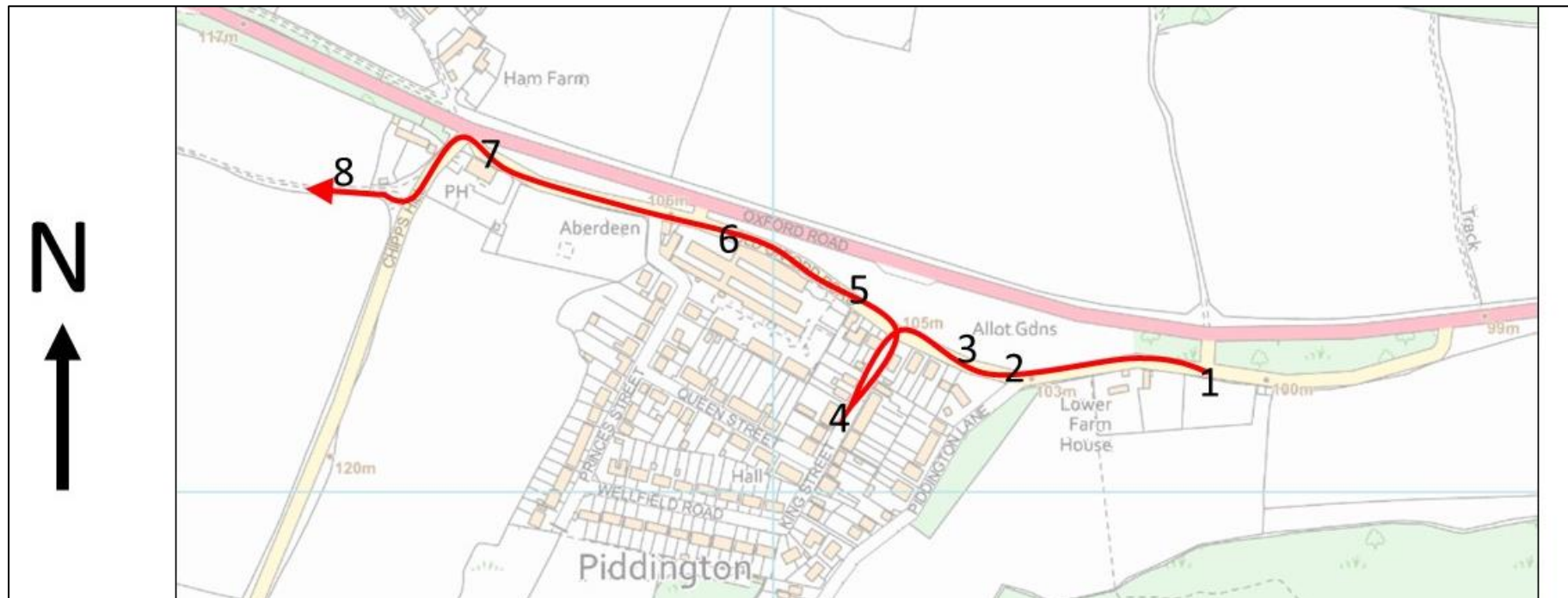


A history trail around Piddington

Piddington is very new compared to most of the villages around, just over 100 years old, but it has some interesting history that you can find by following this trail, and from lots of history websites. The trail is about 1km long. Children should go with an adult, as there are several roads to cross, and the Chipps Hill traffic can be very fast and appear suddenly. Please do not trespass on any private property.



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1. From Piddington, go along Old Oxford Road past the allotments and the farm, to the next turning onto the A40.

Across the A40 main road there is a path heading uphill, which you might have already tried. It is a “hollow-way”, the path is deeper than the fields.

On a map from 200 years ago in 1810, it is shown as a road going right up and over the hill to join the Chorley Road. It was

probably a “drovers’ road”, used to herd hundreds of cattle along to market. The cows’ hooves would break up the chalk, and heavy rain would then wash the chalk downhill, creating the hollow-way.

In 1936 there was a huge storm over Piddington that washed tons of stones down this gully and completely blocked the A40!



This picture was taken from the other side of the A40, looking back towards you. The workmen have cleared one side of the A40, but there is plenty still to do. So, you can see how these hollow-ways became so deep, broken up by cattle and washed away by rainstorms.

And also notice how there are no trees in this photo from 1936, it all looks quite bare. A few trees have just been planted.

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2. Walk back towards the junction of Old Oxford Road and Piddington Lane. Piddington was only started in 1903, it must have taken its name from Piddington Lane.

And you can guess why the Old Oxford Road is called that. It really was the old road going all the way to Oxford until 1924, when the new straight part of the A40 was built. Can you imagine if all that heavy traffic had to come right past the houses now? The new road is like a Piddington bypass, giving us the nice green space in front of the houses, and room for the allotments.

There were only fields at Piddington until 1903, when a big furniture factory owned by Mr Benjamin North had to move out from West Wycombe. He bought the land so that he could get a new factory built, and for new houses for the factory workers. He got the biggest house in Piddington, which had 9 main rooms when it was built. The house is on this road junction, usually well hidden by the trees except in winter.



3. Walk a few yards along Old Oxford Road to the first drive for another look at the factory owner's big house, up the drive.



There were three generations of Benjamin Norths – each one called their eldest son Benjamin, so it gets a bit complicated.

- The first Benjamin North was born in 1811, and had a very poor childhood in Thame working in the fields while he was a little boy, he eventually got a job working for a chair-maker and then became a travelling salesman going all over the country

on his horse and cart selling chairs. He finally got enough money to open his own factory in West Wycombe. By 1892 he had over 350 people working for him.

- The second Benjamin North was his son, born in 1842. He took over the chair-making business and had to move the factory out of West Wycombe to Piddington because he needed some extra land for a wood store. It was this Benjamin that built the factory and the first houses at Piddington in 1903.
- The third Benjamin North was born in 1867, son of the second Benjamin. He carried on the family business and lived in that big house from 1903. And he called his eldest son ... Benjamin!



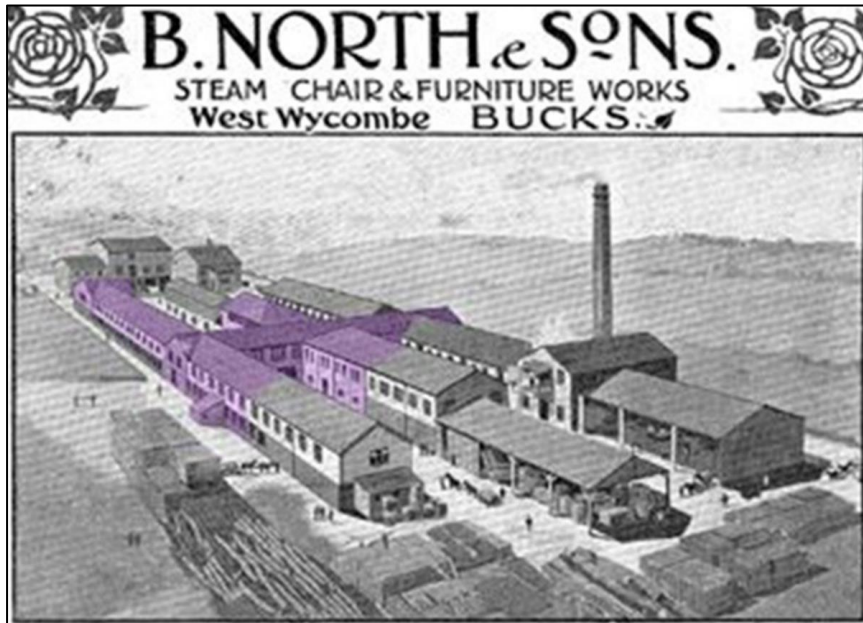
4. Before we see the factory, turn into King Street to see some of the earliest houses for the factory workers, also built over a hundred years ago. Number 9 King Street had 5 main rooms, so probably a kitchen, sitting room and 2 or 3 bedrooms, but they had Dad, Mum, three boys and five girls all living in that little house!

Mr North made some rules for people who wanted to live in Piddington, before they could buy a piece of land:

- No-one could build another furniture factory, to compete with his factory; and
- No-one was allowed to set up a pub in the village, because Mr North did not like people drinking, he thought it was bad for them.

5. Go back down onto Old Oxford Road and carry on to the industrial estate. The three rows of buildings are where the North's furniture factory was, the brick parts are still the originals from 1903. There used to be a tall factory chimney at the right-hand end of this picture, beside the road.





The next picture shows the factory when it was first built in 1903, before any Piddington houses, and you can clearly see that chimney. The Old Oxford Road is behind the chimney on this picture.

And notice how they had all the wood stacked up round the factory, where the car parking is now.

Copyright unknown

Walk further along the Old Oxford Road to look up at that white sign and see what the industrial estate is called.

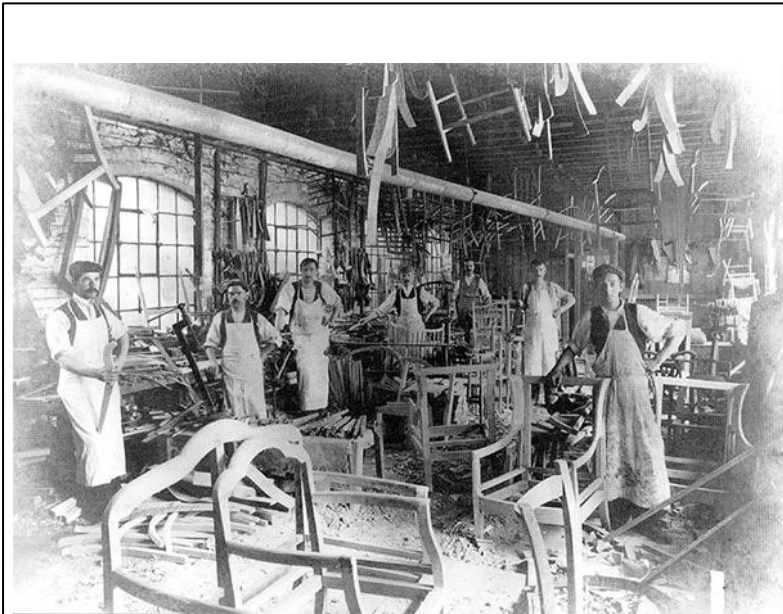
It is called the “Norths Estate”, so this remembers the whole North family, all those Benjamin Norths who really started Piddington from nothing, building a whole village on the fields.





This was the view in 1903, all the Piddington houses were built on this open field in front of the factory.

Copyright Wycombe Museum



This picture shows inside the factory soon after it opened, it looks pretty primitive. The men are all making wooden chairs.

From Davison Highley website

The men had to work 12-hour shifts from seven o'clock in the morning to seven o'clock at night, as well as Saturday mornings. There were not many houses in Piddington so most of the men also had to walk miles to work and back home every day.

In 1911 the only job that women were allowed to do was to make chair seat bottoms, by threading thin cane into a web, instead of a having a hard wooden seat. Some women did this at home, for only 2 old pence per chair, less than 1 new penny. By 1939 some women were allowed to use machines at the factory.

The North furniture factory in Piddington made luxury seats for two big theatres in London, and got the contract to make a lot of the chairs and stools for the last three royal coronations in Westminster Abbey, in 1911, 1937 and for our Queen in 1953. The most important guests got a chair, but the others had to make do with a stool. Some of these are on sale now for thousands of pounds.

The factory probably also made parts for the wooden Mosquito aircraft in the second world war, from 1941.

Carry on along the road, and notice how the older buildings are built in brick, and the more modern ones in metal. There were several fires at the factory, so probably when a brick part burnt down, it was built again using something cheaper.

In 1904 a fire was discovered at five o'clock in the morning, but there were no telephones, so a neighbour had to cycle all the way into Wycombe to tell the fire brigade! When the firemen arrived with a steam-powered pump, their hose would not fit the hydrant and they could not reach the water in the well, but after three hours they managed to put out the fire. There was another big fire in 1976 which put the factory out of work for months.



6. In 1980 a new furniture company took over the tenancy of the factory, you can see their name up there now, Davison Highley.

They make very expensive items for big companies, and even the sofas seen on some TV programmes !

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7. Continue along the Old Oxford Road to the Dashwood Arms pub, probably named after the Dashwood family who still live at West Wycombe Park. They used to own most of the land around here, and the whole village of West Wycombe. The pub is much older than the village, it has been here since at least 1841, so it is nearly 200 years old. The pub used to lend out horses to help pull stagecoaches up the steep hill, then the horses were left to find their way back to the pub on their own.

8. Cross the Chipps Hill Road to the fields, to another popular footpath in Piddington. In 1985 a metal detector club found 11 Roman coins and three pieces of Roman metal jewellery scattered in these fields either side of the path. So historians think this could have been near the route of a Roman road, about 2,000 years old, pretty close to the way we drive up to Stokenchurch now.

Websites You can find more about these places, and find photographs on these websites:

Old photographs

SWOP – Sharing Wycombe’s Old Photographs, all free to view. Search for Piddington.

<https://swop.org.uk/swop/swop.htm>

Historical sites

Buckinghamshire Heritage Portal shows a map of all the historic spots, then click on them for details. All free.

<https://heritageportal.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/map>

Old maps

Old maps of Piddington can be found here, a free service from the National Library of Scotland.

<https://maps.nls.uk/>

Old newspapers

If you want to find newspaper stories, they are on this website, but you have to pay to see them.

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>

Davison Highley furniture factory

<https://www.davisonhighley.co.uk/>

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All modern photographs taken by the author.

The research for this trail was undertaken by Simon Gains for The Woodlanders' Lives and Landscapes project, a partnership between Bucks New University and the Chilterns Conservation Board. The project is part of the Chalk, Cherries and Chairs Landscape Partnership running in the Central Chilterns, funded by the National Heritage Lottery Fund <https://www.chilternsaonb.org/woodlanders-lives.html>

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