

Review: Ledbury People & Parish before the Reformation

Written by John Eager

Thursday, 20 May 2010 00:00 - Last Updated Tuesday, 01 June 2010 14:48

Did you know there was once a medieval vineyard in Ledbury?

Did you know some Ledbury tenants used to pay their rent with honey?

Did you know that prior to 1066 Ledbury was the seat of bishops?

Sylvia Pinches early medieval history of Ledbury paints an informative and fascinating picture of Ledbury. It is a comprehensive history that examines the growth and structure of the town, the important role played by the church and attempts to portray the life of medieval Ledbury people - who the tradesmen were, who poached what from whom, who was murdered and what was murderer's punishment.

Ledbury People & Parish before the Reformation looks in detail at Ledbury's iconic ecclesiastical buildings: the Ledbury Church, St Katherine's Hospital and the Master's House and investigates Ledbury's great mystery: the location of the bishop's hall.

Sylvia Pinches tells us of the importance of Ledbury Church dating back to the Anglo-Saxon C7th. It was probably the seat of roving bishops, who may have been predecessors of the bishops of Hereford. Over 500 years there were at least six medieval building programmes at Ledbury Church, leaving a confusing architectural picture that was further muddled by the Victorians who attempted to restore medieval features. Unfortunately, there is little documented evidence about Ledbury or Herefordshire prior to 1086 and the Domesday Book. What can be surmised is that during this period the importance of Ledbury rose and fell until the building of St. Katherine's hospital in the C13th, which drew support from landowners over a wide area.

Sylvia Pinches moves through Ledbury street by medieval street questioning the Church Lane - Church Street triangle, explaining why Bye Street widens to the West, how the Homend was planned and why the town is termed 'the Ledbury model' in Herefordshire. The writer mentions the burgage plots and their measurements - a statute perch is 5.03 metres - but does not tell the reader why burgage plots had such social, economic and political significance.

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Using the Red Book (a C13th volume containing documents relating to the estates of the Bishop of Hereford) Sylvia Pinches coaxes some everyday life out from her pages. Leather had to be skinned and tanned before shoemakers, cobblers and harness makers could make their shoes, belts and harnesses. This was a smelly business and because the stream ran down Church lane and Bye Street, the tanner was occupied in this central area of Ledbury: "In 1290 Bishop Swinfield paid 6d. for 13 fox skins to be dressed in Ledbury."

The bishop also dealt with Richard Tharcenor the harness maker in New Street, got his poultry from Geoffrey le Polter in Butcher's Row and got his bread and pies from the baker Robert Moreb. In the 1380s Ledbury's 'takeaway' was a cookshop in New Street ran by the widow Alice Gruys who would have pre-prepared cooked meals for the busy and road-weary.

If you want to know how much wine and beer the bishop and his household drank, you'll have to buy or borrow the book!

As well as explaining the origins and growth of the borough of Ledbury, Sylvia Pinches presents an intriguing prehistoric geological view of the area, informing the reader that half a million years ago a river flowed this side of the Malverns that would have provided proto-humans with warm temperate grasslands in which to hunt and gather. This river, dubbed the Mathon, would have been the size of the Wye, but was lost in the subsequent ice ages during the Pleistocene. All that remains of that once mighty river is Glynch Brook and the River Leadon.

Fast forward to Celtic-Roman Britain and Sylvia Pinches informs us that coins discovered recently in Ledbury and Dymock suggest that the Leadon area was relatively late in coming under the influence of the kingdom of the Dobunni. [Had Ledbury existed it would have been on the border with the Cornovii to the North and the Dobunni to the South.]

Sylvia Pinches tells us the creation of the Roman road to the west of the Leadon, linking settlements in Dymock and the Frome Valley, together with the recent find of a Roman-period cemetery at Stretton Grandison, point to the Leadon valley being a 'significant' place in Roman times.

Sylvia Pinches work is a well-sourced, academic account of the period and place using both the written record and knowledge from recent archaeological digs. Written as part of the series [Engl](#)

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, the story of Ledbury's development continues in
[Ledbury: A Market Town and its Tudor Heritage](#)

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