



**North
Warwickshire
Heritage**



The wheel is the oldest invention known to man. It has been the great enabler, the mechanism that has seen the development of trade and with the trade; we see the growth from local to global communications.

*From Chariots
To Salt Carts
To Water Mills
To Stage Coaches
To Pits
To Railways
To Canal turns
To Cars, Lorries
And Bicycles*

They have all shaped North Warwickshire

North Warwickshire is a recycled landscape with a rich past that has seen many people settle in this the Northern most part of the Forest of Arden.



The Romans
Saxons and the Danes
The Monasteries
Royalty and the Gentry
Poets and Writers
Canal Navigators
Railway Engineers
Coal Miners
Modern Industrial Giants



Each turn of the wheel has seen a new generation; of soldiers, clergy, royalty, gentry, poets, writers and builders create the rich layers of history with salt tracks, roads, canals, railways and fine buildings in this the Hub of England.



All have come and settled in North Warwickshire
Each creating a rich historical layer
Each recycling
Each Building and Rebuilding

All making use of man's oldest invention to shape the landscape that it is today in North Warwickshire

This guide tells the story of the influence of wheels upon the North Warwickshire landscape and highlights the "must see" places to visit, where you can see, touch and breath in the atmosphere of the heritage that has shaped the Hub of England.



Invaders and Settlers

North Warwickshire as we know it today has seen people settle by its rivers and along its valleys for thousands of years, each using the fertile land for cultivation, or its hills and ridges as places of strategic fortification. Although pottery and metal objects found in the fields and towns show early settlers in the ages of Bronze and Iron (a), the first major impact came with the Chariot wheels of the Romans. The Romans in their drive northward from London into Wales built Watling Street. The road, which we know today as the A5, skirted the Forest of Arden with a fortification at **Mancetter**. Although only the line of the road remains, you can stand on The Green at Mancetter and imagine the travellers passing through heading both North and South. Soldiers marching to their next garrison with their equipment always ready to do battle should the need arise. Then there were the traders peddling their wares and taking the opportunity to settle wherever they could make a living.



When the Romans left, the road remained. This was to become the frontier border between the Vikings in the East, known as the Danelaw, and the Saxons in the West. The road became a trade route for precious commodities such as salt, which would trundle along the road in over laden carts heading for the towns, such as Atherstone and Coleshill and further a field into Warwick and Stafford. These people also built their castles (mounds of earth with wooden stakes surrounded by ditches). A good example can be found behind the church in **Seckington** (b), where treachery and murder took place.

Then came the Normans. Following the Battle of Hastings in 1066, these great builders made the more permanent features of castles and churches. The remains of the castle at **Hartshill** (c & d) and many of the churches stand as monuments to these settlers, who left their mark upon the North Warwickshire landscape.

Must See Places

- 1 Mancetter
- 2 Seckington
- 3 Hartshill

☉ The Age of the Monastery

North Warwickshire can boast of having more monasteries than any other part of Warwickshire. Religion was a very important part of people's daily lives in medieval times. The Monasteries and Priors grew in North Warwickshire, with many examples still visible today. The remains of **Polesworth Abbey** (a & b) can be found around and within the Abbey church. The monks and nuns provided a place of sanctuary which fulfilled the spiritual needs of the settlers and traveller. They also farmed the land, and using grinding wheels, milled the corn and wheat. They collected taxes in the Tithe Barns, a fine example being close to the church in Polesworth (c).



There was also an abbey at Merevale, and a priory at Maxstoke, the remains of which can be seen from the road. Atherstone's church was also originally a priory. The remains of the priory at **Alvecote** is a nice place to stop for a picnic and to contemplate the landscape. Before the railways and canals that pass by today, this would have been a quiet retreat for prayer and meditation. Time would have been measured by the cycle of the seasons, ensuring that the crops were sown and nurtured, harvested and stored to feed the people throughout the year.

These peaceful times were interrupted with fights and battles, including the final battle of the Wars of the Roses in 1485.

Some historians argue that it did not take place in Bosworth as is commonly thought, but in the fields just north of Atherstone.

Either way we can be sure that soldiers in armour with all their weaponry passed through, and took their communion, praying for God to give them strength in the impending battle in the North Warwickshire churches and chapels.

When Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries, the land passed to the new generations of landowners, and once again we see the recycling and growth of towns in the North Warwickshire.

Must See Places

- 1 Polesworth Abbey
- 2 Alvecote

Royalty and Gentry

The land in North Warwickshire was once owned by the crown and was passed to favoured royal subjects as a reward for their services and loyalty. These Lords of the Manor built fine houses, which we find dotted around the rural landscape today. Many are now private houses such as Packington, Merevale, Whitacre, Kingsbury, Mancetter and Bramcote (a). Some, such as Grendon and Hams Hall, have disappeared altogether. Nevertheless, these were the estates of the rich and privileged, who farmed the land and provided the employment for the local community. It was along the lanes and avenues of these estates that you would hear the carriage wheels pulled along by the power of horses. The finest examples of these large houses are at **Middleton Hall** (b & c). Here you will find not one or two but three examples of the manor house, the earliest of which was built in Norman times and is the oldest domestic building in the county, still in use. The others are of the Elizabethan and Georgian period. These houses have been lovingly restored by a trust group of volunteers, who welcome visitors to see these fine buildings that tell the story of times when the rural landscape relied on the people to cultivate and maintain it.

Later the Lords of the Manor began to exploit the rich seams of coal that lay beneath their estates, and so came another phase in North Warwickshire's history with the birth of industry.



Must See Places

 Middleton Hall

Writers and Poets

The Poet Michael Drayton, a contemporary of William Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, was born in Hartshill and became involved in a literary circle that centred on **Polesworth**. Members included Raphael Holinshed from Bramcote Hall, a chronicler whose works were used by Shakespeare as the source for his history plays.

John Donne was also a member of the group, and wrote his poem Good Friday 1613, as he rode westward out of Polesworth. Sir Philip Sidney was also amongst this fine company.

These men were educated and supported by forward-thinking men such as Sir Henry Goodere of Polesworth Hall

Later George Eliot (a) was inspired by **Astley Church** (b), where her parents were married and which became Knebley Church in her Scenes of Clerical Life. From the churchyard you can see the ruin of Astley Castle which she used as Knebley Abbey. Names of her characters can be found in the churchyards, as she gathered her inspiration from the places that surrounded her.

It was however, Drayton, that gave us a description of the River Ancor (c) that he knew from his boyhood. Today, with a little imagination, you can stand on the bridge over the river in Polesworth and see it, as he did, some four hundred years ago.



To the River Ancor



Clear Ancor, on whose silver-sanded shore
My soul-shrin'd saint, my fair Idea lies,
O blessed brook, whose milk-white swans adore
Thy crystal stream, refined by her eyes,
Where sweet myrrh-breathing Zephyr in the spring
Gently distills his nectar-dropping showers,
Where nightingales in Arden sit and sing
Amongst the dainty dew-impearled flowers;
Say thus, fair brook, when thou shalt see thy queen:
Lo, here thy shepherd spent his wand'ring years,
And in these shades, dear nymph, he oft hath been,
And here to thee he sacrific'd his tears.
Fair Arden, thou my Tempe art alone,
And thou, sweet Ancor, art my Helicon.

Michael Drayton

Must See Places

- 1 Polesworth
- 2 Astley Church

Wheels and Water

The Hub of England became so because of the transportation links. Initially with the Roman Watling Street, and then later with the Salt roads, and packhorse bridges such as we see in Water Orton. However it was with the development of the coaching towns, canals and railways that North Warwickshire became even more recognisable as being the central key to England's Navigations.

Coleshill, with its fine Georgian buildings (a) and coaching inns, was once on the main route through the Borough. The town is watched over by a superb church which stands tall and proud and would have been a signpost for which travellers would head. The town stocks and pillory (b) post offers a glimpse of law and order, which would have been enforced to ensure the safety of travellers and townsfolk alike. Hence highwaymen headed for the outlying hostleries in the villages such as Wishaw. Other towns such as **Atherstone**, also have fine examples of coaching inns such as the Red Lion. Coaching also saw the introduction of Toll Roads, which gathered money at the tollgates for the upkeep of the road. The tollgates, which were located in places such as Kingsbury, no longer survive.

The Coventry Canal and Birmingham and Fazeley Canal meander through the Borough and provide pleasant walks through the towns and countryside. Look out for the architectural features and bridges on display along the towpaths, which give a glimpse into the canals' industrial past. The flight of locks at **Atherstone**, with its canal turn wheel (c), always has someone passing through the locks in the summer time.



The railways came in the 1800s, and the towns of Atherstone and Polesworth developed stations along the routes. **Whitacre Heath** became a major junction, which can still be viewed today from the bridge by the waterworks. Here lines that linked Birmingham and Derby met and the now lost Stonebridge Railway ran down to Hampton with a station at Coleshill on its track. Today we can see the remains of bridges and banks that indicate its way.

The roads that developed from the ancient tracks and the new roads, such as the motorways and toll road, have also pushed their way through the countryside and opened up the transport network.

However, the cycle tracks along the lesser-used quieter routes that criss-cross through the countryside still provide an escape from the traffic.



Must See Places

- 1 Coleshill
- 2 Atherstone
- 3 Whitacre Heath

Trade and Industry

It was the wheel and North Warwickshire's central location coupled with the coal seams that meant North Warwickshire would inevitably become a major part of the industrial revolution. It has however maintained a balance between the industrial urban and the agricultural rural landscapes that we see today. Trading has been a feature for many centuries with towns like **Atherstone** (a) and **Coleshill** with their market squares and market halls. Atherstone also hosted a cheese fair in the past and was once famous as a town that made hats. Today it is developing as a Book Town.

The development of the coal industry with pits at Birch Coppice, Baxterley, Baddesley, Piccadilly and Hurley all provided employment and changed the landscape, bringing the pit head winding wheels onto the skyline. At **Pooley Heritage Centre** (b) interpretation using video and displays shows the development of coal mining within the North Warwickshire coalfield, which continues to this very day with the pit at Daw Mill.

Gravel extraction around **Kingsbury Water Park** (c) has resulted in a series of lakes and nature reserves that give a breath of fresh air and some interesting walks for all of the family.



The need for clean water saw the development of the water industry, which brought the reservoirs at **Shustoke**, and the water works at Whitacre into North Warwickshire (d). The reservoirs have circular walks where you can enjoy watching the sailing boats. The waterworks is a building treasure. Although it can only be viewed from the road it is well worth stopping to admire the design and effort that went into an industrial building.

Today we see the modern industrial giants such as BMW at Hams Hall and TNT at Atherstone finding a home in North Warwickshire, providing employment and keeping the wheels turning and maintaining the hub of England.



Must See Places

- 1 Atherstone
- 2 Coleshill
- 3 Pooley Heritage Centre
- 4 Kingsbury Water Park
- 5 Shustoke Reservoir

Public Transport

For information on public transport in North Warwickshire contact:

Warwickshire County Council

Online: www.warwickshire.gov.uk/publictransport

Telephone: 01926 412987

or Travel Line

Online: www.traveline.org.uk

Telephone: 0870 608 2 608

Disclaimer

This leaflet includes only a limited selection of the heritage sites in North Warwickshire, which have been chosen due to their location and link with the themes.

Whilst great care has been taken to ensure the information is correct, at the time of publication, responsibility cannot be accepted for inaccuracies or omissions.

The text contained in this leaflet is also available in large print

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Contact

If you have enjoyed reading this guide to heritage in North Warwickshire and would like to know more about the area's interesting history, look out for the North Arden Heritage Trail project which is being launched in Summer 2006.

For further information on this guide, or the North Arden Heritage Trail Project, contact the Tourism Development Officer at North Warwickshire Borough Council on:

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