in small cottages in Witney and the surrounding villages. Cape Terrace, a long row of twenty two stone cottages, was built around 1865 by Bartlett's, a local firm of builders, for workers in the blanket mills.

In 1838, John Early gave evidence about Witney weavers' housing to a government inquiry into the lives and working conditions in the textile districts of England, saying 'Some of the houses are neat and comfortable but it is not a general term to be applied to them.'

The development of the woollen industry from numerous smaller workshops around Witney into a few large factories did lead to some small housing developments in the 19th century and there were other housing schemes aimed at providing the blanket workers with suitable accommodation, which carried on in a modest way until the 1960s.

Witney and District Museum holds collections relating to the local blanket industry as well as items connected with Witney at war, local transport, education and religion. Other local industries are explored such as glove making and brewing and the history of many Witney buildings is revealed through photographs and artefacts. Exhibits also include the town stocks, tithe maps and relics of Witney Aerodrome. There is a changing programme of exhibitions in the Bartlett Taylor Gallery upstairs.

**Accessibility:** there are stairs to the Bartlett Taylor Gallery and the ground floor room has narrow gangways.

*...cross Mill Street, turn left and then right down Puck Lane. After 150 yards turn left into Gloucester Place. The terraced housing on your left is Cape Terrace(26). To visit Witney & District Museum(27) turn right at the end of Gloucester Place and then after a few yards right again into Gloucester Court Mews, the Museum is on the left... 🗺️*

## 28 Bridge Street Mill



*Private property but can be seen from the road.*

Bridge Street Mill was made up of a range of different stone and brick buildings that grew up gradually over time, the earliest mill building probably dating to the early 19th century. In 1899 the nine-bay façade, with its three Jacobean style gables, was built, screening the earlier buildings from Bridge Street and giving it a uniform appearance. The complex was quite large, the Cotswold stone buildings that ran south-east from the street being about 280 feet long. William Smith started production here, around 1866. Although sited very close to the river the mill never used water power as William Smith's policy from the start was to use steam. The boiler house and engine were sited near to the mill entrance, power being transmitted to different areas of the mill by means of shafting and belt drives. Steam power gave way to electricity in 1948.

Chiefly a spinning and weaving mill, producing up to 450,000 blankets a year towards the end of its working life, it finally closed in 1975. The part of the building fronting Bridge Street was converted into flats and offices in 2004. In February 2005 the long weaving sheds were demolished.

*...exiting Gloucester Court Mews, turn left heading back up the High Street. Cross the entrance to Gloucester Place and continue up towards the roundabout. Standing by the roundabout, look down the road leading off to the right. This is Bridge Street and a short way down on the right hand side you will see the façade of Bridge Street Mill... 📍*

## 29 The Blanket Hall



Tuesday to Saturday 10am - 5pm, Sunday 10am - 4pm

In 1711, Queen Anne granted the Witney weavers a charter to form a company regulating the products and business activities of the weavers within a twenty mile radius of Witney. For the first few years, the Witney Company of Blanket Weavers met at the Staple Hall Inn and other locations around the town, until building their own premises, the Blanket Hall, in 1721. A large oil painting of Queen Anne still hangs in the Great Room upstairs in the Hall, just as she did in the early 18th century when the company accounts showed money spent on 'cleaning and varnishing Queen Anne'.

The Blanket Hall is built with a country Baroque façade incorporating a splendid one-handed clock, below which are the arms of the Company of Blanket Weavers and a plaque commemorating John Collier, the first Master in 1721.

The Blanket Hall's chief purpose was as an inspection house where blankets had to be brought for authentication against the standards that the Company set at their meetings in the Great Room upstairs. Until the Corn Exchange was built in 1863, The Great Room was also the principal secular public room in the town. It was the scene of many public meetings, including one held in 1830 to repudiate slavery.

With mechanisation, the new mills took over the regulation of the trade, and the Blanket Weavers' Company eventually came to an end in 1847. Since then the Blanket Hall has been a brewery, lemonade factory, engineering shop, hardware store and dancing school.

The Blanket Hall is now restored, and once again welcomes visitors to tour the building, explore its illustrious past, enjoy the riverside garden and, of course, the famous Blanket Hall Pieshop.

*...retrace your steps a few yards and you will see The Blanket Hall(29) on the other side of the street...☞*

## 30 Methodist Church



*Open for services.*

The church's dominant position on the High Street reflects the growing importance of Methodism in 19th century Witney, equalling or even exceeding the established Church of England. It was commented, even as late as the 1940s, by an incoming incumbent that in his previous parish the Church of England ran everything but in Witney it ran nothing.

Many of the local mill owners were Non-Conformists and encouraged their workers to become so. The early Methodist meetings in Witney were held in a cloth weaving shop until the latter half of the 18th century, when a chapel was built in the High Street (the right hand picture above). The congregation eventually outgrew this too and the present Methodist Church was built to seat around 700 people. Funds were raised partly from a meeting organised by John Early in his blanket room at Newland and also a bazaar at the Blanket Hall: the sum raised eventually reached £1,250. The new chapel was designed by James Wilson of Bath in the Gothic style. John Early laid the foundation stone in 1849 and the building was completed nine months later.

To the rear of the chapel, accessible via Wesley Walk, are the buildings that housed the Wesleyan School. It was open on Saturdays and Sundays and teetotal parents were given a reduction in the school fees!

*...continue on up the High Street (past Gloucester Place and the Witney and District Museum), crossing to the other side at the traffic lights. The Methodist Church(30) is on the left hand side, 200yds further up the High Street...👉*

## 31 Corn Exchange



*Property of the Town Council; occasionally open.*

The Corn Exchange is Victorian, built in 1863 by a private company which included among its board of directors the blanket maker Edward Early. As well as catering for the expansion in the corn trade of the time, it also provided a modern market house and social centre for Witney to replace the town hall that was in poor repair by this time. The stained glass in the fanlight above the main doors bears the symbol of the lamb and flag, the symbol of St John, the patron saint of woollen weavers.

*...continue walking up the High Street and you will find yourself back in the Market Place, where the trail started. The Corn Exchange(31) is a little further up on the left hand side (you passed it at the start of the trail!)*

### A verbal legacy of the wool trade:

They **FLEECE** their customers

A **DYED IN THE WOOL** Tory

The **DISTAFF** side

A **SPINSTER** of this Parish

Kept me on **TENTER HOOKS**

Don't be a **WET BLANKET**

A **SHUTTLE** service between...

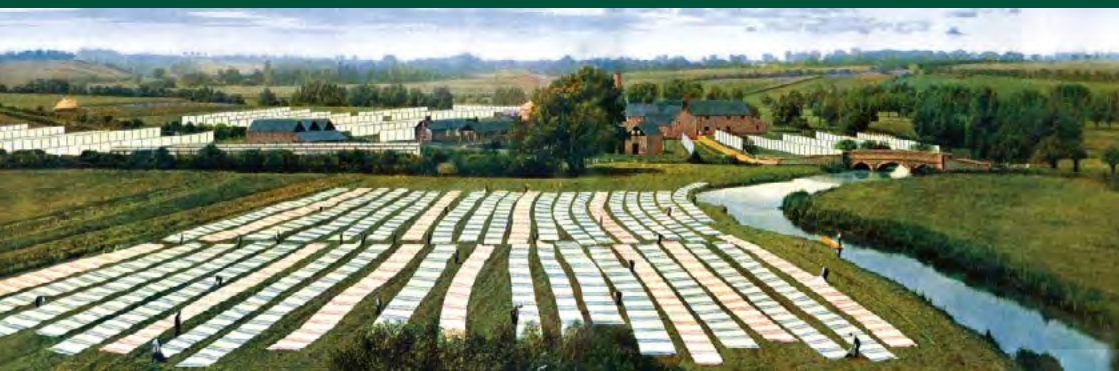
Oh what a tangled web we **WEAVE**

He **SPUN** us a **YARN**

She **PULLED THE WOOL** over their eyes

The idea is a bit **WOOLLY**

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A local industry  
A world wide reputation  
A fascinating story



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