

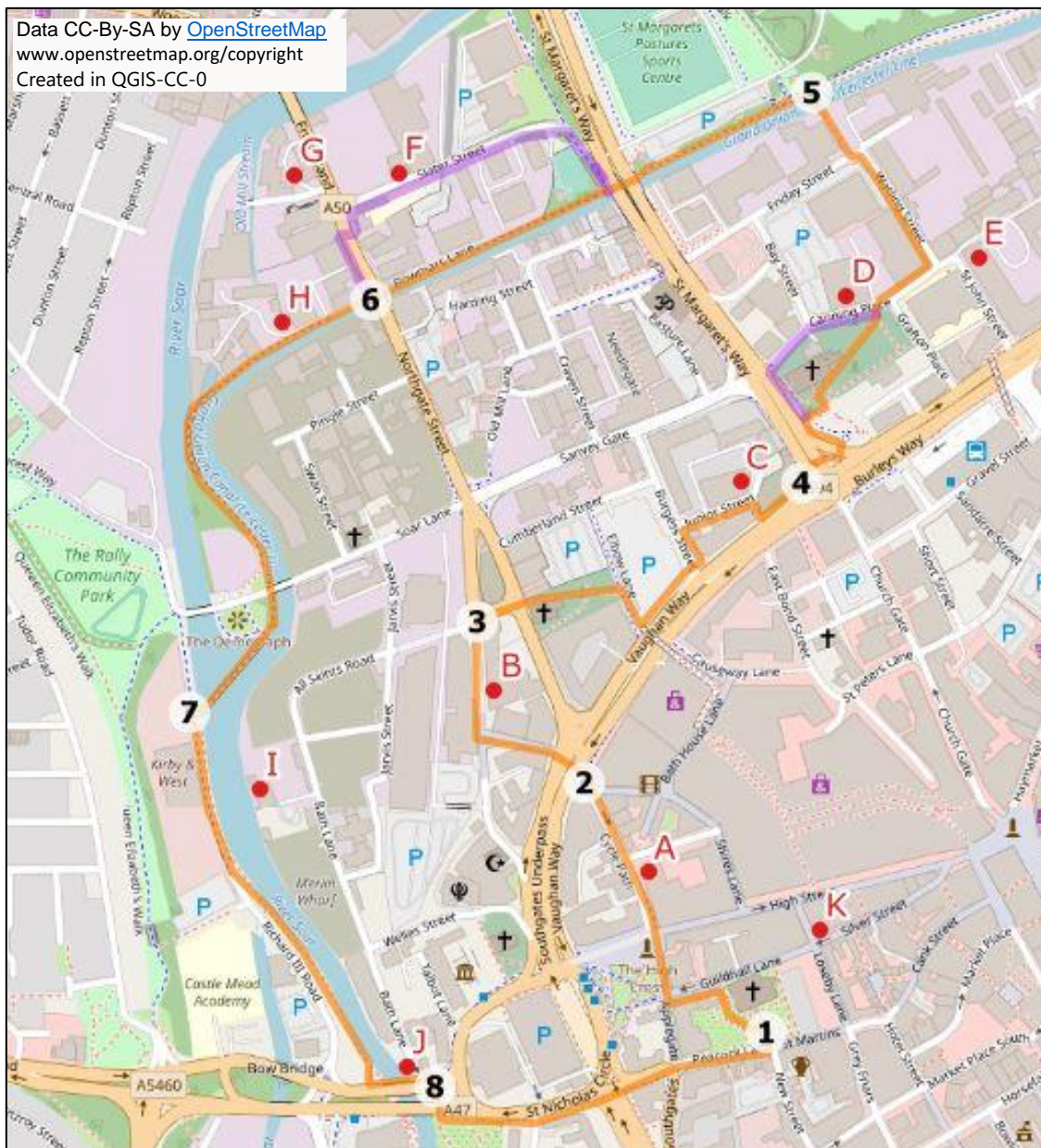
Factory Trails: Leicester's former knitting industry

Start location: Cathedral Gardens, Peacock Lane, Leicester LE1 5PZ

Time taken: 1 hour 10 mins (steady, pace)* **Distance:** 2.3 miles 3.7km **Circular route**
Allow additional time for information stops.

Description:

This short walk passes former industrial buildings associated with Leicester's textile industry. Most date from the 19th and 20th centuries but there is also an earlier example. We pass some well-known names from Leicester's industrial hey-day who provided employment and brought wealth to the city.



- Main route
- Alternative route
- 1 Stage / waypoint
- A Point of interest

*Time is calculated at a steady pace of 2mph, if walked without stopping. Allow extra time to look at points of interest and read the information.

This route was developed by staff and volunteers for Leicester City Council:

www.choosehowyoumove.co.uk/walks



Walk starts from:

Cathedral Gardens, Peacock Lane, Leicester LE1 5PZ.

Safety tips:

- Some streets on this route are tucked away from the popular pedestrian routes. Some areas can feel a bit isolated, so walkers may prefer to visit in company.
- On the back streets be aware there are concealed entrances/exits to factories and car parks. Watch for moving vehicles, including lorries serving the industrial units.
- Watch your head on the low bridge if you take the canal path (tunnel) under Frog Island.
- Be aware that some pavements or paths are narrow and surfaces may be uneven. There are some mooring rings or posts along the canal path – tread with care. Route includes some steps.
- Watch for cyclists along the canal path, on city streets and by cycle lanes.
- Take care crossing roads. Use pedestrian crossings where present.
- Remember to observe the guidance on social distancing.

Introduction:

In this self-guided route we provide the history of the buildings first. If you would like directions to help navigate this trail, see pages 6-8.

From the middle of the 19th century, Leicester's hosiery industry started using large steam-powered machinery to produce garments. In 1851 Richard Mitchell was the first in Leicester to open a steam powered hosiery factory. Companies began to invest in new machinery and build larger buildings to accommodate it. Many of these 19th century former factory buildings remain a feature of the city today.

As an industrial town, Leicester became famous as a centre for hosiery and knitwear production. Besides the garment manufacturers, other companies specialised in the associated activities. This included wool and worsted spinning to create yarns, bleaching and dyeing activities and the manufacture of factory machinery. Some of the old buildings we pass today are examples. (If you are interested in the history of Leicester's hosiery industry, there is more in *Additional Information* at the end).

(A) Former knitting factory for Hirst and Morley, corner of Highcross Street and Freeschool Lane

On Highcross Street are examples of former factory buildings put to modern use. The red brick building to your right at the corner dates from the early 1900s and was built for Hirst and Morley Knitwear. In the 1920s they built another factory opposite. The first is now residential and the latter now a bar, restaurant and an 'escape room'.

(B) E. W. Bryan Hosiery, Great Central Street

This attractive red brick factory was built c.1917 for the hosiery manufacturer E.W. Bryan Ltd, to replace an earlier factory nearby. The company established in 1891 and incorporated the firm of H E Alsopp Ltd who formerly had premises on Upper Charles Street. From the mid to late-1940s the Surrealist artist Salvador Dalí created a series of adverts for 'Bryans'. These featured women's hosiery in a series of unusual, creative and glamorous artworks and appeared in print magazines such as Vogue. These remarkable images can be seen online (see references) and gives the impression of 'Bryans' hosiery as a glamorous 'high-end' product.

Maxim House, G. Stibbe & Co. - Knitting Machinery Manufacturer

Maxim House, now gone, once stood beside E.W. Bryan. It belonged to G. Stibbe & Co (founded in 1886), specialists in making the machinery to manufacture hosiery and knitwear. They supplied companies in the UK and overseas. By the early 1960s G. Stibbe & Co. had over 1,000 employees and were manufacturing circular knitting machinery and seamless hosiery machines. However, they went into decline in the 1970s, out-competed by the advanced knitting machines developed by Italian companies. The building was demolished in the early 2000s.

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Great Central Station, Great Central Street

Turn to look at the former Great Central Station opposite. The Great Central Railway (GCR) was the last main line to be built during the Victorian period. Opening in 1899, it ran from London Marylebone station to Manchester, passing through Leicester, Nottingham and Sheffield. The rapid expansion of the railways in the 1800s allowed goods to be transported across the country in a relatively short time and opened up opportunities for businesses. The station and the railway line closed in 1969, with the motor car and motorways taking away most of the traffic. Recently, the station building was renovated as part of the 'Great Central Square' development (completed early 2020) giving the area a new face-lift and improving its connections with the city centre for those walking and cycling.

(C) The Chimney Apartments, no.5 Junior Street - hosiery factory, 1915

We know many of the former uses of this attractive building, which is now Grade II listed. It was designed by G Lawton Brown and Percy C James. The chimney (for which it is now named) once served the factory's boiler house and can be seen more clearly from St Margaret's Way. The factory was built in 1915 for Toone and Kelsey Ltd, who soon became Toone and Wells hosiery. The original name 'Pedura Works' still features above the building's north-west entrance. From the 1930s until the early 1960s it was a chemical works. Then Corah purchased and re-purposed the building for hosiery once more. Seamless stockings were manufactured here and the building was renamed 'Corrella Works'. In the 1980s the knitwear manufacturer Richard Roberts bought the building. They also had other factories nearby.

Richard Roberts was one of several East Midlands companies who supplied Marks and Spencer but who lost their contract to overseas suppliers in the 1990s. The decision affected other M&S suppliers in the East Midlands and thousands of jobs were lost in the knitwear industry. In 2002 Richard Roberts moved their production overseas, with the loss of jobs and closure of factories in Leicester. They kept some staff in Leicester at their design, admin and sampling warehouse. The Junior Street building was sold for development in 2003 and is now an apartment block.

(D) Former Leeson's hosiery factory, Canning Place

Opposite the churchyard is a red brick building with Gothic arched windows. This attractive factory building was built c.1877, designed by the Leicester architect James Bird. It has had later additions throughout the early 20th century. Originally it was a hosiery factory. It is now in light industrial use.

(E) Corah factory - St Margaret's Works, Watling Street & St John Street

This knitwear factory was built with an integral steam-power system and opened in 1865 for the family firm Corah & Sons. The building was designed by Leicester architect William Jackson. At that time it was the largest factory of its kind in Leicester. Corah became a big employer. In 1919 there were over 2,000 employees. By 1969, at the industry's peak, Corah employees numbered around 6,800. The factory was named after the nearby church and the company adopted the image of St Margaret as their trademark - it is one of the earliest registered trademarks for knitted goods. A statue of St Margaret once featured above the entrance but is now in St Margaret's churchyard. During the First and Second World Wars Corah supplied the government with large quantities of knitted items for soldiers. In the 1920s Corah was the first company to form a supplier relationship directly with retailer Marks and Spencer. From the mid-1970s the UK knitwear industry began to decline. In the early 1990s the company was taken over and broken up. Within a few years St Margaret's Works had closed. Parts of the Corah site are now derelict but there are some units used by small companies. Corah is an example of a hosiery company which started small and became huge. To read about the founder, Nathaniel Corah, see (K) at the end.

Frog Island factories (optional detour)

Slater Street leads to Frog Island. This was an important location for industry in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the road being one of the main thoroughfares in and out of the city. Several large factories were constructed here, including bleach and dye works, worsted spinning factories, woollen mills, hosiery factories and engineering plants. In the second half of the 20th century the city experienced a period of de-industrialisation. Many businesses that were once here have now closed, leaving large mills derelict.

(F) Farben Works, 1914, Slater Street

Farben Works was built in 1914 in a classical style as an extension to an older neighbouring factory (St Leonard's Works, mentioned below) which no longer stands. Farben Works was designed by Leicester architects Harding and Toppott for W.P. Skevington, a worsted spinning and dyeing company. In the worsted process a fleece with long fibres is processed to

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create a yarn which is finer and stronger than yarn produced by the wool spinning system. In the commercial knitting industry, worsted yarn became one of the main fibres used. Leicester's industry developed to specialise in producing worsted products. For more about the worsted process, see *Additional Information* at the end.

St Leonard's Works, 1867 (also called North Bridge Mill or the Frisby Jarvis Building)

A sizeable building in an Italianate architectural style once stood at the corner of Slater Street and Frog Island. It opened in 1867 as a worsted spinning mill for William Thompson and Sons, designed by Leicester architects Shenton and Baker. In 1922 the hosiery manufacturers Frisby Jarvis and Co. took over and the building subsequently became known by this name. The company closed in 1992 and the building was taken over by Martins Ltd. Due to its noteworthy architecture the building was listed in 2003 but fell into disrepair and became derelict. Following a major fire in 2005 the ruined building was demolished.

(G) Frog Island Mill

A little further along Frog Island (on the opposite side of the road) by North Bridge stands another late 19th century former worsted spinning factory. It is locally listed. It stood vacant for years then planning permission was granted in 2010 for its conversion to residential flats. Work was completed in late 2017 and the building is now known as 'Adams Apartments'.

(H) North Mill / Hitchcock's Flour Mill

A number of factories were located in this area of Frog Island including a woollen mill and bleach and dye works. Hitchcock's Flour Mill was also located here. It was water powered and a channel of the river (the mill race) was created to divert water to drive the mill's equipment. A Victorian iron bridge was built to cross the mill race and this still survives. By 1888 the mill was converted to steam power and was in use until about 1905. The building was badly damaged by fire in 2011 and was partly demolished.

(I) Friars Mill, Bath Lane

You might like to look at the information board about Friars Mill on the upper path, opposite the mill (caution: watch for cyclists here). A cluster of industrial buildings formed the Friars Mill complex - now only some remain. The oldest part is thought to date from around 1794, making it one of the earliest factories in Leicester. It is now Grade II listed. There were later extensions to the building to accommodate steam powered processes. The pump house with chimney (also called 'Sarah's Engine House') dates from the 1860s, when the successful textile company Donisthorpe & Co. took over the site. They made worsted yarn for the knitting industry, then later cotton sewing threads and synthetic sewing threads. Different buildings housed different stages of the process and included a dye house on site. Their trademark was an lbex. Following decline in the industry in the second half of the 20th century the mill closed. A recent regeneration project between 2016 and 2019 has transformed the remaining buildings into modern office space.

(J) Sculpture: "Textile Process", corner of St Augustine Road and Bath Lane

This sculpture was commissioned in 2011 by Leicester City Council. It is made from steel and depicts the dyeing process, celebrating Leicester's textile industry. Several dye works were located nearby on Bath Lane including the Merlin Dye Works. Russell's Foundry, formed in 1864 was also once on Bath Lane. Russell's made castings for knitting machines and drive shafts and iron work for factory buildings.

(K) The Globe Inn, corner of Silver Street and Carts Lane.

In 1815 Nathaniel Corah started what later became the famous Corah family hosiery and knitwear business. In his early 20s he had started a small textile business manufacturing garments on a knitting frame, but his business folded with debts and he served a short sentence in prison. Sometime after his release he began a new business. Stockingers would sell garments at the Globe Inn on a Saturday. Nathaniel came here to select good quality items, which he then sold in Birmingham at profit. In 1824 Nathaniel acquired buildings in Union Street. His business became very successful and was continued by Nathaniel's sons after his death in 1831. The company largely used 'outworkers', traditional framework knitters working at home. In 1855 they had over 2,000 such workers and around 20 factory employees. The company moved to their famous St Margaret's Works factory in 1865, which provided efficient steam-powered machinery. By the late 1880s they had transitioned to an entirely factory-based workforce.

Additional Information:

The hosiery industry in Leicester

Hosiery manufacture began as a cottage industry in Tudor times, with workers hand knitting at home. In Leicester many people earned a living this way. In 1589, the knitting frame was invented in Nottinghamshire. This non-powered machine improved the process and the quality of garments but was expensive to purchase and took some time to be widely adopted. Meanwhile, alongside these technical developments, hand knitters continued to produce garments.

In Leicester, knitting frames were in use by 1680. Domestic workers could rent a knitting frame from their employer and work at home. It was work suited to a family working together: men usually working the frame, women seaming stockings and children winding the yarn. Later, with improvements in technology knitting frames became larger. The 'wide frame' was introduced in the early 19th century. Knitting frames began to be housed in the workshops (or frameshops) of master hosiers. With several machines under one roof, framework knitters would work under the eye of the master (or a middleman). Workshops were popular by the first half of the 19th century. They were a step towards centralisation of the industry - the predecessor to the factories. Many framework knitters still continued as 'outworkers' working at home, renting their knitting frame and supplying goods back to their employer to store in warehouses, ahead of sale. In the mid-19th century some large and successful hosiery companies still used a large proportion of outworkers and this continued, alongside the development of the first powered knitwear factories, until around the late 19th century.

From the middle of the 19th century, Leicester's hosiery industry started using large steam-powered machinery to produce garments, with the opening of Leicester's first steam powered hosiery factory in 1851 by Richard Mitchell. Companies began to invest in new machinery and build larger buildings to accommodate them. Many of these 19th century former factory buildings remain a feature of the city.

The move to full factory production was not entirely due to improved mechanisation. Changes in legislation also contributed. The Education Act was introduced in 1870 and by 1880 school attendance was compulsory between the ages of five and ten. This broke up the traditional family production unit used by many domestic workers. In 1874 frame rents were abolished so employers could no longer charge knitters for using their frames. There was then less incentive for employers to use domestic workers.

Worsted spinning

The breeds of sheep traditionally reared in the East Midlands region produce fleeces with long fibres which is good for a particular textile process known as 'worsted'. The fleeces are first combed to align the long fibres and remove dirt. Traditionally, there was then a resting phase. Then the fibres were spun into the worsted yarn. Worsted wool fabric is used for tailored garments, while woollen wool is used for knitted items such as sweaters. Woollen yarns are more bulky because the fibres are not combed. In the commercial knitting industry, worsted yarn became one of the main fibres used. Linen, silk and cotton were also used by the industry. Worsted was a cheaper alternative to the latter two and produced garments that were affordable for most.

Directions to accompany the map, from page 6.

Route directions:

1. From Cathedral Gardens, take St Martins West past the Cathedral and the Guildhall and emerge on Guildhall Lane. Turn left to reach the start of Jubilee Square. Turn right towards the High Cross monument. Pass it and continue ahead onto Highcross Street, keeping to the right-hand pavement. On the right, at the corner of Highcross Street and Freeschool Lane is a red-brick building which was once a knitwear factory (A) and is now residential flats.

(A) Former knitwear factories for Hirst and Morley, Highcross Street

Cross side roads with care. Continue to junction with the busy ring road.

2. At the ring road use the pedestrian 'super' crossing to cross Vaughan Way. On the far side continue ahead through the new pedestrianised space between buildings, towards the former Great Central Station. Turn right a short distance on Great Central Street. Look up to your right to spot the 'ghost sign' on the side of the red brick building (B). Also note the old station opposite, recently renovated.

(B) E. W. Bryan Hosiery; former G. Stibbe & Co. (knitting machinery); old station, Great Central Street

3. Continue to your right along Great Central Street, keeping to the right-hand side. At the junction turn right and continue ahead towards All Saints Church. Use the pedestrian crossings and traffic island in front of the church to cross Highcross Street. Take the pedestrian cut through between the church and shop to access the hidden churchyard. Cross it towards the John Lewis car park. Exit the churchyard via the steps. Turn right on the path (Elbow Lane) beside the car park and continue to the busy ring road, Vaughan Way. Turn left here, walk beneath the covered pedestrian walkway and continue some distance alongside the building to the next set of traffic lights, to your right. Use the pedestrian crossing to the first narrow traffic island. Here there is a choice of pedestrian crossings. Use the one towards the grey and orange 'Highcross House'. On the far side, turn left in front of this building into Burgess Street. Continue ahead then turn right into Junior Street. On the left, just past the 'wavy' railings, is an old factory building (C).

(C) The Chimney Apartments, no.5 Junior Street - Former hosiery factory

4. From Junior Street, take the pedestrian cut-through opposite the Chimney Apartments to pass beneath the undercroft of Highcross House and emerge on the busy ring road, Vaughan Way. Turn left towards the junction with St Margaret's Way. Use the underpass (keeping left at the underpass junction) then take the ramp uphill to emerge near St Margaret's church. Alternatively, you can cross St Margaret's Way via the multiple pedestrian crossings and traffic islands towards the church and on the far side turn left onto St Margaret's Way.

Optional detour to St Margaret's statue

On the far side, you might like to detour to a statue of St Margaret which once featured above the main entrance of a prominent local knitwear factory which we come to shortly. The statue is on St Margaret's Way, a short distance past the church entrance near the corner of St Margaret's Street.

From there, to resume the route turn right into St Margaret's Street and continue ahead - the road becomes Canning Place. Resume from (D), the building with the Gothic arch windows and doorway.

Main route

Without the diversion, from the road or underpass enter the grounds of St Margaret's Church. Turn right before the church, pass the side of the building then cross the churchyard diagonally towards Canning Street. Pause at the bollards to look at the building opposite (D).

(D) Former Leeson's hosiery factory, Canning Place

Continue on Canning Place in the opposite direction to the church. Cross side roads with care and be aware of possible industrial traffic in this area. Note the large red brick building ahead (E) at the junction with Watling Street and St John Street.

(E) Former Corah knitwear factory 'St Margaret's Works', Watling Street & St John Street

Turn left on Watling Street (staying aware of possible industrial traffic and taking care where the pavement narrows and is uneven). At the end, turn left on Friday Street then take the pedestrian cut-through 'Abbey Walk' beside the red brick building.

5. Cross the Abbey Walk footbridge and take the steps down to the canal (watch for cyclists). Turn right on the canal path and continue, soon passing beneath the St Margaret's Way road bridge. Just after St Margaret's Way you have the option to detour away from the canal to view old factories on Frog Island (see below). If you prefer to remain on the canal path, continue ahead. Take care using the narrow tunnel to pass under Northgate Street/Frog Island. Ascend the awkward steps or slope with care. Pick up the directions from 6.

Optional detour to Frog Island factories

For the detour, after St Margaret's Way road bridge ascend the steps to your right to reach the busy road. Continue ahead. The pedestrian/cycle path leads to Slater Street. Bear left to enter Slater Street and pass the sports and leisure club on the right. Further along near the end of the road, pause by (F) on the right. Slater Street leads to Frog Island.

(F) Farben Works, Slater Street; St Leonard's Works / North Bridge Mill / Frisby Jarvis Building , Frog Island

(G) Frog Island Mill, Frog Island

Exit Slater Street and turn left on Frog Island. Cross at the pedestrian crossing and turn left on the far side. Just before the bridge over the canal, turn right beside a red brick industrial building (caution - watch for vehicles). Re-join the canal path by North Lock. Continue from 6.

6. Pass North Lock and continue on the canal path, passing a complex of industrial buildings to your right (H).

(H) North Mill / Hitchcock's Flour Mill

Continue along the canal, crossing the old Victorian iron bridge. On the left side of the canal the area is under redevelopment from former industrial use to a combination of new residential housing and new offices, as part of the Waterside regeneration project. Continue ahead. In time, pass beneath the Soar Lane road bridge. Continue onto the walkway/footbridge beside the weir.

7. On the far side turn left along the canal path (watch for cyclists). As you continue ahead, Friars Mill (I) comes into view on the left bank. There is an information panel on the upper canal path opposite the mill.

(I) Friars Mill, Bath Lane

Continue along the canal path then just before Westbridge leave the canal via slope on the right which leads to St Augustine Road. Turn left along the road and cross the canal. On the left notice the sculpture beside the bridge (J).

(J) Sculpture: "Textile Process", St Augustine Road/ Bath Lane

8. Cross St Augustine Road at the pedestrian crossings. Turn left on the far side. (Caution, there is a cycle lane on the pavement). Pass Castle Gardens, cross Castle Street and continue ahead. Cross the Southgates slip road at the pedestrian crossing then shortly use the pedestrian crossings and traffic island to your left to cross to the opposite side. Continue ahead on Peacock Lane to return to Cathedral Gardens where you started. If you wish, you might like to extend the walk along St Martins and then left on Looseby Lane to (K).

(K) The Globe Inn, corner of Silver Street and Carts Lane.

We hope that you have enjoyed discovering the places and history associated with Leicester's industrial past. There are other factory trails available on our website or the Go Jauntly app. You may also be interested in this and other walks available to download from the Choose How You Move website: www.choosehowyoumove.co.uk

Acknowledgements: Route developed by staff for Leicester City Council.

References:

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Marks and Spencer's effect on knitwear decline in the East Midlands

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Bryan Hosiery - Salvador Dalí's Bryan Hosiery Art

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Great Central Railway

GCR Heritage Railway: www.gcrailway.co.uk/station-facilities/leicester-north/

The Great Central Railway had its beginnings in a much smaller railways and you can read more about this and the "London Extension" here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Central_Railway

Richard Roberts Knitwear

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