

The Heritage of Alvechurch

In early historical periods Alvechurch appears to have been a frontier zone between the Cornevii and Dobunni tribes. Washhills is a high vantage point in the north of Alvechurch Parish and its name is derived from the old English “weard-setl” which means “a look-out place”. The Cornevii tribe lived in the north of the area while the Dubunni lived to the south.

The pattern of settlement and land use that was established in the parish by medieval times can be discerned in the landscape today. Alvechurch and Wast Hills were Domesday Manors, Weatheroak and Hopwood were medieval hamlets and there are sites of deserted medieval hamlets at Radford, Pyria, Forhill, Alcott, Bittell and Red Hill. For some distance, the parish boundary follows the Dagnell Brook, the waters draining from Weatheroak Hill to the river Arrow and the south while a short distance away water drains to the river Cole and north to the Trent. In former times the Arrow has provided water for fishponds and power to drive a number of mills. Remains of these are still in existence in varying states of preservation and access. 1, 2,3,4,5 (Bibliographic References)

Alvechurch once held eight salt houses in Droitwich which had exported salt since ancient times. A well-used track, or saltway, came from Droitwich over Copley Hill. One branch is now a footpath which leads down into Alvechurch through the railway station. The other branch continued down into the valley, up what is now The Holloway and along Storage Lane to the east, passing through an area of common rights recorded in 1244, and which can be identified in the landscape today.⁶

The Roman military road, the Ryknild Street (which was formerly The Isenhylt Way) runs from the Fosse Way, through Weatheroak and on towards Watling Street. It links Redditch with Forhill on the North Worcestershire Path. In this area it is a hollow way, a narrow country lane with high native hedges and native ground flora. It forms part of the Avoncroft Cycle Way which is sign-posted from Bromsgrove across the parish and north, on to the city.

The recent social history of the parish has been recorded in detail in two books by members of the Alvechurch Historical Society, showing that at the beginning of the twentieth century the parish was without much unemployment or poverty, but little luxury. Some were employed in the needle industry of Redditch, some in motor manufacturing at Longbridge and many in local businesses including the brick yard, then later, manufacturing of springs, nuts and bolts, Dellow motors, machine guards and at the British Cast Iron Research Association. The books show that the community had developed, and still has, a large number of Societies and Institutions in which members carry out a wide variety of voluntary work. 7, 8

The parish has been closely associated with the Bishopric of Worcester since 780 AD when Offa, King of Mercia and Overlord of England, gave the land to the church. The Bishop of Worcester built a wooden summer palace at Alvechurch and imparked land to hunt deer before 1168. Documents show that Alvechurch (Allchurch) Park was extended in the 13th Century and today the ditch and bank (which was topped with a wooden fence to contain the deer), is still clearly evident around much of the perimeter. It is shown on a map of 1701, held in the County Records, and runs along Radford Road in the north, Rowney Green Lane in the East, through the middle of ancient woodland, (Peck Wood) then along a line close to the Redditch Road(B 4120) back to the Bishop’s Palace. The map is very detailed and measures 1.5metre by 0.75metre. It is in colour, with field names which

describe their use. Aerial surveys in the 20th century failed to identify signs of earlier field systems in the parish so local hedgerows and the many veteran trees could be very old indeed.^{9, 10, 11, 12.}

The site of Alvechurch Park lies across the hillside to the east of the village. It has been assessed by a former County archaeological officer as “ a very good example of the recently-recognised concept of medieval aesthetically-modified landscapes”, writing “ the palace, gardens, spectacularly-engineered set of moats and fishponds within the park point to a strong element of deliberate design for recreational and aesthetic motives. 12,13,14,15.

Sharing its northern boundary with the southern boundary of Alvechurch Park, is the medieval Bordesley Park which was first imparked in 1138 by the monks of Bordesley Abbey. The area has been imparked and disparked twice. At its

most northerly point stands a veteran hollow oak tree, reputed to have been a meeting place and called the Calling Oak. Until the 20th Century a small church-like building, said to be a shelter for the monks, stood nearby.¹⁶

Bromsgrove District Plan. 2011- 2030. states in the District profile that “The largely unspoilt rural environment ,the rich variety of historic assets and character.....no doubt help in attracting tourism and regeneration.”(paragraph 2.28.) It also states that “Tourism destinations are varied” (paragraph 2.21) and “many historic assets are undesignated” (paragraph 2.23)

The site of Bordesley Abbey is at the southern edge of Bordesley Park and just within Redditch Borough. It was a Cistercian monastery, whose foundation stone was laid in 1138. Excavations have shown that it is a very valuable site, giving much evidence about rural economy and settlement which is difficult to obtain elsewhere. Adjacent to the site is Bordesley Abbey Visitor Centre and the National Needle Museum of Forge Mill. Forge Mill was converted into a needle-scouring mill in 1730 and contains original machinery which is still operational.^{17, 18, 19, 20, 21.}

Near the south east boundary of Alvechurch parish in Beoley parish stands the 12th century parish church of St Leonard, one of the most ancient and splendid churches in the diocese of Worcester and which has connections with the Sheldon tapestry. A short distance from the church there is the site of a possible adulterine castle ^{22, 11}

The Worcester and Birmingham Canal runs through the western side of Alvechurch parish. The canal is fed by the Upper and Lower Bittell reservoirs. Many visitors from home and abroad begin and end their canal holidays from the local marina. There is a sailing club at the Upper Bittell reservoir , fishing is a popular leisure activity in the parish and self-catering residential accommodation for 36 people is provided in Peck Wood, which is particularly suitable for youth groups, but can be hired for use by the general public. ^{23,24.}

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