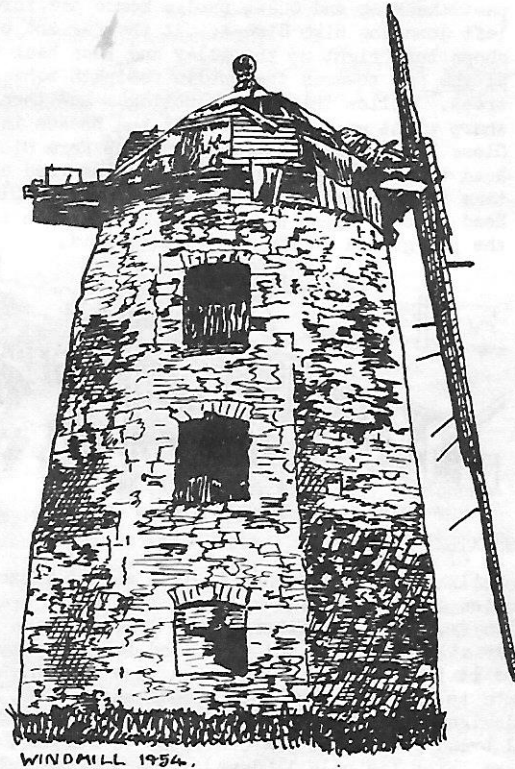


# WHEATLEY WALKABOUT



## No.2 The Howe

A circular walk to the south and east of the village which has outstanding views and passes the old Wheatley Station and the windmill. It is arranged to begin at the car park in Church Road (50 yards west of the Church) but can of course be joined anywhere. This leaflet describes the history of some of the places of interest along the way. Distance  $2\frac{1}{4}$  miles.

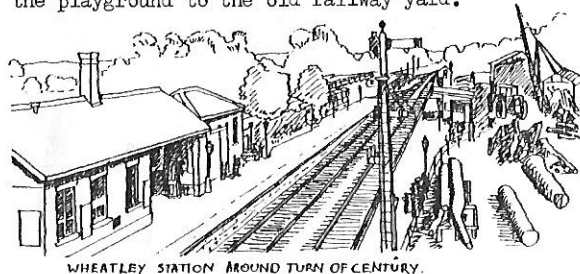
Compiled by Gilbert Littlehales with historical advice from Dr W O Hassall.

PUBLISHED BY THE WHEATLEY SOCIETY ENVIRONMENT GROUP  
1979

PRICE 15p.

(NOTE: parts of this walk follow footpaths which can become muddy or overgrown at times, but alternatives along public roads are described in brackets.)

Walk down the public footpath from the car park past the King and Queen public house and turn left down the High Street. At the far end of the shops turn right up the alley and then bear left at the end towards the public footpath beneath the trees. Follow this to the cottages and then turn sharp right up the path behind the houses in Farm Close Road. (Alternatively walk up Farm Close Road to the 'T' junction.) Cross the road and take the footpath which begins where Farm Close Road becomes Beech Road. Keep straight on past the playground to the old railway yard.



#### 1. WHEATLEY STATION

This railway line was opened in 1864 as the Thame-Oxford extension of the Wycombe Railway. This was a branch to High Wycombe and Thame from the Great Western Railway at Maidenhead. It was owned by a company who leased it to the G.W.R. (The main line from High Wycombe to Paddington was not opened until 1906.) It was designed by Brunel's firm and was constructed to his usual broad gauge, but was converted to standard gauge 6 years later (in only 11 days). The village welcomed the railway, especially the vicar who was reported to believe it would "raise the character" of the people of Wheatley and teach them punctuality!

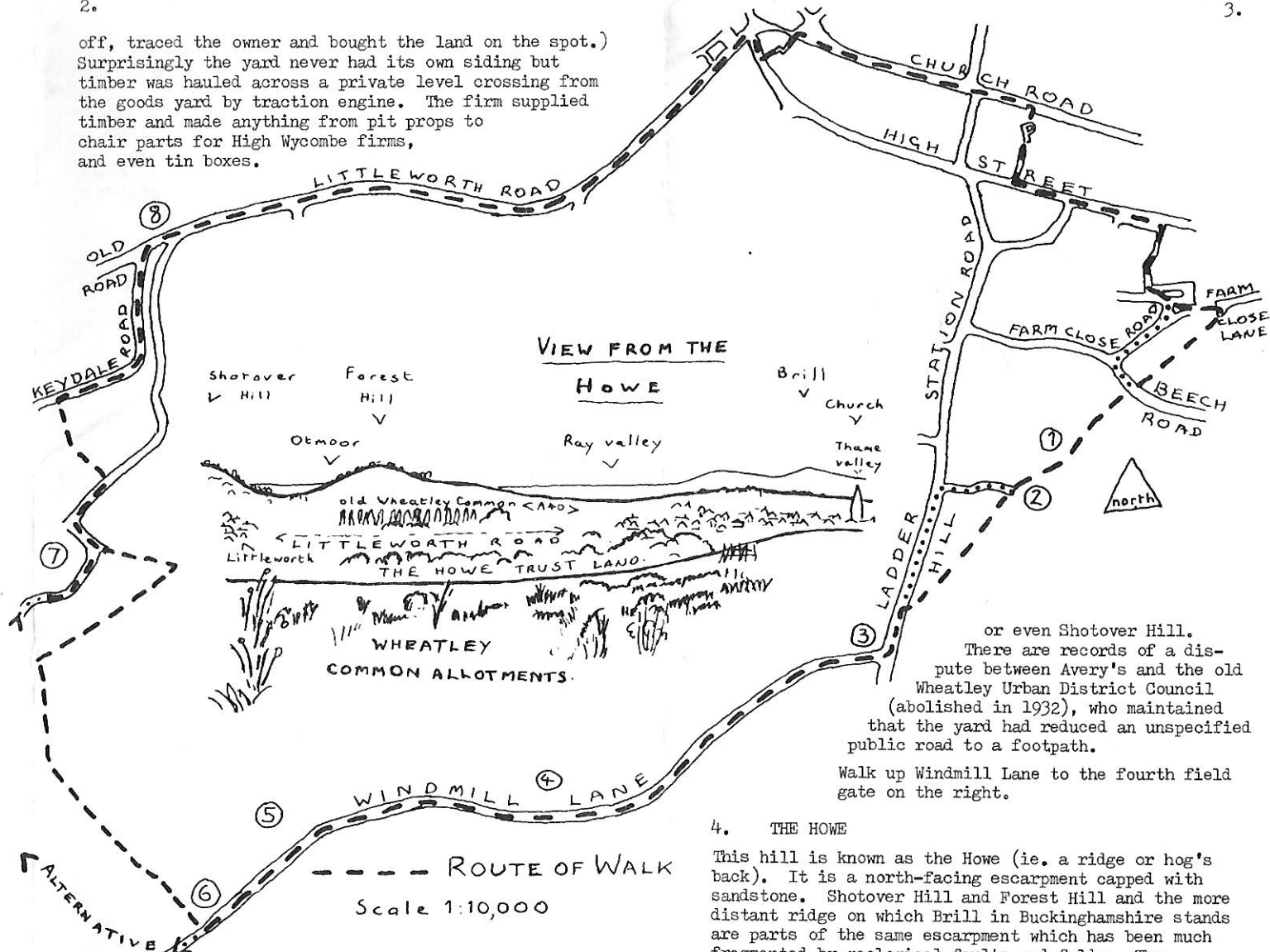
The railway was a country branch line with a single track, but the station had a passing loop and two platforms. The buildings were modest and there was no footbridge. The yard had two sidings and a goods shed. The last passenger train ran in January 1963 and the line closed to goods in 1965. The track was lifted in 1969 and the Ladder Hill bridge became unsafe and had to be demolished in 1971.

Cross the goods yard and the ends of the old platforms and follow the footpath to the right of the timber yard as far as the gates.

#### 2. BAYNES' (FORMERLY AVERY'S) TIMBER YARD

The Wheatley area was once well-known for its large oaks and elms and woodworking became a cottage industry. William Avery was a High Wycombe chairmaker who had gone into the timber business. Wheatley had good rail access to High Wycombe yet less competition for timber, so he moved here in 1893. (The tradition is that he saw the site from an Oxford train at the station, jumped

off, traced the owner and bought the land on the spot.) Surprisingly the yard never had its own siding but timber was hauled across a private level crossing from the goods yard by traction engine. The firm supplied timber and made anything from pit props to chair parts for High Wycombe firms, and even tin boxes.



Cross the road and walk up the footpath to Ladder Hill, then continue for a few yards to the junction with Windmill Lane. (Alternatively turn right along the road and then left into Ladder Hill.)

#### 3. LADDER HILL AND WINDMILL LANE

Ladder Hill has always been the road to Cuddesdon, and until Wheatley became a separate parish in 1854 the long drag up the hill was a notorious feature of local funerals. Windmill Lane is referred to as "an old turnpike" in old records, but its history is unknown. It may have continued down the footpath you have just climbed to Farm Close Lane and joined the London Road at Crown Square. Windmill Lane could have been used as an alternative route to Oxford avoiding the High Street

or even Shotover Hill.

There are records of a dispute between Avery's and the old Wheatley Urban District Council (abolished in 1932), who maintained that the yard had reduced an unspecified public road to a footpath.

Walk up Windmill Lane to the fourth field gate on the right.

#### 4. THE HOWE

This hill is known as the Howe (ie. a ridge or hog's back). It is a north-facing escarpment capped with sandstone. Shotover Hill and Forest Hill and the more distant ridge on which Brill in Buckinghamshire stands are parts of the same escarpment which has been much fragmented by geological faults and folds. The marshy valleys of Otmoor and the rivers Ray and Thame have been eroded into the softer clays below. At the foot of the hill the Wheatley valley is also cut into clay, but the lower hill beyond is formed of the Wheatley Limestone. The older part of the village was built on a projection of this limestone into the valley where there are dry foundations, but the new estates spill over onto the clay.

The fields sloping down to the village were awarded to the owner of the Manor House in 1813 by the Enclosure Commissioners, as compensation for the loss of alleged manorial rights. (In fact these rights appear to have lapsed by the 16th century, but he had influential connections!) In 1846 he sold the land to the Shotover Estate, who exchanged it for

Wheatley Common in 1879. The Howe Trust was then set up under the auspices of the Charity Commissioners to administer the Howe on behalf of the village. The Trust has let the land as grazing and allotments ever since and the proceeds are used to assist local people and organisations. The allotments are still known as Wheatley Common Allotments.

Continue along Windmill Lane until the windmill is seen in the garden of a house on the right.



#### 5. THE WINDMILL AND OCRE AND IRON WORKING

The Windmill dates from at least the 17th century and is first recorded in 1671. It has had various alterations, but some of its machinery is dated 1784. It has been owned by the Cripps family since 1857 and they still live in the mill house adjoining. It is an unusual octagonal building and originally had four sails covered with canvas and a copper dome. It has not been used since 1915 and was badly damaged by a storm in 1939, but a restoration society was formed in 1977 and they are now working on it.

The mill also drove separate machinery for grinding ocre outside the building. Ocre is an iron ore, either red or yellow, used for colouring paint. Yellow ocre is found both on the Howe and on Shotover Hill and is of exceptionally high quality. It was once widely exported from Wheatley, and this is why Oxfordshire wagons were traditionally yellow. An ocre pit once adjoined the windmill but was filled in to make the garden of the house to the east.

The iron deposits have also been of interest for smelting. There are traces of old furnace slag on Shotover Hill. It has been suggested that Abingdon Abbey's main reason for acquiring the parish of Cuddesdon from the King in 956 AD was to work iron (the abbot, St Aethelwold, was a metal worker by trade) and the field to the south of Windmill Lane is still known as Bishop's Piece. As recently as 1875 a company was set up to extract ore from this field, but it proved to be uneconomic.

Continue along the lane as far as the track which enters from the left.

#### 6. ANCIENT TRACKWAY

This track is at least 1000 years old. It is mentioned as the boundary of Cuddesdon in the original charter of 956 AD and is still the parish boundary between Wheatley and Horspath.

The shortest route is to turn right down the footpath along the east side of the hedge. This descends across fields to Littlemore, turns right along the back fences of the houses, and then sharp left down a track to the village street. (The longer alternative to continue along the lane and then turn right down the road into Littleworth is perhaps a prettier approach to the village.)



#### 7. LITTLEWORTH

The hamlet of Littleworth was first mentioned in 1625 but its origins are uncertain. It lies at the junction of the ancient parishes of Cuddesdon and Horspath with the royal forest of Shotover, and the theory is that the earliest inhabitants settled here to try to evade the jurisdiction of the crown or of a particular parish.

However the village is now firmly part of Wheatley and in 1834 the village workhouse was built here. Littleworth was the home of the Wheatley Morris Men whose tradition died out at the end of the 19th century. (Reputedly because the Bagman (treasurer) ran off with the money.) Fortunately two members lived until the 1920s and Cecil Sharp recorded many of their dances including the famous Wheatley Processional. The Morris Men were revived in 1975 and are now flourishing.

Walk down the village street towards Wheatley. Turn left just after the last house down a public footpath (crossing the stream and the course of the railway) to Keydale Road. Turn right and continue to the road junction.

#### 8. WHEATLEY COMMON

The stream that later flows under Wheatley High Street emerges from a culvert on the other side of the road. At this point it is known as the Common Brook because it enclosed 20 acres of common that were given to Wheatley in compensation for the loss of grazing rights in Shotover Forest. During the 19th century there were frequent disputes and even riots over who could use it, and the Shotover estate disliked the arrangement because it gave poachers a legitimate excuse for being in the area. The exchange for the Howe Trust Land was only effected after various abortive schemes and much controversy. The nearer part is now the playing fields of Wheatley Lower School, formerly the County Secondary School.

Turn right down Littleworth Road towards Wheatley. At the cross roads turn right down the High Street and then immediately left up an alley to Church Road. (This avoids the dangerous corner by the Sun Inn.) Turn right at the end and continue down Church Road to the car park.