



Discover Downham Working Life Trail



Railway Station

Downham Market was an important market centre for the surrounding agricultural area. It incorporated a famous horse fair and weekly livestock and butter markets. There were maltings in the town providing workers with beer and employment. Bridge Street was where the professional classes lived and worked including bankers and solicitors. Trades such as basket maker, stay maker (possibly related to the whaling industry) were based here.

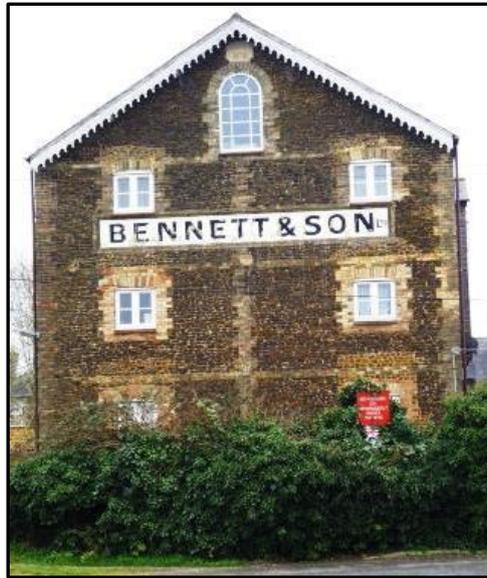
Walking through Downham Market it is still possible to discover information about the working life of people who lived, many years ago, in the 'gateway to the fens'.

1. The trail starts at the train station. Before the arrival of the railway in 1846 this lowlying area was largely agricultural with warehousing for river transport centred on the Great Ouse at Downham West. With the coming of the railway there was a rapid industrial and residential development into Downham Market.



Heygate's Mill

Jacob Mason Bird built his steam mill by the railway. The mill, now run by Heygates, is still known as Bird's Mill. Other industries grew too as the railway became the focus for warehousing, the loading of cattle and products, and the building of railway housing.



Bennett & Son and other industries had their own branch line. Bennett's granary has now been converted into flats but their name is still visible on the building. The terraced housing built for workers are still inhabited.

2. On your progress into the town centre you reach an area where bricks were made. There were formerly at least three brickyards in the area. This sign is all that remains.

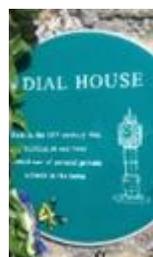


A walk down Brick Fields Lane takes you to a nature reserve on the site of the brickworks. In the winter people used to skate here - a typical fenland pastime. Porter and Sons were owners of one of the brickyards in the late 19th Century. Most of the traditional carrstone houses have corners reinforced with white Downham bricks.



3. You are leaving the agricultural area behind as you walk past the Garden Centre. This was one of several maltings supplying the brewing trade in the town at a time when beer was often safer to drink than well water. The public houses were a meeting place for working men at the end of the day. In 1912 there were 88 fully licensed houses, 54 beer houses, 3 off licenses.

4. Next to the Garden Centre is Dial House which is now a Bed and Breakfast. One of the oldest Buildings in town it has been used as a school – one of several small private schools.



This area was known as Cow-gate, as gates across the road stopped cattle strolling into town. The small cottage at the entry to Paradise Road was once a blacksmiths – an essential trade at the time when horses were the main form of transport.

5. On your left you can see the refurbished public house. The new Whalebone reflects the whaling trade that once flourished in this area. Recently the White Hart, the Whalebone has reverted back to its 18th

century trading name. According to one source the building was at one time partially surrounded by a moat.



Whalebone sign

Continue into town and notice the number of small shop premises increase. Here were butchers, bakers, dressmakers, tailors, saddlers, grocers, haberdashers, milliners, cobblers, etc, 6 . Reeds Department store was established by Harry Reed in Nelson House in 1906. Local tradition says that Horatio Nelson attended school here but this is unsubstantiated and very unlikely. In earlier days the building was associated with solicitors Reed, Wayman and Hyner.



Nelson House

7. The centre of town was the professional area in the nineteenth century with large houses for the solicitors, doctors and bankers, etc. Next to Bank House, Barclay's Bank operated here until 2019. In 1904 it incorporated Gurney's, Birkbeck, Buxton and Cresswell banks. John Walter Hayden was manager. As you approach the town centre in front of you is the iconic clock. A gift to the town.

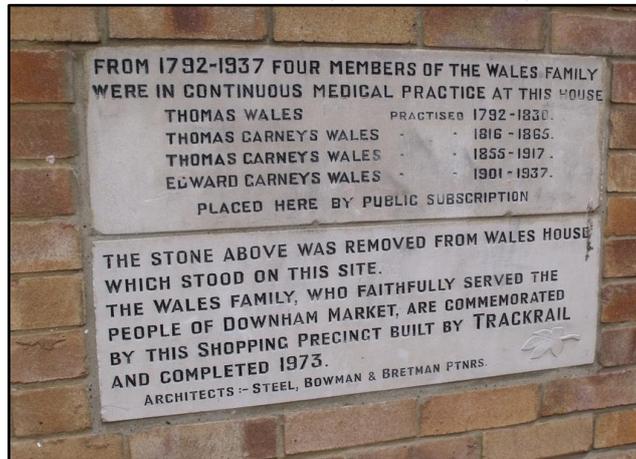
The Town Hall was the corn exchange, an important building in an agricultural town that supported several corn merchants and windmills. One still surviving at nearby Denver.

Ahead of you is the Swan Hotel where King Charles I stayed in 1646 after his defeat at Naseby. The Swan Hotel was used as a ticket office for the railway due to its central position. Also in the Swan, The Clackclose Association for the Prosecution of Felons, to which the solicitor Thomas Lancelot Reed acted as clerk, used to hold its general meetings at The Swan.



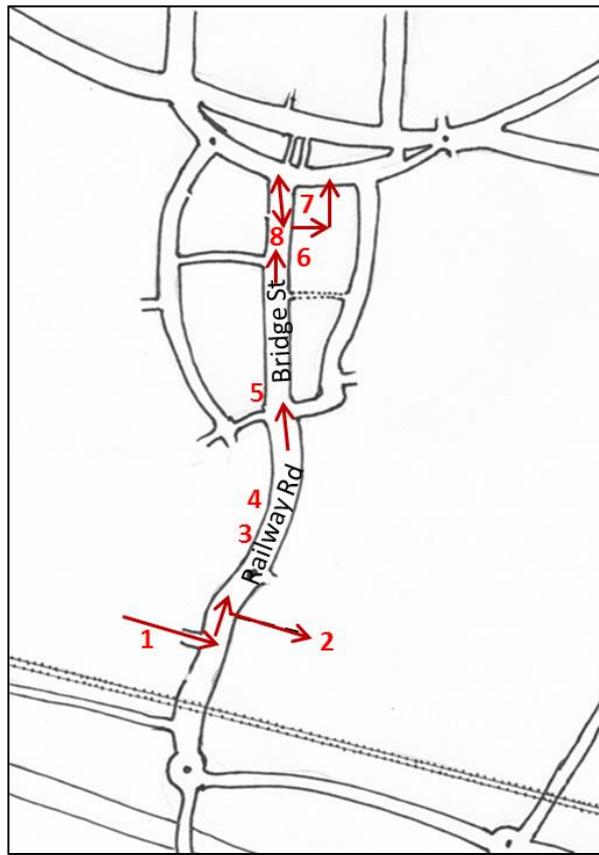
In the High Street many small traders plied their wares such as bakers, grocers etc.

8. With the Town Hall ahead of you turn into the precinct. Pass Boots, turn left and you will see a plaque celebrating the Doctors Wales whose house and garden were demolished to create the precinct. The first Doctor Wales came to the town in 1792 and the family continued to practice in the town years to come.



This leads to High Street – the main road from King’s Lynn to London and the location of the coaching inns The Swan, The Castle and, in Bridge Street, The Crown.

Working life trail map



Starts at Train Station, Railway Road, Downham Market, PE38 9EX
Ends High St, Downham Market, PE38 9DB

*Produced by Downham Market U3A & Downham Market
District Heritage Society Shared Learning Project*