

Mortimer Heritage Trail

Walk 1: Stratfield Mortimer 3.75km (2.5 miles)

This is the first of two moderate walks identifying interesting properties and places. This trail focusses on **Stratfield Mortimer**, the original part of the village. The walk starts at the **Fairground Hall car park** (1), marked on the blue route on page 5, at the edge of the Mortimer Common Fairground, a centrally located historic open space amenity. Once used for horse fairs it became designated as a fairground in 1802. From the car park (1) walk along the pavement towards the War Memorial. At the junction with Hammonds Heath, the pond contains two small brick walls. From one, a culvert leads eventually down to Foudry Brook, near the railway station. The other was for the overflow from the water tower which stood just across The Street (now the entrance to the new housing development). The water tower was the first public amenity to be provided in the village. Domestic water was drawn from the wells on each property when village development began in the 1880s. Mains sewage disposal was not provided until the 1960s so waste disposal was “bury it in the vegetable plot”. This led to outbreaks of cholera and typhus in the early years of the 20th century. The piped supply was started in 1914 and finished in 1918 – 1920. Every morning Jimmy Jarvis cycled down the hill to the pumping station (you will see this later in the walk) and turned on the pump to take water from the storage tank up to the water tower. He would then cycle back up the hill and wait for water to appear in the overflow. He would then cycle back down to the pumping station and turn off the pump.

Turn left into Hammonds Heath. Almost immediately on your right is **Chestnuts** (2), built around 1805 as two cottages by the Hunter family for their employees. They were some of the first houses to be built adjacent to the newly-enclosed common. After about 150 yards, past “Dragon’s Lair” take the footpath on the right through the woods. At the far edge of the woods take the path that’s ahead but bearing slightly right. It has a low fence to its right and a hedge to its left. You’ll pass through three “kissing gates”. Note the location of the path to the left at the third gate, but continue ahead following the path. At the open field, with a path gate in the distance, you can see to your right through the hedges **Abbeycroft** (3). It was built as a vicarage at the start of the 18th century to replace Saddlers that’s at the foot of The Street. In the 19th century Abbeycroft was modified to become a preparatory school for Eton College and adapted to provide accommodation and classrooms for up to 20 pupils. The vicar at the time was the Revd. Harper who had 14 children and later became Bishop of Christchurch, New Zealand and finally Archbishop of New Zealand. More recently it was lived in by members of the Lambton family and racing driver Nick Williamson.

Retrace your steps to that third kissing gate and turn right. Go through the wooden gate, bear right through Wheats Farm (have a good look at the woodwork in the big barn if you get the chance to seek permission), passing between buildings and continue down the track, forking right at the junction. You’ll see Wokefield Park in the distance to your left. This was the home of the Palmer family who together with the Huntleys made biscuits in Reading. Later it became an approved school (borstal) for the London Borough of Brent; it is now a hotel, golf and conference centre. When reaching the road, you will see **Wern Cottage** (4) on the left, originally a pair of cottages owned by Eton College until sold with the rest of the Rectorial Glebe (church land that provides an income to the vicar) in 1879. Its records go back to 1612. The advowson for Mortimer Parish was granted by King Edward IV to Eton College to provide funds to support

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the College. Eton became responsible for appointing the Vicar to the living and for the upkeep of the church. Lands within the Parish were allocated for this purpose (the Rectorial Glebe) which included College Piece, seen in Walk 2. The other land owners in the Parish provided a tithe, typically 10% of their produce, to support the Vicar and the Church.

Cross straight to the footpath at the end of which is a timber clad house on your right called **Saddlers** (5). This was the vicarage in the 17th century and beside it stood the tithe barn. The Revd. Joseph Haycock lived here in comfort during his long stay as Vicar. During his tenure his house was considered delapidated and Abbeycroft was built as the Vicarage. But he preferred the comforts of Saddlers and stayed. The fact that it is still standing today is a fitting tribute to his judgement. Later it was the home of Walter Long who was a famous harness maker and saddler. Mrs. Long was renowned in the district for her home made lemonade.

Turn right and walk towards the mini roundabout. To your left is the white **Pumping Station** (6) that supplies Mortimer's drinking water from a borehole that goes down to the chalk 250 metres below. If you look across the fields behind the pumping station, you can just make out the roof of the Great Barn at Great Park Farm. This was a stud farm for the breeding of heavy horses during the Wars of the Roses. It was part of the Manor of Mortimer that Henry VIII gave to each of his six wives in turn as part of their dowry. Not many of them lived to enjoy it. At the roundabout turn left and walk up the hill to the **Railway Station** (7) on your right.



Figure 1; Mortimer railway station

This is the last known surviving example of Isambard Kingdom Brunel's design for a small station. The Duke of Wellington, when given the Stratfield Saye Estate, that lies next to Mortimer, by a grateful nation, decided he didn't want the railway near his house so Mortimer became his local station. The Duke did however use the station frequently for his visits to London. Tri-ang, makers of model railways, made a station based on its design. Dr Who's assistant Sarah Jane Smith (Elizabeth Sladen) is seen arriving here in 1974's 'Planet of the Spiders'.

Return to the roundabout. Opposite you is the original **post office** (8). Turn left up the Street past the old post box. The white house before the Cinnamon Tree was once the home of Mr. Gilbey the gin maker. The **Cinnamon Tree** (9) on your right is the oldest pub in the village living through many names in its long life from The Horne to the Railway Hotel, when the railway arrived, to The Fox and Horne and is now an Indian restaurant. At the rear, the village bowls club had a three-rink green. To its left stood a wheelright. Further along **Harris House** (10), formerly Mr Harris' bakery, is where the culvert, fed from the pond at Hammonds Heath, erupted in 2007 creating a flood. This was one of the principal shops when village life was in this part of the village. The next house is Foudry House the striking large pink Grade 2 listed property formerly the home of Gordon Palmer, the Lord Lieutenant of Berkshire and his wife Lorna and family known to friends as 'Lor and Gor'. Gordon Palmer Avenue opposite, is named after him.

Take the gravel track on the left which leads to **St Mary's Church** (11), thought to date from the 15th century but completely rebuilt between 1866 and 1869. It is thought to be the sixth church on the site. Inside you will see the Saxon tombstone, which was unearthed during the re-build. Leave the churchyard and bear right to **Foudry Brook** (12) which runs over the remains of a hydraulic ram, which used to pump water up to the **Manor House** (Church Farmhouse) (13) that is visible beside the church gate.

The ram is on the site of a 13th century watermill. Note how the stream has been straightened to form the leat (a watercourse) for the mill. Cross the stream and look along the drive leading to **Ladyfield** (14).

The kerb on the right of the drive marks the site where the village fire pump was kept. The horse that pulled it lived in the paddock nearby.

Return to The Street and continue up the hill. On the corner of **Mortimer Lane** (15), in the field is a 'pill box' strong point (guard post) installed in the Second World War. There is an explanatory notice board. Lime Cottage, on the other side of the lane was a dame school (private preparatory school) which provided elementary education for a penny a day before national education came to Mortimer.

Further up the hill on the left **St Mary's School** (16) was started in the 1860s by applying liberal coats of lime wash to the walls of the old poor house to address the bug population. This was soon knocked down and a proper schoolroom and house for the headmaster was built by 1868, complete with a clock tower. The Benyons, as primary landowners in the Parish, provided the funds for the re-build of the Church, the construction of a proper school, a Men's Club, a work yard and many pairs of cottages for the accommodation of the workers throughout the village.

Next to the school is **The Old Police House** (17). On its right you can see the cell where villains were kept until they were transported to Reading on the train. One tried to be difficult by overnight systematically destroying all his clothes. But he was outwitted by the Mortimer constable who went to the farm and fetched a sack. He cut three holes in it and pulled it over the villain's head and off he went to Reading to his trial. Continuing up the hill, at the school children crossing sign is a house on your left, on the site of the **Fire Station** (18) built when the brigade first obtained a fire engine. A building behind was used for many years as the postal sorting office.

Passing Pitfield Lane, you will come to the entrance to **Mortimer Hall** (19) on your left, a place that's had many uses including a home for the blind, a school, a dormitory and now apartments. In the 19th century it was the home of Richard Fellowes who was a distant relative of the Benyons. An extraordinary chain of events left him as the heir to the Englefield Estate provided

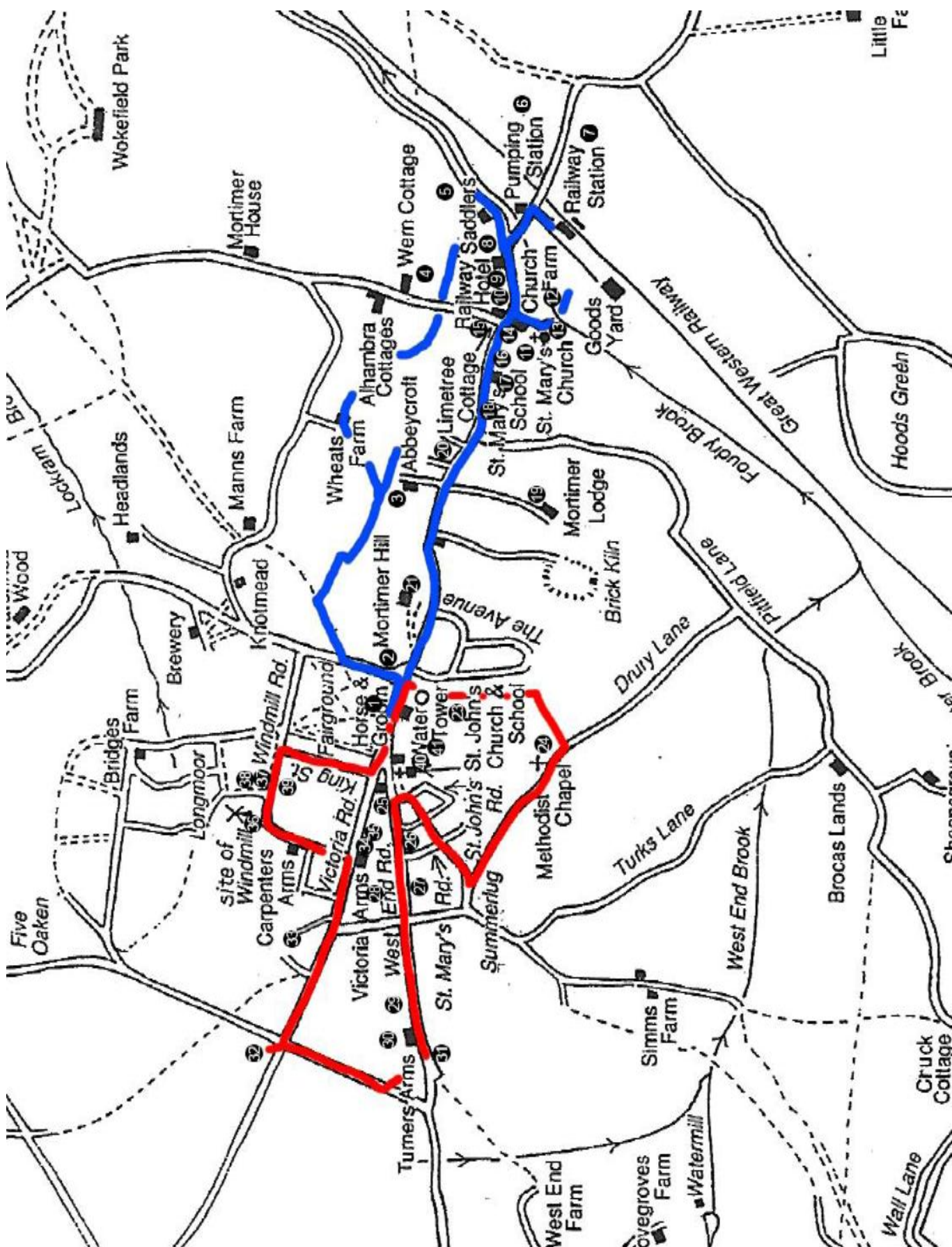
that he changed his name to Benyon. He did so and was known forever after as one of the lucky Fellowes. He was known to be the richest landowner in Berkshire.

Across the road next to the drive to **Abbeycroft** (20) was Thorp's shop at **Paices** (20) (now Abbots Lodge) which served as a tuck shop for the schoolboys attending Canon Cameron's boarding school at Abbeycroft. Canon Lovatt Cameron was the Vicar who replaced the Revd. Harper when he went with his family to New Zealand. Continue up the hill, with Abbeycroft itself visible in the distance on your right. Cross at the pelican crossing. At the brow of the hill, the road suddenly bears left. This was done to take the public road away from the frontage of **Mortimer Hill House** (21) the last 'big house' in the original village settlement, formerly lived in by the Lambton family, the gardens of which were once Mortimer Hill Fruit Farm that once boasted the most deliciously juicy harvests of Worcester Permain and Cox's Orange Pippin and now the site of an appropriately named housing estate.

Having passed through Stratfield Mortimer, the original village settlement, Walk 1 is now complete. Walk 2, also starting at the car park (1) takes you round Mortimer Common, the newer part of the village.

Note: all access is by public roads or footpaths. NO private land consents have been obtained. Some of the properties on the map have changed name or no longer exist.

This trail is produced by the Parish Council with thanks to Mortimer Local History Group who provided most of the content. There is more information in their book "Mortimer in the Nineteenth Century" available in the Library. If you have any feedback or suggestions to enhance this guide please call the Parish Council office on 07436 807543 or email admin@stratfield-mortimer.gov.uk



Walk 1 –blue route (nos. 1 to 21). Walk 2 –red route (23 to 41)

Map provided by Mortimer Local History Group. Route artwork:James Carter