

Luton Hat Trail Around Old Bedford Road

There is plenty of evidence of Luton's hat making history in the buildings you pass everyday in the town. Discover the sites of the earliest buildings in the area, past and present hat factories, plus a few famous local connections!

This is a good walk to take after your visit to Wardown Park Museum. The district contains many small domestic looking buildings that were once used for the hat industry. This contrasts with the area around Bute Street where the larger hat factories are situated.

Estimated Walking time without stops: 35 minutes
Distance to walk: 2.67 km, 1.66 miles
Estimated time to complete trail: 1 hour 10 minutes

Start: Wardown Park Museum

Bear left and follow the path to the park lake. Walk along the lake until you reach the play area. Turn left and leave the park to join **Old Bedford Road**.

1) Former site of Lye's Dye Works. In 1857 Thomas Lye opened bleaching and dyeing works here. It was a long and difficult process to dye straw with natural dyes and it was only possible to produce a limited range of colours. Lye's became well-known for their "Quaker Grey". The invention of aniline dyes in 1856 enabled the development of a range of bold colours and shades of colours, beginning with mauve and shades of violet then greens. In the 1800s straws were dyed so that the plaiters could make speckled, or multicoloured, plaits. Lengths of ready made straw plait and imported straw hoods were bleached or dyed here. The business eventually closed in the 1960s, and the building was demolished in 1990 to be replaced with housing.

- ❖ There are examples of speckled, dyed plaits and hats in the hat gallery of Wardown Park Museum.



Former site of Lye's Dye Works



Continue down **Old Bedford Road**, and cross at the zebra crossing. Turn left into **Clarendon Road**, where many building are connected to the hat industry.

2 & 3) Clues to the hat industry. House numbers 1 to 11 have archways for vehicles that were once used to deliver and collect goods for the hat industry. Also look for the flats named “The Old Hat Factory”.

- ❖ Many of the buildings in this area look like regular Victorian terraces, but if you look closer, you will see that some are deeper than you expected. This is often a clue that the building was involved in the hat industry, as the extra space was used as workshops.



Clues to the hat industry on Clarendon Road

4) K.R. Snoxell and Sons.

This is a well-known firm who make the Luton “Civic Boater”, named because they were supplied to the council. Snoxell also make a range of hats for summer and winter wear both for shops and individual hat designers.

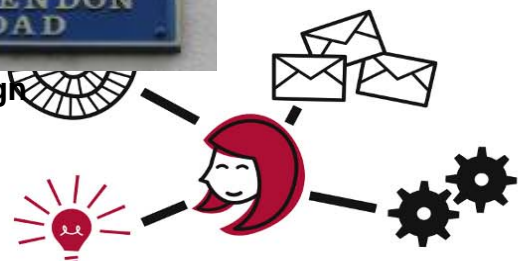


K.R. Snoxell and Sons

5) At number 52 you can see a blue sign reading “Warboys”, a reference to the hat manufacturer that was situated in this building, **J. Warboys**.



Warboys sign



Turn Right into **Havelock Road**.

The **Bells Close Field** is part of **People's Park**, and stopped further houses being built in this direction. To the entrance of the park there is a board with further information about its history. The slope in People's Park is great for sledging when it snows – don't forget your woolly hat!



Bells Close Field

Continue walking down **Havelock Road**.

6) This building was used as a **Children's Sick and Convalescent Home** between 1889 and 1894, due to the generosity of Alfred Phippen Welch, a retired hat manufacturer. The building has a "cut-off" corner, which is a feature of many buildings in the town.



Children's Sick and Convalescent Home

- ❖ At Wardown Park Museum you can find out all about Children's working conditions during the 19th century in the hat gallery on the first floor, and if you book a hat learning session for your class.

7) On the opposite corner you will see a catering equipment centre. This was **Norton House School** from 1881 to about 1909. **Bell's Close** and **People's Park** at the rear were used as playing fields for the school. When it closed Herman Homan purchased the premises, and part of the building was used as a cardboard box factory to be used for storing hats. During the 1920s the building was used as a hat works.



Catering Equipment Centre



8) The works of **Barford Brothers** to your right is one of the few hat dyeing firms in the country. Between the wars the company added the making of felt hoods to their dyeing business and were associated with **Hubbards**, a firm that came to dominate the felt hat trade. In 1939 Hubbards claimed to be the largest hat industry firm in the world. After World War Two, the making of felt hoods collapsed and Hubbards eventually passed out of the industry.



Barford Brothers

Continue to the end of **North Street** until you reach the corner of **Old Bedford Road**.

9) **The English Rose** public house was originally called **The Rabbit** (renamed **The Wabbit** in 1983). It was 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 were demolished in the 1960s and the site became the pub garden. In the 1950s the landlord's son, David Hamilton married the film star **Diana Dors**, who regularly helped out behind the bar. The pub was renamed the English Rose in memory of Princess Diana.



The English Rose public house



Walk further along **Old Bedford Road** heading back towards the museum.

10) Mussons Path was used as a service road for the hat workshops that stretched behind many of the houses in this area.



Mussons Path

11) This building was once occupied by a hat company called **Kerrie Hats**.



Former Kerrie Hats

12) In 1940 during WWII, a bomb landed 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). This dining hall is now the **Kingdom Hall of the Jehovah's Witnesses**.

13) Ken Pierson & Sons make specialist hats, including the so-called "divorce hat" featured in a Volkswagen TV advertisement.



Ken Pierson & Sons



Further along **Old Bedford Road** you will come across some large black iron gates and **Luton Women's Centre**. Walk through the gates and look to your left.

14) Olney & Co moved here from York Street in 1976. The building was very badly damaged from a fire when the company acquired it. Albert Olney moved to Luton from St. Albans, where the hat makers had specialised in men's boaters. The firm has made boaters for various schools, including Harrow, and one of its customers included the French film star and singer **Maurice Chevalier**.

- ❖ One of Maurice Chevalier's boaters is on display in the Hat Gallery at Wardown Park Museum. The singer signed the hat inside the crown.
- ❖ This is where the straw boaters used in our school handling sessions are from.



Olney & Co

Continue along **Old Bedford Road** back towards **Wardown Park Museum**.

15) Wardown Park used to host spectacular Easter bonnet parades in the 1950s.

- ❖ Why not make your own Easter bonnet as a class activity?

