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Alvechurch Village Trail

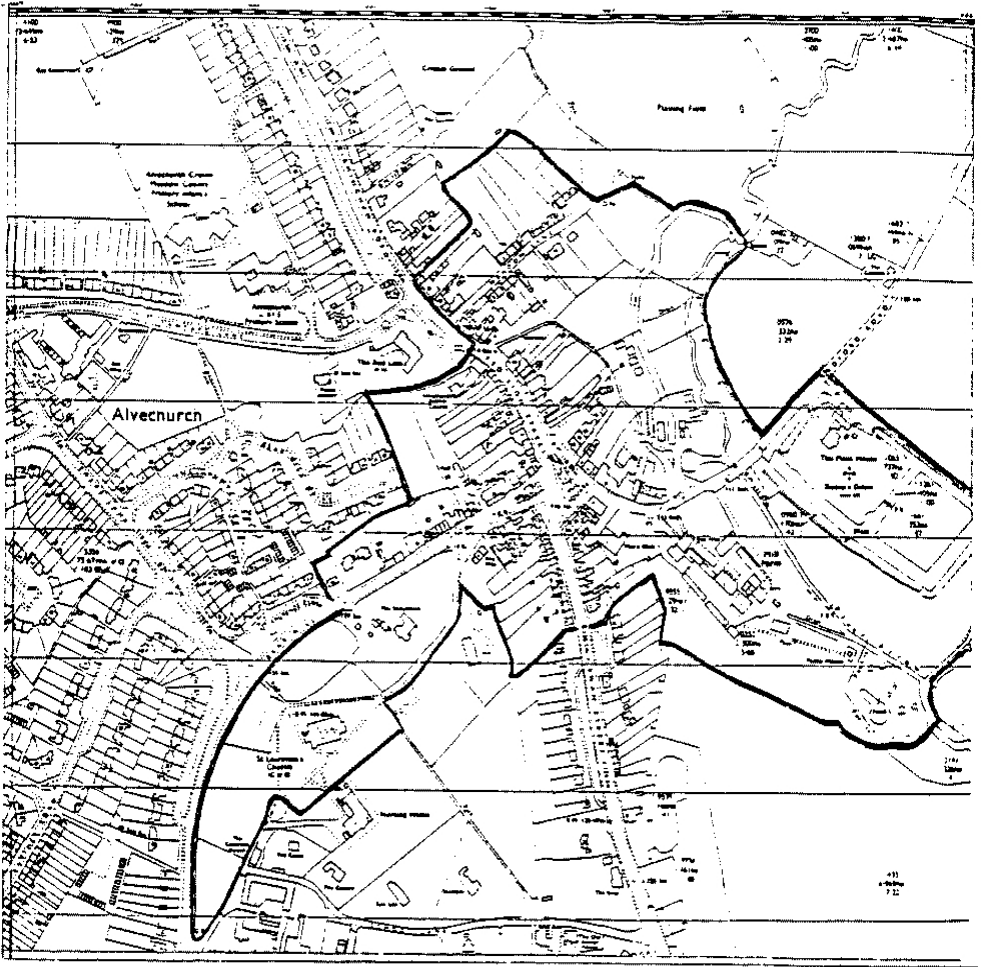
by

G. C. Scane



The Alvechurch Village Society

Alvechurch, North Worcestershire



ALVECHURCH

Village Conservation Area
Civic Amenities Act 1967
Worcestershire County Council
Conservation Area No 10

Alvechurch Village Trail

a gossip guided walk

by

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The Alvechurch Village Trail offers
a short tour of the village centre,
confined to the designated conservation area
(see facing map, inside cover).

The distance is just over one mile.
Even with 'stops and stares' it can be
completed easily within the hour.

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G. C. Scane
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Villagers of Alvechurch

Historical Note

Alvechurch has been closely associated with the Bishopric of Worcester since 780AD when Offa, King of Mercia and Overlord of England, gave the land forming the parish to the Church. Some time later the Church of St Laurence was built, and for over 1000 years has dominated the village from its low hillock. From modest numbers at Domesday, 1087, the population grew rapidly over the next two centuries, owing much to the presence of the Palace, where many bishops and their households spent long periods. By 1299 borough status had been granted, and there was a weekly market and an annual Fair lasting three days. Unhappily, the Black Death had a catastrophic effect on the people, and the population did not recover until the 1750s.

'Alvechurch' is a shortened version of the Anglo Saxon name for the settlement: Aelfgithcirce (the church of Aelfgithe). Possibly a wooden church was dedicated to the Anglo Saxon Saint Aelfgythe, a sister-in-law of King Athelstan, who regranted the land to the Church of Worcester in 943. It would then have been rededicated to St. Laurence when the Normans built the stone church, fragments of which remain.

Farming was always the main occupation of the parish. Nail and needle making spread from Bromsgrove and Redditch respectively, but these have long disappeared. While now the village is in great part a dormitory, it retains important features of traditional village life and treasures its ancient buildings in its centre.

We shall start our walk at point A on the map in the centrefold.

A: The Square At the heart of the designated conservation area is The Square. Years ago it comprised a larger area, being the original market place, and lay on what was then the main road running from Droitwich to Coventry. The 'Square' was originally triangular, before the erection of the three-storey Georgian house in the Square and the black and white houses on the island site at the foot of Bear Hill.

Some of the cottages facing the northeast side of The Square are of late medieval origin. Some exhibit timber studding (visible, e.g., in the upper walls of the butcher's yard), pierced by tiny 'peep' windows, whose original uses are not known.

B: Radford Road From The Square onto Radford Road one encounters a row of cottages now occupied by the local surgery and a number of small businesses. Amongst many former tenants was 'The Crown', a public house which existed for many years until 1903 and is remembered by a name plate ('Crown House'). The veterinary hospital (note the weather vane) recently moved to a new location on Birmingham Road. The working men's club (now relocated to its premises opposite) had its origins in this row, as did a local branch of the Oddfellows.

Note the bricked up archway and remains of gate or door hinges. One might speculate on what manner of vehicles and passengers frequented the yard of the hostelry when the Excise Officer had his office at The Crown during the 1850s. Remains of a grain hoist can be seen on the side wall of the shop opposite the cottages, perhaps related to the nearby mill.

C: *The Mill and Mill Bridge* The present mill building (now a fashionable and excellent restaurant) is only about 150 years old and was in use as a water driven mill up to WWII. It occupies the site of the Bishop's Mill dating from 1299 or earlier. Over the bridge wall one sees trees, shrubs, falling waters, and in springtime wild flowers—a miniature natural countryside at the edge of the village.

D: *Bishop's Palace* The 'Moat House', seen on the further side of the bridge, is built on the site of the residence of former bishops of Worcester. The Black Prince wrote to Bishop Brian of Worcester, then Chancellor of England, at this palace to tell of the English bowmen's victory at Poitiers in September 1356.

The palace was finally dismantled by 1746. All that remains are the twin moats and outlines of fishponds, which augmented the diet of inhabitants and their guests.

Excavations in the field adjoining the Moat House revealed medieval artifacts and the site of a 'Long House', either an accommodation provided for retinues of the bishop's visitors and other travellers or the shelter for masons and other workers engaged in constructing and maintaining the building.

Radford Road continues on to Weatheroak, where the freehouse The Coach and Horses was an old staging inn on the road from Coventry.

E: *The Precinct* Back in the Square and the shopping precinct, we are on the site where "once stood a fine house". Its occupants were probably inconvenienced by a local slaughter house that stood on the area now occupied by the Golden Gate restaurant (before that a small factory).

F: *Red Lion Street* From the Precinct we walk past cottages numbered 6 and 8, Red Lion Street. Dating from the late Middle Ages, they probably formed part of a larger building based on the medieval hall plan. Some of the timber studding is exposed. Recently a shoe was found in the rafters of No. 6. It has been dated to around 1790, and is believed to have been placed there in order to frighten away evil spirits.

Although numbers 16-18 may have originally constituted a single building used as a private school, it was converted into separate dwellings many years ago. Beyond that, the varying cottage house styles along Red Lion Street shows the range of rural architecture in a typical English village street. Note the original house names echoing ruralness (e.g., 'Lily Cottage' and 'Lilac Cottage').

G: Meadow Lane Before long we reach the entrance to Meadow Lane (once known as Dog Lane), which leads to the village playing fields. It boasts a row of 'picture postcard' cottages, each with its unique history. Among former occupants at the turn of the century were the village washerwoman and a saddlery.

H: The Meadows The playing fields here were donated to the children of the village by the Wiggin family of Forhill House, in memory of their son lost in the Great War. Besides children's play equipment, there is space for cricket and football pitches.

The Meadows has been the site of an Urban Fringe Countryside Action Project. Wild flower species have been increased from 30 to 76, and improvement has been made to trees and streamside areas. Part of the boundary is marked by the River Arrow—from which some local elders claim to have caught trout in their youth.

I: Birmingham Road Back on the main road, heading north, one finds another terrace of artisans' cottages showing the mosaic of village architecture.

J: Cricket Club Next to the entrance to the village cricket club is the former police house and what was the village 'lock up'.

K: Tanyard Lane Crossing the Birmingham Road and returning toward the village centre, one encounters Tanyard Lane (by The Red Lion). Though not part of the Village Trail, Tanyard Lane is of interest for at least two reasons: it leads to land known as Crown Meadows, on which stand a First School, Middle School, and village public library; and beyond that, it leads via Snake Lane to Withybed Lane, thence to Withybed Green, a hamlet on the Worcester & Birmingham Canal.

The reference to 'crown' may relate to the old Crown Inn, in The Square—most coaching inns had pasturage nearby. The Crown Meadow was the site of the Horse Show, a thriving institution until the Great War.

Some cottages in Withybed Green are 300 years old, some 200, and most 100. The hamlet housed canal builders and workers in the local brick factory (located on the canal between Withybed Green and Scarfield Hill, to the south). Both the canal and the brick factory, which closed before World War II, stimulated the growth of modern Alvechurch. A walk from the Crown Inn in Withybed Green is featured in *Pub Walks in Worcestershire*.

L: Red Lion Public House The Red Lion public house is the latest of several hostelries built on this site. The two flower beds at its roadside front, originally planted by Toc H and the Village Society, are now maintained by the brewery. The Village Trail then crosses an almost unnoticeable bridge over a stream called the Hoobrook, or Holbrook.



Church of St Laurence



The Old House, S
Bear Hill



M: Baptist Church The Baptist Church, built around 1862, was enlarged with a school/meeting room in 1927. Later another hall was added. The spaces serve not only the Baptist community but, through their generosity, the entire village, since numerous shows and fetes are held there. One room is regularly used for monthly meetings of the Executive Committee of the Village Society.

N: Red Lion Street (cont.) The low doorways of cottages next to the Baptist Church are accentuated by high threshold steps. These resulted from householder endeavours to keep water out of their homes when the stream, unable to find a way under the road, made its annual crossing on the surface, flooding the street in each direction. Happily this is now an event of the past!

The façades of the next buildings show changes wrought over the years, with outlines of bricked-up doors and windows. At the time of this writing, it is not known how much of this architecture will survive the new housing development fronting Red Lion St and carrying back, beyond the car park, to Bear Hill Drive. An open space just before two new dwellings (part of the housing development) gives pedestrian access to the village car park and anticipated public toilets.

The building terminating in the Tudor Rose Fish Bar is similar to its counterpart on the almost opposite side of the road, in that it was also built on the medieval hall plan. The name 'Tudor Rose' was chosen because in an upstairs room (as in a room in 8 Red Lion Street opposite), there is a fine plaster ceiling decorated with a large Tudor Rose, all dating from the 16th Century.

Some village residents fondly hope that a scheme could be found to return the fish-and-chip shop and numbers 1 and 3 Red Lion Street to its former medieval glory as an integrated building. A more realistic possibility is that the northernmost part will become a village centre building for use by the Parish Council, the Village Society, and other local organisations.

O: Bear Hill The site circumscribed by Red Lion Street, Bear Hill, and the pedestrian walk-through (known as BobHopping Street) had for many years been the home of retail trade. Among past tenants were a shoe shop, a haberdashery, and a sweet shop. The end of the building facing the main road carries the display and information boards of the Village Society and Parish Council, together with notices of other village organisations. The only remaining 'fire mark' in the village centre can be seen on a renovated cottage on the pedestrian walk-through.

The medieval half-timbered black and white building on the south corner was for many years the village bakery (and is still affectionately called 'Prettie's', its common name, by oldtime residents). Is the symbol on its roof-level weather-vane meant to represent a bakery or smithy? The bakery has shrunk to just the rear part of the building.

The village post office occupies part of the building that was originally a grammar school, whose trust fund continues to help finance village children in further education. While the origins of the grammar school are uncertain, in 1663 a schoolmaster was licensed. There were only 12 foundation scholars, but schoolmasters took in boarders, of whom there were 34 in 1851; the school was closed in 1901.

P: Village Hall Funded by a bequest of J. W. Partridge augmented by village donations, on land given by Mrs. Batchlor, of Hopwood, the Village Hall was inaugurated in 1929 by the Chairman of the Parish Council, Mr. A. H. Wiggin. Previously a lemonade factory occupied the site.

In addition to providing the venue for meetings of various societies and for other civic activities, the Village Hall hosts private functions. The interior, with its high dormer windows and black beams, has changed little over the years, apart from the removal of a balcony dictated by later building regulations.

On the west side of the hall is another path to the car park. Note the unusual Parish Council notice board: three wooden panels with a stone frame

Q: Village Green As one climbs Bear Hill, across the road can be seen the triangular Village Green, with a flag-pole and a seat under an oak tree. This was established as a 'garden of remembrance' by the Parish Council in 1949. (In earlier times it was the site of the village pound for stray or distrained animals.)

R: Bear Hill (cont.) Varying house styles ascending Bear Hill suggest questions about the original builders or owners. Is the imitative dovecote on the gable end of the first house beyond the Village Hall purely decoration, or was the builder leaving a reminder of a by-gone dovecote that served the nearby medieval plan dwelling in its heyday? Why is the three-storey single fronted house so narrow? Is the vine thriving on the slightly recessed frontage of 'Vine Cottage'? What kind of vehicles used the arched entrance, now bricked up?

No. 30 Bear Hill retains a nail shop in the garden, a reminder of the days when nailmaking was important in the village.

S: The Old House This 16th century building was once the staging inn on the road to Bromsgrove and Worcester known as 'The Bear'. Internally, the house features a fine oak staircase and large stone fireplaces in rooms with exposed structural beams. Although recently converted to 'nursing home requirements', much of the interior structure has been retained. Most of the land originally belonging to The Old House has been sold and turned into housing developments.

T: School Lane Vehicular access to the Church of St. Laurence is via School Lane, from the Redditch-Birmingham Road or from Bear Hill at its crest. At that point Bear Hill carriageway becomes Station Road, leading to the railway station on the Redditch-Birmingham line. Just beyond the canal bridge it becomes Scarfield Hill, with the Alvechurch Boat Centre on the left (and then carries on to Bromsgrove).

U: High House Farm As one climbs School Lane, to the right near the top stands High House Farm, now being converted into condominiums. This farm contributed to past village life. Dramatics were enacted in its barn at the turn of the century. The Georgian house has connections with the Halesowen novelist Francis Brett-Young.

School Lane to the right becomes a one-way section of the lane coming up from the Redditch Road. This is the only realisation of the one-way traffic system proposed for the village in the 1969 *Appraisal* by Major John Gedge. (An updating of the *Appraisal*, entitled *Alvechurch 2: 1994*, by Antony Sealey, Vice-President of the Village Society, has recently been published by The Alvechurch Village Society, with assistance from the Bromsgrove District Council. It is on sale in local shops.)

'The Coach House', the imposing building at the top corner, once housed vehicles of the rectory next to the church.

V: The Former Rectory The former rectory, which replaced the original medieval building which lay half a mile away on the glebe, was built by the Venerable John Sandford, Rector, and Archdeacon of Coventry, in 1855. As with the church, the architect was William Butterfield (who built nearly 100 churches and is known as well for his Keble College, Oxford). Now called 'The Lawns', the house serves as an elegant home for a number of elderly citizens.

W: Churchyard One enters the churchyard through a well-worn 'squeeze' in the wall by the iron main gates. Beside the path is the familiar churchyard yew tree. This one, with its hollow trunk, is reputed to be some 600 years old (perhaps a local exaggeration).

X: The Church of St. Laurence No trace exists of the original (probably wooden) Saxon church on this site. Some few remains of the 13th century church (the Norman surround in the south doorway—re-erected in the 19th century, parts of a sedilia in the chancel, the priest's door to the chancel) are doubtless the oldest remaining construction in the village. Some of the windows date from the 14th and 15th century, and the tower was built as early as that. There are tombs dating back to the 15th century.

The church was rebuilt, 'restored', and added on to over the years. A major re-construction was completed by the above mentioned church architect William Butterfield in 1861. Except for the porch, the external walls of the rebuilt church are constructed of sandstone from Bromsgrove and Alvechurch. In the interior Butterfield used sandstone, red brick, and white brick diapering. Elegant trusses and exposed rafters make up the impressive support of the steeply pitched roofs.

Outside the church porch lie the remains of the medieval preaching cross, particularly interesting for having a scratch sun dial from which the times of services could be ascertained.

A more detailed history and description of the church is available inside.

Y: School Lane (cont.) The footpath beyond the lower gates to the churchyard leads to a kissing gate, passes behind the present rectory, and takes one back to School Lane opposite the original buildings of the village school. One is now used as a parish room by the church, another is set aside as the museum and meeting room of the Alvechurch Historical Society, and the main building serves as the local Roman Catholic church.

Z: Return to the Village Centre School Lane intersects with the Redditch-Birmingham Road. As we turn left, the road name becomes Swan Street, after the dominant hostelry at this end of the village.

The recently built terrace houses on the opposite side replaced 'Bug Row', the derisively named dwellings that tradition claims as mean homes of cottage needle-makers.

On the left side are renovated cottages served by a raised access path which finally descends to roadside level at the shop of the village clock and watch mender, housed in half of the former blacksmith's forge. The other half of the forge, whilst maintaining its link with horses, is concerned rather with their racing performance.

The cottages 2-6 Swan Street were built as the parish workhouse, before the days of the Bromsgrove Union. No. 1 Swan Street, on the other side of the road, housed the village lock-up before the Police Station was built.

A: The Square Back at the village square, the buildings fronting the southeasterly prospect were once private dwelling houses of 'quality' (and were still that at the turn of the century). The wine shop on the Radford Road corner was formerly a general grocery store, the building society office was formerly a wool shop, and the neighbouring bank joined it to form a double fronted house. Older villagers remember the pharmacy as a small nursing home, birthplace of a number of them.

The island site building on the northwestern side, once the home and premises of a local artisan, has been renovated in recent years to serve as offices.

Much of the village is not covered by this short tour, and a great deal of history has been omitted. But we hope this provides a stimulus for further exploration.

Notes

Nearby Places of Interest

Redditch:

Forge Mill Needle Museum

Only needle museum in Britain, commemorating over 350 years of needle-making in the area.

Only needle scouring mill in working condition in Europe, with one of the few working water wheels in the Midlands.

Special exhibitions, workshops, and talks.

Open March - November.

Bordesley Abbey Visitor Centre

Site of 12th century Cistercian monastic precinct.

Site of ongoing archaeological study.

Guided trail over abbey precinct.

Museum of artefacts.

Bromsgrove:

Bromsgrove Museum

Museum of 'everyday things' from yesteryear.

Avoncroft Museum of Buildings (at Stoke Heath)

Open-air museum of re-erected authentic buildings from a 600-year span of central England history.

Demonstrations of old working skills.

Open March-November.

Hanbury:

Jenny Ring Craft Centre

Restored farm buildings, with craft workshops, gallery, and farm exhibits.

