## A history of routes through Piddington, and early occupation   Simon Cains

The hamlet of Piddington lies on the A40 between West Wycombe and Stokenchurch (not to be confused with the larger old Piddington in Oxfordshire). The first houses did not appear until 1903 when Benjamin North's furniture factory moved here from West Wycombe, but the location has a long history.

A40 route

Travellers from the London area needing to travel north-west have a choice of easy routes through the Chilterns following the low valleys known as "wind-gaps", for instance through Princes Risborough, Wendover, or Tring. But travellers wanting a direct route to or from further west, e.g. to Oxford and then onto Wales, have no cut-throughs. The Chilterns ridge line is continuous from Princes Risborough to the Thames at Goring, so the direct routes have to climb over the ridge. The route from West Wycombe to Stokenchurch climbs almost 150 metres from Piddington to the summit, then a steep drop back down Aston Hill. This route from Wycombe to Stokenchurch is shown on one of John Ogilvey's 1675 strip route maps, which describes it as part of the route from London all the way to Aberystwyth, going right past the future site of Piddington.

In 1824 a group petitioned parliament for a new road from Princes Risborough to Oxford, so that traffic to Oxford did not need to climb the Stokenchurch hill, but it did not go ahead, perhaps because the route around Thame was marshy.
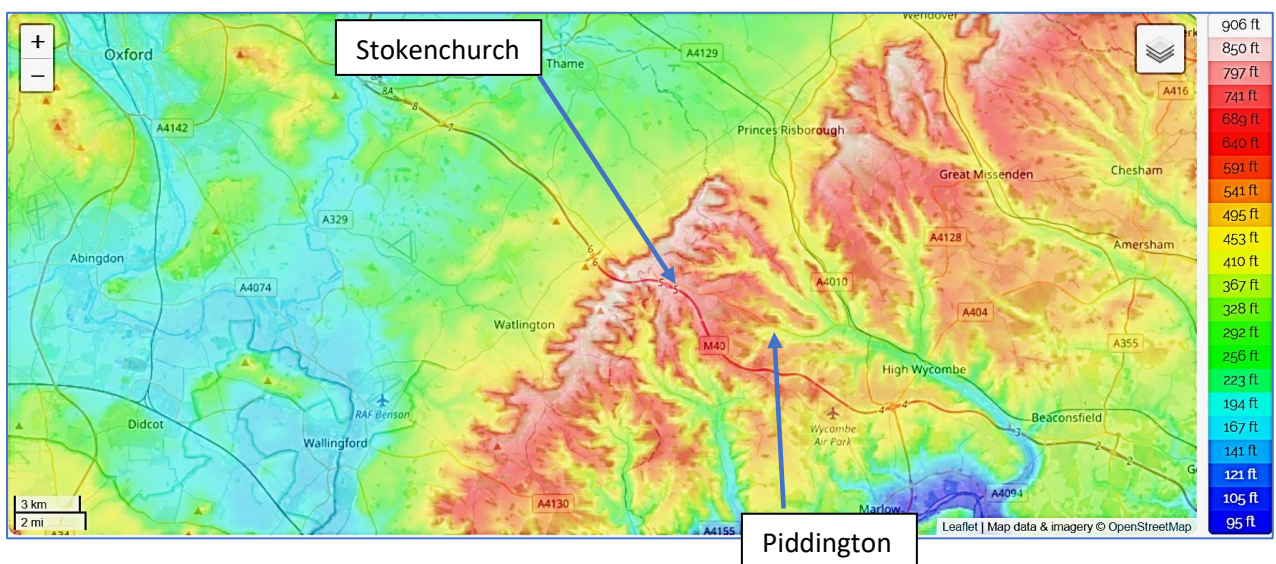

Topographic map of the Chilterns

Three different historical routes have been made up the steep hillside just west from Piddington :-

1. There is some evidence to suggest that a Roman road passed through the site of Piddington (see Occupation section below), then took a curving uphill route which is now a wide deep hollow-way, first north-west then turns south-west, which reduces the slope of the road.

A historian Charles Morris in 1970 thought he could see traces of a Roman road from Wycombe, running south of West Wycombe House and right through Piddington, then following the route of the later holloway. It would have been mostly lost when the holloway was eroded out.

Fig. 4. Desborough Castle to East Wood.
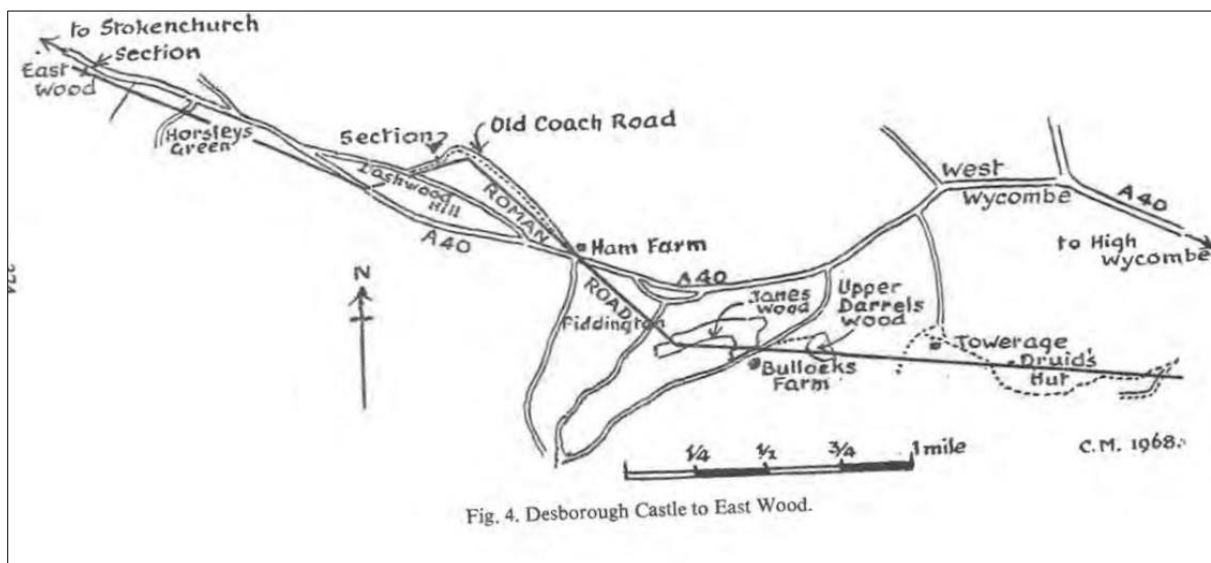
This hollow-way or sunken lane is seen clearly on the Lidar survey recorded for the "Beacons of the Past" project, see below. It is still a public right-of-way. In 1928 it was still described as "the ancient coachway".

The possible Roman road route, and various metal Roman finds and coins are shown on the Buckinghamshire Heritage portal.

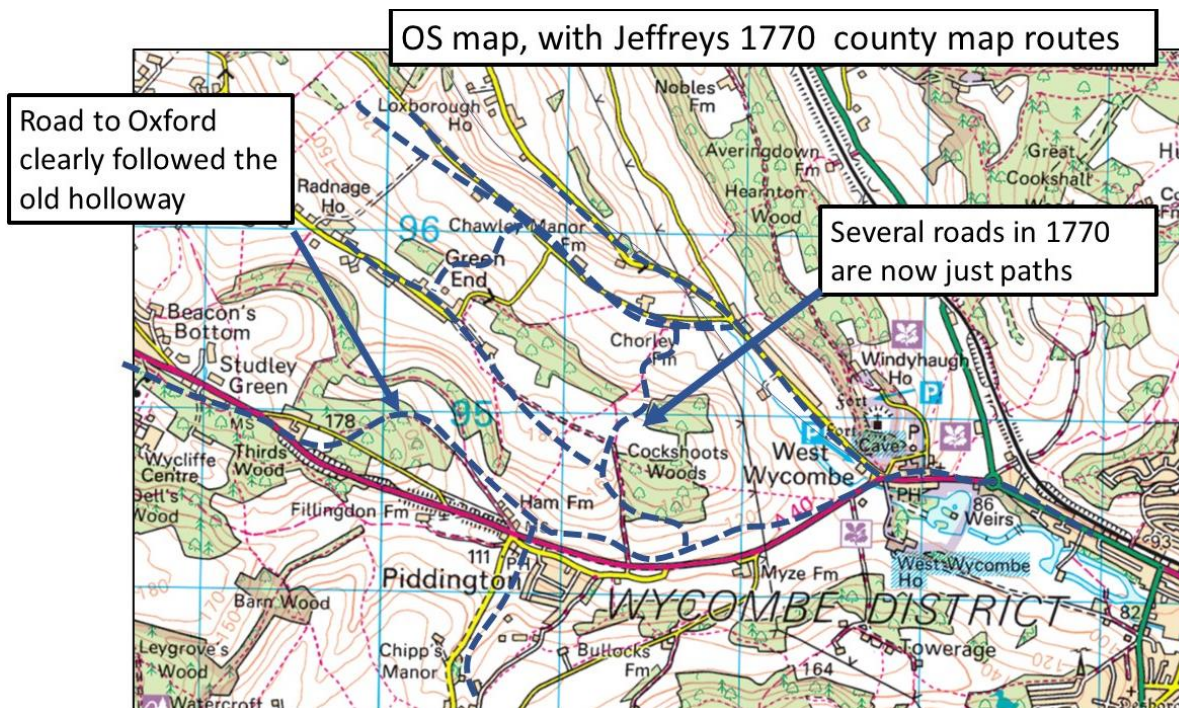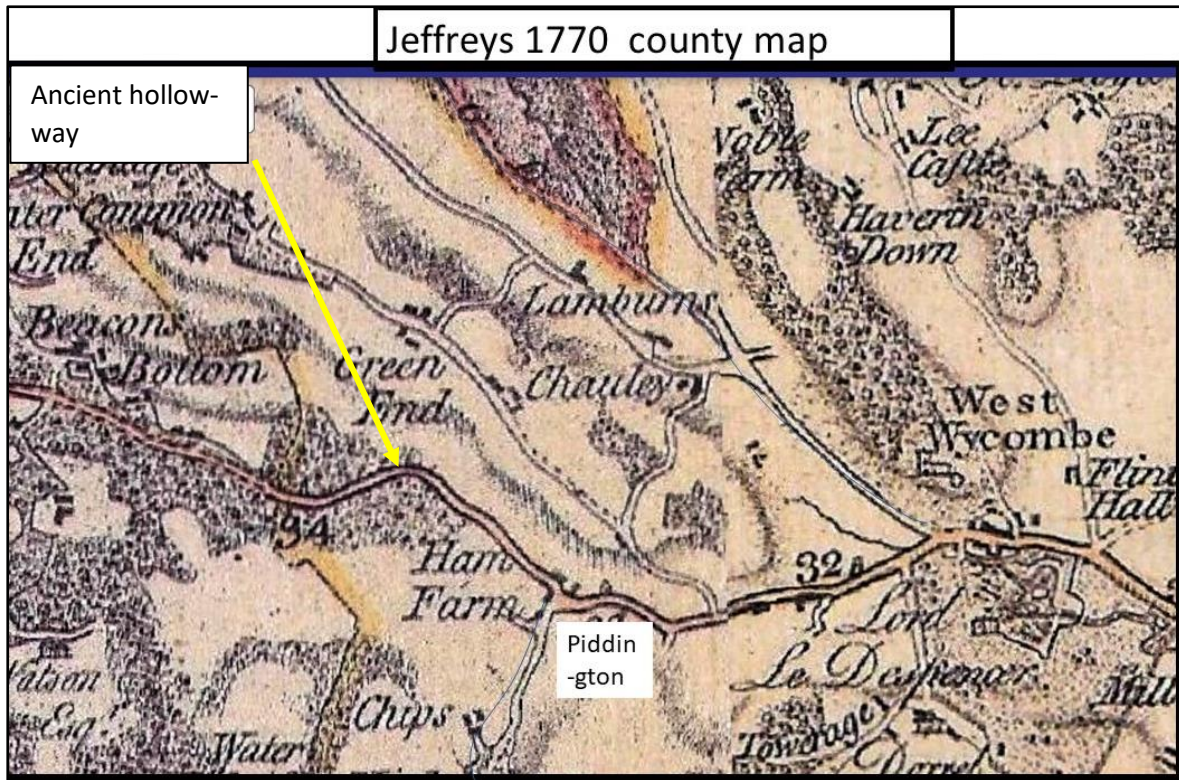https://heritageportal.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/globalsearch/index?q=roman
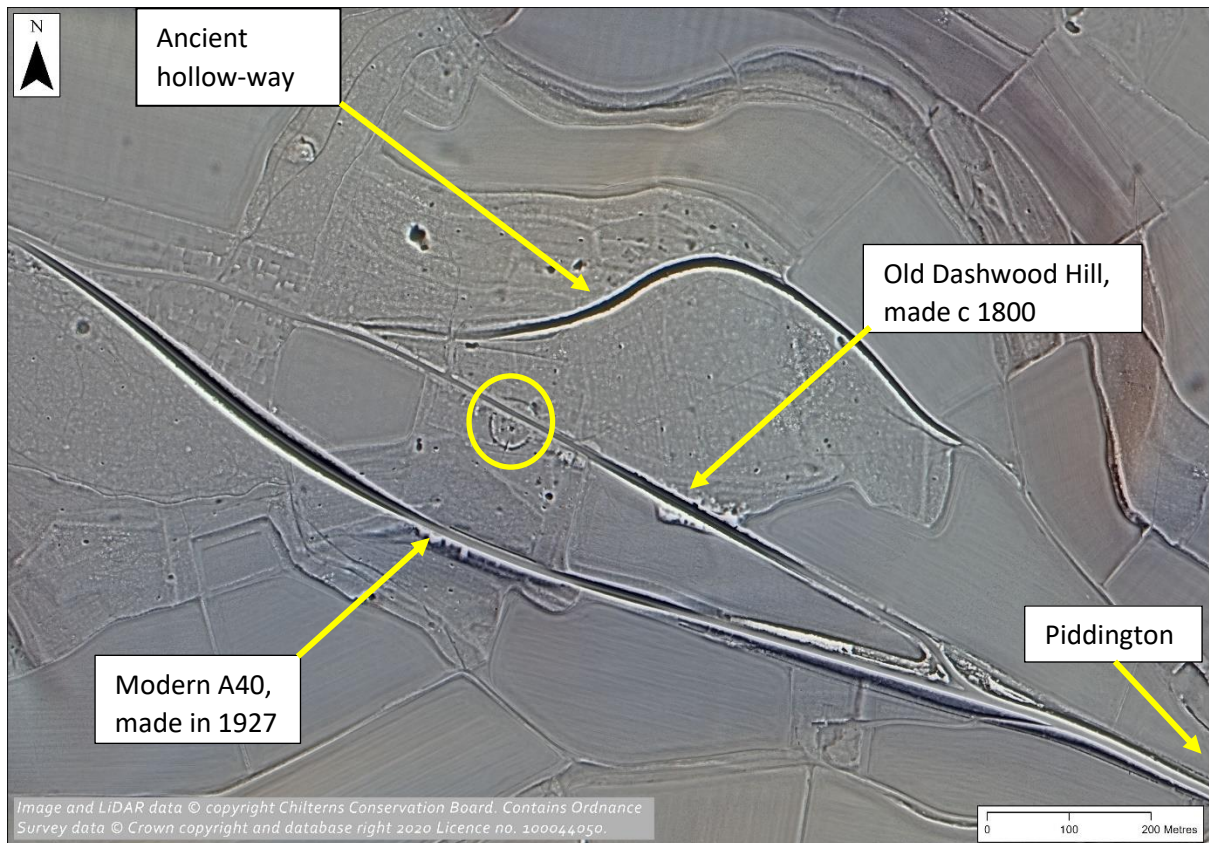
Lidar image showing local relief, which highlights the hollow-way and road cuttings. The yellow circle is the Fillington Wood medieval and Roman settlement, see below. Lidar image copyright Beacons of the Past/Chilterns Conservation Board.

The hollow-way is shown on Thomas Jeffery's 1770 map of Buckinghamshire. The road was probably eroded mostly by cattle-droving, this was a main route to bring herds of up to 600 cattle from Wales to London. Hollow-ways only form on hillsides, not level ground, because rainstorms can flush soil and stones down a holloway on a slope after the ground has been broken up by cattle etc. A heavy storm in 1936 washed down tons of rocks from a small hollow-way east of Piddington, covering both carriageways of the A40 knee-deep in stones, showing how these hollow-ways get formed.

https://swop.org.uk/dindex.php?pid=04446

Jeffreys 1770 county map

Ancient hollow-way

Piddin-gton

OS map, with Jeffreys 1770 county map routes

Road to Oxford clearly followed the old holloway

Several roads in 1770 are now just paths

In 1719, the Beaconsfield to Stokenchurch Turnpike Trust adopted the road, maintaining it in return for collecting tolls at a toll house just east of High Wycombe. The hollow-way has a much wider flat base than the typical v-shaped routes eroded by cattle, suggesting it was cut back to widen the road for coaches etc by the Turnpike Trust. The route now has mature trees growing in the base

which clearly show it has not been used by anything larger than walkers for a long time.


Hollow-way route NW from Piddington, the main route to Oxford and Wales until 1800.

There is a milestone dated 1744, further along the road where the Old Dashwood Hill road meets the A40 again.

2. Around 1800, a route straight up the hill was made from Piddington by the Turnpike Trust, (now called the Old Dashwood Hill) but this direction made the road slope very steep. It was also slightly cut into the hillside for a short stretch to reduce the gradient but is still around 1 in 10, so it was difficult for stagecoaches to climb and descend safely, so some may have still used the older curving holloway route for a while.

Labels on map: Ancient Hollow-way; Old Dashwood Hill, made c 1800; Piddin-gton
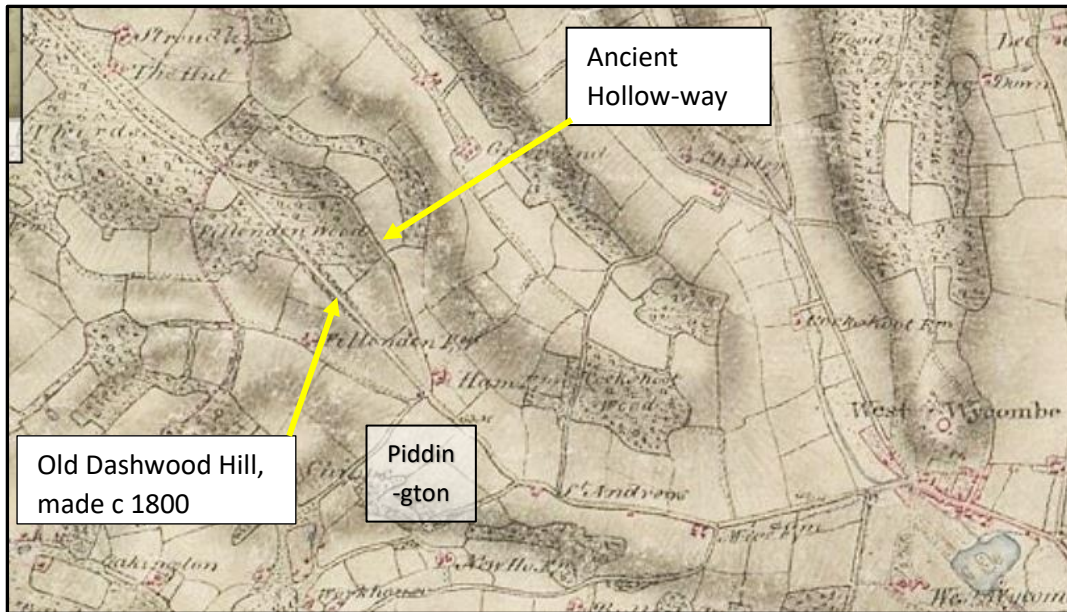
1812 map, earliest draft for the Ordnance survey. British Library collection.

The stagecoaches sometimes needed to borrow one or two extra horses from Ham Farm or the Dashwood Arms to pull up the hill, then the horses were allowed to gallop back down to home on their own !

In the SWOP photo database, there is a photo of the Old Dashwood Hill, the straight turnpike, seen from the Dashwood Arms. The modern A40 route bears off slightly to the left and through a cutting.

https://swop.org.uk/dindex.php?pid=05115

Even with motor transport, sometimes lorries had to take half their load up the hill, then the drivers put the load on the roadside and come back for the rest. Motor coaches would often tell passengers to walk down the hill because it was too dangerous to drive down on ice with a full load.

3. The A40 route was improved again in 1925 by making a curved route round the south-west side of the hill, with an embankment and then a deep cutting in the chalk with the help of the technology of the time - a steam powered shovel running on a narrow gauge railway and small goods trains to remove the spoil. The A40 was described as London to Fishguard (and onto the ferry to Ireland), passing through the South Wales industry.

Search in the photo database https://swop.org.uk/swop/swop.htm for A40 and diversion to find lots of photos of the steam-powered digger and miniature trains.

At around the same time the A40 was straightened past Piddington creating a green space between the hamlet and road, reducing the nuisance from the traffic and making room for the allotments.

OS maps from 1922 and 1938, Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland

In 1946, a photo shows a family enjoying a picnic on the roadside up from Piddington, https://swop.org.uk/dindex.php?pid=06819 but the photo of the same spot only 14 years later in 1960 shows that a picnic would be a deafening experience. https://swop.org.uk/dindex.php?pid=76847

All these efforts to make the A40 straighter and flatter have only encouraged drivers to go faster, so a search for Piddington in the SWOP photos has many pictures of serious road accidents. The speed limit had to be reduced to 50 mph in 2022 to reduce accidents.

4. Finally the M40 was built around 1987, passing a mile south of Piddington and almost through Stokenchurch, with a massive and controversial chalk cutting. The M40 has at last taken most of the traffic away from Piddington.

Occupation history

Several Roman finds suggest that this route may have been used by the Romans. The Bucks Heritage portal can display a map of these

https://heritageportal.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/globalsearch/index?q=roman

A large Roman villa was found in the Rye at Wycombe (buried by the modern leisure centre!), and several Roman skeletons were found in Church Lane, West Wycombe which suggests a cemetery. Numerous Roman coins were found on the hillside facing West Wycombe house, west of Chorley Road, and more Roman coins and metalwork in the fields just west and east of Piddington.

Roman pottery shards were also found as the lowest layer at a site right on the Old Dashwood Hill route, called the "Medieval Settlement site at Fillington Wood", approx. 1 mile NW of Piddington, the yellow circle on the Lidar map, the third picture in this note. The large size of the shards suggests a Roman settlement, not just accidental scatter.

This site was used again in the 12th/13th century, dated by the large number of pottery finds. It has an impressive 60 metre-wide enclosure formed by a circular bank and ditch, which can still be seen clearly today. (The Old Dashwood Hill road was unfortunately cut right through the enclosure in 1800).

It was excavated from 1967 to 1974, the archaeological trenches were left open including one cut through the south side of the bank (the trenches are the dashed areas on this map).
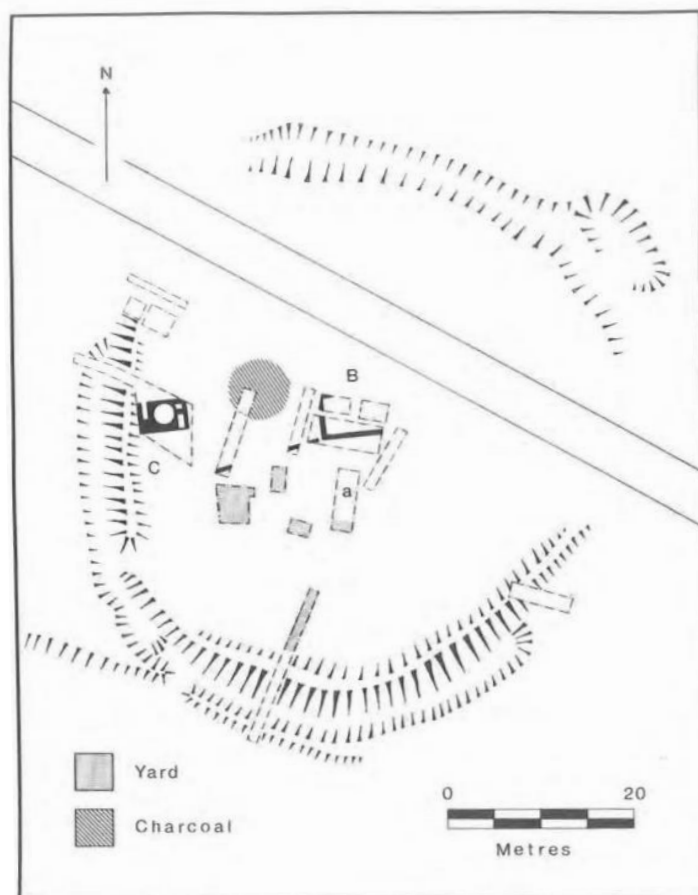
Fillington Wood enclosure, and finds within, cut by the Old Dashwood Hill turnpike. See sources below

Several buildings were found inside the enclosure, including a kitchen area. There was also a 3m wide stone dovecot nearby, keeping doves for their eggs, feathers etc. These were only allowed for a high-status settlement at this time, so it is a mystery why this little settlement had one. Two human skeletons and two other skulls were found about 8 metres down in a well or mineshaft.

The archaeologists were even able to identify people who lived here, from a tax document of around 1300. The tenant was "Walter of Silindene" (Filindene), one of his "villeins" or labourers was Henry of Filindene. Walter paid an annual rent of 5s 6d (27 1/2p) for two virgates (strips adding up to 20 acres). The site may have been abandoned due to the Black Death.

The large farmhouses around Piddington are listed buildings :- Ham Farm and Bullocks Farm 17th century, Lower Farm Cottage late 18th century, Fillingdon Farm from early 18th century. Most of the farms changed names, perhaps when the owners changed, except for Ham Farm. This site may have been named in early Saxon times, from the German word "Heim" meaning home.

In 1902, Benjamin North called his new factory the "Piddington Estate", presumably from Piddington Lane, and the whole hamlet soon came to be called Piddington. There is a farm off this lane, called Piddington Farm from 1864 in newspapers, but called Upper Style Farm in censuses. (It recently changed again to Oakridge Farm). Piddington Lane is first mentioned in 1865, so it isn't clear if the farm was named from the lane or vice versa.

The earliest record of the Dashwood Arms pub is on the census of 1841, long before Piddington was started. It was ideally placed for passing trade, at the junction with Chipps Hill road heading south, and they could lend out horses to help pull coaches up the hill. In some censuses it was called The Ham, but in the trade directories up to 1883 it was often called the Griffin's Head.

Final thoughts

This is being written in 2020, another historic year which will be remembered for the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns. When we first moved to Piddington it seemed quite remote from people and places to visit. But when we were only allowed to walk out for one hour a day in lockdown, it was a great location to explore the local footpaths and find all this history right on our doorstep.

Simon Cains, October 2020, Piddington.

Sources

Full history of Piddington and the North's furniture business in :-

"Piddington and Furniture" , by Simon Cains and Brian Robertson 2022, 100 pages. Copies available from simon.cains@gmail.com for £12, plus £2.70 postage.

Buckinghamshire Heritage portal
https://heritageportal.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/

Beacons of the past Lidar survey can be viewed here
https://www.chilternsaonb.org/projects/beacons-of-the-past.html

Newspaper archive https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/

Sharing Wycombe Old Photos https://swop.org.uk/swop/swop.htm

Stokenchurch in Perspective , editors C.J.H. Starey and P.G. Viccars. Covers the hamlets to Studley Green, and the traffic through Stokenchurch. Out of print.

Historical OS maps, free at https://maps.nls.uk/

A medieval settlement site at Fillington Wood, West Wycombe, by R.F. Parker and A.W.F. Boarder http://www.bucksas.org.uk/rob/rob_33_0_128.pdf

Fillington Wood medieval settlement summary
https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1014560

Links to details of objects found at the Fillington Wood settlement.
https://heritageportal.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/Monument/MBC625

Details of roman finds in fields just west of Piddington :-

 https://heritageportal.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/Monument/MBC14082

https://heritageportal.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/Monument/MBC14094

A Roman Road through South Buckinghamshire. Charles Morris. G. H. Hargreaves and R. P. F. Parker, in Records of Bucks vol 18 part 5, pages 367-385.

Roman burials in West Wycombe
https://heritageportal.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/api/LibraryLinkWebServiceProxy/FetchResource/47861/full_47861.pdf