



# The Luton Hat Trail



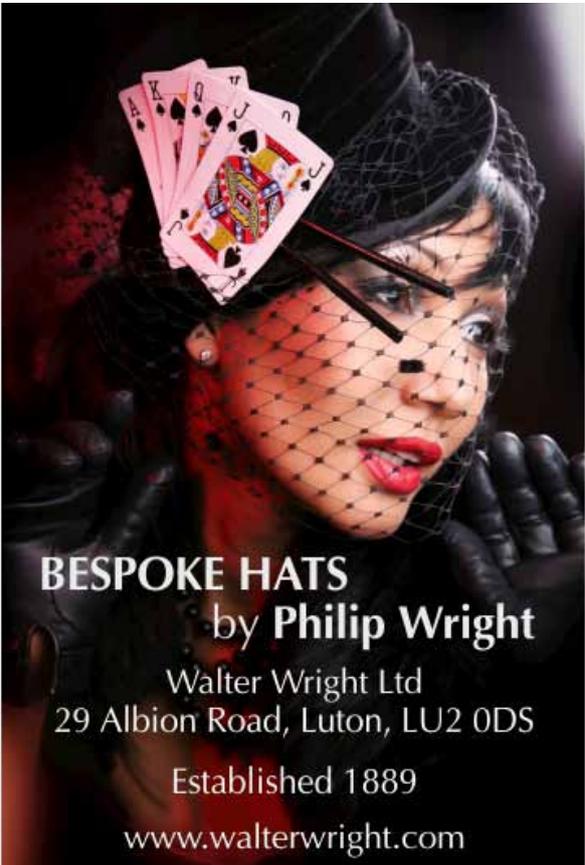


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Walter Wright



**BESPOKE HATS**  
by **Philip Wright**

Walter Wright Ltd  
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Established 1889  
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Bespoke Hats

**Philip Wright, a member of the Felt Makers Livery since he was 21, has been running the family business, Walter Wright, hat manufacturer, for over 15 years.**

The company was formed in 1889 by Philip's great-grandparents, Walter and Minnie-Susan Wright, in Albion Road, Luton. The Wright family have been involved in the making of quality ladies hats for over 300 years, making Philip one of the oldest 'blood line' hat manufacturers in the world.

Inspired by his private customers and friends, Philip designs and makes hats for individuals, including HRH Princess Royal, film, theatre, television, uniform and department stores and boutiques worldwide. He takes his creations to a variety of different public exhibitions from Dubai to London. Whether the hat is for a special occasion, such as the races or a wedding, or more niche club and daywear, Philip endeavours to have a hat for everyone.

See video at  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=oZcADJzQrfY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oZcADJzQrfY)

# Introduction

## Welcome to the Luton Hat Trail!

In the 18th century the English hatting industry was predominantly centred on London, Luton, Denton and Stockport (*near Manchester*), and Atherstone (*Warwickshire*). Historically it consisted of two distinct crafts, the straw hat trade (*women's hats and bonnets*) and the felt trade (*caps and men's hats*). At the beginning of the 1800s the Napoleonic Wars blocked imports of straw plait and hats from the continent, so Luton's businessmen and women set up factories, both large and small, to supply local and national markets with straw hats. As a result the town expanded significantly in size and population from the mid 1800s onwards. Between the mid 19th and mid 20th centuries the hatting industry so dominated the town that hat-making became synonymous with Luton. As demand for the straw hat fell after the First World War, felt hat production began to flourish in the town, and even though the industry declined in more recent decades, Luton is still considered to be at the centre of the country's hat trade.

A map covering both trails is included in the centre of this leaflet. The numbers shown on the map match those numbers referred to within the text.

**The Luton Hat Trail** comprises two different tours of the town for you to choose from. Both are designed to cover the most intact parts of the remaining historic hatting districts of Luton, each with their own architecture and character that are linked together by the hat trade of the 19th and 20th centuries.

**Trail 1 — the Bute Street area** — is about a half-mile walk lying south of the railway. It houses a concentration of hat factories and workshops, which were often large and sometimes of considerable architectural distinction. This trail lies within the Plaiters' Lea conservation area.

**Trail 2 — the High Town / Old Bedford Road area** — lies north of the railway and is roughly a mile long. It covers a more dispersed area and includes the domestic side of the industry (*modest scale workshops attached to houses*). Part of this trail includes an older part of Luton, the High Town Road conservation area.

Both trails start and end at **The Hat Factory** in Bute Street, by the railway station, where refreshments are available. There are also several pubs and restaurants along the way. Most of the premises highlighted are not normally open to the public, however some provide opportunities for visits. This may be possible by contacting the owners directly.

## Hat Trail 1: Factory and Warehouse Architecture

In the hat industry the terms 'factory' and 'warehouse' were virtually interchangeable and buildings often combined both uses. Although the sewing rooms in factories needed much light and the warehouses did not, there is no difference in architectural treatment of the building elevations. Both warehouses and factories took part in buying and selling hats and storing plait. The leasing of factories and the frequent moves within the industry further encouraged the construction of buildings serving a variety of uses. So warehouses and factories were not differentiated or specialised, and today they are readily converted to other uses. (*Right: sewing room at Welch's Hat Factory, Cheapside, Luton taken from 'The Graphic', 14 December 1878.*)



### Typically, warehouses and factories shared:

- a basement for storage, with access and lighting from the street
- steps up to the entrance
- emphasis on the ground floor elevation, with large windows fronting the showroom
- and large areas of glazing to the upper floors (sewing rooms).

Separate rooms, often in detached buildings, were used for stiffening, steaming and blocking. This segregated the noisier and smellier activities from the rest — and the men from the women! Bleaching and dyeing were done by specialist firms on separate sites away from heavily populated areas.

Many hat buildings were modest in scale and design. The more ambitious 'emporia' were usually in one of two main styles:

- At the turn of the century an eclectic 'neo-Jacobean' or 'Queen

Anne' style was favoured, with noticeable 'Dutch' influences. Such buildings were in red brick and terracotta with stone dressings, and had a pronounced central bay and pedimented gables. Examples are nos. 32, 40 and 50 Guildford Street and 64 Bute Street.

- Later, a 'neo-classical' style was adopted. The local firm of Franklin and Deacon (*architects of the old public library, later demolished*) built some of the buildings in the 1910s and 1920s; these included nos. 30 and 37-39 Guildford Street and perhaps 57-61 Guildford Street.

Later still, styles were plainer, as with **The Hat Factory** and the 1930s **Vyse's Factory**, both in Bute Street. Whatever the style, the architecture was mostly in the facade and the side elevations were often blank. The best of the earlier buildings have been listed but so far the 'new classical' ones have not been given this protection.

# Trail 1 — Hat Factories in Luton

## THE 19TH CENTURY

In 1840 George Street was bustling with the plait market, and lined with hat warehouses. Behind it, except for a few buildings in Bute Street (named after a former Lord of the Manor who lived in Luton Hoo), there was very little development and gardens and meadows swept down to the River Lea. Barbers Lane, an old route, crossed the river by a small footbridge and entered the field beyond known as Seven Acres. By the late 1840s Seven Acres had been laid out with streets and partly developed, however the main development of the area followed the opening of the Dunstable-Luton-Welwyn railway (later the Great Northern) in 1858, and the death of John Waller, a member of the eminent hat-making and plait-dealing family, a year later. Waller's death enabled the rapid development of the large gardens behind his George Street house: hence the names John Street, Waller Street and Melson Street (named after one of the executors of his will); Cheapside, once the access to his gardens and blocked off by iron gates, could now be opened up all the way to Guildford Street. By 1870, helped by cheap imports of plait from the Far East and by the invention of a sewing machine for plait, the hat industry was booming. **The Plait Halls** had just been opened in Waller Street and Cheapside in the developing area which was rapidly becoming the nucleus of the industry (see bottom right image on front cover: 1907 photo of the Plait Halls in Cheapside, since demolished). Large factories clustered near railways (the Midland railway had been opened in 1867 for goods and 1868 to passengers) for the transport of goods, as orders were coming from all over the world. From the 1870s the production of felt hats in Luton began to be added to that of straw hats.



During the 19th century plaiting became increasingly confined to rural areas and better paid sewing jobs to towns. A sewer in a large hat factory had much better pay and working conditions than in most jobs available to women, and indeed better than for many men. Hours were long but flexible and the women were independent. Thousands of girls migrated to Luton from the surrounding areas and in the busiest season from December to May in some parts of the town they generally outnumbered men. Luton became known as a good place to seek a wife! An idea of how totally involved the town was in the hat industry can be gained from reports like this from a visitor in 1900:

*“As the train comes into Luton station you see bundles of plait from the bleachers hung outside all the houses like clothes on a washing line. At the station you find yourself surrounded on all sides by straw. Women hurry to-and-fro with bundles of plait tied up in black calico squares as large as they can carry. The area along the railway and beside the pavement is filled with huge boxes of hats and packing cases. As you walk out of the station you can hear the whirr of hundreds of hand-driven sewing machines and along the street you meet many more people carrying straw—some in great shapeless bundles as big as themselves which contain the home-made hats they are taking to the warehouse. In Bute Street there are queues of drays each loaded with boxes, cases and crates up to 10ft high, while bringing up the rear is a miscellaneous assortment of boxes, some carried on men’s shoulders, others causing pairs of small boys to stagger under the weight, while several are conveyed by the humble wheelbarrow. At the station the boxes are removed from the drays and placed in sheds to catch the ‘van train’ which is the only one of its kind in the country and is specially designed for the hat trade. The boxes are returned on a special goods train on Sunday.”*

## THE 20TH CENTURY

Around 1900 the hat industry was at its zenith and dominated the life of the town. Enormous railway warehouses (later demolished and replaced by students’ accommodation) stored boxes of hats prior to despatch to London. Between the railway and George Street was a virtually unbroken belt of hat factories and warehouses, characteristic of this area rather than the domestic workshops of more outlying parts of town. Every building seems to have been involved with either hat-making or ancillary trades such as cardboard boxes, or selling ribbons, thread or sewing machines. (The trail map shows buildings known to have been used in relation to the hat trade, but it is safe to assume that nearly all the older buildings were used at one time or another). After the First World War fashions changed and the industry went into a decline. By the 1930s engineering had replaced hats as the chief employer in town. But the hat industry has always been adaptable: though straw hat manufacture declined, the production of women’s felt hats increased and by 1939 formed three-quarters of the Luton trade. Manufacturers who had previously sent hats away for trimming now began trimming themselves — Luton’s so-called ‘millinery’ trade. But there was little development constructed for the industry after 1930 and the Second World War led to a further contraction.

During the later 20th century many hatting buildings were demolished, especially for the 1970s Arndale Centre, now the Mall Luton, which removed the central concentration of the industry (including **The Plait Halls** in Cheapside) and broke the link between George Street and the railways. Other buildings have been converted to flats, offices or small businesses: their facades remain but little of the original internal character. That the area still contains former hat factories gives character and historical associations to this important ‘gateway’ from the railway to the town centre. Several

buildings were listed in 1981 to give them statutory protection and in 1991 the area was designated as the Plaiters Lea conservation area to mark its historic links to the hat trade and to protect its remaining character. Meanwhile, although the industry is much smaller that it used to be, Luton is still one of the world's leading hat centres and continues to adapt to the latest trends.

A historic area assessment of the Plaiters Lea conservation area was undertaken by English Heritage in 2011 and this can be viewed at <http://research.english-heritage.org.uk/report/?15021>



**01**  
**The Hat Factory**, the arts and media centre at 65-67 Bute Street has been converted from what was until the early 1990s a hat factory, last occupied by James Egleton Ltd. Built in the 1930s, it replaced two earlier straw hat manufacturers on the same site (*above*).

**02**  
Opposite stands the La Trattoria restaurant and **George II** public house.

**03**  
Walter Gurney and Sons' hat factory at 64 Bute Street. Dated 1889, this attractive building is grade II listed. The upper floors are in the 'Dutch' style but the ground floor is classical: the Corinthian columns are echoed inside the building by cast iron ones which help support the structure. Note the handsome timber panelling of the entrance doors and surround, and the etched glass panels marked 'warehouse' and 'showroom' (*right*).



**04**  
The hat press machine (*see picture on front cover*) on the corner of Bute Street and Guildford Street came from James Egleton's factory — now 'The Hat Factory'. It was placed here as a symbol of Luton's hat heritage at the gateway to the town from the railway and bus stations.

**05**  
The **Great Northern** public house also dates from the 1860s and is grade II listed. Originally The Ship, it was renamed in the 1870s after the railway. The upper floors match those of the Shannon, but the ground floor public house frontage is a more delicate design.



**06**  
At 47 Guildford Street is Maurice Davis' hat factory, a grade II listed building from the 1860s with a more domestic appearance but a striking facade of Luton grey brick and stucco 'dressings' (*above*). It wraps round into Barbers Lane, the line of which pre-dates the urban development of this area.



**07**  
The **Wheelwright Arms**, 34 Guildford Street, dates from the early 19th century. In the middle of the century the owners of the pub also carried on the trades of wheelwright, bonnet blocker and herring curer! During the busy hat trade era, with high-loaded carts passing to and from the railway stations, it was not permitted to have a traditional hanging pub sign, so the tools of the wheelwright's trade, together with a cart wheel, were mounted flush on the façade (*above*).

**08**  
32 Guildford Street is a red brick ex-hat factory with a 'Dutch' style parapet, built on the site of the wheelwright's premises (*still there in the 1890s*). It was occupied by Stewart Hubbard's straw plait business in 1914 (*see front cover, top centre*).

**09**  
30 Guildford Street (**Stirling House**) is another ex-hat factory, used at one stage by a bridalwear company and a number of other businesses, built in a contrasting 'neo-classical' style and dating from 1919. Here the ground floor showroom was given a bow window set behind the columns (*below*). The rest of Guildford Street in this direction shows a similar story, with former hat factories either demolished, converted to other uses or still empty and awaiting new occupants.



**10 & 11**  
Behind at 28b Guildford Street, Bute Mills (10) thrusts up its landmark tower, whilst nearby brick buildings to the east at nos. 24a, b&c (11) are remnants of the former Great Northern Steam Mills, named from the railway whose sidings were once directly alongside.

## 6 Trail 1



12

The Millyard gates alongside 24 Guildford Street are a reminder that other trades existed in the area (*above*).



13

An example of the 'neo-Georgian' style that was current in the early 1930s can be seen at 22 a&b Guildford Street (*above*). Designed by B.B. Franklin in 1931, this is a small symmetrical pair of premises built over the basement of an earlier warehouse. The commercial function is seen from the treatment of the ground floors: each property has a central doorway, reached via steps spanning the basement and flanked by two display windows. There was basement storage and a ground-floor plait shop with offices, and a first-floor showroom running the width of both properties.

16

At 42-48 Cheapside the ground floor bay divisions are topped by small pediments over the cornice — a feature also seen on 53 Cheapside. These buildings and no. 50 were once hat factories or warehouses, as seen by their large ground floor showroom windows.



14

23-27 Guildford Street is another ex-hat factory (*now flats and businesses*), dating from the early years of this century, this time in Luton grey brick with a striking symmetrical design arranged over four floors (*above*).



15

On the opposite side of Guildford Street, nos. 37-39 are a striking 'neo-classical' design with pedimented dormer windows instead of the more usual parapet, built about 1912 as a warehouse and factory for Austin and Co. By 1947 it had become a clothing factory and was later divided up internally, leaving little of the original features (*above*).

### Cheapside

The name Cheapside comes from an old Saxon word meaning market. Like Bute Street, before the Arndale Centre (*now The Mall*) was developed, the road ran through to George Street.



17

53 Cheapside, lately the **Diamond** nightclub, was built in 1882 as The Cowper Arms, a 'temperance tavern' (*coffee shop*) run by the Beds Coffee Co., and is a grade II listed building (*above*). A pleasing design with its triple gables, jettied second floor and oriel windows on the first floor, it was occupied by straw hat manufacturers in the early 20th century.



18

49 Cheapside is the only one remaining of a row of buildings in the same style which used to extend south towards Silver Street (*above*). Its first and second floor windows and well detailed, ground floor shopfront are key features. Built circa 1900, it was used as a hat factory/warehouse.

## 19

The view over the open corner site at the junction of John Street and Cheapside is where the backs of former hat factories lining the River Lea stood and gives a good idea of the industrial character of the town in the earlier years.



## 20

The former pub The Engine was built in 1865 on the site of the old cottages and a blacksmith's yard. It was rebuilt in 1900 (*above*).

## 21

Behind The Engine is another view of 'old industrial Luton' — the backs of former hat factories fronting Guildford Street (*red brick, converted to flats*) and Bute street (*yellow brick, part of the former Vyse factory*).



## 22

47–53 Bute Street, Vyse's former hat factory, eventually became a TSB bank and, more recently, a general store and fast food outlet (*above*). The 'V' for Vyse can be seen between the second and third floor central windows. Above that the art deco architectural style ornamentation points to a 1930s date and in fact the factory had to be rebuilt following a disastrous fire in 1930. It is an excellent example of a 'daylight' factory built with numerous large windows.



## 23

The Coopers' Arms public house, lately a restaurant/café **Desert Rose**, was given its first licence in 1864. Its symmetrical ground floor dates from the late 1980s when the pub was extended into what had been a garage entrance on the righthand side (*above*).

## 24

Opposite, the 'broken pediments' first floor of 50–52 Bute Street (the **Sun Do** restaurant and a betting shop) is a striking feature of its late 19th century Baroque architectural style. In the early 20th century it was used as a straw hat factory and warehouse.

## 25

In total contrast to the crude block of government offices now on the site, Cheviot House, at the corner of Bute Street and Guildford Street, was once occupied by a very decorative building of red brick and stone, described as 'new warehouses' in 1907.

## 26

**The Easy Hotel** at 40a Guildford Street, formerly the Shannon Hotel, is also a grade II listed building. The corner building dates from the 1860s but the taller section extending to Guildford Street is later (1901–1905). It has a distinctive facade of bright red brick above a 'rusticated' stucco ground floor, well detailed cornices above the ground floor windows and a typical Luton 'cut-off' corner. The big arched windows on the ground floor show that it too was a hat factory or warehouse, occupied in the 1930s by Sanders and Bagni.

## The fire at Vyse's

The fire at Vyse's factory in February 1930 killed eight people and was the worst peacetime disaster in Luton's history. Girls could be seen at the higher windows during the fire but could not be reached.

Hat factories were always vulnerable to fire and it was said that over the years a build-up of dust, cloth scraps and rubbish beneath the floorboards on all floors helped the flames to accelerate. The factory was completely gutted and had to be rebuilt. Remarkably, the two public houses on either side were largely unscathed.

## 27

57–61 Guildford Street, now occupied by offices and flats, was a hat factory built in the 'neo-classical style' (*below*) as two premises, each the mirror image of each other. Beyond, hat factories and the dye works of E.W. Hart once stood on the site of the former library car park.



## 28

40 Guildford Street was built in 1905 and is a grade II listed building. Also built in red brick in the 'Dutch' style, the brickwork has been colourwashed. The central Jacobean gable and parapet details make a particularly fine skyline. Like no. 50, it is no longer used as a hat factory.

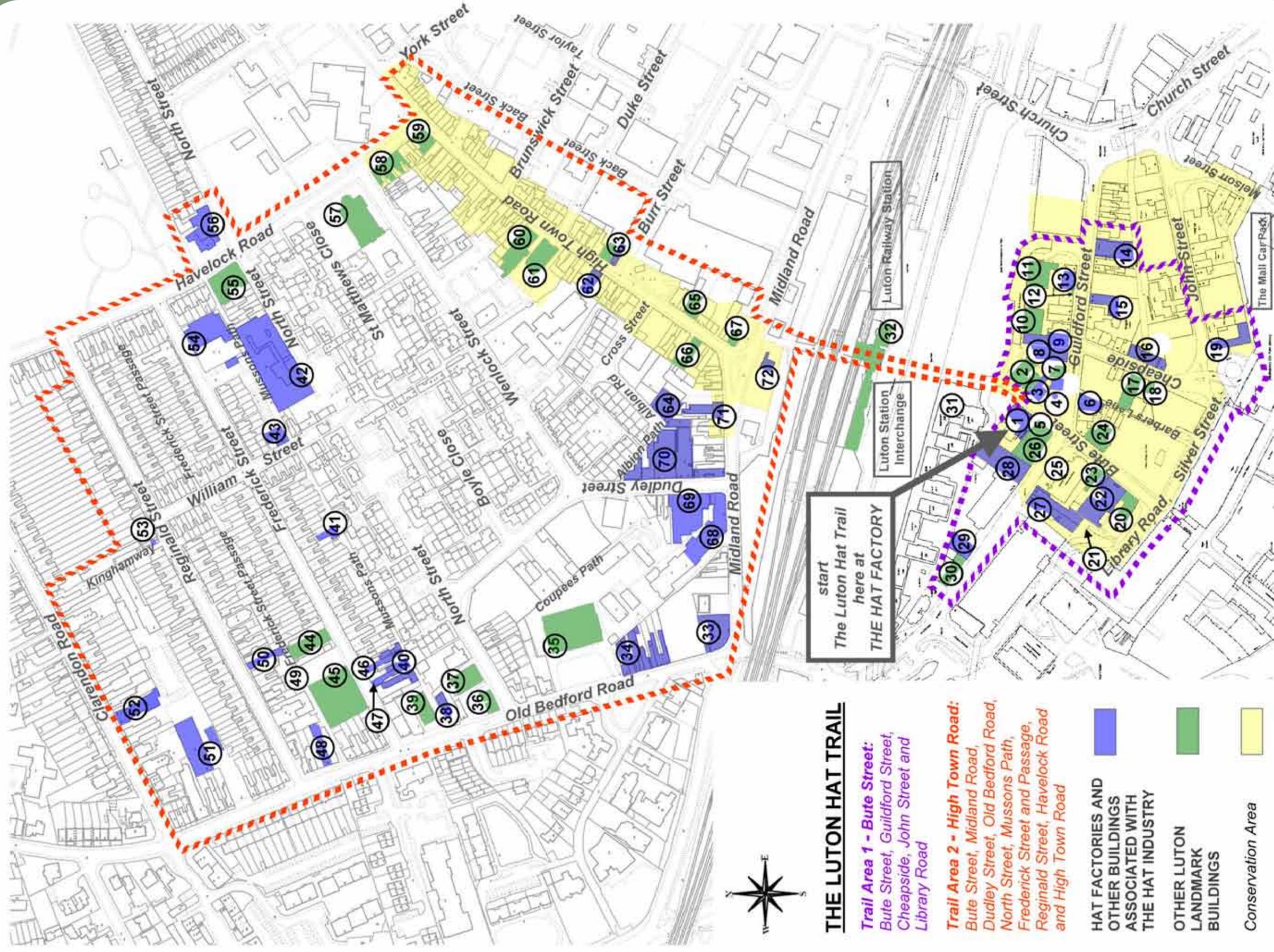


## 29

50 Guildford Street, formerly Balfour and Sons' hat factory (*lately a travel agents*), was built at the end of the last century as a warehouse and is a grade II listed building (*above*). An 1895 map shows it as a plait warehouse occupied by Durler and Suter. In 1905 Durler moved to a new 'straw goods warehouse' at no. 40, and the premises were taken over by Lambie and Cain. The building is of red brick and in the 'Dutch' style, with fine brick and stone ornamentation to the central 'Jacobean' pediment at the top and the moulded brickwork above the first and second floor windows. Inside there are Corinthian columns on all floors except the basement and attic.

## 30

52–60 Guildford Street is a small terrace of houses erected in the 1860s, each one equipped with a basement for storage and windows allowing for deliveries of hat materials. The houses may well have housed outworkers servicing the adjacent hat factory.



### THE LUTON HAT TRAIL

**Trail Area 1 - Bute Street:**  
Bute Street, Guildford Street, Cheapside, John Street and Library Road

**Trail Area 2 - High Town Road:**  
Bute Street, Midland Road, Dudley Street, Old Bedford Road, North Street, Mussons Path, Frederick Street and Passage, Reginald Street, Havelock Road and High Town Road

- HAT FACTORIES AND OTHER BUILDINGS ASSOCIATED WITH THE HAT INDUSTRY
- OTHER LUTON LANDMARK BUILDINGS
- Conservation Area

# Cottage Hat Industry in Luton

While the Bute Street area (Trail 1) was a dense concentration of hat factories and workshops which were often large and sometimes of considerable architectural distinction, High Town /Old Bedford Road (Trail 2) was a more dispersed area where the domestic side of the industry was important. Here, modest workshops were attached to houses where small makers produced goods to sell to the central warehouses. This pattern was modified in the earlier part of this century when a cluster of larger hat factories was built near the railway in Midland Road and Dudley Street, and the area also had one or two modern plants. Another distinctive feature was the presence of ancillary trades such as dyeing, block making, and ribbon and cardboard box manufacture.

## Hat Trail 2: Workshops and Workers

The large number of small units in the hat industry had an interesting effect on the plans of houses which from the mid 19th century on in Luton were often built with two large rooms extending at the rear — forming the typical hat factory of the town. The heavier blocking and stiffening processes were carried out on the ground floor and the sewing was done in the room above. Some houses were built on this principle even in the early years of this century. The lower part of North Street (before redevelopment), and Frederick Street, Reginald Street and Clarendon Road (developed in that order) showed this pattern very well. (Picture below: example of a domestic hat sewing room, taken from 'The Quiver', 1884). Building lots here were large enough to allow considerable workshop expansion which, together with the provision of rear access in the narrow roadways of Mussons Path and Frederick Street Passage, meant that the problems of congested and inadequate workshops could be overcome. The 1851 census showed that there were many more females than males between the ages of 10 and 30 in High Town. This was mainly due to the time of the year the census was taken, being at the height of the season in the bonnet industry (January to May). Many of the women and girls were described as lodgers, others probably related to the head of the household or his wife, staying just for the season. Some 88 per cent of females for whom an occupation is given were in the bonnet industry, mostly as sewers. Many must have worked in factories in central Luton but others could have been employed in small workshops in High Town and some could have been home workers. Some girls as young as six were described as sewers. Domestic service was the only other occupation of any note given for females.

As for the males, only 21 per cent of those with an occupation given were in the bonnet industry and its ancillary trades (blocking, dyeing, stiffening etc), confirming the estimate sometimes made that the industry employed five or six times as many women as men. Other significant male occupations were in agriculture, showing that High Town was still partly rural, and the building trades.

The census also showed that many people had come to High Town from the rural areas of Bedfordshire and north Hertfordshire, mainly because of the bonnet industry.

BL/57/55-Bagshawe. Artist: William Hatherell (1855-1928)



## Hat Trail 2: The High Town / Old Bedford Area Tour

### 31

Where blocks of student flats now stand, there was an enormous railway warehouse built to store boxes of newly-made hats prior to their dispatch to London. To the right of the footbridge formerly stood the Bute Street Station of the Great Northern Railway.

### 32

Ahead stands Luton Railway Station, formerly the Luton Midland Station. Built in 1937 in the 'Dutch modernist' style, later additions have spoilt the building's original lines.



### 33

The tall building curving round the corner of Midland Road and Old Bedford Road was built in 1929 as a hat factory (date is inscribed above the central second floor window). Large windows are set between brick pilasters and the main entrance has a stone-effect 'classical' appearance with steps up to the door. Formerly known as Chiltern House, 146 Midland Road became government offices but has recently been redeveloped with upper floors added and is now occupied by a solicitors (*above*).

### 36

The **English Rose** public house was originally The Rabbit (*renamed The Wabbit in 1983*), named after the former hamlet here of Coney Hall. In the early 19th century Coney Hall consisted of two rows of terraced cottages facing each other across the road to Bedford. In about 1845 two end cottages were converted to a pub and in 1908 these were replaced by the present building. The remaining cottages to the left were demolished in the 1960s and the site used for the pub garden. In the 1950s the tenant landlord's son David Hamilton married the British film star Diana Dors, who apparently regularly helped out behind the bar.



### 34

Genevieve Louis Ltd formerly occupied 14 Old Bedford Road, part of a row of properties (*nos. 10-28*); only nos. 16-28 remain (*above*). In contrast to the purpose-built factories of the Midland Road/Dudley Street area, this is an example of the domestic frontage with workshops to the rear, typical of the area between Frederick Street and Clarendon Road. Appearances are deceptive: 70 people were employed here, making nearly 2,000 hats a week sold through 500 independent boutiques throughout the UK. The firm once made ladies' special occasion hats, working for Harrods, House of Fraser and John Lewis, among others.

### 35

The former Territorial Drill Hall of about 1922, until about 1914 this area was the field used by Coupees for bleaching hats by sunlight. The site has been allocated for much-needed affordable housing.

### 37

Behind, the 'Queen Anne' revival style church was built in 1913 for the Wesleyans and since 1960 has been the **North Street Seventh Day Adventist Church**.

### 38-41

Mussons Path. **Kerrie Hats** occupied a building on the south side of the entrance to Mussons Path (38). There were several small hat firms in this area when on 15 October 1940 a bomb fell on the hat factory of W.O. Scales, killing 13 people and injuring 35. The site was eventually used to build a dining hall for Old Bedford Road School opposite (*which closed in 1967*). The dining hall is now the Kingdom Hall of the Jehovah's Witnesses (39).

Mussons Path, like Frederick Street Passage further north, served as a rear service road for the hat workshops which stretched behind many of the houses in this area. Much of the south side of Mussons Path has been redeveloped but on the north side several examples of the old workshops once used in relation to the hat industry still survive, for example those at the rear of 12 Frederick Street, **Randall Ribbons** (40), part of which are still in use and the buildings at the rear of 62 Frederick Street, formerly W.S. Hooker hat manufacturers (41).



### 42

The works of **Barford Brothers**, one of the few hat dyeing firms in the country, stretch along North Street (*above*). The chimneys of the dyeing factories were once a feature of the Luton skyline and a 1931 aerial photograph shows a very tall chimney at Barfords. The firm appears to have come here from Barbers Lane in the town centre around the turn of the century. Between the wars Barfords added the making of felt hoods to its dyeing business and was associated with Hubbards, a firm that grew astonishingly at this period and came to dominate the felt hat trade (*by 1939 Hubbards claimed to be the largest firm in the hat industry in the world*). After the Second World War the making of felt hoods collapsed and Hubbards eventually passed out of the industry. The firm became Barford Brothers again in 1948, but the association with Hubbards can still be seen on the sign on the building.

**43**  
**William Street** was Fischer and Sons, on the corner of Mussons Path and William Street, hat material merchants.

**44**  
**Randall Ribbons**, 12 Frederick Street. Behind this modest house front lies a wealth of trimmings for the hat industry. Established in 1918, selling ribbons, artificial flowers, veilings, hat pins, cottons etc, as was said on The Clothes Show TV programme at Easter 1997 (*Top Hat Awards*), there is "hardly a hat on earth that doesn't feature something supplied by Randalls of Luton".

**45 & 46**  
 Opposite, the red brick building with ornate stonework around the windows at 3-7 Frederick Street (45) was erected in about 1910 for Marshall, Brookes and Chalkley (*printers*) and had many subsequent users including Dickinson and Adams, motor engineers. Next door at no. 9, Peter Evans Studios (46), had a sign advertising "scenic embellishment and armour for the entertainment industry".



**47**  
 8 Frederick Street is now occupied by **DRH Pickering & Co** hat manufacturers (*above*) who moved from Power Court (no. 17 on Trail 1).



**48**  
**Ken Peirson and Sons** at 86 Old Bedford Road is another domestic-looking frontage with workshops behind (*above*). This firm, which also incorporates Randall Ribbons, makes specialist hats including the so-called 'divorce hat' featured in the iconic Volkswagen TV advertisement in 1993.



**49**  
 Frederick Street Passage is another near service road, like Mussons Path, for the hat workshops behind many of the houses in Frederick Street (*above*). Here too most of the workshops are now used for other purposes.

**50**  
**R.B. Parsons** at 28 Reginald Street also made 'special occasion' hats. The sign 'Princess Hats' refers to the founding of the business in Princess Street, Luton, where the firm still has premises.

**51**  
 Returning to Old Bedford Road, Olney and Co. occupy the large factory at no. 106. A 1920s map shows it as a cardboard box factory and by 1939 it was used by Leslie Jones, hat manufacturer.

### Lye's dyeworks

Hat makers originally tried to colour the plait themselves but wood and vegetable dyes produced only black, brown and blue. In 1857 Thomas Lye developed a site between Old and New Bedford Roads, immediately south of what is now Wardown Park, for a bleaching and dyeing works using recently introduced aniline dyes. With this and his improved ribbon weaving techniques, Lye gave a greater range of colour and trim to the hat industry and built up a very successful business. In 1868 he bought Leagrave Hall (*built in 1850*) as his residence.

In 1939 Lye and Sons were described as plait merchants, dyers and bleachers, manufacturers of felt hoods and of millinery and elastic bands and tape.

The business closed in the 1960s and for 20 years the works were used by various small firms until demolished in 1990, to be replaced by housing.

When Olneys acquired it in 1976, having had to leave its premises in York Street in a redevelopment area, the building was basically a shell following a fire. Olneys makes a range of hats mostly for men, including Panamas. Albert Olney came to Luton in 1914 from St Albans where the hat makers had, unlike those in Luton, specialised in men's boaters. The firm has made boaters for various schools but other customers have included Maurice Chevalier.

Beyond Clarendon Road and on the opposite side of Old Bedford Road is the former site of **Lye's** important dyeing and bleaching works (*see panel on previous page*). The site is now developed for housing (*Earls Mead etc*). Further north, Wardown Park Museum has a nationally important hat industry and headwear collection.

**52**  
 Snoxells Hats, famous for the 'Civic Boater' is a well-known hat firm operating from the Block House in Clarendon Road. This is a working hat factory specialising in a range of hats for summer and winter wear.



**53**  
 Kingham Way (*between 67 & 69 Reginald Street*) perpetuates the name of G. Kingham, a building firm (*left*). The premises at the rear are now used by a variety of businesses, mostly unconnected with the hat trade, though the old sign 'Luton Boxes Ltd' at the entrance indicates a past connection (*second from top on the sign*).

**54**

The large white building at 120 Frederick Street stretches between Frederick Street and Mussons Path, behind 43–53 Havelock Road. It has been redeveloped into flats (**Fredericks Gate**) but appears to have been built around 1910. Adjoining is the boiler house of **Barford Bros.** whose main works face onto North Street.

**55**

The striking building at 39 Havelock Road, on the corner of Havelock Road and North Street, with a steep roof and typical Luton 'cut-off' corner, was used as a childrens' sick and convalescent home between 1889 and 1894 due to the generosity of A.P. Welch, a retired hat manufacturer. Later it became the Home Laundry.

**56**

On the corner opposite at 36 Havelock Road is a house and premises that was Norton House School, more often called Norton College, from 1881 until about 1909 a boys' boarding school — with Bell's Close and People's Park at the rear, ideal as playing fields. When it closed the premises were bought by Herman Homan and part was used as a cardboard box factory. A 1920s map shows it as a dye works and in 1939 it was the Norton Works of Battersby and Co.

**57**

**St Matthews Church**, 1876 and grade II listed. A few years ago iron railings were reinstated around the church, the originals having been removed in the war.

**58 & 59**

Past another 'cut-off' corner at 21 Havelock Road and the adjoining 1870s terrace with its attractive arched doors and windows (58) (*above, top*), we come to the grade II listed (59) **The Painters Arms** (*above*), where a small public house which opened in 1865 was rebuilt as now in 1913. The building has many attractive period details but perhaps its main claim to fame lies in the marital career of Sylvia Hawkes, step-daughter of the tenant landlord in the 1930s and remembered for her beauty. She married the Earl of Shaftesbury's heir, Lord Ashley, after which she broke up the romance of Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, whom she later married. When this failed, she was married in turn to Lord Stanley of Alderley, Clark Gable and Prince Djordgazi. She died in 1977 aged 73.

**60 & 61**

Return to High Town Road to the **Methodist Church Hall** (60), the original church built in 1852, and the **Methodist Church** (61), built in 1897 on the site of the Cottage Hospital. Both are listed grade II. The cupola of the church is a landmark seen from many parts of the town (*above*).

**62**

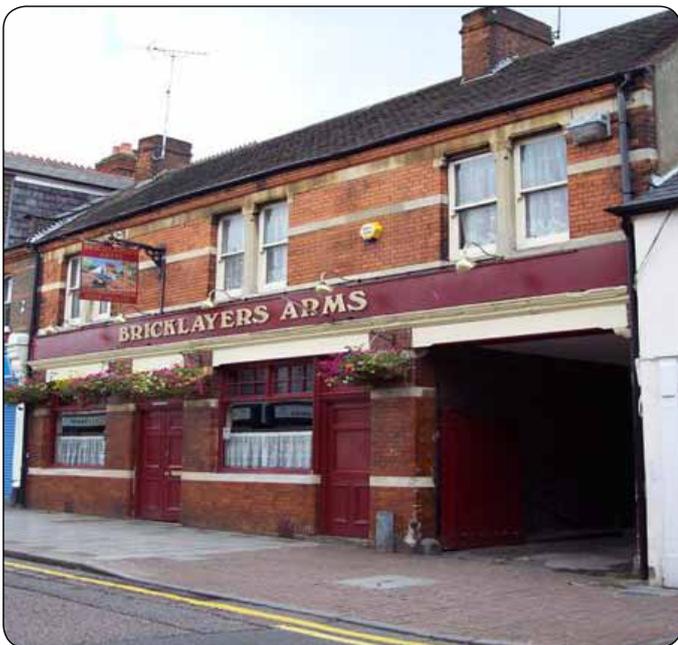
Kilbys, the hat materials merchants, survived at 33-35 High Town Road until about 1995 when their vacated premises became the Post Office. It is now a supermarket.

**63**

38-42 High Town Road, opposite, have attractively detailed dormer windows and decorative terracotta panels (*above*). No. 38 is another example of the Luton 'cut-off' corner and was the premises of the sewing machine engineers Janes Brothers from about 1890 to 1940. Advertising as 'engineers to the straw trade', they repaired and maintained sewing machines, acting as agents for German manufacturers before patenting their own machine 'The Lutonia'. The building attached to no. 38 (Barbers Corner) along Burr Street has been converted to flats.



**64**  
Albion Path leads to Walter Wright's hat factory at 29 Albion Road (above) an existing hat factory visited by HRH the Princess Royal in 2009. The classical-style wall along the roadside here is the remaining ground floor façade of the factory which was partly destroyed by fire in 1978. When built in 1889 it was an example of a purpose-made premises at a time when smaller hat factories were at the rear of residences. To make an appointment to view the factory visit [www.walterwright.com](http://www.walterwright.com).



**65-67**  
Finally, three public houses whose names sum up much of the history of High Town. **The Bricklayers Arms** (65) was first built in the 1820s but has since been rebuilt (above). The former pub known as **The Railway Tavern** (66) at nos. 16-18 was opened in 1834; it is now the first building in High Town Road but was once 100 metres up from the bottom of the road — demolition for the railway and for Midland Road has effected the change. No. 5, The Blockers Arms, now **Déjà Vu**, (67) dates from the mid-19th century; it was built almost on the site of the old 'Windmill', High Town's first licensed pub (and itself named after a windmill somewhere in this area which was blown down in the mid-18th century).

**68**  
Large hat factories were confined to the town centre until almost the eve of the First World War when Paul Walsler and Woolley Sanders built theirs in Dudley Street. In about 1930 Walsler replaced his Dudley Street premises with this large building on the Midland Road corner, something of a landmark as seen from the railway. Walsler's trademark was **Reslaw Hats** (*his name spelt backwards*). During the Second World War most of the factory was occupied by Percival's for the manufacture of parts for Mosquito aircraft. It has been recently redeveloped (*extended and upper floors added*) and is now occupied by a variety of businesses. The building has the typical Luton 'cut-off' corner.

**69**  
Marida Hats, one of the largest of the Luton hat firms, occupied two buildings at 1-5 Dudley Street, an older red brick one with decorative stone detailing to the ground floor, and a modern block to its north.



**70**  
All the buildings on the east side of Dudley Street south of Albion Path, including 112 Midland Road on the corner, were hat factories or warehouses at one time or another (left, top). 4 Dudley Street, a 'neo-classical' style factory dating from about the 1920s, is now the **Celestial Church of Christ** (40b) (left, bottom).



**71**  
The hat factory of I. Llewellyn and Co. at 98-100 Midland Road (right). An 1895 map shows a hat factory on this site.



72

**Station House**, formerly the Stationmaster's House, now offices. The building actually dates from about 1840 (before the railways) and formed part of the old southern end of High Town: houses to its south were demolished for the Midland Railway in the 1860s and Midland Road was driven through to its north, cutting it off from the rest of High Town. It served at some stage as a small bleaching or dyeing unit for the hat trade. It was used by the Midland Railway Co. as the Stationmaster's House until sold to the last stationmaster, William Thomas, when he retired in 1969.

## Image information

### Front cover images

**Top row:** blocking room of a Luton hat factory in 1907 (T.G. Hobbs, Luton Culture/The Luton News); ex-hat factory at 32 Guildford Street; ex-hat factory at 40 Guildford Street.

**Middle row:** late 19th century hydraulic hat press machine in Bute Street/Guildford Street courtesy of Peter Wakefield; photo of a sewing room in the 1930s; blocking in the 1870s (Luton Museum Service), ILN Dec 1878 —section of a full-page illustration titled 'straw plait and bonnet-making at Luton, image labelled 'Pressing hats by machine-crimping a Dolly Vanden'.

**Bottom row:** Petula Clark at Odeon, March 1952 (photographer George Gurney, Luton Culture/Luton News); photo circa 1907 of the Plait Halls, Cheapside entrance (T.G. Hobbs, Luton Culture/Luton News).



## Parking and travel information

There are several public car parks in the town centre:

### Trail Area 1 (south of the railway, parking free outside these hours):

- Silver Street car park (The Mall), 8am-6pm, multi-storey
- Bute Street car park, 8am-6pm.

### Trail Area 2 (north of the railway):

- Wenlock Street car park, 8am-6pm
- Brunswick Street car park, 8am-6pm
- Taylor Street car park, 8am-6pm
- Station car park, Midland Road, 24 hours.

For travel information relating to the Luton Dunstable Busway, local buses or trains, please go to [www.travelluton.co.uk](http://www.travelluton.co.uk) where you will also information about walking and cycling in and around town.

# The Luton Hat Trail

## Places of interest

### The Hat Factory

65-67 Bute Street, Luton LU1 2EY  
Tel: 01582 878100 (box office)

**Open: 10am-4pm Mondays to Fridays;  
11am-4pm Saturdays and Sundays;  
11am-4pm bank holidays.**

Opens late on gig nights, club nights and performances, three bars operate during events.

The Hat Factory also contains a performance venue, recording and dance studios, cinema, art gallery and other facilities that can be hired.

Food is served at The Kitchen providing a wide selection of meals, drinks and light snacks. Open: Mondays to Fridays 7am-6pm (and some evenings until 9pm) and Saturdays 9am-4pm.

### Wardown Park and Museum

Old Bedford Road, Luton LU2 7HA  
Tel: 01582 546722

**Open: 10am-5pm Tuesdays to Saturdays;  
1-5pm Sundays; closed Mondays.  
Admission free, tea room.**

Wardown Park is open all hours.

The museum has a nationally important collection relating to hats and the hat industry as well as many other exhibits.

### Stockwood Discovery Centre and Park

London Road, Luton LU1 4LX  
Tel: 01582 548600

**Open: Summer (1 April to 31 Oct) 10am-5pm Mondays to Fridays; 11am-5pm Saturdays and Sundays; 11am-5pm bank holidays.**

**Open: Winter (1 Nov to 31 Mar) 10am-4pm Mondays to Fridays; 11am-4pm Saturdays and Sundays; 11am-4pm bank holidays.**

Admission free, shop and The Garden Café.

As well as displays of rural life, skills and trades, the museum has regular craft demonstrations, including straw plaiting. Also at Stockwood is the Mossman Collection of horse-drawn vehicles. Stockwood Park is open all year round and includes children's play area.

The locations above are run and managed by Luton Culture, [www.lutonculture.com](http://www.lutonculture.com). For further information see also [www.lutonhats.com](http://www.lutonhats.com)

Luton Borough Council is indebted for the information in this leaflet to several authors of books on Luton's history and buildings. Special thanks are due to David Bevan for the use of his dissertation 'Buildings of the Hatting Industry'. Other information has come from 'The Story of High Town' by John Dony, and Stuart Smith's 'Pubs and Pints' and 'Plaiters' Lea Conservation Area, Luton. Historic Area Assessment' by English Heritage (2011).

Thank you to BEAMS Ltd for updating the Hat Trail leaflets that were originally published in 1998.

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## Contact details

**Luton Borough Council, Town Hall, Luton**  
Upper George Street, Luton LU1 2BQ

**Tel:** 01582 546000

**Open:** 8.30am-5.30pm Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays;  
10am-5.30pm Wednesdays.

**Local information leaflets are available from the Town Hall reception.  
For local tourism information please visit [www.luton.gov.uk/tourism](http://www.luton.gov.uk/tourism)**



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