

Swindon Heritage Action Zone



Historic England



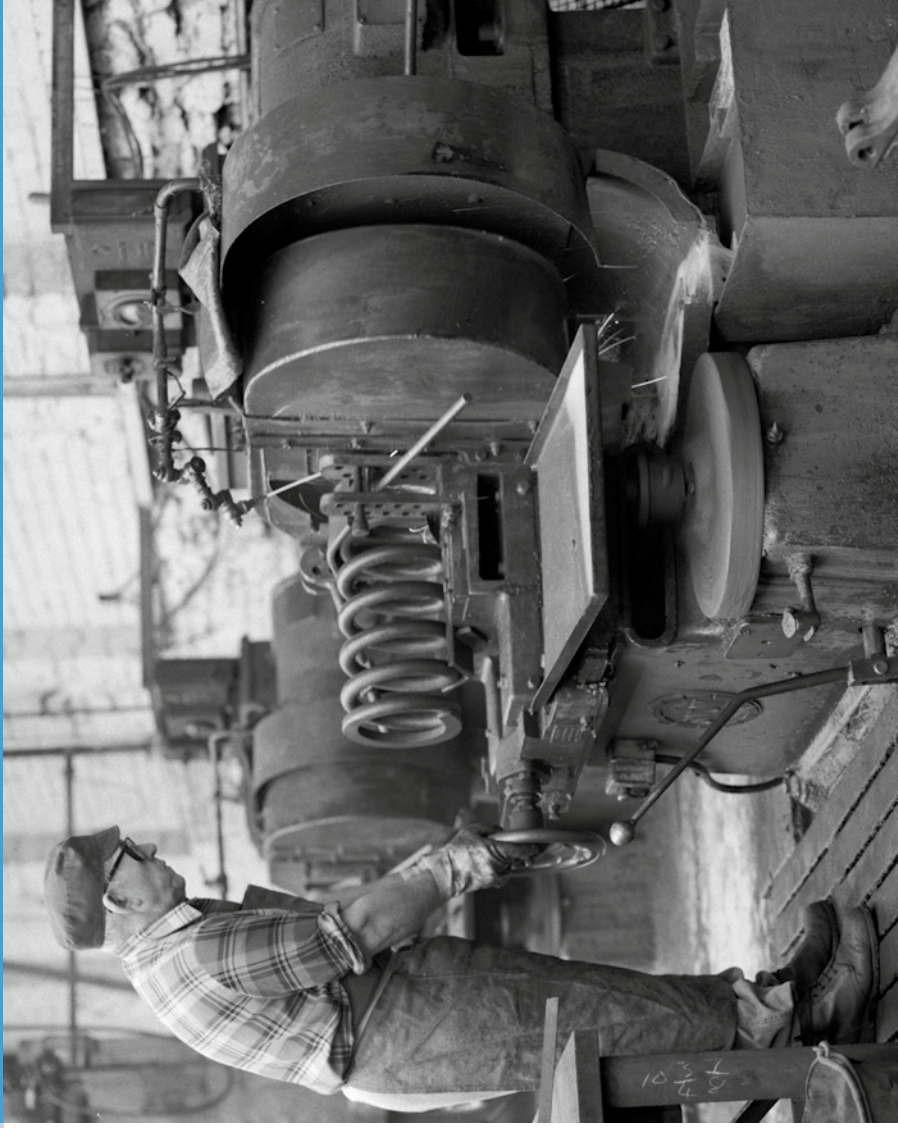
Swindon and the Railway

For nearly 150 years, Swindon was home to the railway and locomotive works of the Great Western Railway (GWR). In 1840 the GWR chose a site over a mile to the north of the existing small market town of Swindon, because it was located nearly halfway between the two terminus stations in Bristol and London. It also had the advantage of two existing canals which were important for delivering coal and coke.

Construction of the works was rapid: they officially opened in January 1843, just two years after the London to Bristol line opened. Over time they expanded until they covered more than 325 acres (130 hectares) in 1948, of which 77 acres (30.8 hectares) were workshops and offices. There were only about 180 workers in 1843, but this increased to over 14,000 in the early 20th century. The GWR provided housing for their workers in a village to the south of the works, and helped set up facilities for leisure, health care, shopping and socialising.

During the two World Wars, the railway works produced munitions and specialised trains, such as ambulance carriages. Nationalisation in 1948 eventually led to a reorganisation of railway works in the 1960s, which caused the demolition of many redundant buildings. From 1970, British Rail's engineering workshops were free to tender for outside work but internal and external orders diminished and the works closed on 27 March 1986. Since then, the historic works buildings have been reused as offices, shops, restaurants and a museum, interspersed by modern buildings.

Despite some losses, the railway works are still the best preserved railway complex in England, and the village is an important example of an early Victorian planned village. Work continues to bring all redundant buildings back into use, and the Heritage Action Zone (HAZ) partnership between Historic England and Swindon Borough Council is aiming to boost this process.



Working for the GWR

Inside the works compound were buildings for many different functions relating to the design, engineering, construction and repair of locomotives, carriages and rails. One of the earliest buildings was the former general offices building (now the **Engine House (1)**), the offices of Historic England and English Heritage), whose earliest part dates from 1842-3. Other early buildings now house **STEAM, the Museum of the GWR (2)**. Originally, workers had to use a dangerous level crossing to approach the works from the railway village. This was replaced in 1870 by the **tunnel (3)**, the new main entrance. It was constructed at the same time as the **Carriage Works (4)**. The workshops for the construction and repair of carriages were located at first-floor level where they could enter and leave at the level of the mainline tracks. The ground floor was used as a canteen for 500 workers.

Further information:

[HistoricEngland.org.uk/SwindonHAZ](https://historicengland.org.uk/SwindonHAZ)

[Swindon.gov.uk/info/20030/planning_and_regeneration/1016/the_swindon_heritage_action_zone](https://swindon.gov.uk/info/20030/planning_and_regeneration/1016/the_swindon_heritage_action_zone)

Read the book: John Cattell and Keith Falconer 2000 *Swindon: the Legacy of a Railway Town* (English Heritage)

Visit STEAM, the Museum of the Great Western Railway, Swindon SN2 2EY

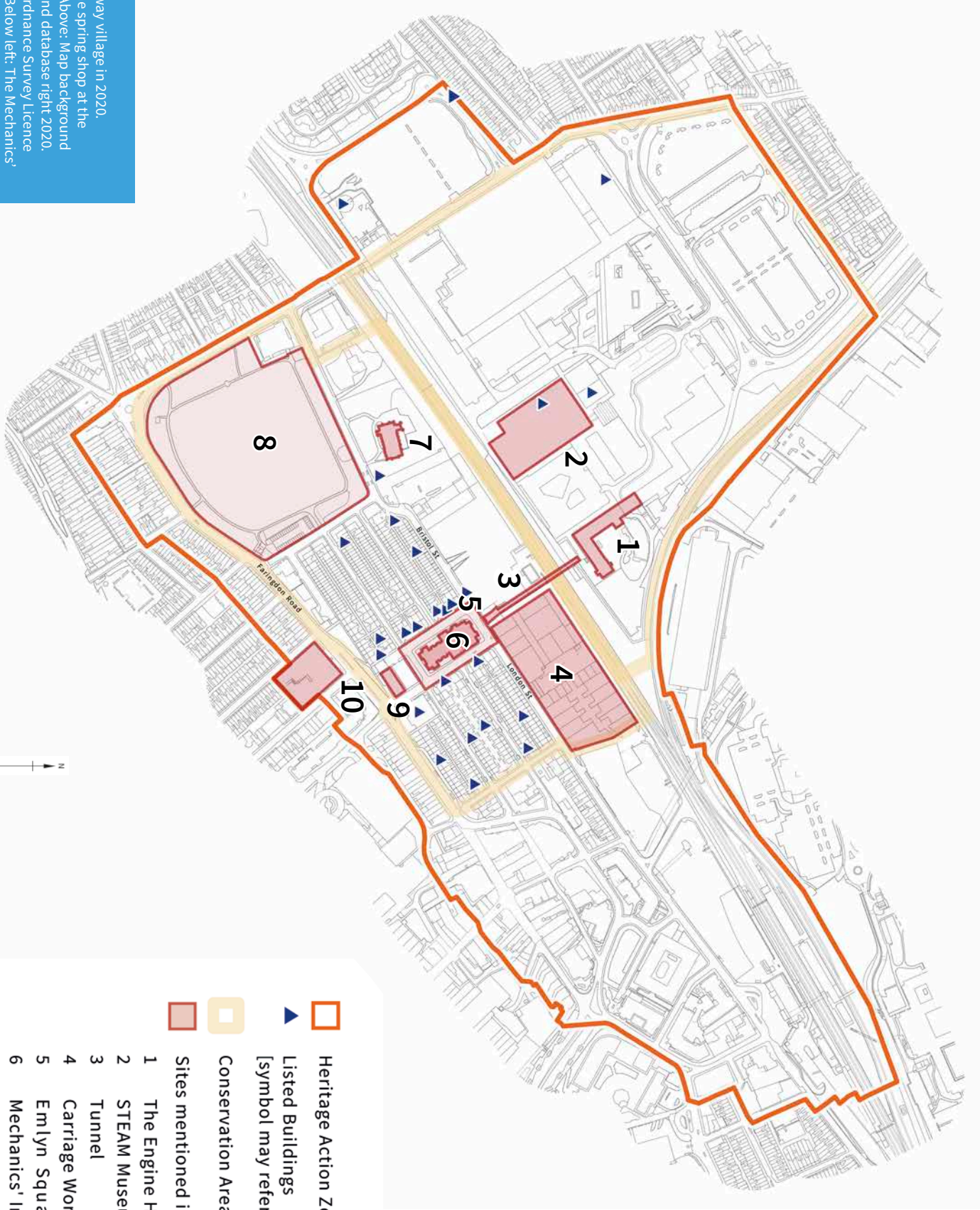
Visit the Railway Village Museum, 34 Faringdon Road, Swindon SN1 5BJ

About the Swindon Heritage Action Zone

Launched in 2019, the Swindon Heritage Action Zone (HAZ) is an ambitious project by Historic England, Swindon Borough Council and others to revitalise the town's unique heritage and unlock its economic potential. It will breathe new life into the railway works and village, to make them a more attractive place for residents, businesses, tourists and investors. Working in partnership, the HAZ initiative will restore and repair neglected public buildings and bring them back into use, improve public spaces and connections between the village and the town centre, and promote and celebrate the area's special qualities.

Over five years, Swindon Borough Council and Historic England will jointly invest nearly £10m in this special area. Sixteen separate projects – from repair schemes to place branding and public engagement – will add up to make a big difference to Swindon's future prosperity.

Projects that are already underway include: refurbishing the Carriage Works and the Cricketers' pub to bring these spaces back in to use and provide employment opportunities; improving the condition of the Health Hydro to increase use of its facilities; and developing a detailed plan for a sustainable new use for the Mechanics' Institution. Future projects for the HAZ include public realm improvement across the HAZ area, and enhancements to the shopfronts in Faringdon Road, Fleet Street and Bridge Street.



Living and leisure

The layout of the railway village was designed by Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the GWR's chief engineer, in 1840 and by 1855 most of the 12 terraces in the village had been completed. The cottages visible from the railway line were designed by Brunel in a more decorative style; the others are plainer and simpler in design. In 1966 all cottages were acquired by the Council and restored. Several shops at the ends of the terraces faced the High Street, which in 1893 was renamed **Emlyn Square (5)** after Viscount Emlyn, the deputy chairman of the GWR. The shops originally included a grocer, a baker and a butcher. Two pubs, the Cricketers' Arms and the Baker's Arms, had been established by the 1850s.

In 1854-5 the **Mechanics' Institution (6)** was built in the centre of Emlyn Square, a rare example of such an institute at a railway works. It contained a library, reading room, public baths, and a first-floor theatre. Behind it was a covered market, which in 1891-3 was replaced by a reading room extension. After a fire in 1930, the stage area was rebuilt and a tall new fly tower constructed. The building has been empty since 1986 and awaits a sustainable new use.

At the west end of the village are **St Mark's church (7)** of 1845 and the **Park (8)**, which was used as a cricket ground from the 1840s and later also hosted the annual GWR children's fete.



Health and well-being

Railway work could be dangerous and initially there were few medical facilities for employees. In 1847, the GWR Medical Fund Society was set up, for which each worker paid a mandatory subscription from his wages. These subsidised the salary of Stuart Rea, the GWR's doctor, who had a surgery and dispensary in Emlyn Square. In 1871, the Society opened an **accident hospital (9)** in the converted armoury of the XI Wiltshire Volunteer Rifle Corps (now the Central Community Centre). The Society's dispensary and swimming baths were moved in 1891 to a new building, now the **Health Hydro (10)**. It housed a wide range of medical and recreational facilities, from swimming baths to Turkish, Russian and washing baths, and doctors' and dental surgeries. The range of services increased further in the early 20th century, making it an important model for the integrated medical centres which the National Health Service established after 1948.

