

# Market Town Excursions

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**Society  
members visit  
and compare  
Bradford on  
Avon and  
Frome**

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**Alastair  
MacLeay**

**A**lthough Bradford is much older, with a lost Iron Age hill fort on the promontory at Budbury, and a magnificent Roman villa complex under St Laurence School playing fields, the similarities are most striking. Both towns lie on fast flowing rivers and were built up the steep sides of lime stone escarpments that contain many springs and underground watercourses. Both had a 'monasterium' (monastery or minster church) founded by St Aldhelm, in Frome circa AD 685 and circa AD700 in Bradford; both developed along similar lines, and prospered over the centuries from water power, wool and cloth. The Domesday Book records markets, and populations of about 400 in Bradford and 700 in Frome, with two mills on the river Avon and three on the Frome.

Bradford's wealth during the middle ages is reflected in the immense 14th century tithe barn and granary at Barton Farm, together with the attractive 'packhorse' (a misnomer as it is wide enough for carts) bridge over the river Avon. There are other vestiges of medieval buildings in St Mary the Virgin on Tory, the high black wall of Priory House on Market Street, parts of the Chantry on Church Street, and behind later facades in Silver Street and the Shambles. Frome by contrast only retains the memory of the middle ages in the central street pattern with Apple Alley giving the feeling of a medieval back street. In fact, a number of houses in Cheap Street, Gentle Street, Stony Street and Catherine Hill incorporate medieval structures.

Both towns have fine examples of grand clothiers' houses and clothworkers' cottages. The most outstanding in Bradford are the two mansions, the Jacobean Hall and Belcombe Court. The steep terraces of Newtown, Middle Rank and Tory were developed for his workers in the late 1600s by the wealthy clothier Anthony Methuen. Frome has Melrose House in Whittox Lane and Rook Lane House both built in the late 17th century, but it was the developments of the Trinity area together with that of the Frome clothier William Sheppard that have made the most lasting mark on the town. Those terraces of cottages are now the finest example of early industrial housing in Western Europe.

When walking round the two towns, however, it is remarkable how appearances differ. There is easy access to the limestone on the hillsides and old quarries and stone mines abound. But Bradford sits on Jurassic oolites which are easier to work than Frome's harder and coarser forest marble. Bradford's classical Georgian buildings have smooth ashlar facades and mouldings such as Westbury House and the Georgian Lodge in St Margaret Street, and Druce's Hill and others in Church Street. Frome's grand houses generally have a pleasing contrast of rubble stone walls with ashlar doorways and window surrounds, as shown by Iron Gates House in King Street and Wine Street House.

Both towns have fine Anglican churches, built over Saxon predecessors. At Frome's St John the Baptist the earlier evidence was completely obliterated by the Tractarian William Bennett in the mid 19th century with a Via Crucis, leading to the crucifixion over the North porch; this is unique in Britain. During the 19th century restoration of Bradford's Holy Trinity a carved panel of earlier Saxon style was discovered and used to reconstruct the altar in St Laurence, which is one of the few surviving Saxon churches in the British Isles. It is dated circa AD 1000, when the manor of Bradford was granted to the Abbess of Shaftesbury by King Ethelred.

Following the Religious Toleration Act of 1689, and with the rise of the prosperous non-conformist clothiers, many chapels were built during the 18th and 19th centuries. The most important in Frome is Rook Lane Chapel (1707) on Bath Street, strategically placed to look down over St John's Church. In addition, is the Wesley Church (1812) together with the delightful group of ministers' houses and Sunday School, two fine Baptist chapels and primitive Methodist, Congregationalist, Irvingite and Rechabite chapels to be admired. Similarly in Bradford, the Old Baptist Chapel (1689)

in St Margaret's Street, and the Grove Meeting House (1698) and now the Zion Baptist Chapel were followed by six other competing chapels of various dissenting denominations of which the most prominent is the Methodist Chapel (1818) in Coppice Hill (now a roofless shell enclosing a swimming pool).

Transport was important to the development of both towns. The Kennet and Avon Canal opened to Bradford in 1810 and gave a major boost to the economy. Movement of goods became cheaper, no longer dependent on packhorses as at Frome. Cloth and local stone could be exported more cheaply and coal was brought in via the Somerset Coal Canal for mill engines and gas lighting. Today the canal gives an additional attraction that Frome lacks.

Steam superseded water power more widely in Bradford. If the ill fated Dorset and Somerset Canal had been completed, it would have brought similar benefit to Frome. But Frome gained from the arrival of Brunel's broad gauge railway in 1850. Bradford's station had been built in 1848, but the track was not completed until 1857. Both stations were designed in Brunel's offices and remain largely unaltered over 150 years later.

The main bridges in both towns have their own charm; Bradford's original Town Bridge probably resembled Barton Bridge, but was doubled in width in the late 17th century, retaining two pointed single width Gothic arches. It supports a blindhouse or lockup, with two cells. Frome's bridge was rebuilt in the early 19th century with a row of two storey Georgian houses on the North side facing the austere Blue House which was built in the early 18th century as a school for boys and an alms house for old ladies.

Despite the 19th century decline of the cloth trade with competition from Yorkshire, Bradford continued to build new mills, the last being the handsome Abbey Mill of 1875 which operated only until 1903. In 1850 the introduction of the manufacture of rubber products to the old cloth mills prolonged Bradford's industrial self-sufficiency for a further 140 years. While Abbey Mill is the most conspicuous survival, there are many other fine structures from forgotten industries, now converted into residential or office use, such as the old rag rug factory on the skyline and Greenland Upper Mill. St Margaret's Hall, now the town hall, was originally a dyehouse. Redevelopment of the derelict Kingston Mills is awaited with trepidation because of its impact on the traffic on the congested Town Bridge and narrow central streets.

Frome's Tourist Information Centre is housed in an old drying kiln and the feather factory and Rawlings carding factory are other examples of buildings originally used in the cloth trade. There are some vestiges of Tucker's Wallbridge mill, which closed in 1965, but houses have now replaced the extensive weaving sheds.

Both towns had their breweries and maltings, all of which are now closed and demolished or converted to housing and offices. Prominently situated are the old Seven Stars Brewery in Newtown, Bradford and the Lamb Brewery on Gorehedge, Frome.

During the second half of the 20th century, both towns lost traditional industries and important landmarks, although many fine buildings have been saved by the exertions of their respective Civic Societies. In the 1960s Bradford's historic St Margaret's Hill area was cleared, but the Preservation Trust was formed in time to save the superb grandstand terraces of Tory, Middle Rank and Newtown. Sadly, this was not the case for half of the Trinity area in Frome.

The two towns have their similarities of setting and history, but differences of development and character. On two delightful summer evenings last June and July, members of the Bath and Camerton Archaeological Society were able to compare and draw their own conclusions as to which has the greater appeal.

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