

Book Reviews

Cains, Simon and Robertson, Brian. *Piddington & Furniture a history and dynasty* (Coval Consulting Publishing, 2022)

This is both a history of Piddington — a small Buckinghamshire village near High Wycombe — and a history of Benjamin North's furniture factory. The two stories are intertwined because the village would never have existed without the factory. But in 1853, when the first Benjamin North set up his original factory in West Wycombe, the idea of moving the factory and creating an entirely new village in fields a couple of miles away must never have crossed his mind.

The book starts with the Piddington site before the factory and village were built there. There are some surprisingly interesting anecdotes, given that the site of the future village was just empty fields with no buildings. Its history includes Welsh drovers, eighteenth-century highwaymen, and medieval skeletons in a nearby well.

The next few chapters are largely based on the first Benjamin North's autobiography, detailing his difficult childhood in Thame, Oxfordshire, his short-term jobs and his conversion to Methodism. His Methodist faith, and that of his son and grandson, would have implications for the future running of the factory and would shape the development of Piddington village — especially the location of the pub, well outside the village. North entered the furniture trade by chance, beginning as a turner after a short period of unemployment when the papermill where he worked closed. He then became a travelling furniture salesman, working for a fellow Methodist, taking wagons loaded with Wycombe furniture as far north as Leeds. According to his autobiography, he worked hard, saved hard, taught himself to read and write. He also sold

locally-made lace on the return journeys, so that in 1853 he was eventually able to set up his own factory in West Wycombe. Other sources for the early history of the West Wycombe factory include newspaper accounts, an employee's notebook, an early photograph, pages from a catalogue and a patented chair from this period. There are insights into how furniture factories' perennial challenges of strikes and fires were dealt with, and a sense of how these affected the wider community. There are also accounts of more festive times such as factory social events and a West Wycombe chair arch to rival the better-known High Wycombe examples. In common with so many of the factories in the area, North's expanded from Windsor chairs to 'fancy cabinet furniture' in the later nineteenth century.

By 1902, and now under the leadership of the third Benjamin North, the factory must have seemed like an immutable element of West Wycombe village, as well as being its largest employer. But when the factory, for a combination of reasons, suddenly found itself needing more space, the West Wycombe landowner was unwilling to sell any land to North on terms he could accept. The solution was a move to the empty fields a mile or two away that became Piddington village.

We learn how the move affected the workforce and other villagers — from old men who now had a much longer walk to work, to widows who could no longer conveniently get their firewood from the factory. We also discover how the factory affected the development of the village, for example by providing an early source of electricity for the village. A wealth of photographs from the early years of the new factory, inside and out, illustrate this section, many previously unpublished.

Later chapters deal with another aspect of local Piddington history, with army exercises taking place there in the years running up to World War I. Further developments include new furniture styles of the twentieth century, Coronation furniture and World War II. The original buildings still remain and the site still houses a furniture factory. The village hall now occupies the site of the original factory in West Wycombe.

This book is engagingly written and very accessible. One of the strengths is the plentiful illustrations, despite a small minority being unattributed. Another strength is the clarity with which it is written. With the potential confusion of three generations of Benjamin Norths, it is always clear which generation is being referred to, and historically ambiguous or unfamiliar terms are clearly explained. It's also refreshing to have the role of women workers included and to understand the pitifully poor earning potential of women at this time.

The authors tell us that this book emerged partly from walks taken during the strict lockdown rules of 2020. It's good to know that one of the positives that came from that challenging time is this very readable addition to furniture (and local) history.

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