

# Wyre Forest Study Group

## Stourport, Stagbury Hill, Ribbesford Wood, Winterdyne & Bewdley - Monday, 28th October 1878

WORCESTERSHIRE NATURALISTS' CLUB

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The fourth and last meeting for the season 1879 was held on Monday, the 28th of October, in *Ribbesford Woods*, when the members assembled at *Stourport Station*, and, after passing through the quiet town of *Stourport*, and over the iron bridge, where a toll was then taken from foot passengers, the route was continued by roads shaded by trees in autumnal tints to *Areley Kings*, and a pause made at the church. The sacred structure has received numerous alterations not much to its advantage since its first erection in Norman times, the existing church showing mostly fifteenth century work, though a Norman doorway not in its pristine state yet stands on the north side. The red sandstone tower occupies an unusual position, being built over the south porch.

Standing in the churchyard, Mr. Noake made some comments on the history of the parish, namely, that it had given birth to the noted monk and historian, Layamon, within a few years of the Conquest; that Prince Rupert is said to have slept at the manor-house on one occasion during the civil wars; and that in 1633 John Millard did penance in the church for "divers diffamacious words against Mistress Eliz. Burrastone." Next he pointed out a sculptured dial standing on a pillar, and which was removed many years ago from a garden at *Hartlebury*. It is covered with curious inscriptions and symbolical figures, and it is said to have belonged to a wizard - one Master Fifkins - whose chief gratification was in casting a spell to keep persons wandering around the village all night until sunrise, after which he had no power. The company were then taken to Sir Harry Coningsby's monument, consisting of huge blocks of stone, which formed his portion of the churchyard fence when it was the duty of every householder in the parish to repair a certain part of the said fence allocated to him, the inscription of which is as follows: - "Lithologema quare Reponitur Sir Harry." Among the sepulchral inscriptions is the following:- "Hee's gon before and paid a debt most juste and dew, Which all people here on earth ye same must doe." And there is a stone in the chancel to a William Walsh, "who was ruinated by three Quakers, three lawyers, and a fanatic to help them."

An advanced was next made to *Stagbury Hill*, the ascent of which is rather steep, although little more than half the height of the *Malvern Range*. The prospect from the summit is most splendid and extensive, embracing the windings of the Seven at the base of the hill, the bridge and town of *Stourport*, the *Malvern Range*, and the *Bredon* and *Cotteswold Hills*, southward; while on the east or the *Clent Hills*; and northward the picturesque

woods of *Ribbesford* charm of the eye, *Kinvaur Edge* bounding the far horizon. From thence the naturalists proceeded to the woods below, and their intricate paths were threaded under the guidance of a gamekeeper, but no Fungi worth of recording were found.

The members, on emerging from the woods, came to the Severn side, and the large manorial mansion called *Ribbesford Hall* soon came into view, formerly inhabited by Lord Herbert of Chirbury, but now owned by the Ingram family. *Ribbesford Church* is not very far from the *Hall*, and the north doorway, on whose tympanum is a Norman sculpture representing a hunter shooting with bow and arrow at some strange animal, has been properly carefully preserved. This sculpture was now regarded with interest, the old story respecting it being that the hunter represented shot at a deer, but killed a salmon. It was decided that the apparent legs settled it that the animal was no salmon, but opinions were divided as to the carved animal being a beaver or a seal. Mr. Lees argued on behalf of the seal, as those animals have been known occasionally to stray up the Severn, while Beavers were never known to inhabit this part of the country. Mr. Noake thought the sculpture emblematical, as the inhabitants hereabout had to supply the monastery at Worcester from the produce of their hunting and fishing. Besides this sculpture on the tympanum, there is another on the side of the eastern pillar, which represents some saintly legend in which a fish - perhaps a salmon - really does take part, but the explanation of this legend or allegory is not evident.

After the discussion was ended, Mr. Noake alluded to the numerous and peculiar inscriptions to be seen in the churchyard, many of which refer to the vicissitudes and dangers of watermen's lives, as the Severn, running close by, had no doubt being the cause of death to many persons who are buried there; for instance

1. My anchor's cast,  
My rope's on shore,  
And here I lie  
Till time's no more.
2. Boreas' blasts and Neptune's waves  
Have tossed me to and fro;  
I strove all I could my life to save;  
At last obliged to go.  
Now at an anchor here I lay,  
Where's many of the fleet!  
But now once more I must set sail,  
My Saviour Christ to meet.
3. Sharp was the stroke that took my life;  
Sad news it was onto my wife.  
I anxious was my wife to see,  
But died before she came to me.

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And, with reference to these river casualties, Mr. Noake quoted the following from an old M.S.: - " Nov. 29, 1620. In the river Severn was the greatest flood that ever was since the flood of Noah. There were drowned at Hampton's Loade 68 persons as they were going to Bewdley fair."

Before leaving *Ribbesford Church*, two ancient stone coffin lids, found under the floor of the chancel, which have ornate crosses sculptured on them, and on one the cross passes through a shield, no doubt once emblazoned with coats of arms, were examined.

From *Ribbesford* the members took the nearest way to Winterdyne, for the pleasing walks here had been thrown open to the members of the Club by the courtesy of the present proprietor, Mr. Shaw, who most politely accompanied the party in their ramble, and pointed out the most remarkable points of view.

Dinner was served at the *George Hotel, Bewdley*, after which Mr. Lees read a paper "*On the History and Folk-Lore of the Apple and Pear, with notices of their products, Cider and Perry,*" which is printed in extenso on the pages succeeding the report of this meeting.

Mr. J. Noake next read a paper, at the request of the President, "*On the History and Peculiarities of Bewdley.*" It was a border town in the Marches of Wales, and he explained the full meaning of that term, and referred to the *Palace of Tickenhill* as the Council House for that town. In this house Prince Arthur was married by deputy, and here his body lay on its way from *Ludlow* to *Worcester*, where it is buried in the Cathedral. Here Queens Mary and Elizabeth visited in their youth; and here the unfortunate Charles had a brief abode during his conflict with the Parliament. The

house was ruined at that time, and was subsequently rebuilt. Some old timbered houses of the 17th century still remained in the town, and the gates of the town were not entirely removed till the beginning of the present century. *Bewdley* was a place of sanctuary, or "city of refuge," in the middle ages. By the act of Henry VI. it was placed within the parish of *Ribbesford*, and the whole within the jurisdiction of the Marches; but, by an Act of Henry VIII., it was made part of the county of *Worcester*, and is now a separate parish. The ancient trade of the town consisted of tanning, comb-making, and the manufacture of caps. These caps were protected by Act of Parliament, and persons within the district were compelled to wear them or forfeit 3s. 4d. The first bridge was said to have been built temp. Henry VII., when the town was a great thoroughfare between *Manchester* and *Bristol*, and multitudes of waggons and pack-horses were employed in the trade. The present bridge was erected by Telford in 1797. The junction of the canal with the Severn at *Stourport* did great damage to *Bewdley*, and was the cause of the rise of the former town, which had previously consisted only a beer-house and two or three cottages. "Pride goes before a fall" was illustrated in this case, seeing that *Bewdley* had persistently opposed the canal being brought to itself. Mr. Noake strongly recommended the erection of a more decent church at *Bewdley*, and concluded by comments on the objects of interest in the neighbourhood - the "*Devil's Spittleful*" and legend - *Blackstone Rock*, with its ancient hermitage - and the remains of the ancient *Forest of Wyre*.

At this meeting the following gentlemen were duly elected members of the club: - Mr. Edward Corbett and Mr. J.W. Prosser, of Chaddesley Corbett, and Messrs J.P. Lett and W.B. Williamson, of Worcester.



The tympanum at Ribbesford Church, 23 January 2014

Rosemary Winnall