

## **Midsomer Norton Audio Trail - Smith's Brewery**

*[Ambient sound: industry/brewing, tea party, cinema reel, dance hall music]*

Facing you now are the remaining parts of an extensive brewery complex that would once have dominated the Midsomer Norton skyline. Until the 1700s, beer was a staple in most people's diets and was mostly produced in inns, or even in the home. Only a small proportion was brewed by larger, specialist businesses. But all that changed around 1800 with industrialisation.

The brewery here was in action by 1839. The site had many buildings, all used for the different stages of production and storage, even including the making of the barrels. You can still see several remaining structures, including one of the surviving chimneys from the engine house. The Palladium Electric building, to your left, housed the cellars.

The wealthy owner and brewer was William Smith. He was the uncle of Thomas Harris Smith, who we met earlier - the builder of the Town Hall and Greyhound Inn. William was clearly very influential in shaping Midsomer Norton High Street. In 1859, he donated land opposite the Brewery to the Methodists so that they could build their church there. When the church's first stone was laid...

*Voice 1: There was a large tent erected in the field adjoining for the public tea. Water for the tea heated in the brewery*

*over the other side of the water. Planks were placed cross water for bridge.*

Take a moment to imagine local people 150 years ago, bustling back and forth across their rickety, makeshift bridge with hot cups of tea in hand, ready to celebrate the latest new addition to their High Street.

Thomas inherited the brewery after William's death, but his story becomes a tragic one. Clearly in financial difficulty, by the 1870s he had declared bankruptcy and sold the brewery. His wife Emily died and later he found himself at the centre of an assault scandal – he denied all charges, but was found guilty and died in debt and shame at the age of 59.

Like many buildings on our High Street, the brewery found a new lease of life after its original purpose had been fulfilled. In 1893, the Bristol Times & Mirror reported on the opening of a new public hall. Afterwards, it became a boot factory, a theatre, and a library. The cinema in its cellar, The Palladium Electric, was one of the earliest in the country, and can still be seen today as a JD Wetherspoons pub. But its most lively incarnation was probably as 'Bob's Palais', a dance hall.

*Voice 2: FOR THAT HAPPY AND HOMELY ATMOSPHERE –  
without question the Finest Dance Floor in the West Country!*

The venue hosted roller skating, jiving, wrestling, bingo, and live music, even hosting a performance from Merseybeat

legends The Swinging Blue Jeans. More than just businesses, the cinema and club were important community spaces, bringing great joy to the lives of local people throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.