

Nettlebed

My first recollections of Nettlebed are from the 1950s. Henley YMCA cricket club played the Nettlebed village team on the Recreation Ground and my father played for the YMCA. During the afternoon I would explore the area around the cricket ground, covered in bracken, with numerous paths and a pond.



Nettlebed Recreation Ground and Sports Pavilion



The Sea Pond, fed by a spring

This area was the site of the Nettlebed clay pits for the local pottery and brick works. At the top of the hill a windmill once stood, hence its name, Windmill Hill.

Nettlebed was important in being at the crossing of the ancient Ridgeway path and the Henley to Oxford road. At an altitude of 211 metres above sea level, it is the highest point on the Chiltern Hills in Oxfordshire. The existence of local woods, Reading clay, sand and spring water made it an ideal site for pottery and brick making. And delivery to surrounding towns and villages was all down hill!

In the late 18th century, Windmill Hill was surrounded by brick and pottery works. All that remains today of the brick making industry is a single bottle kiln and the old clay workings that are now the Recreation Ground.

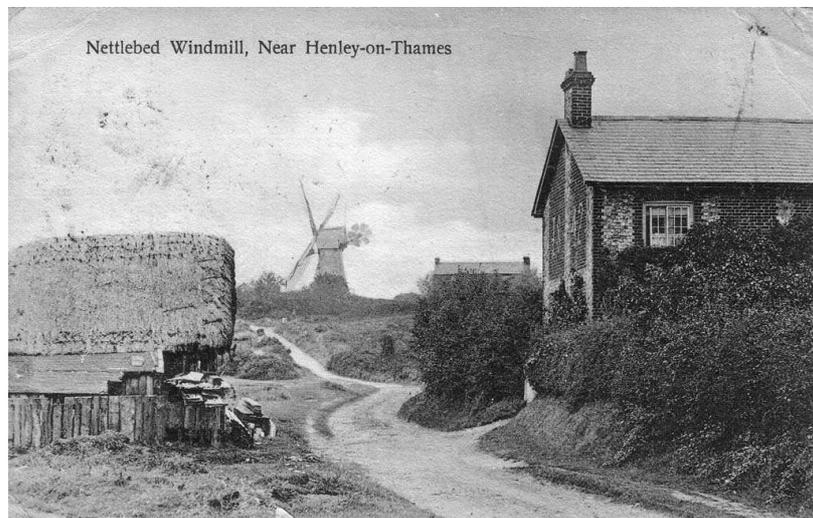
In 1676, Dr Robert Plot wrote in his *Natural History of Oxfordshire*, '*About Nettlebed they make a sort of brick so very strong that whereas at most places they are unloaded by hand, I have seen these shot out of carts after a manner of stone to mend highways and yet none of these broke*'.



Preserved Bottle Kiln in Nettlebed

Cecil Roberts describes a visit to one brickyard, owned by the Fleming family, in 1935 in Gone Afield. *I walked into the office of the brickyard, on the edge of the Common, with its great bottle-shaped kiln girdled with an iron band. Across the way were the first houses of Nettlebed's High Street. He led me up the yard, and the colours of the bricks began to arouse the building mania. They were attractive colours, russet and coppery, sand-faced and with a slight bluey glaze. I picked up one of the thin bricks and felt I would like to build a garden wall. "After the Romans they were irregular in size," said the voice, bringing me back to Nettlebed Common. "Then in 1625 the Crown ordered them to be 9 by 4¹/₂ by 3 in. - which is what they are mostly today" I learned a lot about bricks. They had once put a tax on them, and repealed it in 1839, when the size was again regulated.*

The Windmill burned down in 1912.



Nettlebed Windmill from a postcard in 1905

Nettlebed's position led to the opening of several inns. Only one, The White Hart, remains open today. But opposite it, on the High Street, can be seen the buildings for The Bull, another coaching inn that closed only recently.



The White Hart Hotel in Nettlebed High Street

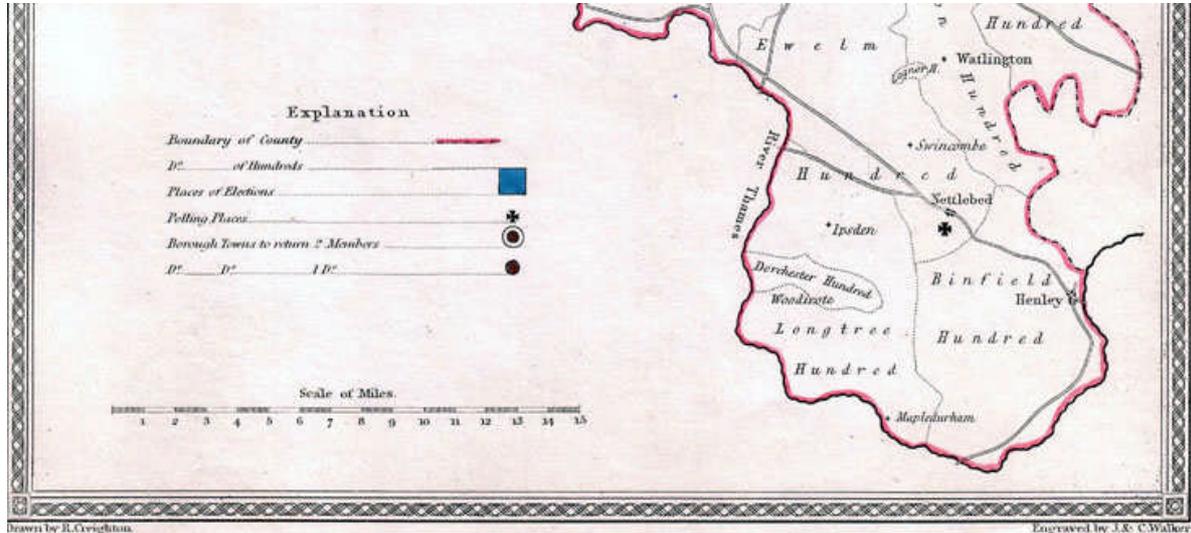


Nettlebed High Street – the former Bull inn on the left, Brights of Nettlebed on the right

The High Street also had plenty of shops in the past. Today Brights of Nettlebed occupies the site of several former cottages and the bakery. Dating back to 1866, the company makes and sells replica and reproduction furniture and has two other branches in Topsham and Wimborne.

In Watlington Street, Nettlebed has a village stores with Post Office and a garage.

The Creighton-Walker Oxfordshire County map of 1835 shows that Nettlebed was also important as a polling station for South Oxfordshire.



Extract from Oxfordshire map by Creighton-Walker 1835

Nettlebed has a church with origins dating back a thousand years. Of particular interest are the stained glass windows by John Piper. The current church of St. Bartholomew was completed in 1846. The earliest part of the building is the 12th century lower part of the tower.



The Lych Gate, which is also Nettlebed War Memorial



St Bartholomew's Church, Nettlebed



John Piper window



Interior, St Bartholomew's Church, Nettlebed



Font and John Piper window