
Railway Village Information

Materials to help prepare for the visit

1. Introductory notes
2. Swindon's Railway Village ('The Company Houses'), Notes for Teachers
3. Map of Swindon's Railway Village

Introductory Notes

Self-Guided Tour of Swindon's Railway Village

This pack includes materials and maps to help teachers conduct a self-guided tour around Swindon's Railway Village, built to house the families that moved to New Swindon to work for the Great Western Railway.

This activity will take about an hour and links particularly well with the Discovery Session 'Life in a Victorian New Town – The Railway Comes to Swindon'.

There are several busy roads that need to be crossed during the tour and the pupils will need to walk on pavements alongside busy roads. A Risk Assessment and Safe System of Work for a self-guided tour of the Village is provided in 'Risk Assessments and Health and Safety Guidelines'. We strongly recommend that the Group Leader comes on a preliminary visit to the Museum when planning a self-guided tour of the Village and familiarises her/himself with these documents and the suggested route.

As Swindon's Railway Village is outside, pupils should be appropriately dressed and wear suitable footwear and the tour should only be attempted during clement weather.

Swindon's Railway Village

('The Company Houses')

Notes For teachers

Outside the front doors of Steam

STEAM itself is sited in the midst of the site of the original Locomotive, Carriage and Wagon Works. Most of the STEAM building used to be one of the Machine Shops.

As you leave STEAM, it is worth pointing out that the whole area as far as the eye can see would have been covered with different workshops (or 'shops') – dirty, noisy, smoky etc.

You can see the original GWR hooter (pink) above the roof of the Designer Outlet Village Food Court. This could be heard up to 15 miles away, was steam powered and sounded to wake up the men who lived in the Railway Village. It also sounded to mark different points of the working day.

The railway line runs adjacent to the STEAM building and the Village was built on the other side of the track. You can see the spire of St Mark's Church from the entrance to STEAM.

The Company Village

The village was built between the early 1840s and 1865 to provide much needed accommodation for the railway men and their families. It is a unique, planned and preserved workers' community or model village. The estate is laid out on a regular grid pattern based on eight streets. The houses, although small by modern standards were of an advanced design for that period, comparatively spacious with each house having a small front garden. The village also contained many facilities including a school, hospital and library. However, people living in the village had to obey the Company's rules or they would lose their job and also their house!

5. This is the entrance to the Works and tunnel under the railway line

The building of the tunnel made getting to and from work much safer for the factory workers. Many workers lost their lives having to cross the line from home to work in the morning and from work to home in the evening. One of the jobs of the G.W.R. police was to pick up the dead bodies! As you emerge from the tunnel, look back at the wall that divided the Village from the railway line and the factories. This long, high wall gave rise to the nickname 'working inside' to working in the railway factory because of its resemblance to a prison wall.

4. Mechanics' Institute/Institution

This was built to provide a social life and opportunities for self-improvement for the workers e.g. library, reading and writing lessons, newspaper room, music, dancing, theatre, coffee room, snooker, chess and billiards. The Mechanics' is now in very bad repair. Pupils enjoy thinking of a good use for the building, for the people of Swindon.

3. Glue Pot Public House

This was built for the workers to socialise outside working hours. This was where the Carriage Shop Workers used to drink anecdotally. They used a lot of glue to make the carriages, hence the name.

6. Cricketers' Public House

This is situated close to the G.W.R. Park. G.W.R. workers used to drink here on their way back from playing cricket during the summer months, hence the name.

7. Bakers Arms Public House

There used to be a shop above the pub where the villagers could buy bread and cakes, hence the name.

8. Water Tower

The function of this tower changed several times. Some say that it provided water for the steam engines to top up when they arrived at Swindon. There is an opportunity here to talk about why steam engines needed water and what other fuel they needed etc. Others say that it provided water for the Village itself (in addition to the wells and pumps) and the factories on the other side of the line. It also provided water for the G.W.R. fire engine. The tall structure to the left of the water tower was used by the fire brigade to hang out their canvas hoses to dry.

9. GWR School

The class size in 1847 was 168 pupils (to one teacher!) The school was very strict. Pupils were suspended or expelled for one example of poor behaviour. What differences can the pupils identify between this school and their school?

10. GWR Church (St. Mark's)

Reading some of the gravestones is very interesting. You can see that people often died very young and can link dates with various epidemics that happened over the period (e.g. TB, cholera and typhoid). You can find examples of different roles and jobs inside the Railway Works. Many of the graves have 'of New Town' after the name. The 'New Town' was the Railway Village that was built to accommodate the railway workers (as opposed to the original 'Old Town' up on the top of the hill).

In 1880 (which was quite late on when health was starting to improve) there were 178 funerals and 147 of these were for babies and children under 8 years old. The average age of death was 29.

11. GWR Park

This was for the workers and their families to enjoy. Every summer there was a G.W.R. summer fete and all the children received free fairground rides, fireworks and GWR cake. Approximately 20,000 people attended the summer fete.

12. Park House

The GWR doctor lived here. This was also the place that potential GWR employees went to have their interviews and medicals. Firemen went here for their examination on GWR rules, which they needed to pass before they could be promoted to drivers.

13. GWR Medical Fund Hospital (now a Community Centre for local people)

It was very dangerous working in the Railway Factory. There was at least one death or disablement every week and also a lot of disease in the Village. All the workers paid a proportion of their wages towards the facility, which grew from provision of just a doctor to a true 'cradle to grave' service. Some claim that the GWR Medical Fund Society was used as the blueprint for the NHS. There was ultimately also a sickness fund if workers were too ill to work, an eye clinic, an undertaker and funeral service, dentists, chiropodists, a pharmacy and public baths.

1. 'The Barracks'

It was built for the single men who came to work in the new Railway Works. It had 100 rooms. The rules were strict and the men who lived there were not allowed to drink alcohol. Over time, it became more popular for single men to lodge with families. Later, the building became a Methodist Chapel (note the windows) and then the Museum of the G.W.R. before its closure and the opening of STEAM in 2000.

2. Railway Cottage

In 1861, Mr John Hall, his wife, 5 children and a lodger lived here (according to the Census). They moved from Newcastle to Swindon because of jobs on the new Great Western Railway and in the Works. The house type is terraced or 'back to back'. Note the original chimneystacks. The Railway Cottage is now operated by the Mechanics Institute Trust and open to the public on designated days.

34 Faringdon Road was originally built in the early 1860s during the last phase of construction of the village. This last batch of houses was larger than usual in that they had three bedrooms, two largish rooms downstairs and a much larger front garden.

15. 'the Backsies'

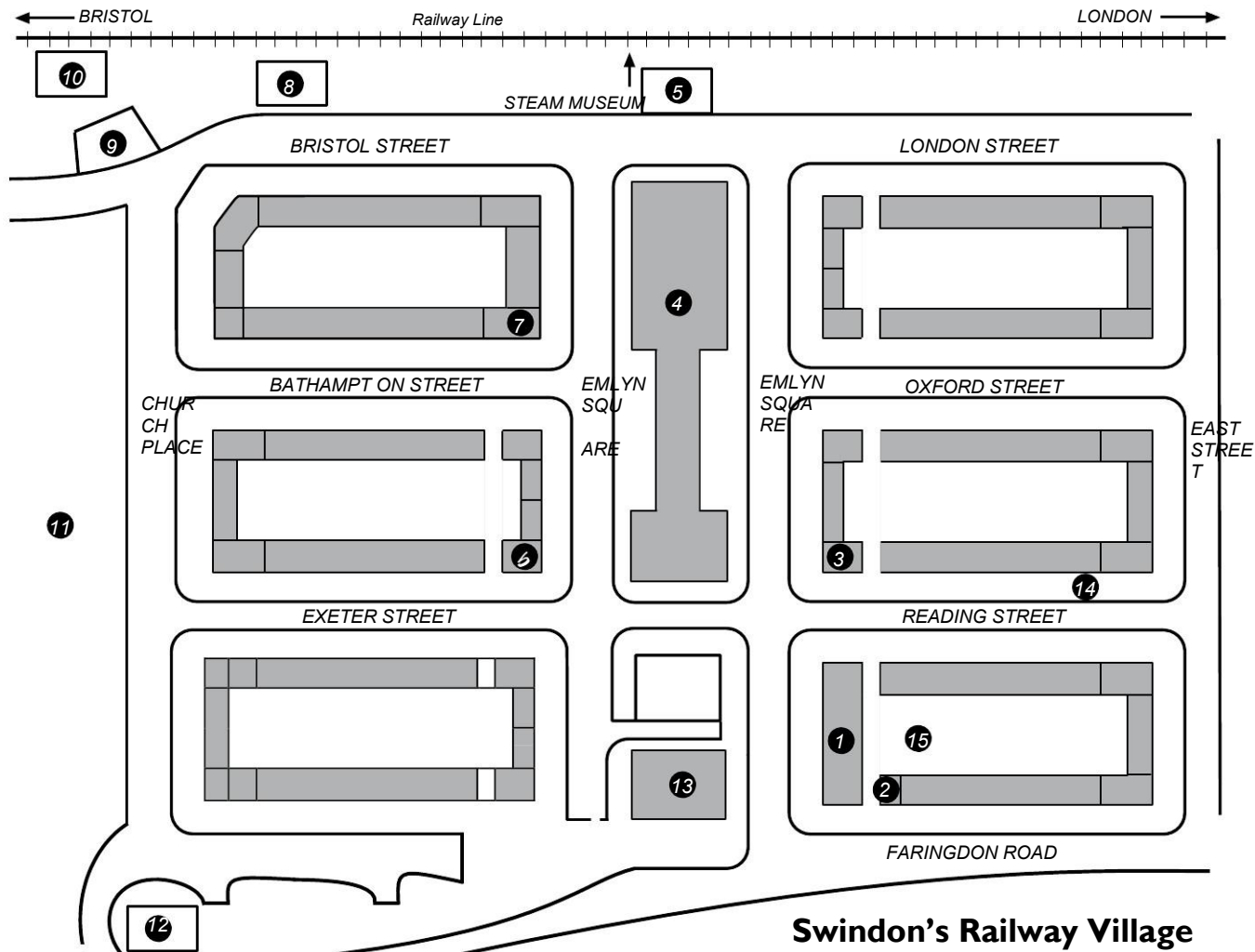
The black bricks on the pavement represent the areas where there would have been open drains.

In 1861 there would have been no lavatory/bathroom/running water inside the houses. All dirty water and chamber pot contents would have been emptied into these drains. As well as a nasty smell, this caused disease as the water supply (wells and pumps) became infected. In the 1850s and 60s, Swindon suffered epidemics of cholera, typhoid, small pox and scarlet fever. There are reports of chickens and even pigs being kept in the alleys in the 1840s!

14. Reading Street

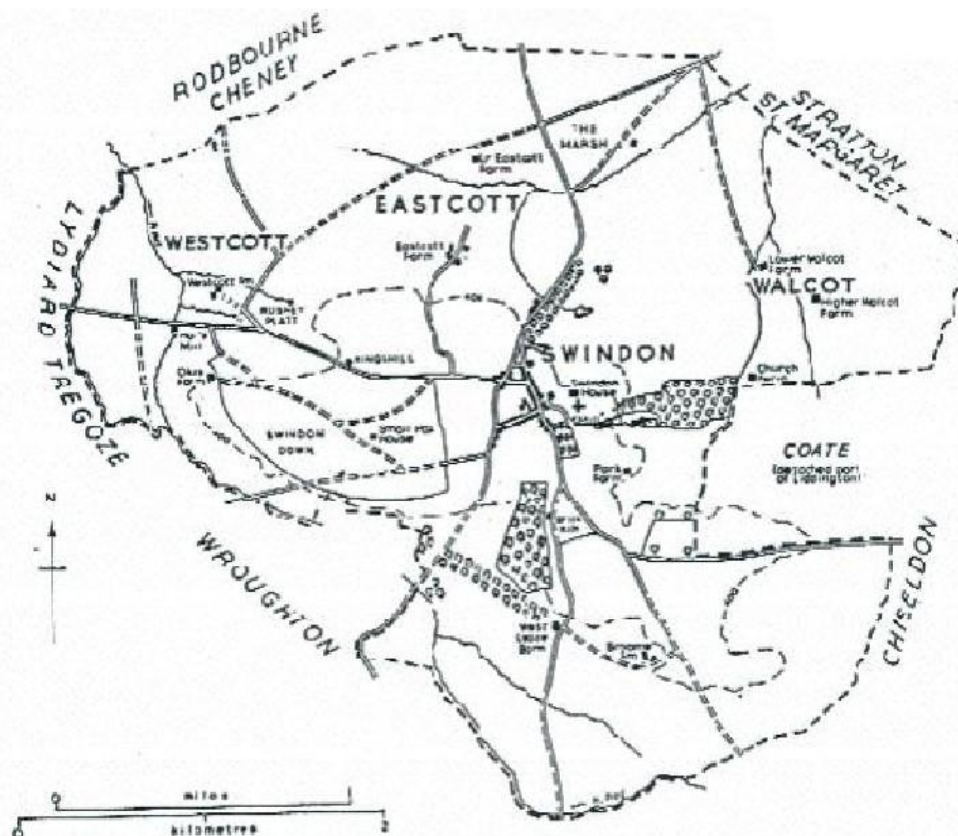
Most of the streets in the Village are named after GWR stations that existed at the time or were being planned. These houses were built for married railway workers and their families.

Pupils can usually notice that the houses are all the same (to prevent disagreements between workers and because they were thus cheaper to build). Foremen and charge hands lived in the larger houses at each end of the terraces. Today these buildings are listed. Note the door and window colours. The current occupants are only allowed to use certain colours. Also note the lack of TV aerials and satellite dishes!



Swindon's Railway Village

Map of Swindon c. 1773



O.S Map of 'New Swindon' 1891

