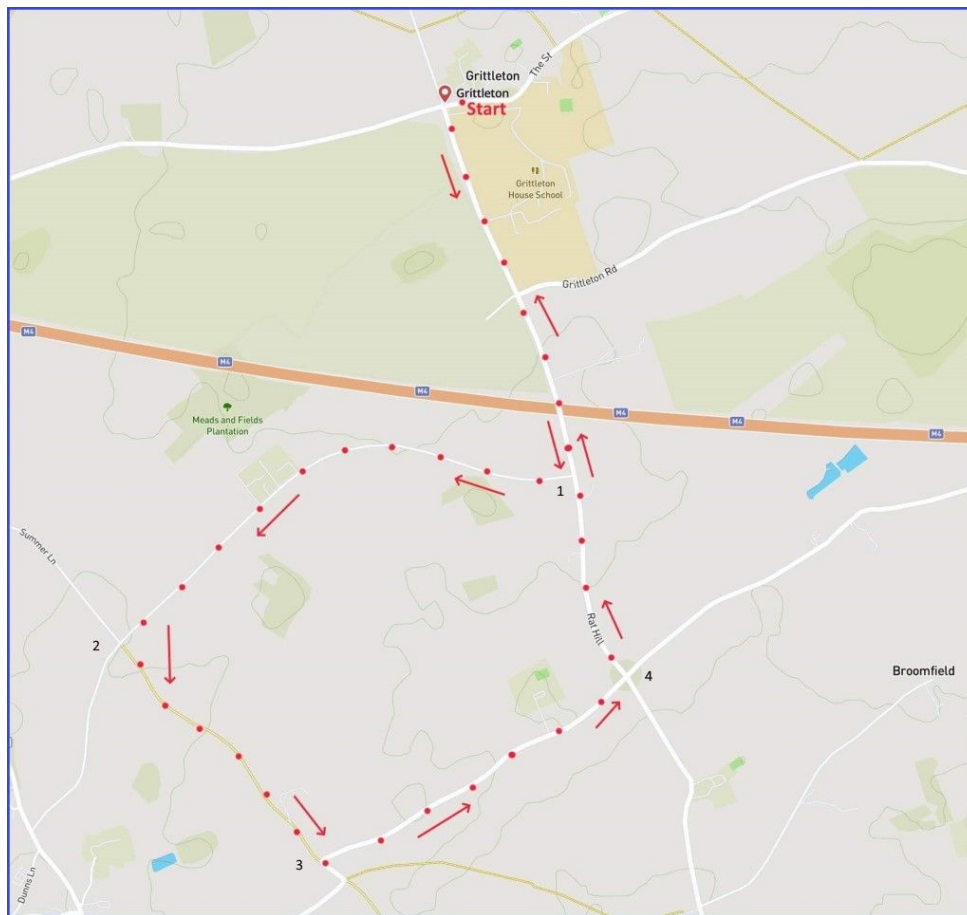




Grittleton

[Leave a Comment](#)

A 4-mile Wiltshire walk quite suited to wet winter days – i.e., mainly firm under foot and flat. A pleasant village community and an interesting estate history. Click [here](#) for an arial view. Click [here](#) for printable PDF download of these notes.



(Routes suggested from each map point + metres to next point)

Start: Walk away from Neeld Arms, turning left at junction. Walk towards motorway, take right lane to Castle Combe. 1.4km

1: Follow lane to x-road junction and take left path. 1.5km

2: Follow this path until 'by way' marker where you turn left. 900m

3: Follow this lane until T-junction with main road. 1km

4: Take left direction and road back under motorway to village. 2km

The pictures below are in the order things were seen on this walk. Clicking on any one will enlarge it (and the slideshow)



[D]



[E]



The walk

The shape of this walk is a lower-case “d” – which does mean covering the same ground at the end as covered at the start. That entails a bit of a cheat on the claim to be “circular”. In addition, it’s a walk that does not give much in terms of landscape. And neither does it compensate by offering a walk of honest exercise. These failings reflect the flatness of the countryside and the paved surfaces that make up much of the route.

Don’t be discouraged though. Sometimes it’s a flat and firm-under-foot walk that is needed – perhaps when the climate is wet and muddy and the appetite for exercise is more fresh air than stiles and slopes. Moreover, although there is a fair bit of road/lane surface on the route, there is relatively little traffic, and the grass verges are generous [C].

Of course, there is also the matter of the M4 motorway: it bisects this route. However, the dramatic moment of looking down onto six lanes of traffic may infuse this flat landscape with a little compensating charm. Besides, the motors are well concealed and neither their sight nor their sound is much of a disturbance. So the pleasure of this walk is more a reflection on the history of this place – particularly on how the architecture here has a certain coherence. This is due to the influence of Joseph Neeld on the village and its surrounds. So, read on...

The village

There is something about the name of this village that is unattractive. Originally (in the Anglo-Saxon era), it was known as Gretelintone – from which it has mutated numerous times to become “Grittleton”. This has something to do with gravel. No mining evident today though; the village is now just a string of houses forming an L-shaped ribbon at the intersection of Alderton Road and The Street. The surrounding roads are quiet. So much so that it’s hard to tell from a map where any passing traffic might be going – although the roads do link together a number of small Wiltshire villages.

There is a church, a village hall, a cricket ground, a pub (once the Red Lion, controversially renamed the [Neeld Arms](#) in 1944) and a large manor house. It is the manor house that dominates the village. Wiltshire manor houses tended to locate their estate staff at a polite distance. Not this one. That housing was made adjacent to the manor and became all of an architectural piece with the estate.

The church is pleasing, although with no striking features. It has a 13th century core and a perpendicular period tower (with bells), but it is mainly Victorian-restored. The churchyard is pleasant and behind it there an interesting 18th century rectory ([Church House](#)) – now privately owned and most recently valued at around £5m.

Joseph Neeld

What is intriguing about Grittleton (and some of its neighbouring villages) is to be found in the story of one man: namely a Bristol solicitor, Joseph Neeld (1789-1856). It is a story that might usefully guide your eye as you take up this walk.

Neeld is said by some to have been the richest man in Victorian England. This wealth derived from the legacy of his uncle, Philip Rundell (1746–1827) – a successful London silversmith. Rundell left Neeld £900,000 (which was grown further through investment in East India stock and London land). This legacy

was motivated by the gratitude of the otherwise miserly Rundell towards nephew Neeld – who had looked after Rundell for 14 years prior to his death. Neeld went on to use his wealth in acquiring the Grittleton estate. This comprised a 17th century manor house, some land thereabouts and the manor of Chippenham, which secured two parliamentary seats.

Neeld himself became MP for Gatton (a rotten Borough with only one elector) – although he made no speeches in the House of Commons. Later he was MP for Chippenham (where he did at least speak for the abolition of slavery). Then, in 1831 and at Warwick Castle, he married Lady Caroline Ashley-Cooper, the daughter of Lord Shaftesbury. This may have contrived a trade between money and social connections. However, the union turned out to be a disaster. On returning from honeymoon (so it is claimed – but certainly very soon after), Lady Caroline was surprised to find a young girl living in the house. Neeld admitted that this girl was his illegitimate daughter, one Anne Marie (c.1812-89). (Modern commentators always invoke illegitimacy “by a beautiful French woman” – possibly metaphorical, because such detail never comes with any authority.)

There followed a litany of legal cases converging on Lady Caroline’s failing to achieve a divorce (her own reputation was imperfect), although she was granted a separation and an annual income. Thereafter Neeld lived at Grittleton as a bachelor with his mother and consequently he died with no legitimate heirs. In 1844 the estate was based in trust to his brother John (1805-1891). John had six sons, all childless and the estate ended up with the descendants of Anne Marie.

Grittleton House

Apart from a colourful life story, Neeld’s significance in history lies in the building and charity that he carried out in Grittleton – and in villages nearby. This starts with Grittleton House itself.

The Anglo-Saxon registration of the Grittleton estate had been donated to Glastonbury monks. After the Dissolution it passed to the Crown and later (1705) to the Houltons, a Wiltshire clothier family. The estate at that time included a 1660 Jacobean manor house. This was something that Neeld wanted to rebuild: creating what you now see sprawling across the edge of the village. He worked to design a house that would be dramatic and that would contain his substantial collection of art works.

Neeld’s replacement manor house was largely the work of Scottish architect James Thomson. Neeld fancied his own talent as an architect and so he played an active part in directing the designs. Although this did lead to frequent fallings out and periods when Thomson was simply replaced. Pevsner comments that Thomson’s talents lay more in conceiving charming cottages and so were poorly matched to the demands of making a Great House. What therefore emerged was an eccentric mix of iconic styles which Pevsner judges in the end to be “beyond definition” (meaning, one imagines, undefinably dreadful).

Neeld villages

The historical significance of Joseph Neeld lies not just in his expansive manor house and its prominence in Grittleton village. He also worked (with Thomson) on shaping the houses all around his estate. Moreover, he extended these designs to create dwellings for estate workers in villages nearby: notably Alderton, Leigh Delamere and Sevington. Each villager had a cottage with an allotment for vegetables but also a pigsty – making them self-sufficient as a family. In Grittleton’s Alderton Road the houses still show the original Neeld/Thomson layouts.

Neeld also built almshouses, schools, and model farms in the area; he restored the churches at Grittleton and Norton (and he built the town hall in Chippenham). Taking all of this together produces a pattern that some have defined as the ‘[Neeld Estate Villages](#)’. Not that this architecture was always purely functional. There was some exotica in the mix as well. For instance, just off this present walk (left turn before M4) is [Crowdown](#) with its 5-stage tower – supposedly to act as a semaphore signal point, to warn of Neeld’s return to the estate. Also to be admired on this walk is the 1850 West Foscote House [\[D\]](#) with its unusual oriel windows (much favoured by Thomson) and its bell tower with weather vane and sundial.

Finally