



heritage open days

Self Guided Tour BRACKLEY



#HODs



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heritage **open** days

All content in this booklet was produced by members of the Brackley & District History Society, with graphic design and printing provided by the team at Brackley Town Council.

**BRACKLEY & DISTRICT
HISTORY SOCIETY**

in partnership with

BRACKLEY
TOWN COUNCIL 

OLD TOWN SELF-GUIDED TOUR

1. *Fire Station*

The Old Fire Station was built in 1887. It was the home of the Fire Service of Brackley until 2010 when they moved to new premises on the Oxford Road. It was owned by the National Trust, which sold it to the Town Council in 2013 who let it for commercial use, currently the Old Fire Station Café.



2. *Park*

The Park was originally part of the land owned by the Egerton Family – the lords of the manor and holders of titles such as the Viscountcy of Brackley, the Earldom of Ellesmere and the Earldom and Dukedom of Bridgewater – **VERY** confusing. The Egertons' other estates included New Hall, Worsley (near heavily-industrialised Salford – known for cotton, coal, brickmaking) and Stetchworth Park (near Newmarket) as well as Brackley. The first Viscount Brackley, Sir Thomas Egerton, was a high-ranking lawyer and judge during the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I.



The Ellesmere auctioned off their assets in 1915 to pay death duties when the 3rd Earl died, the park was due to be sold as a building plot. Luckily, the park did not sell and it eventually became owned by a Mr Collingham who lived in London but had once been a resident of Brackley.

He gave the park to the National Trust in 1928 and the National Trust entrusted its care and management to the Brackley Corporation (the Town Council of its day). The Town Council signed a new 99 - year lease on the park in 2013. By the way, we needn't feel too sorry for the Egertons – they still held on to Mertoun House in Scotland, Stetchworth Park and Bridgewater House in St James's, London and other Bridgewater properties. Note the three Wellingtonia (Giant Redwoods) – examples were also planted by Queen Victoria at Worsley in 1857 in memory of the first Duke of Wellington.

3. Winchester House



The site of Winchester House School, opposite the park on the other side of the main road, was given to the Egertons by George III as a reward for canal-building in Lancashire. It was redeveloped by the 3rd Earl of Ellesmere in 1870, who used it as a hunting lodge and weekend retreat! This impressive building has been home to Winchester House School, Brackley's only independent school, since 1922.

Before that, it was briefly St Edith's School for girls. Prior to its life as a school, though, it was Brackley's manor house. The original building was a 17th century tithe house and later, a hunting lodge. In the late 19th century, it was rebuilt and expanded by the Earl of Ellesmere. The only original part remaining is a Tudor doorway that faces the High Street.

4. Almshouses



In the 17th century, Brackley's prosperity was declining as Banbury's was on the rise - this continued for a couple of hundred years, to the extent that in 1860 in *Das Kapital*, Karl Marx referred to Brackley as

"one of the most down-trodden places in England for agricultural workers." Brackley's absentee lord of the manor, John Egerton the 1st Earl of Bridgewater and son of the first Viscount Brackley, was unpopular - as mentioned earlier, the family had substantial estates elsewhere, which also included Tatton in Cheshire and Ashridge House in Hertfordshire, one of the largest country houses in England, bought from Elizabeth I. Increasingly, the town looked for political guidance to Sir Thomas Crewe, Lord of the Manor of nearby Steane and Hinton, who was Speaker of the House of Commons.

In 1633, Crewe founded Brackley's Almshouses, providing accommodation for six widows of the town. In 1969, the almshouses were converted into four flats and still provide accommodation for the most needy in Brackley.

5. *St Leonard's (leper hospital)*

Another hospital that operated in Brackley was that of St Leonard, a hospital for those with leprosy. Whilst much smaller than the other hospitals, it was set up by Robert le Blanchmain, who had a son afflicted by the illness. The hospital was operational towards the end of the 13th century, although by the 15th century it shared the same master as the Hospital of St James and St John and it is thought they had merged.

The hospital is believed to have existed to the north of Halse Road, Brackley, about half a mile from the main hospital. Nothing of St Leonard's hospital has survived, although some stonework in a private garden may be from the hospital.

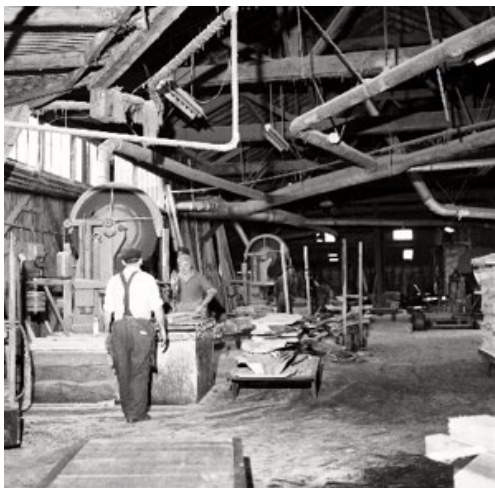
6. *Radstone Road (site of Bronnley factory)*

Luxury soap maker and royal warrant holder, H Bronnley & Co., in 1989 moved its factory from Brackley town centre to a new facility at the junction of Northampton Road and Radstone Road. The company relocated to Milton Keynes and the site of the factory was redeveloped for residential use after its closure in 2012.

7. Top Station

Brackley Central (Top Station) was opened by the Great Central Railway in 1899 as part of its main line from Manchester, Sheffield, Nottingham and Leicester to London Marylebone.

Brackley Viaduct, a magnificent 253 metre-long structure of black engineering bricks with 20 arches, carried the line over the River Ouse and what is now the A43. The line was closed in 1966 and the viaduct was demolished in 1978. The booking office and goods shed remain and, since closure has had various uses including tyre shop and, most recently, a café. The rest of the goods yard is covered by an industrial estate.



The Station Master's House stood alongside the station until it was demolished in the early 1990s.

Beyond Top Station, roughly where the BP garage now stands, was the seven hectare site of Brackley Sawmill.

Archaeological exploration has revealed Iron Age grain stores on the site.

8. Church Road

Once off the High Street at this point, you are in what is known as 'Old Town'. There is also a road called Old Town which you will reach later but this whole area is known by that name as it is the oldest part of Brackley.

The thatched houses that pepper Church Road give us a reminder of what Old Town would have looked like many years ago. Whilst most houses have replaced the thatch with Welsh slate, which is common across the town, there are a few remaining houses which remind us what old Brackley would have looked like – thatched cottages, a village green and a dominant embattled tower. Some of the original 18th and 19th century windows remain.

9. Village Green

It is thought that this small patch of green is the remains of the original Saxon village green. So, you are now standing at the heart of Historic Brackley, where communities have met



and dwelt for hundreds of years. Brackley got its name from a man, which is very unusual. The main manor was historically Halse, and one of its Saxon settlers, Bracca, moved and settled in a clearing or lea. The area became known as Bracca's Lea and has become Brackley - could

this area possibly be “Bracca’s lea”? Evidence suggests Roman activity here and down towards the river, where the Roman Way estate now stands, before the Saxons, but Brackley’s real roots seem to lie in the Saxon period. Furthermore, archaeological investigations in recent years have found Iron Age activity on Poppyfields, Radstone Road and the Sawmill site. The Normans settled in a different area of Brackley, nearer the river to the south, which became a separate part of the town.

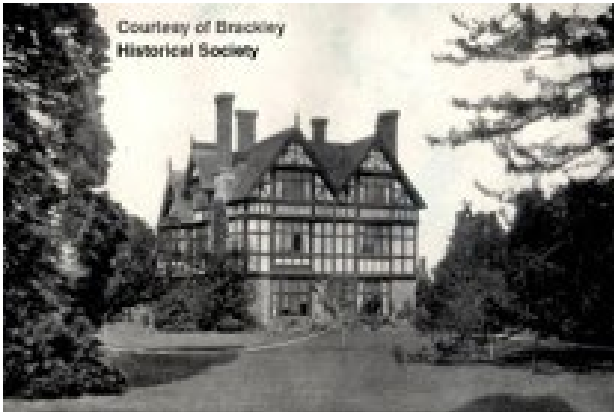
10. *Golden Spring Well*



This was one of Old Town’s many wells. The stone arch surrounding the wellhead has been here since the 13th century, with additions made by the Victorians which helped to preserve it. You can see two statues on the church tower:

these are St Peter (to whom the church is dedicated) on the right and St Hugh of Lincoln (more about St Hugh later). It is said that at night the statues come to this well to drink. Nearby is another of Brackley’s famous springs, called St Rumbold’s spring.

11. *Old Town & Egerton House Wall*



The road to the left of Golden Well is Old Town, the road that named the area. The layout of the streets heading off from Old Town dates back to the original Saxon village.

Behind the high wall that runs along the right-hand side of the road, once stood a beautiful mock Tudor house that was built around 1870 as the vicarage. It was later turned into a school, 'Egerton House', and sadly demolished in the late 1990s – before the Old Town was designated as a conservation area.

Walk along Old Town and turn right after the house called 'Little Ingrams'. Do not follow it now, but the road past the Church bears left onto a footpath that leads down to the River Ouse and continues over a footbridge to Turweston.

12. *Church of St Peter & St Peter's Churchyard*

The site of the parish church of St Peter may have been in use for worship since the 7th century, although nothing survives of the original Saxon building. It was built by the Normans around 1100 and as Brackley's wealth increased during the Medieval period,



it was altered and extended. The oldest remaining features include the Norman arch above the south door, which is inside the new modern extension.

Unusually, the entrance is via the west door under the tower, rather than through the north door, which is bricked up. Local myth says that the devil entered the building through that door so they bricked it up to stop it happening again. The congregation, on the other hand, were encouraged to enter through the new west door; this is unusual in that it faces west (towards the new town) and is at the foot of the clock tower that houses the church bells.

The carvings around the west door include two that point to another one of Brackley's mysteries - can you find them? One of the mysteries surrounds a priest who was murdered by a servant of the lord of the manor and was buried with his dog. The second mystery tells of a thief who sought sanctuary in the church but was tricked into leaving by a servant of the lord of the manor. The thief was then murdered by the servant.

Both murders would have been considered acts of sacrilege against the Church and the perpetrators would have been punished severely (there are gruesome stories about the penalties!). This may explain why there is a statue of St Hugh, Bishop of Lincoln, above us, as he was well-known for his rigorous enforcement of Church law.

The final part of the mystery concerns something that may be found in the churchyard to the left of the west door: in the grass under the hedge, you may find a grave covered by a stone in the shape of a man wearing

priestly vestments said to be the grave of the murdered priest. The remarkable Brackley poet, Mary Leapor (1722-1746) is buried in the churchyard; her gravestone has been lost, but she now has a permanent memorial in the Lady Chapel inside the church.

13. Watery Lane & spring

The path from the church to the south leads through a gate to a footpath up to Pebble Lane. This footpath is Watery Lane and passes another spring on the right - St Rumbold's spring. St Rumbold's Well is probably to the left of the path, in a private garden.

The story of St Rumbold is a strange one. The legend goes that the grandson of a Saxon king was born in King's Sutton in 662 and immediately began talking of his Christian faith and foretold his own death. When he died, just three days later, his wish was to be buried first in King's Sutton and then in Brackley, for one year each, before finally being laid to rest in Buckingham. A new well sprang up at each of his resting places and many miracles were said to have happened at St Rumbold's spring in Brackley.

Miracles aside, the waters help secure their place within Brackley history; it is said that the water from the spring ran down the road and subsequently gave the road its name!

14. *Pebble Lane*



Pebble Lane runs parallel to Church Road and leads back to the 'New Town' of Brackley. This, and Watery Lane, were once part of the main road between Banbury and Buckingham. On the 1760 map of the town, it is called 'Pibble Lane'. Pibble seems to have been an alternative word for *pebble* in the 15th-18th centuries, so the fact that it has changed is not so odd.

15. *Cottage Hospital*

The cottage hospital was first established in 1877 and had two beds. It was financed by local philanthropists and was taken over by the newly formed National Health Service in 1948, by which time it had 13 beds. It was taken over by a charitable trust in 1991.

After that, services decreased as funding diminished until the hospital was closed in 2015. The property was sold to be developed into the private dwellings that we see today. The new health centre near Sainsbury's in the north of the town carries out some of the old functions of the cottage hospital.

NEW TOWN SELF-GUIDED TOUR

16. *Master's Lodgings*

This building, called Master's Lodgings was used as the home of the master of Magdalen College School and as a boarding school for



many years. It is now a private residence, but in 1741 it was called Northgate House, the home of the Reverend Dr Littleton Burton. One of Dr Burton's servants, Henry Kerwood, was sacked for being 'saucy' to the Reverend. Instead of leaving, Henry went back to work with his mates. When he was discovered, the Reverend struck him with a stick and again told him to leave. Henry was so enraged that he picked up a pitchfork and hit the Reverend on the head. The Reverend died, but Henry was never caught, despite a reward of 10 guineas being offered for his capture.

17. *St John's Chapel*



This is Magdalen College School Chapel, the chapel of St John - the oldest school chapel still in use in England. The chapel is now only used by the school, with public worship having recently

ceased. You can see the remains of the elegantly carved Norman doorway. The chapel was built in around 1160 as part of a hospital that had been built around 10 years before. Both the hospital and this chapel were built by Norman Lord of the Manor: Robert le Bossu. Le Bossu was the son of Robert de Beaumont, Earl of Leicester, who, having fought with William the Conqueror, became one of the biggest landowners in England. When the hospital was built, it was quite a way from the Norman settlement of Brackley, which is further south towards where Tesco is today. It offered relief for the poor and hospitality to travellers. None of these buildings remain as only the chapel was properly cared for in the Middle Ages.

Robert le Bossu's son, Robert le Blanchmain, ensured the hospital and chapel's survival for many years and centuries to come by endowing the hospital foundation in Brackley with considerable land and property which gave the hospital an income. There is a story about Robert

Blanchmain that tells of what happened to him after his death in 1190 in Romania. Supposedly his heart was cut out, preserved in salt and placed in a lead casket and then transported back to Brackley.

Apparently, hundreds of years later, during some restoration works in 1836 a workman discovered an 'old box' with what appeared to be some 'old leather' inside and he threw it away! Magdalen College, Oxford, bought the chapel and hospital buildings in 1483 so they could finance their work in Oxford and have somewhere away from Oxford to send their scholars in times of plague. The school grew and grew over the centuries and always occupied buildings on or near this site. (the 1760 map shows the vast number of properties that were still owned by the college).

The building standing back from the road across a lawned area is Grade II listed and consists of the remains of a probably C16-17 house which has been altered and added to.

The buildings facing west are Grade II listed and consist of, in the centre, the remains of a partly rebuilt early structure and, to the right, work of 1896, the latter with the shield of arms of Magdalen College on it. The early part, which may date from C16 to C17, consists of a stone stack with 2 diagonally set moulded brick shafts, to the south of which, at eaves level, is a gable with stone coping, a finial and a 2-light stone mullioned window. The rest appears to be all C19 with "Tudor" headed stone windows.

This school was a boys' school, with the girls being educated at Brackley High - what was Southfields Primary Academy until its closure in July 2024. A new secondary modern was built on Waynflete Avenue. All three schools combined to create a co-educational school over two sites in 1973.

18. *Magdalen College War Memorial*

The War Memorial to the left of the chapel, honouring Magdalen College School's Great War dead, was dedicated in 1920, having been commissioned by H.P Stace, a local auctioneer, and his wife in memory of their son, Arthur. Arthur was a pilot in the RAF, killed in a flying accident in Belgium in 1919.



According to the 1760 map of Brackley, a pound for holding stray animals stood opposite the chapel and roughly where the public conveniences stand now was the site of the town's ducking pool.

19. **Brackley House**

This imposing building that stands dominant in the centre of Brackley was once home to Col. William Cartwright. Cartwright was the son of Thomas Cartwright of Aynhoe Park and his wife Mary Catherine Desaguilliers.

He was elected Member of Parliament for Northamptonshire in 1797 and later for the new South Northamptonshire constituency until he resigned in 1846.

Cartwright was Lieutenant-Colonel in the local militia during the Napoleonic Wars and was responsible for the Brackley Battalion.

The house stopped being a private residence and had many uses thereafter from municipal offices, a hotel and a retirement home before being converted into apartments in 2000.

What is less well known, however, is the part this magnificent building played in World War II. In 1939, due to the importance of the Bakelite company to the war effort, they evacuated their London Office and Brackley House became its wartime base. Brackley became the home of many of the staff and their families. Single staff were billeted at Oatleys Hall, Turweston and were bussed into town every day. The manufacturing base of their products (telecommunication equipment casing and other “plastic”-like material was extensively used in motor vehicles and aeroplanes) was at “shadow” factories in the Midlands.

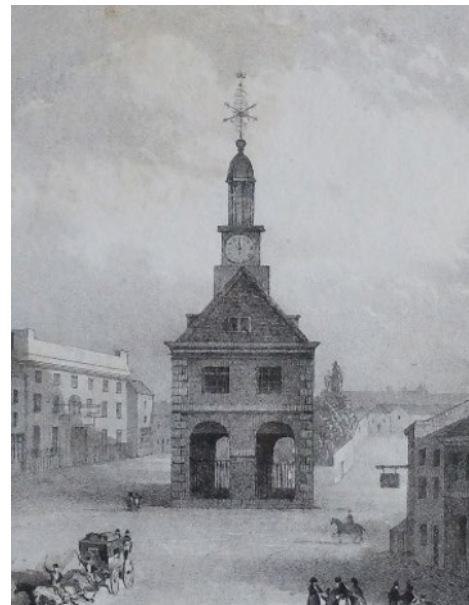
20. War Memorial

Brackley's war memorial was dedicated on New Year's Day 1920. Those who died in the Second World War were subsequently added to the memorial and, more recently, Nicholas Webster-Smith's name was added after his death in Afghanistan in 2009.

The war memorial has not always been in this position. It was originally placed further north on what is now the western side of the car park. This piazza, on which you are standing was also a car park; in 2006, there was a project to 'liberate' both the Town Hall and the War Memorial from car parks and create a more fitting setting for them both. The Royal British Legion led a re-dedication service after it was moved.

21. Town Hall

In 1706 the head of the Egerton family, Scroop Egerton, built a Market House at a cost of £2,000, he then sold it to the Brackley Corporation for a shilling. There was a Town Hall further up the High Street which was in a state of disrepair, so eventually that one came down and this Market House became known as the Town Hall. It was smaller when it was built, by one bay (one arched window). The arches were once open



doorways which allowed a market to take place under cover. It was primarily a wool and lace market and later became a corn exchange. In 1883, the great-great nephew of Scroop Egerton, Francis, commissioned the extension of the building. A fifth bay was added and the clock tower moved along. A further, extensive, restoration project, with substantial support from the Heritage Lottery Fund, was completed in 2018, ensuring the protection of the building for many future generations.

22. Market Place

The market place around the Town Hall has seen centuries of activity. Brackley was the second wealthiest town in Northamptonshire by the early 1300s, thanks to the wool industry; the market place accommodated a thriving livestock market into the 20th century. In 1784, the Reverend John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, stopped on his travels to preach outside the Town Hall. He records in his journal that “The congregation was large and attentive but seemed to understand me no more than if I had been talking Greek”. The piazza now hosts regular events such as classic cars shows, civic celebrations, a weekly market and performances on Bank Holidays by the Brackley Morris Men.

23. *Crown Hotel*

The Crown is the oldest inn in the town. It would have been very busy when the town was a key stop for coaches travelling from Oxford and Northampton. There was a very big fire in August 1649 which destroyed 14 apartments at the rear of the hotel and then spread north along the high street. The fire reached a chandler's shop in Hall's Lane and some £200 worth of tallow exploded. The inn was restored after the fire. In 1814, during a tour by allied leaders celebrating the initial downfall of Napoleon, the Prussian field marshal, Gebhardt von Blücher, stayed at the Crown where he was greeted by adoring crowds. A year later, Blücher was Wellington's second-in-command during the Waterloo Campaign.



24. *Goose Green & The Loco pub/café*



In December 1866, a well-attended political reform meeting at the Town Hall, seeking to give voting rights to all men aged 21 or over, was followed by a riot at the Locomotive Inn (on Bridge Street) that the two local policemen struggled until the early hours to suppress. Thomas Judge, the “Demon Grocer of Brackley”, was a leader of the reform movement; his family shop occupied the splendid Georgian property on Bridge Street that is now occupied by the Orchid Dental Practice.

25. *Bottom Station & Barrel Line*

Bottom Station (part of the line from Verney Junction to Banbury) was situated where the Fire Station and St James Road is now located. Opened in 1850, the station was on a branch line of the Buckinghamshire Railway (later the London and Northwestern Railway), between Bletchley and Banbury. In 1950, the station was used by King George VI and Queen Elizabeth (the Queen Mother) on their way to Silverstone. The station closed to passengers in 1961 and to goods in 1963.

No trace of the station remains, although the line of the railway follows the Pocket Park Walk alongside St James' Lake. It can also be traced from the end of Herriot's Farm Road to the A43 Brackley bypass.

The Barrel Line siding was used to connect the Hopcraft and Norris Brewery (now the site of houses in Old Brewery Walk) with the station yard. Horses were used to pull wagons up the 1 in 20 gradient to the brewery, the wagons being returned under gravity to the station yard. The line went out of use in the 1920s. No sign of it remains today.



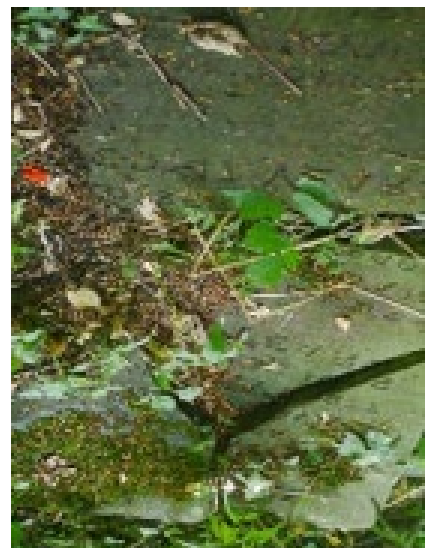
26. Castle

Further down Bridge Street, which becomes Oxford Road, was the site of the Norman settlement on what is now called Castle Mound, behind Tesco, opposite the New Fire Station. The area opposite St James' Lake occupied by allotments and pasture, is a scheduled monument and is the site of the castle. The castle, of which there are no visible remains, dates from around year 1110. It was a motte and bailey castle with a moat. At the crossing of the River Great Ouse, the castle was built to help the Normans suppress the English, it was destroyed around 1173 possibly in retaliation for the rebellion against Henry II by Robert le Blanchmain, 3rd Earl of Leicester.

In the eighteenth century, Philip Leapor, the father of the important Brackley poet Mary Leapor (1722-1746), operated a successful nursery business on the castle site. Mary will appear again in our story. The 1760 map shows that a number of properties in Goose Green were owned or occupied by a "Leapor", so it is likely that Mary lived there.

27. St James' Church

A castle church, St James', existed in one form or another until the 1930s, near to the site of the new Fire Station (opened in 2010); there are still some grave markers in the wooded area next to the Oxford Road.



28. *St James' Lake and Pocket Park (east end)*

St James' Lake is in the probable position of the castle moat and fishing ponds. The Pocket Park follows the old railway line, which has been removed.

29. *Banbury Road*



On the corner of Banbury Road and Bridge Street, you will see a black-and-white mock Tudor building with an armorial inscribed "BT 1895". The building has nothing to do with telephones, but actually housed the local office of the Bridgewater Trust and a row of shops. A few

metres along Banbury Road, at the Saffron Indian restaurant, you will see another fine stone carving inscribed "*The Statuaries*". This may have been where Edward Timms, the father of Flora Thompson, the writer of "*Lark Rise to Candleford*", worked as a stonemason in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The large stone building at the junction of Banbury and Manor roads housed the Old Police Station and courthouse. It is Grade II listed, built in the 1850s in a Tudor style, similar to the Victorian developments at Magdalen College School. It has now been converted to residential use.



If you walk along Banbury Road for another hundred yards or so you will find on your right a neo-classical building bearing the date 1836. This too is Grade II listed and was originally the United Reform Church. It has now been converted for residential use.



Much further down, past Westhill Gardens on your right, you will find a lane on the left, adjacent to a bus stop. This leads past some private houses to the western end of the Pocket Park at a bridge over the line of the railway, immediately before the new housing development.

30. Manor Road

Manor Road is one of the oldest streets in Brackley, it runs parallel to the High Street so would have been one of the first main residential roads. This area also has many non-historic elements, but everything is inside a conservation area that is protected and subject to tighter planning rules. Waitrose and the flats above it, stand on the site of one of Brackley's larger breweries and the original Bronnley soap factory (before the latter relocated to Radstone Road), and reflect their industrial shape.

31. **Waynflete Avenue and Brackley Workhouse**

Here is the second site of Magdalen College School, in an estate that is a post-war addition to the town.

Incidentally, the road here is named after William Waynflete who founded Magdalen College, Oxford in the 15th century and so has links with our Magdalen College School, too. The Brackley Workhouse stood in what is now Westhill Gardens, down Waynflete Avenue. It was opened in 1837 and came down in the 1930s. The Brackley Urban District Council minutes of 1888 record that a request was made for the newly founded Brackley Sanitary Authority, who were providing better mains water to the town, to provide mains water to the workhouse at a reduced rate due to it being a long way out of the Town Centre and provided for the poor. The minutes go on to record that this request was turned down by the council who told the workhouse they would have to pay the same as everyone else. Incidentally, this development is a vast improvement on the conditions described by Mary Leapor in a satirical poem published in 1751: *"This Brackley is the worst of
Airs;/Where standing Wells, and putrid Drains,/And
sweating Nymphs, and spawling Swains,/On either Side,
before, behind,/Provide a Stench for ev'ry Wind/ Who
can endure the hideous Scene / Where ev'ry Face
creates the Spleen ?"*!

32. *Hill Street Chapel*



The first Methodist church building was up this end of Hill Street, then called Tinker's Lane. It was a small chapel and the building remained in use by the Methodist Church and

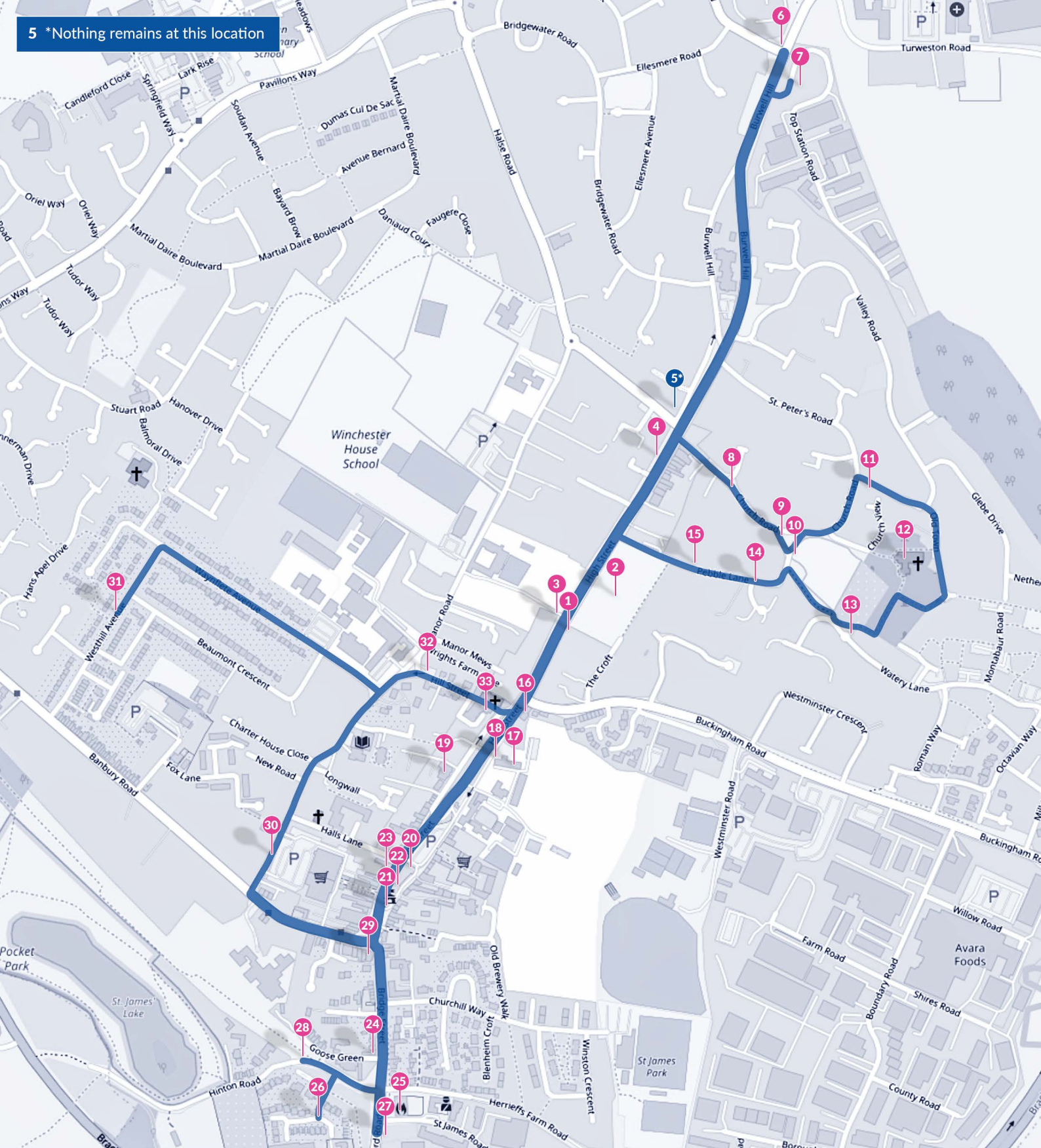
then for storage until it was demolished in the 1970s. The gravestones at the junction with Manor Road are all that remind us that this chapel was once here. In 1905, the new church opened further down Hill Street, which you will see in a moment.

33. *The Bell Tower ("Feed My Lambs")*

This beautiful building is known as 'The Bell Tower' and also 'Feed My Lambs School' due to the inscription above one of the doorways. It was opened as a Church of England school in 1871 and remained so until the late 1960s. Many people living in the town have memories of being taught here. After its closure as a school, it was a restaurant and nightclub amongst many other things before being sold in 2011 and converted into flats.



5 *Nothing remains at this location



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All content in this booklet was produced by members of the Brackley & District History Society, with graphic design and printing provided by the team at Brackley Town Council.