

Water Meadows

Particularly evident downstream of Frampton, the valley floor is occupied by water meadows. These low-lying fields are tracked with grassy ditches and bounded by larger channels, all ultimately connected to the river. An agricultural innovation of the seventeenth century, these channels and various water control structures enabled farmers to deliberately flood the fields. The spring-fed river water and its steady temperature warmed the soil to encourage abundant grass growth for feeding sheep in the lean months of March and April. Impressively large flocks of sheep were noted by contemporary writers feeding on this lush 'early bite'.



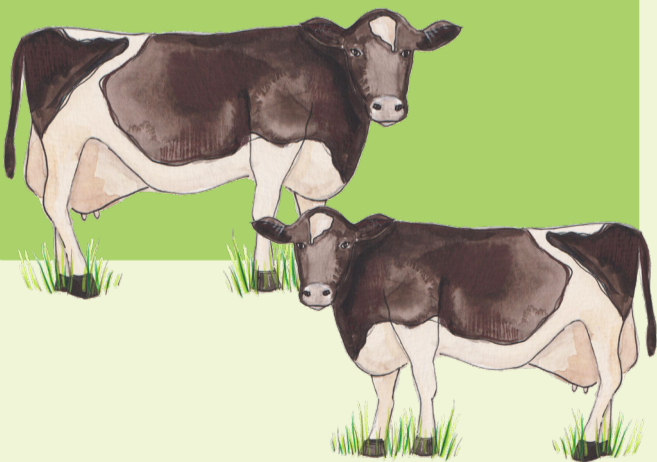
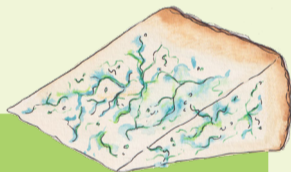
The River

The River Frome's name derives from the Old British 'ffraw' meaning fine or brisk. It is a chalk stream fed by numerous springs up the valley where rainwater that has percolated through the highly permeable chalk rock is pushed out under pressure. Due to the water clarity and mineral-richness, chalk streams are an important wildlife habitat. England is home to around 85% of the global total of chalk streams. A flinty gravel bed provides spawning habitat for salmon and trout which feed on abundant invertebrate life, including mayflies, dragonflies and dainty damselflies. These have spent their larval stage in the water among the gravel or the river plants like water crowfoot, before emerging on the reeds and rushes that poke out of the water.



Dairying

Another traditional land use in the valley is dairy farming. Milk, butter, cream and cheese are all products of the daily cycle of grazing, chewing the cud and milking. Doing well on the rich pastures, the milk is perfect for making West Country Farmhouse Cheddar. Only milk from Dorset, Devon, Somerset or Cornwall can be made into cheese under this protected name, which is matured for at least nine months to give its nutty, round flavour with a hint of sharpness. On the route, house names like 'Dairy Cottage' refer to past use; you'll also pass alongside modern dairy buildings of Littlewood Farm.



Roman Aqueduct

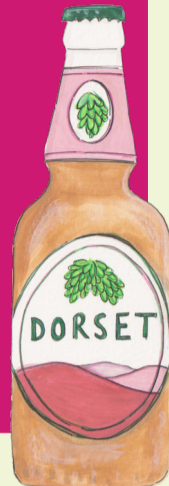
This aqueduct carried water from a source near Notton to the centre of Dorchester, where the 2nd Legion Army was camped and the Roman town developed. 19km of sinuous earthworks carried the water in a gentle incline, appearing to climb the valley sides. By the time it arrived in Dorchester, the water was delivered 20m higher than the river in the valley bottom.

Downlands

Sheep fed on the rich grass of the water meadows were kept overnight on the arable fields upwards from the valley sides in 'sheepfolds', pens made from split hazel hurdles. Their dung fertilised the soil ahead of planting, leading to richer crops of wheat (for breadmaking) and barley (for beer). Today these chalky soils are well-known for the quality of malting barley they produce, and many a ton would have travelled down the valley to the breweries in Dorchester.



On many of the steeper slopes, the land may not have been cultivated for hundreds of years. Where they've also remained unfertilised, the thin, droughty, chalk soils give rise to chalk grassland with a wide range of specialist species. Hog Cliff National Nature Reserve, just to the east of Maiden Newton, is a great example, and the light grazing by cattle and sheep maintains the wildflower abundance and hum of insects. It's home to the rare butterflies Adonis Blue and Marsh Fritillary, to name a few.



Watercress

The valley's clean water has also been exploited for the deliberate growing of watercress. Providing a peppery zing to salads or soups, this nutritious plant from the cabbage family is an early leafy crop, and has been grown in Dorset since the early 1800s.



The Route

At around 8.5 miles (13.6 km) this route of off-road paths and quiet roads follows the River Frome between Maiden Newton and Dorchester. You don't need to be an avid hiker or keen cyclist to enjoy this gentle, family-friendly journey through some lovely Dorset countryside.

The route can be travelled in either direction. If you don't want to retrace your steps, let the train do the return leg.

The Frome Valley with its meadows, pastures and fields, has been shaped by millennia of farming and food production. Through the ages, the production of food has shaped this landscape, transforming the swampy-bottomed, patchily-wooded place it was when the first settlers arrived after the last Ice Age into what feels like beautifully bucolic English countryside.

Dorset Food Trail



By Train

This route has a rail link between Dorchester West Station and Maiden Newton. Dorchester West is a four-minute walk from the Fairfield market site. Managed by Great Western Railway (www.gwr.com), free bicycle reservations are recommended if you intend to travel with your bike as spaces are limited. Journey time is just over ten minutes, with trains running approximately every two hours, seven days a week.

Dorchester's Markets

The Wednesday Charter Market in Dorchester dates back to 1305, when King Edward I granted a charter, and is a tradition that has continued for centuries. Taking place every Wednesday throughout the year from 6.30am to 2pm, you'll find it on Fairfield opposite the new Brewery Square development. The market features traders selling a variety of goods including fresh produce, quality meats, clothing, plants, and hot food. It's just short walk from the town centre.

The Cornhill Market on South Street, in the heart of the town operates daily from Monday – Saturday. Here you'll find a small marketplace for residents and tourists offering a variety of stalls including fresh fruit and vegetables, flowers, and fresh produce, alongside a selection of quirky artisan stalls selling clothes, jewellery and book stalls which change daily.

Dorchester Artisan Market is new to Dorchester's market scene, on the fourth Sunday of each month from April to November, 10am to 3pm. Featuring local artisans selling handmade crafts, artisanal food and street food, unique gifts, vintage clothing, and artwork, it's a great place to find one-of-a-kind items and support local producers.



Dorset Food Trail



Follow this valley to market trail along the River Frome between Maiden Newton and Dorchester

