

The earliest history of Westfield relates to the Roman Road (Fosse Way) which crosses the hillside. The remains of the road go from Clandown, via Five Arches to Westfield and on to Stratton on the Fosse, en route to Exeter, part of which is pictured below.

Westfield has taken its Parish name from the rather prosaically named field, which was west of South Hill. Norton Hill means a north enclosure in old English.



Photograph courtesy of Joan Pack

Mining heritage

Industrial coalmining was established in 1763 and statistics show that by the 1970's when the mines closed over 10,000 men and boys had been employed in the local pits.

Coal seams found in the Westfield area are known as carboniferous. Coal had been formed from vast masses of vegetable matter deposited from the luxuriant growth of plants many million years ago. Large ferns must have been flourishing at that time as fossils of their leaves were found in great profusion throughout the local coalfields. Some fish fossils were found in a mine in Radstock.

In the 17th Century vertical pit shafts began to be sunk. The workforce consisted of about three or four men and few small boys. The men worked at the coalface while the boys carried the coal to the pit bottom. It is assumed that the coal was raised by reed or wicker baskets and the men and boys lifted from the mine in the same manner. Later in the century horses were used to activate a wooden drum until the receptacle carrying the coal reached the surface.

This system in essence remained in operation for at least 70 to 80 years. Carts were then invented called 'putts' which looked like snow sledges. When fully laden a putt contained approximately 100cwt of coal and was pulled along by a boy wearing a rope girdle around his waist, known as a 'guss and crook'. Pictures and illustrations can be found in a book written by a Mr Fred Flower called "Somerset coal mining life" A Miner's Memories". In 1908 an explosion occurred in the Norton Hill New Colliery when ten miners lost their lives. The accident happened following a similar disaster at another local pit. Intense investigations were made and it was discovered that the explosion was caused by layers of very fine coal dust which, when layered, caused a certain amount of gas generating heat, which was then ignited by shot firing. A very fine dust called Fullers Earth was introduced as a deterrent. It was scattered at frequent intervals, on all tram roads, roadsides and roof supports. This preventative action alleviated any other explosions in the area.

In 1763 Coal deposits were discovered in the Radstock and Wellow area. By 1896 the pits were owned by the trustees of the Countess Waldegrave whose families had been Lords of the Manor of Radstock. Between 1800 and 1850 Ludlow Pit, Middle Pit, Old Pit, Smallcombe Tyning and Wellsway mines were opened.



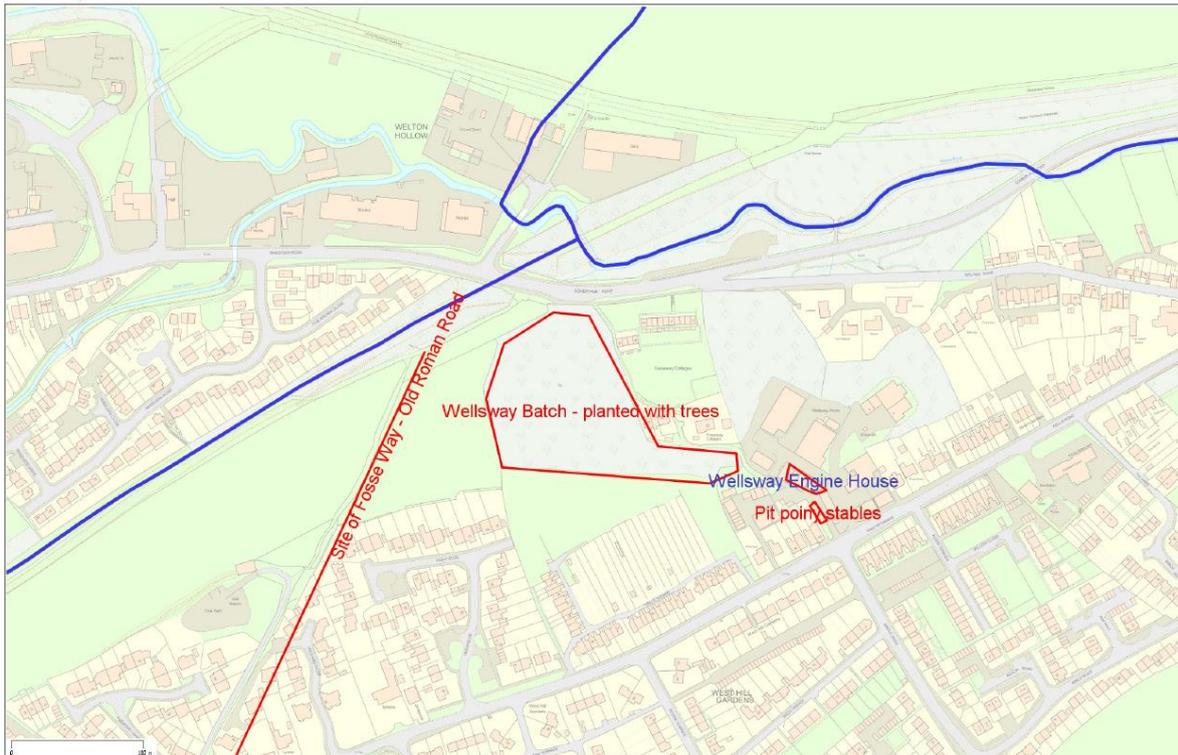
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Difficulties occurred over the transportation of the coal. The roads were in such a bad condition mine owners lost money in transportation. Canals were built in 1800's and the first canal was cut through alongside the river to transport the coal. Then in the 1850's steam trains took over all the transportation business.

The coal mined in Westfield was "hand cut" from 1763 to the 1940's, when mechanical cutters were introduced. This mechanism caused the eventual closure of the mines because the coal seams were very narrow and unprofitable. There was also the added difficulty of extra dust. The last mines closed in the 1970's.

Wellsway Pit

Wellsway Pit in Westfield was owned by Lady Waldegrave. To this day buildings remain at the Wellsway Colliery which was closed in 1920. The old Engine house remains together with the low arched entrance, which were old pit pony stables. It is thought that these are the only surviving examples of such stables in the country.



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Pit ponies were used to drag the wagons through the topple paths to the top surface. Despite rumours, pit ponies were not blind, their wellbeing was second to none. If a pony's flesh had been broken there was a major enquiry, calling for attendance by a Vet, special reports written and an inspection by an independent mining official.

The miners were happy in their assumption though that if for any reason their lamps had gone out, the ponies were able to find their way out. The ponies were taken out of the pit for a fortnight's holiday. The ponies were sturdy but quite short legged and were used in the local mines until 1952.

In 1839 a mining tragedy occurred which is commemorated in the Midsomer Norton Churchyard with the following wording,

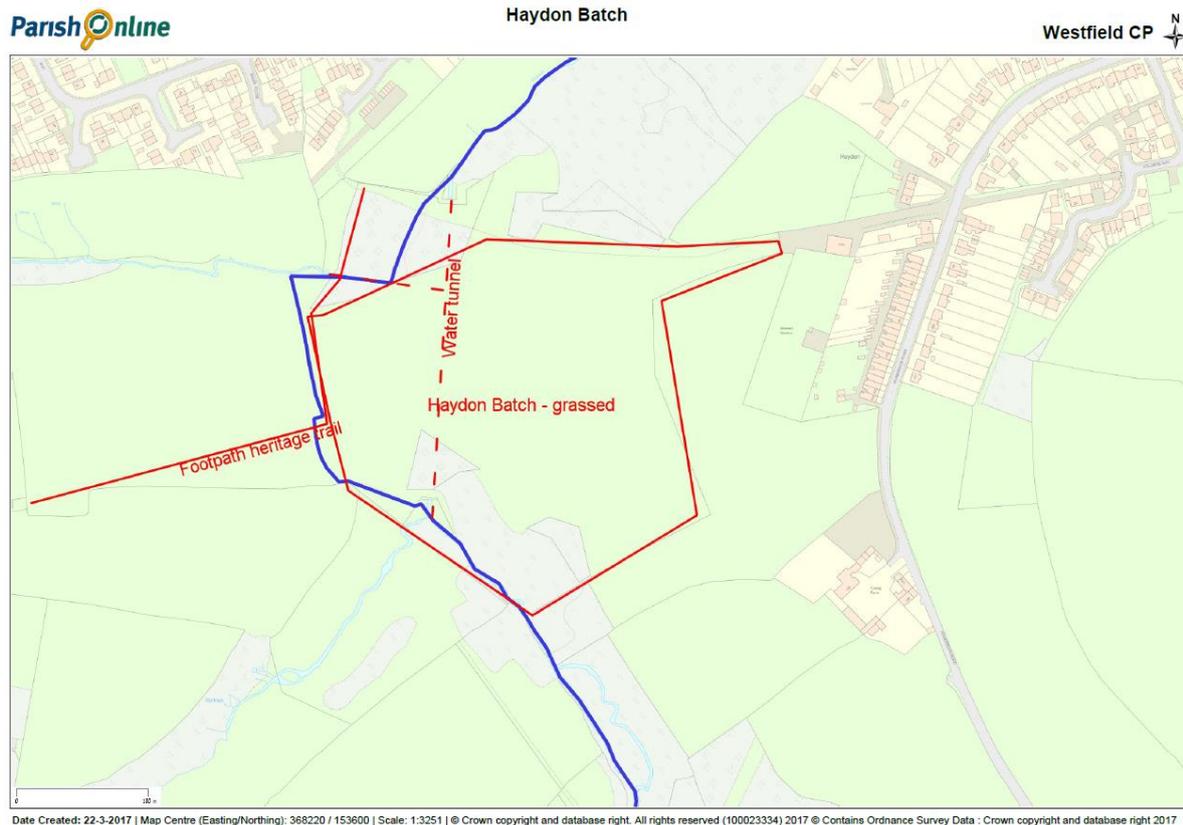
“In this grave are deposited the remains of the twelve under-mentioned sufferers all of whom were killed at Wells Way Coal Works on 8th November 1839 by snapping of the rope as they were on the point of descending into the pit. The rope was generally believed to have been maliciously cut”

There was usually one Pit Manager for the five pits in Radstock and Wellsway. Mr James McMurtrie, who was born in 1839 and died in 1914, was the manager of the pits in the late 1800's. His chief job was to forward £2,000.00 a quarter to the Countess Waldegrave, or explain why not. These working conditions caused many bitter disputes, remembered to today. Mr McMurtrie lived in the South Hill Manor, with the estate and grounds running down through Waterside to St Nicholas Church.

This property was demolished in the 1950's and the grounds now taken over by Bath College.

The Earl of Waldegrave eventually leased the remaining working pits, Wellsway included, to Sir Frank Beauchamp for an annual fee of £10,000.00.

Batches were formed from the residue stone and dust which was left after the coal was extracted. Most batches have been since sifted and the stone used for road maintenance, and then landscaped.



Railways

In the mid 19th Century railway fever gripped the country and in 1871 the Bath extension of the Somerset and Dorset Joint Railway was built. This railway line provided opportunities for the coal mining companies. The Midsomer Norton station was built on the south of the town at the junction of Silver Street and Charlton Road which meant that Westfield had immediate access to a station. Around 1900 a new deep mine, Norton Hill pit was constructed on the hill above the railway line to enable the coal freshly mined to be carried by rail.

Elm Trees

In Westfield there was an old hollow Elm Tree which of course was said to be haunted. The tree stood by the road which ran from Exeter to Lincoln which was laid down approximately 1800 years ago by the Romans.

Mr Authur Waugh wrote in his 1875 biography named 'One Man's Road', "when we took a longer walk there was an old hollow Elm Tree at Westfield, halfway between Norton Down and Radstock coal pits which all nursery authorities agreed to be haunted. The three of us could walk into it upright and gaze straight up to the leaves above."

Many areas in Westfield are named Elm Tree. Elm Terrace, Inner Elm Terrace, Elm Tree Avenue, The Elm Tree Inn whose skittles teams carried the name, as well as the Elm Tree Football team.

Westfield Parish Council, established in 2011, took the elm tree as its logo.

Schools

In 1922 any child who lived in Westfield walked to Radstock or Midsomer Norton to go to school.

A temporary army hut was commissioned by the Council and an infant school was opened in Westfield on 3rd July 1922. From archived material held by Westfield Primary School it states that the school opened on that day at 9am and thirteen children presented themselves for schooling. Four children were sent home because they were only three but nine pupils were registered on the first day.

By 1925 a party of 30 children who attended the school were taken to Bristol Zoo by coach on the 14th July.

Infectious illnesses were very prevalent and in November 1927 the school was closed for two weeks because of an epidemic of measles and in 1930 again many children were away from school suffering from Diptheria and Scarlet Fever.

In 1932 the School Inspectors gave the school a good report so far as their academic progress was concerned but were very alarmed because no provision was made for rest periods for the under fives and they had no toys to play with.

In the 1950's the school transferred to the present Westfield Primary School, but by the end of the 1960's the population had grown and once again the children were being taught in temporary school huts.

Over the years the school has expanded but care must be taken to preserve the playing field and playground area which provide play time for the children.

Listed buildings

Westfield House Grade 2 listed, detailed below:

5120 WELLS ROAD Westfield Westfield House ST 65 SE 2/100 II 2. Circa 1830. Three storeys, coursed limestone with coved eaves course to slate roof. Coped verges, stone end chimneys. Three windows, glazing bar sashes.

Central ½ glazed door with cut brackets to flat hood. Gable lit garret. Extension to rear, forming 'L'-plan.

It was possibly an isolation hospital for smallpox patients.

Another listed building in Westfield is the public house called The Railway Inn which was built in the nineteenth century. There were two public houses on the site, built side by side, one called the 'Railway Inn' and the other 'The Wellsway Inn'.

In the 1950's a Mr Kenneth Mitchard took over the licence of the public house, the Wellsway having closed. The structure of the Wellsway Pub was incorporated into the Railway Inn as one building. A Grade II listing refers to the front façade of the building only.

War Years and the Westfield Women's Institute (which has now closed)

In January 1939 First Aid Classes were arranged and letters received from the WI Federation asking for homes for evacuees. In November that year all speakers were cancelled because of the blackout and petrol shortage. Supplies of sugar had arrived and at least 3 lbs of jam could be made, per person. In 1940 a meeting stopped because of an air raid warning.

In June 1941 the WI Federation wrote asking WI members to join the ATS. September that year saw the whole WI go blackberry picking. 68lbs of blackberries were harvested. The fruit was sold to The Jam Centre and the money handed to the Wool Fund.

In 1942 members were busy knitting for the Forces. Packets of seeds from Canada were distributed at the meeting. In April a speaker from the Red Cross showed members articles that were sent in the boxes to the Prisoners of War each week and she asked for redoubled efforts for supplies of dried herbs and felt hats. In fact, anything that could be spared.

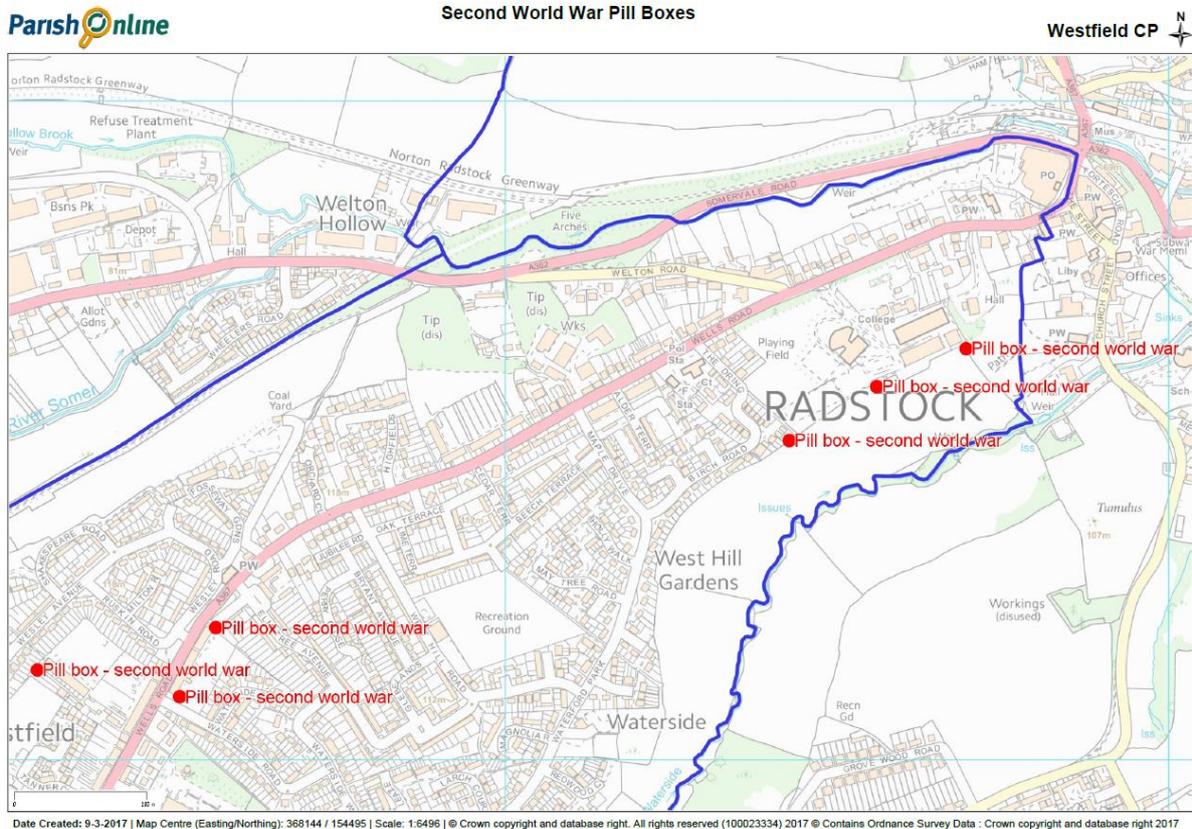
Throughout the war years money was raised by members and gifts given to every conceivable fund, from the Bath Air Raid Relief Fund, the Red Cross, the China Fund and the Russian Appeal. Gifts of money were frequently collected and sent to Lady Lytton for the Prisoners of War.

In September 1945 a letter was received from the King and Queen thanking the WI movement for the work that had been done throughout the war. Westfield WI celebrated the end of the war by giving the elderly people in Westfield a party.

Pill Boxes

A point of historical interest in Westfield is that during the second world war pill boxes named British Hardened Field Defences World War II were erected, and these pill boxes still exist. There were 28,000 of these defences built in 1941 and 6,500

have survived. Erected to protect the pits, six pill boxes remain in Westfield, three in Waterside Valley, one in Inner Elm Terrace and two either end of Westfield Terrace. A tank track ran from Westfield Terrace to the Waterside Valley.



Churches

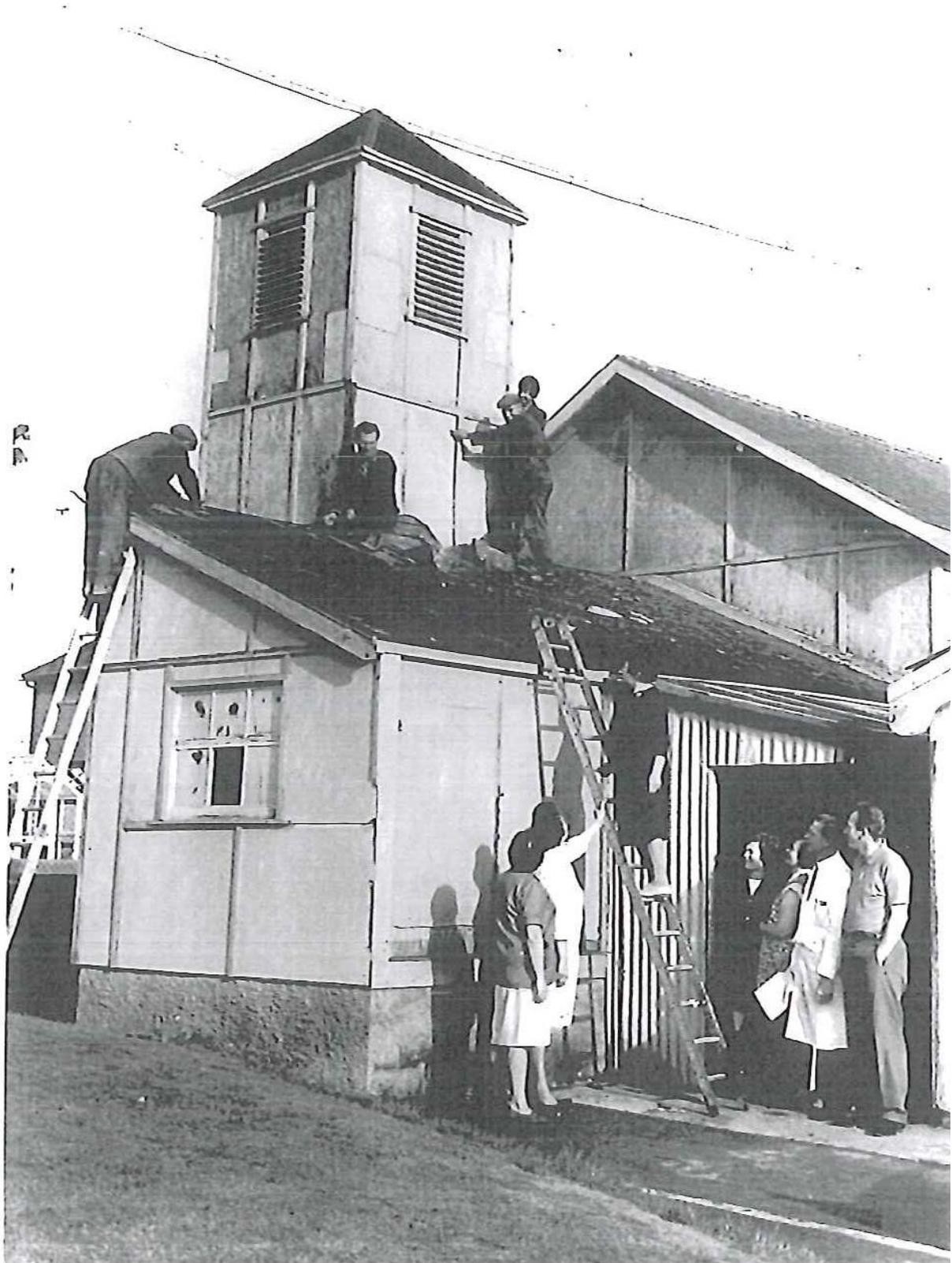
There are still three remaining churches in the parish of Westfield, St Peters Church, Longfellow Road, the Methodist Church, Wellsway and the Radstock Baptist Church.

In 1900 Westfield was essentially an outpost in the Parish of Radstock. The first Church of England activities in Westfield appear to have commenced around 1900 with a series of open air services conducted by the Rector of Radstock, the Rev. Thomas Gardener. These meetings were held very near the land opposite Mitchard & Sons butcher shop and Westfield House.

Because of problems with poor weather a kind parishioner provided a room in her home. This house was eventually demolished and the Elm Tree Inn built. This in turn has been demolished and a new estate has been built.

In 1905 an old disused Railway carriage was placed on a piece of land given by the Waldegrave Estate opposite the then timber yard of Messrs Edgell and Co which was fronted by Elm Terrace.

In 1907 the carriage was dismantled and a corrugated iron roofed Mission Hall/Church was erected. On 15th June 1907 the Church was dedicated and named St Peter's Church.



Photograph courtesy of Bill Biggs

In 1914 the Bishop of Bath and Wells decided that Westfield should become a separate unit. Sadly no legal documentation creating the district was signed until 1948. The ecclesiastical boundaries, Parliamentary boundaries and local authority boundaries are considerably different and still cause dissention.

In 1915 St Peters Church received a gift of vast importance. A local farmer named Mr Frederick Hoskins sold a piece of land to the Church for the nominal sum of one guinea. Work began to raise money to build a new church on this ground. Funds were raised sufficient to build and the new church was consecrated in 1955. Sadly this church developed disastrous building defects, bringing closure and demolition. The church was rebuilt partially funded by the sale of some land and contains many artifacts saved from the previous churches. The stained glass windows are quite beautiful.

The Methodist Church was built in 1869 and it became a temperance church.

St Hugh's Roman Catholic Church was housed in a former Purnells printing works and the church acquired the building after the First World War.

Businesses

Many businesses have prospered and then closed, namely Clarks factory, Prattons, Mardons, Dando & Dark, but many more have taken their place and the industrial estate in the parish of Westfield is thriving and has a good future.

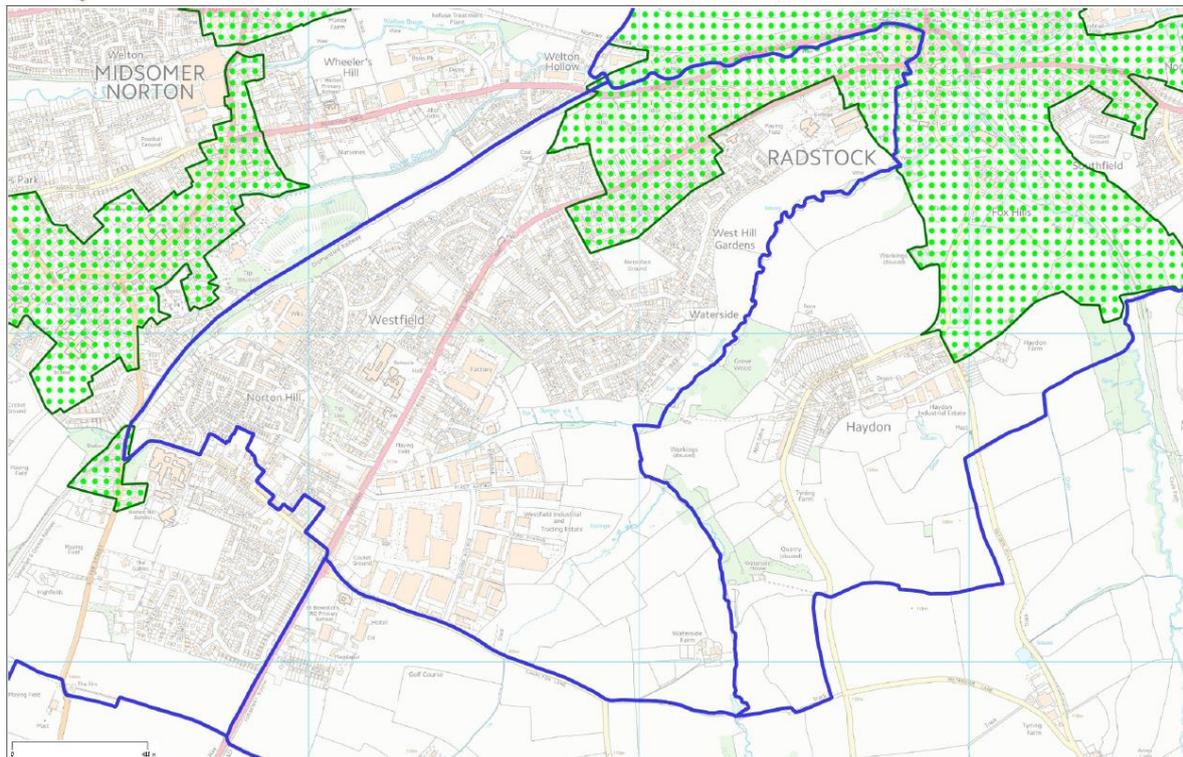
Mr William Edgell of Westfield died 12th January 1935. He was a wood merchant and 'Flat earth theorist'. He was the founder and senior partner of WSA Edgell Midsomer Norton. Alfred Edgell his younger brother, with his wife and family attended his funeral at Shepton Mallet.

Charltons Wood Manufacturers are still in existence, their company had supplied wooden props for the miners and Mr Brian Mitchard's family butcher business which started in 1913, has just celebrated its centenary. Many people live in Westfield and work independently for their own businesses, many commute to Bath and Bristol, many are self employed. It has always been a very industrious place to live.



Photograph courtesy of Mitchards Butchers

Conservation Area



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This history of Westfield finishes with a first hand account “1964 and all that”.

On the 3rd December 1964 Ted and I moved into our new home in the Parish of Westfield together with our eldest son Neil, then aged two. We were exiles from Plymouth but both were very happy to make a new life amidst the coal tips. I made a lot of friends very quickly because the key that unlocked our dining room door, also unlocked most kitchen doors on the estate. Loosing door keys was a hazard in those days.

Westfield was made into a Parish with its own Priest in Charge in 1913.

My first real insight to living in Westfield was seeing an old, slightly mucky, bus stopping by the Westfield Chapel bringing the coal miners home from their shift. Men were clambering out of the bus laughing and joking with one another, all covered in dirt and grime.

The very first lesson to be learnt from living “on top of the hill in Westfield” was that when the wind was particularly fierce any washing left hanging on a clothesline was covered with little coal smuts. You needed to rush out to pick in your clothes very quickly if the weather changed for the worst, otherwise you would have to wash everything again. In the early 1960s most clothes were hand washed or boiled in a copper; no such thing as an Automatic washing machine.

Some miners regretted the closure of the mines in 1973, but many were thankful they no longer had to work under such terrible conditions. Mrs Olive Edwards, who used to live in Inner Elm Terrace told me that during the depression her husband would cycle miles each day from pit to pit to stand outside the pit gate in the hope of being chosen to work on that day.

In 1966 the Somerset & Dorset train line through Radstock was closed, the Great Western Railway line having closed in 1959. Up until then a grand way to keep a little boy happy had been the promise of seeing the trains go through Radstock.. There used to be two Railway Level Crossings with gates within yards of one another. This caused a lot of traffic jams, but for a little lad good fun to watch the trains go by. The local Library used to be housed in the Victoria Hall in Radstock. Chance to change a library book before the walk back up the hill to Westfield.

In 1964 there were eight shops on Westfield Green. A Greengrocer, the Newsagent, a Hardware Store and the Chemist Shop. Around the corner was The Spar Shop, with a Ladies Hairdressers next door. In the 1960s if a gentleman wanted a haircut he went to Midsomer Norton to visit Mr. Stanley Ashman for a short back and sides. Next to the Hairdressers was a Haberdashery selling lovely wool, cottons and silks. The art of knitting was very important in the sixties. Little babies and children all wore beautifully hand knitted clothes. The Co-op had the last corner shop.

Along the main road travelling to Norton Hill there was, and still is, a superb Butchers Shop. Further on a Fish & Chip Shop together with Westfield's own Post Office. On the main road down to Radstock was a tiny little shop with a corrugated iron roof locally known as "The Shack. " At the corner of Charlton Cross Roads there was another Newsagent, with a little general shop in Hazel Terrace. Everything was within walking distance. A Coal Merchant delivered coal, two Milk Men vied for your custom, and a Baker delivered bread every day.

Because of the rapid increase in the population of Westfield , the Doctor's Surgeries had to employ more Midwives to cope with all the new babies born in the year 1965, my youngest Son Andrew included. The Surgeries held a weekly clinic in St Peters Church Hall to weigh new babies and check how they were progressing. Nurse Francis, Nurse Thomas and Nurse Evans were the District Nurses attached to the various Surgeries.

In 1964 the Buses went through Westfield every two hours, the 184 Bath to Frome, and the 196 Bath to Bristol Bus. If you missed either of these buses, and you needed to go to Bath you walked to Radstock or Midsomer Norton to pick up a connection there. On arrival in Bath, you could borrow a Push Chair from the Bus Company. The Bus Company held your return ticket, and when you returned the Push Chair you had your ticket back.

Norton Hill and Westhill Recreation Parks was a lifeline to all Mums. The Miners had subscribed money towards the purchase of playing fields in the area in the early

1900s in order to play football and for their children to have somewhere to play. At Norton Hill there was a small park set aside for little children to play, with a lovely wooden seat for Mums. A slide, a sandpit and four swings made up the equipment for the babies. The tennis courts were very much used and football matches played every weekend with an enthusiastic following of supporters

Both the local Churches were the central points of the Parish, with many organizations using the Church halls for monthly meetings or places to meet on a weekly basis. There was also a huge emphasis on sport; every Pub had a skittles, cribbage and darts team. Pub sports like shove-halfpenny and dominoes were very popular and there were many teams of young men either boxing, playing cricket, and football or running just for the joy of it. Most of the factories in Westfield worked on a shift basis and this meant many men were able to work on their kitchen gardens during the day after they had woken from their night shifts.

The younger children of Westfield went either to Westfield Primary School, or St Nicholas School Radstock, depending which side of the Chapel you lived. Mrs Lines was the Head Mistress of Westfield Primary. Compared with the schools in Plymouth, Westfield Primary School was quite amazing, especially with the lovely expanse of green playing fields. The Senior School at Norton Hill was also blessed with superb playing fields, the envy of anyone who came from a City environment.

We settled into Westfield and still live here, Plymouth was home, but always on the return journey back to Westfield we were coming home.

Joan Pack

Westfield resident and member of the Westfield Neighbourhood Plan Working Group