

Platelayers' Huts on the Nickey Line

Nickey Line construction began in 1867 and the railway ran till 1979.

Nine platelayers huts were built at intervals along the line to provide shelter for the platelayers who maintained the tracks as well as a space to store their tools.

The buildings were approx 10ft by 8ft, made from good quality engineering bricks.

The floor was generally brick and the roof would have been of corrugated iron.

A cast iron stove provided heating and a means of cooking.

Furniture would have consisted of a few chairs or a wooden bench and a table.



The platelayers hut at the end of the platform at Redbourn, August 1952.

With the closure of the line, the huts were demolished. In some cases the bricks were left where they fell, eventually being buried as nature reclaimed the land.

The huts were largely forgotten - though still featured in Sue and Geoff Woodward's Harpenden to Hemel Hempstead Railway book as in the above photo.

The Huts Rediscovery

The first platelayers' hut to be discovered was at Owen's Siding (Hut 7) during a Friends of the Nickey Line work party in late 2021 when a few bricks were unearthed.

On a work party in early 2022, more bricks were discovered, buried in the undergrowth at another site, just north of the Redbourn Lane roundabout. (Hut 3)

Into 2023 a small team of Friends of the Nickey Line volunteers started to investigate if yet more huts lay buried along the Nickey Line and, if possible, to locate and excavate them.

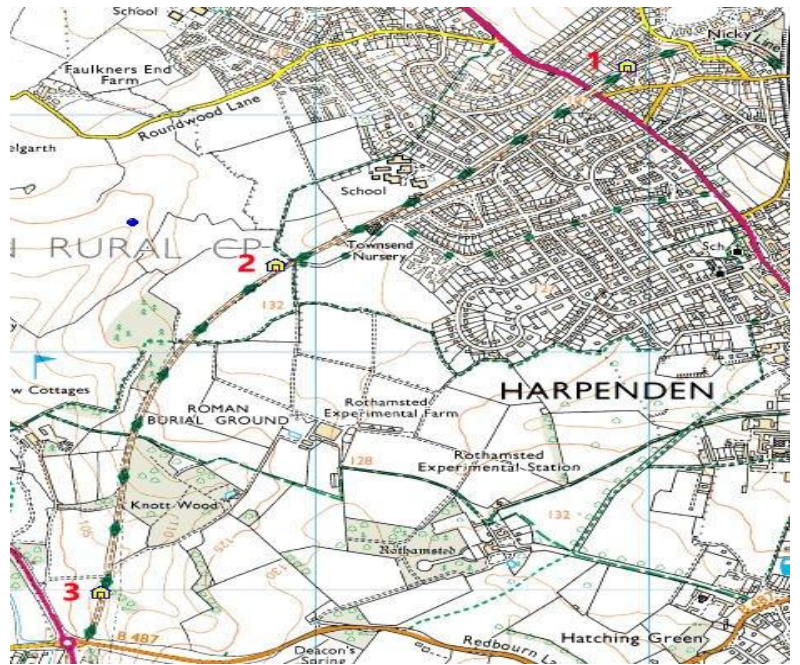
The Friends want to thank our volunteers, in particular Alan Gahagan who has led much of the work reported here.

Hut Locations

Investigation of Victorian Ordnance Survey maps, scale 25 inches: mile, digitised on the National Library for Scotland website (www.nls.uk), provided confirmation that a total of 9 huts had been erected.

Our area was surveyed by the OS in 1878, 1897 and 1922 and it is a great credit to the Victorian mapmakers that coordinates taken from the old maps enabled us to locate the huts on (or rather under) the ground.

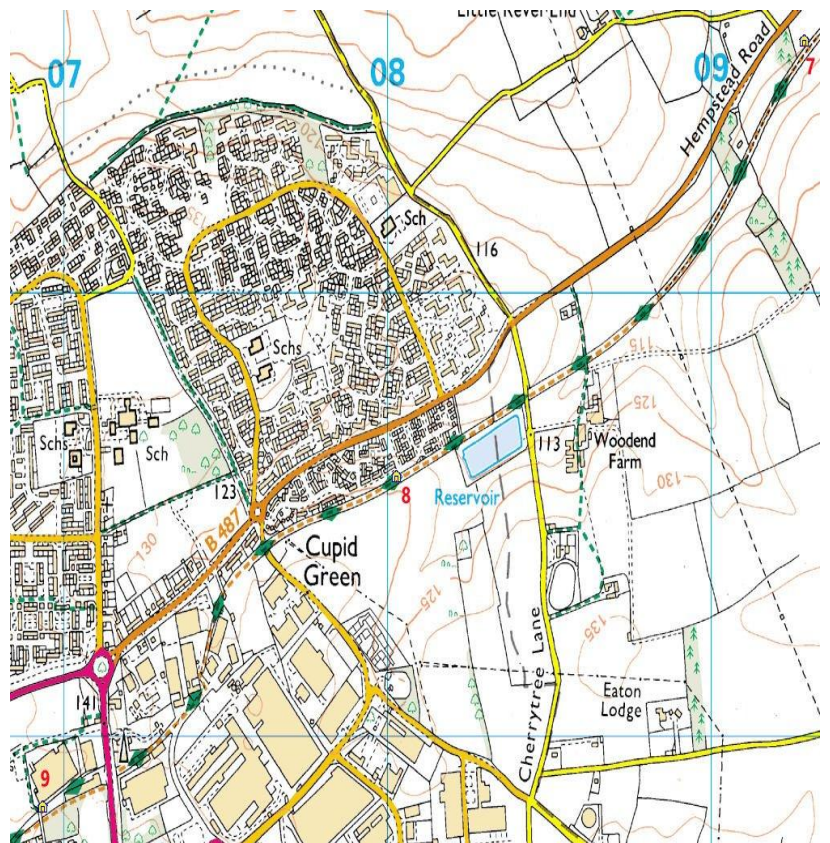
Huts 1 – 3 from Harpenden to Redbourn



Huts 4 – 6 South of Redbourn



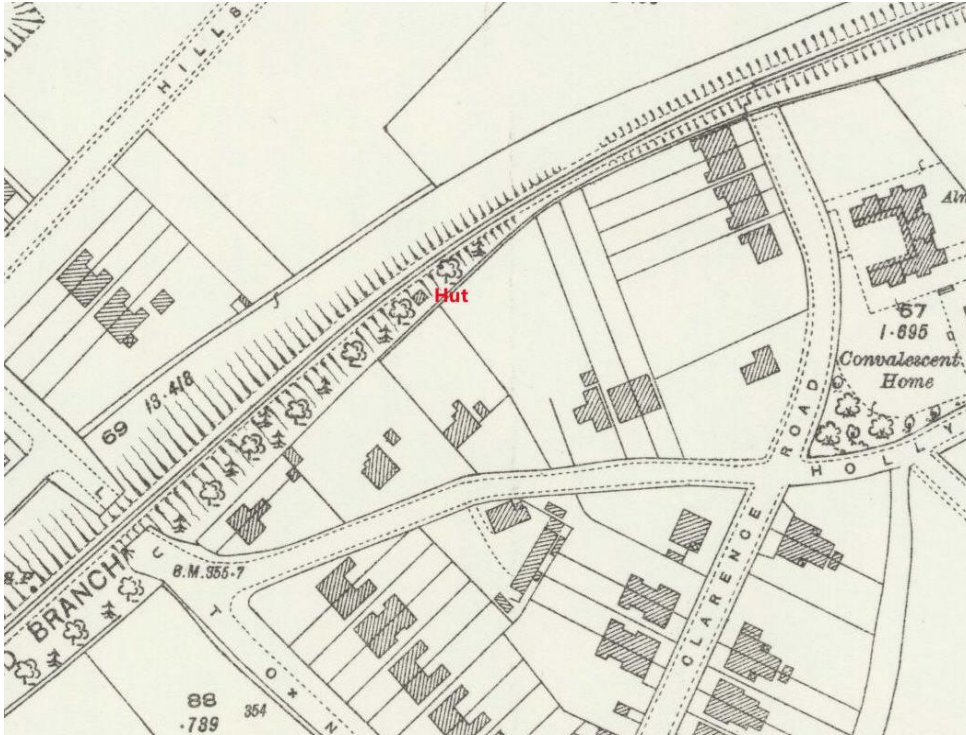
Huts 7 – 9 Redbourn to Hemel Hempstead



The Huts

Hut 1 – Near Hollybush Lane (GR 12933 15180)

This hut appears on the OS 25 in: mile map (pub 1924) but not on the earlier ones so it must have been built after 1897. It seems to be on the side of a steep, heavily wooded embankment and is now in the garden of a private property.



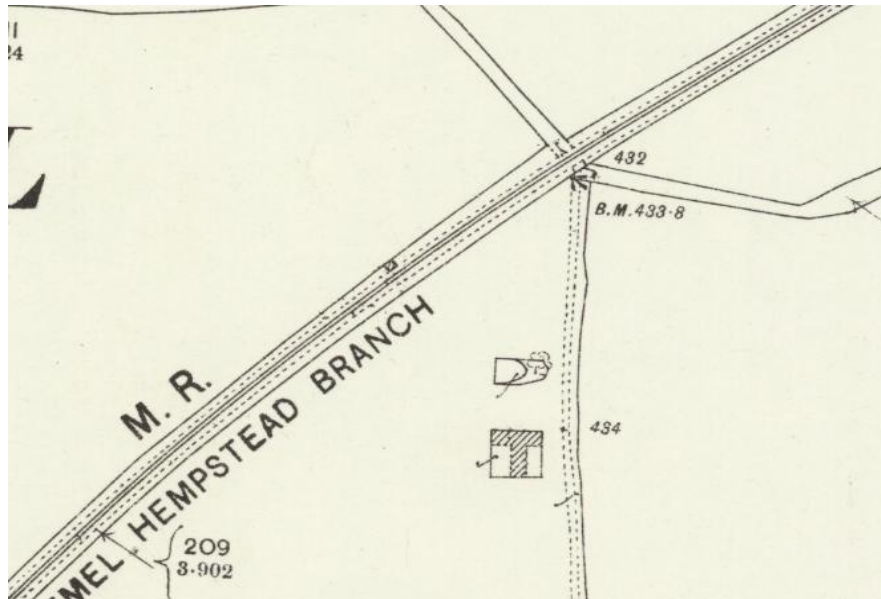
Below is part of correspondence by Colin Gaskell to Harpenden History Society which refers to the hut:

In the early 1930's we often had a family post Sunday lunch walk along the Nickey Line, either scrambling up the embankment from our home or strolling up Park Hill and joining the line at the Roundwood Halt. Although we often walked as far as the Townsend lane access I don't recall ever going much further, so can't shed any light on the remains beyond that point..I do, however, recall an old platelayer's brick-built hut not far from what is now the Clarence Road access to the line. The hut was located roughly behind the house inhabited by Mr Merritt and his daughter, Hilda Merritt. I assume that that house has now been removed and the land becomes part of Bramblewick Close. Perhaps the FoNL members already know of the hut - it was always a great thrill to find the door unlocked and, as far as I can remember, there was a small fireplace and simple seating either side of the fire. When we moved into 2 Holly Villas (as it was then known) in September 1929 there was still the remains of a foot access gate in the hedge of our front garden leading to a footpath alongside our back garden and that of Mrs Seagrave's house (St Brelades, Hollybush Lane) leading to the platelayer's hut I have mentioned.

Hut 2 – Near Five Ways (GR 11878 14342)

OS 25in: mile map, pub 1898

This hut is approx 63m from Five Ways in the direction of Redbourn.



The floor is brick lined with a slab of concrete at the doorway. The bricks are high quality engineering bricks which have resisted the ravages of time. Some of the bricks appear to have been cut at an angle with a layer of mortar, presumably to accommodate a pitched roof, possibly corrugated iron.

Much of the cast iron stove was found and pieces of the chimney. Other pieces of iron work unearthed include rivets and a door hinge. Fragments of glass bottles were also found.

Photo showing the stove up against the far wall



The base of the chimney which sat on the top plate of the stove



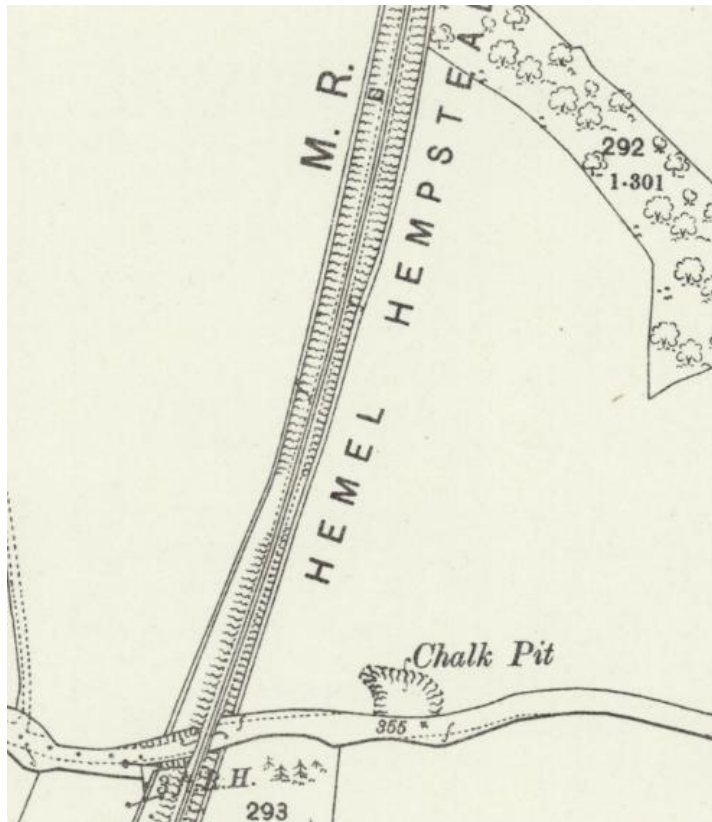
One brick was found at the site bearing the name of makers Mobberley and Bayley, Stourbridge who went into liquidation in May 1879.



Hut 3 – Near Redbourn Road Roundabout (GR 11261 12973)

OS 25 in: mile map, pub 1898

This hut is located 200m north of the Redbourn Road roundabout.



It was brick built with a brick floor and a cast iron stove at the far wall.





Most of the bricks unearthed so far are old engineering bricks. However several later frogged bricks have been found bearing a London Brick Company stamp. London Brick Company acquired Hardy & Sons brickyard in Fletton in Beds in 1900.

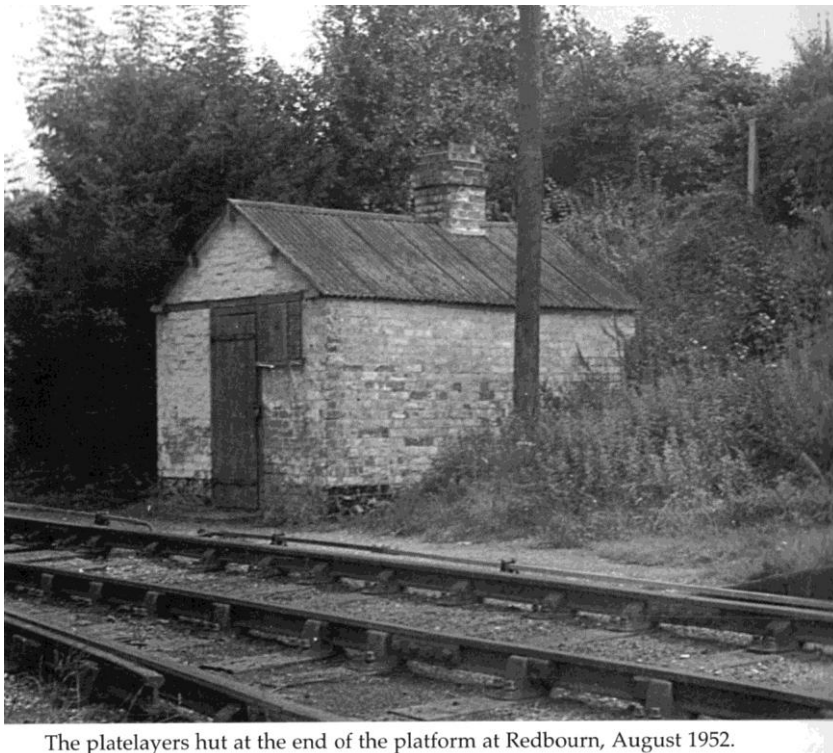
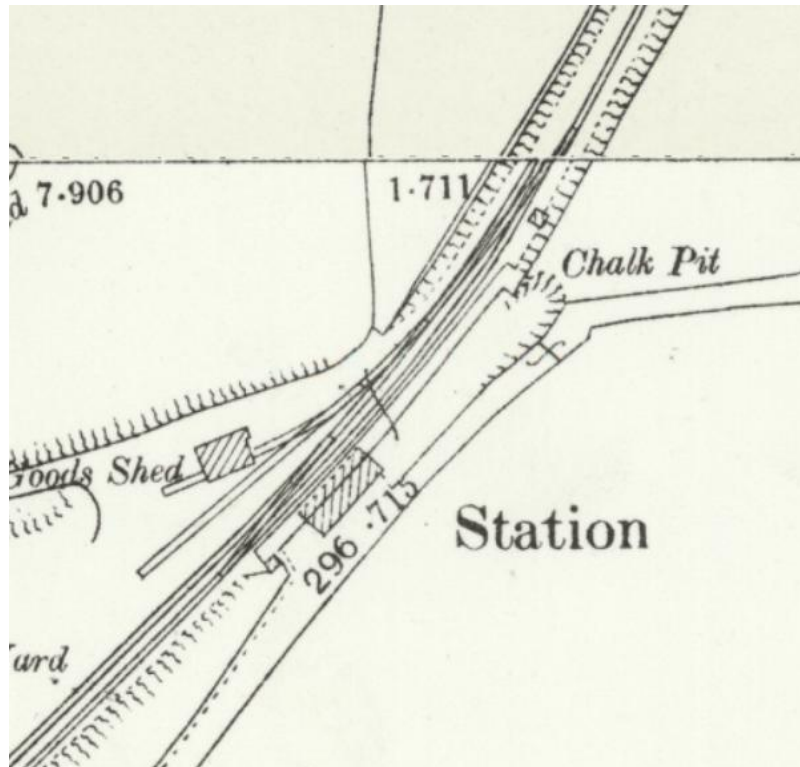
Early brick presses only applied two presses to the powdered clay in the brick moulds. The trade-name Phorpres came about because Fletton Bricks made in Bedfordshire are pressed twice in each direction so that they are literally 'four pressed' if the phrase is pronounced quickly it becomes Phorpres!



Hut 4 – Near Redbourn Train Station (GR 11092 12129)

OS 25 in: mile map, pub 1898

This hut (see *S&G Woodward photo*) was 80m north east of Redbourn station. There is very little evidence of the hut now. The location is very close to the Redbourn bypass where a line of trees now stands. No doubt the hut was removed at the same time as the station. The bypass was built in 1984.



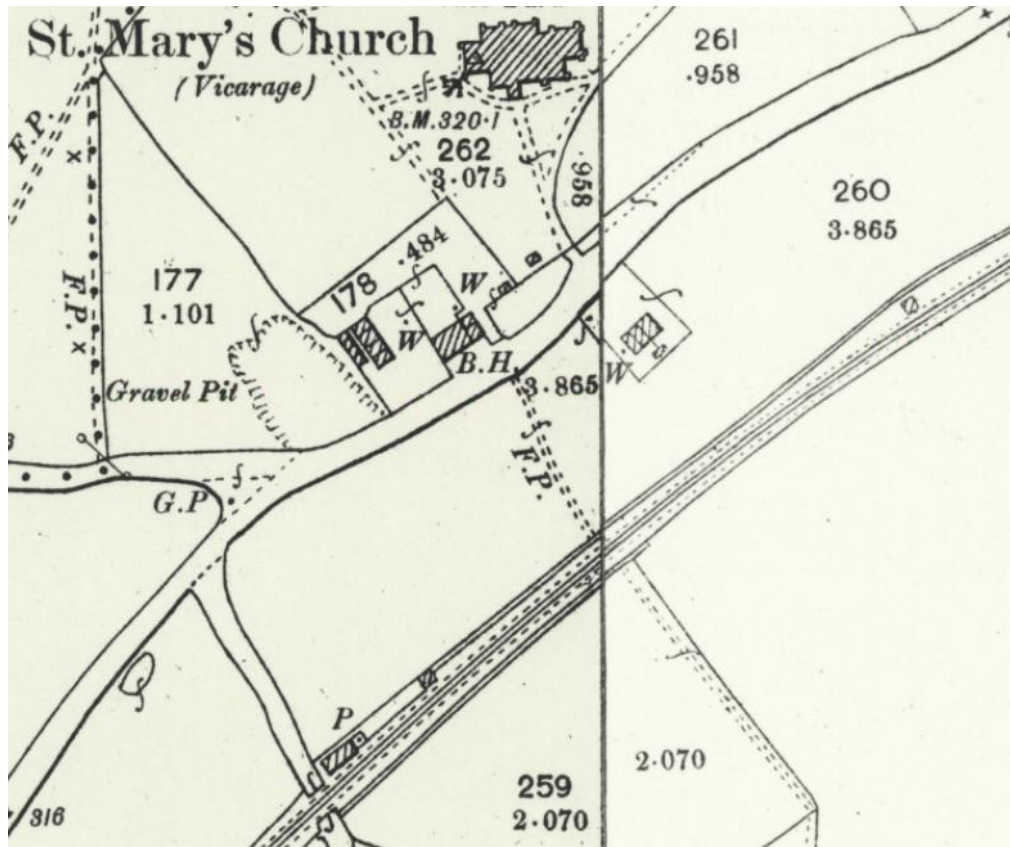
The platelayers hut at the end of the platform at Redbourn, August 1952.

Hut 5 – Redbourn (GR 10099 11436)

OS 25 in : mile map, pub 1898

This hut is located 100m north east from where a footpath joins the Nickey Line (See right hand side of map beneath 3-865 marker).

The hut is in the early stages of excavation at the moment.



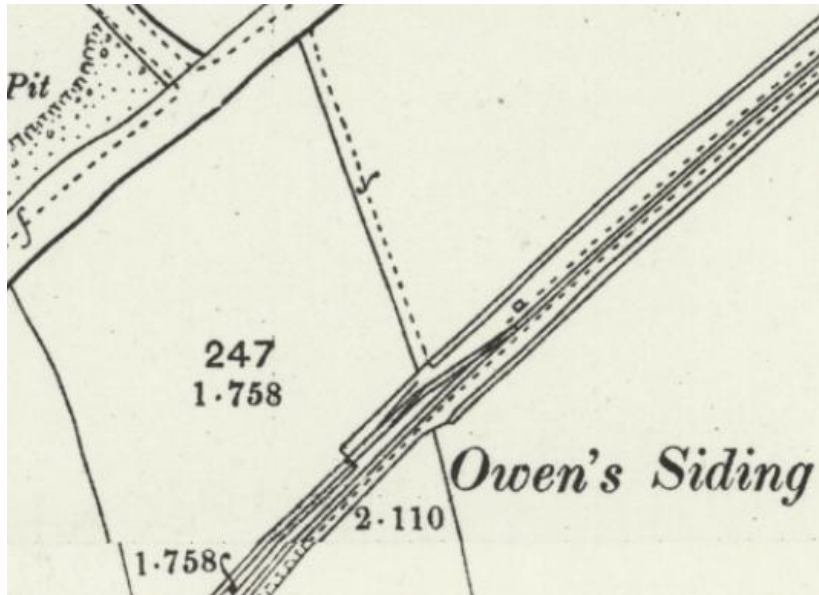
Hut 6 – Redbourn near Beaumont's Halt (GR 09969 11364)

This hut was 30m north east of Beaumont's Halt in Redbourn (see bottom left of [Hut 5](#) map above). There is very little evidence of it now.

It was probably demolished and removed at the same time as Redbourn station and Beaumont's Halt.

Hut 7 – Owen’s Siding (GR 09290 10541)

OS 25 in : mile map, pub 1898



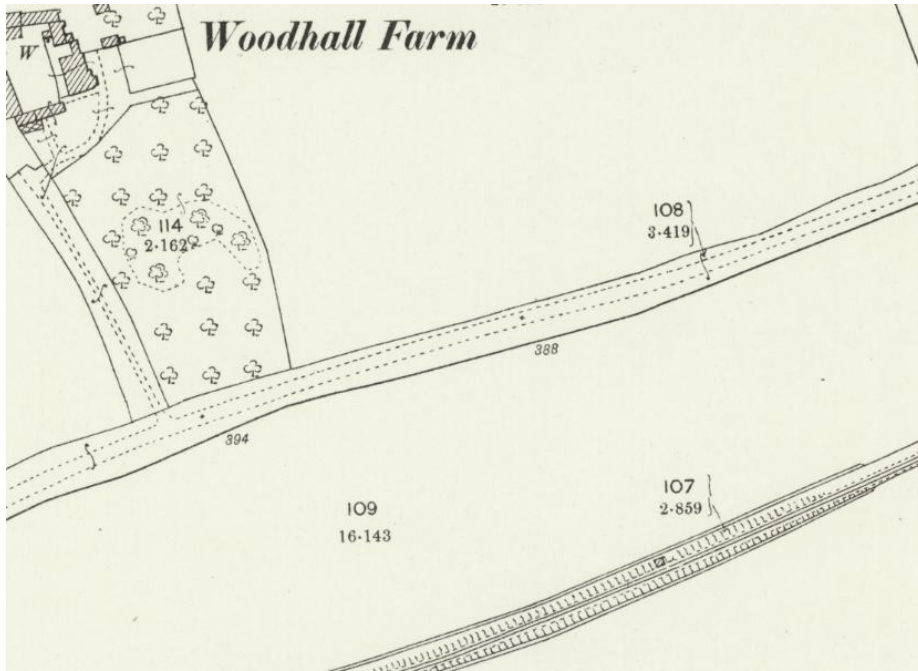
Owen's siding was installed to enable material from a nearby gravel pit to be loaded on to the wagons. The hut is next to the siding and may have been provided by Owen, a prominent local businessman with several building projects in the area.

The hut was of good quality, brick built with a brick floor. There was no sign of a stove which was probably removed.



Hut 8 – Near Hunter’s Oak (GR 08027 09576)

OS 25 in : mile map, pub 1898



This hut is close to present road Hunter’s Oak at the intersection with Half Moon Meadow (just below 107 marker on map above). It appears to have been situated on the north side of the railway track.

The hut hasn’t been properly investigated yet but this section of the Nickey Line is steeply banked both sides with well established trees and no immediate sign of the hut is apparent.

The hut may well have been removed at the time of the housing development nearby.

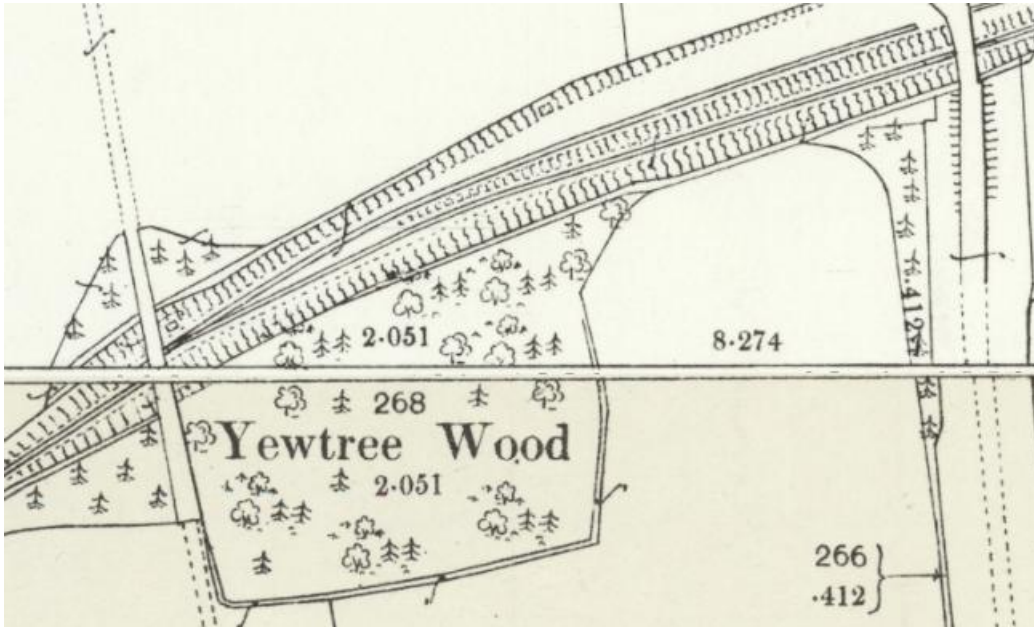
A portion of brick, made by London Brick Company, was found on the south side of the track.



Hut 9 – Yew Tree Wood (GR 09634 08828)

OS 25 in: mile map, pub 1898

This hut was to the north of the north west corner of Yew Tree Wood.



There is no trace of the hut now. It is at the bottom edge of an industrial site car park.