



**Cleeve Prior Chroniclers**

# Cleeve Mill And The River Avon



## Cleeve Prior Chroniclers

Through this story we are going to take in the early history of the river Avon and its navigation, looking in detail at Cleeve Prior.

To understand the river as a navigable entity we have to go back to Henry 6<sup>th</sup> Reign 1422 – 1461 who had a friend who became an enemy who then became a friend again



Richard Neville 16th Earl of Warwick probably the most powerful man in the land the Kingmaker It was he that had the vision of bringing goods from Bristol via the Severn to Tewkesbury and then via the Avon to Warwick and thus create an inland port. This would in turn attract merchants and wealth to the town which no doubt tax accordingly.....He was eventually killed at the Battle of Barnet in 1471 aged 42

Sadly the vision did not become a reality and the river did not see a boat of burden for a further two hundred years



King Charles 1<sup>st</sup> was the sponsor of the project, when, in 1635, he wrote to the sitting member of parliament for Evesham a Mr William Sandys of Fladbury asking him to make the River Avon passable to boat traffic up to Coventry or as near as possible.



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William Sandys, known as Waterworks to distinguish himself from other members of the family, was a staunch Royalist, and during the civil war he became an arms agent for the crown based in France. He was a fine water engineer and as well as making the Avon navigable he also spent time on the much faster flowing River Wye. His plan was to build two gate, pound locks, the type which you see on canals today. These were popular with the landowners along the river as it was a way of controlling the river and harnessing water power without lowering the water levels as was the problem with the single gate locks.

Close to Cleeve they put a lock around the Saxon weir at Cleeve Prior allowing traffic through to the bridge at Bidford



This is the bridge as we see it today from the upstream side. It is recorded that by 1449 the bridge was in a very bad state of repair and the Bishop of Worcester

*'offered a years indulgence to all who should contribute toward its repair'.*

It is not recorded however who took up his very kind offer or indeed just what was their indulgence!

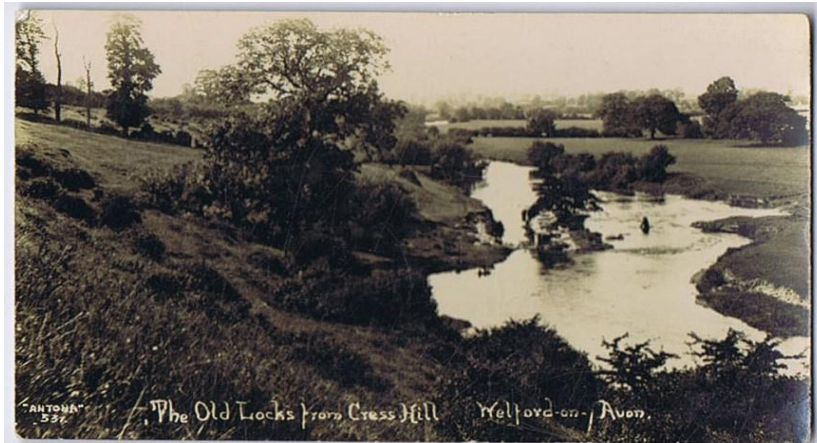
In 1545 it was partially re-built from stone from Alcester Priory which was being taken down following the dissolution of the monasteries, the navigation route passed through the tall round arch and this may have been modified for the boat traffic to use. It was certainly this arch that was blown up by Royalist troops in 1644 when covering their retreat from



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Worcester to Oxford. Anyone who thought that Warwickshire Highways were slow in repairing the last time it was damaged, should reflect on the fact that it took 6 years after the Civil War to complete the repairs!

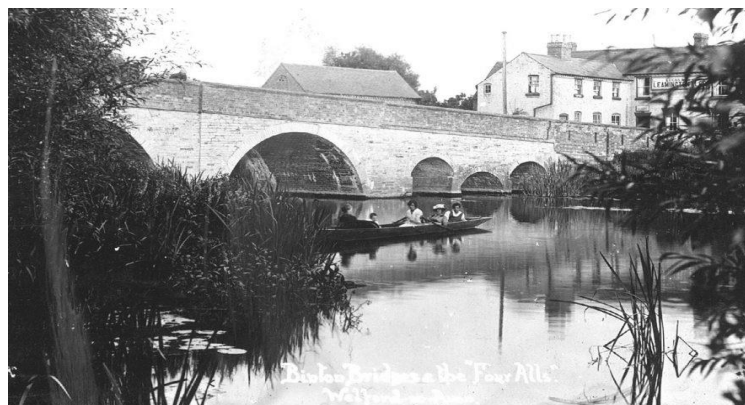
Moving upstream we go through Barton, where two sets of locks had been built, and into Welford, the first landmark being a set of locks at Cress Hill in Welford.



This is photo taken around the 1900's showing the old Cress Hill lock on the left hand side of the river, with the gates rotted away. All the area around the lock is now solid land but there is still one very large sandstone block weighing several tons that is still there despite the floods of the last 100 odd years.

Moving upstream we go through the 13<sup>th</sup> Century bridge at Welford which would have been around in Sandys time but this was replaced by the existing bridge in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, which has been further refurbished to strengthen it over the years.

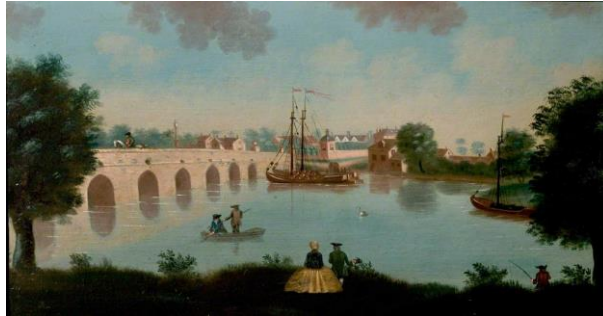
The picture below was taken in the early 1900's with the Four All's pub in the background which at the time sold Leamington Ales





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The next bridge Sandys would have seen was Clopton Bridge built in 1486, which replaced the old timber bridge of 1318



By 1639 the navigation had eventually been completed up to Stratford for the use of commercial traffic, and by 1640 it is within 4 miles of Warwick. The cost of putting in an increasing number of expensive double gated pound locks catches up with the scheme and it is not taken any further.

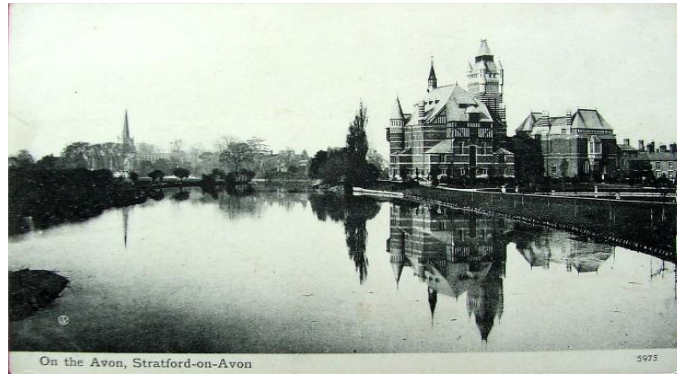
In 1642 the Civil War breaks out and with the bridge blown up at Bidford and the channel blocked, the Avon's brief dalliance with commercial boat traffic comes to an abrupt end. We have to wait until the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 to see further progress and it was through the engineering efforts of Andrew Yarrington, that we see reasonable volumes of traffic starting to use the river. In 1751 it is recorded that over 400 vessels of over 30 ton capacity docked at Stratford or paid tolls when passing through. Yarrington had a vision of a new industrial town for 10,000 people at Milcote where the Stour joins the Avon, this was going to be called New Haarlem

Improvements were made to the river in the following decades, and by 1795 it enabled barges of 47 tons to come up the Avon from Tewkesbury on a regular basis. In 1816 the link between the River Avon at Stratford and Birmingham had been established with the building of the canal and the inland port basin which we now call the Bancroft Gardens. In 1826 the 16 mile tramway link to Moreton in Marsh opened which took coal to Moreton and limestone and agricultural products on the return journey, and for the time being Stratford upon Avon was booming with the various mills along the river being able to ship out their products.

Stratford Theatre was built in 1875 on land given to it by Charles Flower of the Flowers Brewery and this was alongside what became the commercial hub at the junction of the Stratford canal and the river Avon. What the picture below beautifully hides is the industrial workshops, coal depot and storage yards to the right of the theatre.



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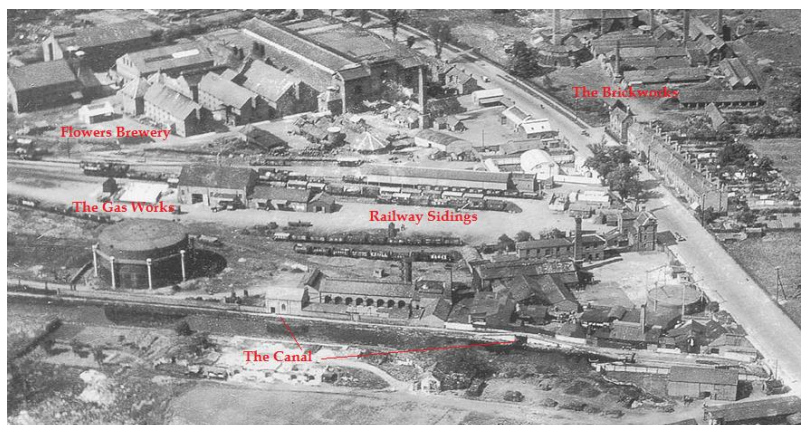


The Theatre 1895

The Stratford basin was originally twice the size it is today, with the second basin almost reaching the steps of the Theatre.



Stratford was at this time a large distribution centre for South Warwickshire with as many as 22 coal merchants operating along the river banks. In 1834 The volume of coal supported the opening of a Gas Works in close proximity to the river, it was located on Chapel Lane which runs by the theatre and the Arden Hotel. Stratford was now booming as an industrial town and a second gasworks was opened in 1837 off the Birmingham Road where the Shakespeare Brickworks and the Flowers Brewery were also to be found.



Picture: Birmingham Rd. 2<sup>nd</sup> Gas works by the canal Shakespeare Brickworks to the top right, these eventually became the Alfred Epsley brickworks (1900 and eventually closed in 1942 (Maybird Centre) and Flowers Brewery with its own railway siding. The only thing still there now is the row of cottages and the canal.



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Almost everywhere on the Avon where there was a weir and a lock you also found a mill. There were a number of mills in Stratford the biggest being Lucy's Mill, which in its heyday, was bringing in the majority of its corn from Ireland via Bristol and up the River Severn and the Avon. It was the first company to have its own steamship plying up and down the river and was also served through a railway siding from the busy "Old Town" station which sat on the junction of the LM&S and GWR railways. At its peak the mill was processing 3000 bushels of corn a week, a bushel of corn being 56lbs the mill was producing about 4000 tons of flour on an annual basis which all got bagged and distributed, via the River Avon or the Stratford Canal. This continued until 1941 when the mill burnt down, but by then its best days were already long gone. Evidence of its existence is still visible on the banks of the Avon where the arch from the mill wheel has been incorporated into residential apartments which are to be seen today.



When you look at the old records of the river mills, the rent the landlords charged their mill tenants was in both the money of the day, together with a quantity of eels. The term used for a quantity of eels was a stitch, which numbered 25 and the quantity demanded was usually between 20 stitches (500) and 60 (1500) per year.

The Mill owner had to use the resources of the river & the weir to catch the eels. And a typical example of an eel trap can be seen as we travel downstream to Welford Mill



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Above we see the Welford weir in the winter where the sluice gates being open meant that the top of the weir was as dry as a bone and could be used as thoroughfare or right of way for the laden carts of corn from the opposite side of the river



In the centre of the weir was a sluice to regulate the water & below that the eel trap, to catch the valuable common freshwater eel who migrate from the Sargasso Sea to the river to spawn. They live in the river as small elver & silver eels for 10 years before they migrate only to return to breed and die, a bit like the salmon. They are really a warm water fish and in the winter they hibernate in deep water or holes in the bank, usually starting their migration in August when the river water is warmest and continue until mid-October or until the start of the frosts.







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Simon tells us how he and his mate Mick Hawkins, the grandson of the Miller, used to catch eels in the river which were about 4 – 5 lb in weight, although he did once did have one once of 8lb 10oz, . The picture above shows one of over 9lbs. He goes on to tell us that eels are not easy to handle and, although he wore waders, they both used to get absolutely plastered with slime, and he began to understand why his Mother was so keen for him to leave home.

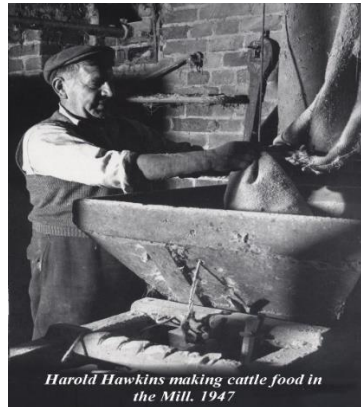


He goes on to tell

*“When emptying the eel trap, the roach, chubb and other fish were put back into river, the eels who were trying to migrate, slithered up the slope and into a separate collecting area. We used to get down there for 6am every morning and place the eels that had been caught in a large wooden box , drilled with small holes to allow a flow of fresh water , and stored them in the deep water upstream of the weir. On Saturday a man from Birmingham fish market used to come out and pay us cash for the eels. We used to split the profits with Michaels father taking 50%, and Mick and I the rest. On a good week could earn three or four pounds each. At the time an underage drink at the Shakespeare Pub or the Bowls Club was 1 shilling and penny and so for about 3 months of the year we were fairly flush. The landlord at the Shake was Roly Basson who always referred to us ‘as you young buggers’. Great days and fond memories”*



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*“The Welford Mill was owned and worked by the Hawkins family. This is a picture taken in 1947 of Harold Hawkins making cattle feed. It was my playground as a boy growing up in the village and that he has continued the association by playing bowls at Welford for the last 45 years with Harold’s Grandson Michael. Usually the mill owner was granted the fishing rights both upstream and downstream of the mill and this was the case at Welford with them owning about ¼ mile either side of the weir.”*



*“Welford was a two wheel mill with the outflows running out into the mill pond. In 1958 Harold Hawkins the last miller, died. There was no money to be made in this old fashioned way of milling and the mill wheels stopped turning. The building slowly became more dilapidated and as kids we used to mess around in the old mill site which I found absolutely fascinating.*

*One day Ashley Workman one of the village boys went crashing through the rotten floor boards one day and broke his leg so after that it all got boarded up so we couldn’t gain access and was later sold for re-development.”*



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Further downstream just above Barton we find the site of Grange Mills which were east of Bidford where we find the Bidford Grange Golf club house down by the river. The picture above is a 19th century lithograph, but there was a mill there long before this time going back as early as the 14<sup>th</sup> century.



The early mill was run by Cistercian Monks from Bordesley Abbey in Redditch, who cultivated the land and erected farm buildings along with a Fulling Mill for turning wool into cloth. This process in the 1400's involved a scouring and thickening process which meant the monks treading bare foot on fleeces of wool soaked in urine, which they then rinsed out in the river, before drying them and weaving into cloth. Indeed urine was such a valuable commodity in the process it was taxed. At the dissolution of the monasteries in 1536, the land became part of the Crown and in a big flood of 1588 the Fulling Mill was washed away.



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With the Avon being made navigable by William Sandys it became easier to harness the power of water and on the same site quite an industrial complex developed. Three mills were built, a paper mill, a corn or flower mill and another fulling mill. There is little evidence of this today as Bidford Grange Golf Club House and various outbuildings now sit on this site, but you can see where the old locks used to be if you park your car at Dorothy's Wood car park in Barton and walk upstream for a couple of hundred yards or so.

Below Bidford we had two mills, closest to Evesham was at Harvington, and again with a weir, it gave access across the river over the weir, and in earlier times by an ancient ford.



The old mill still stands today but it is in a terrible state.



So to Cleeve Prior, which had the Mill the ford and the luxury of the footbridge over the weir



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Cleeve Hill, Cleeve Prior, Worcestershire



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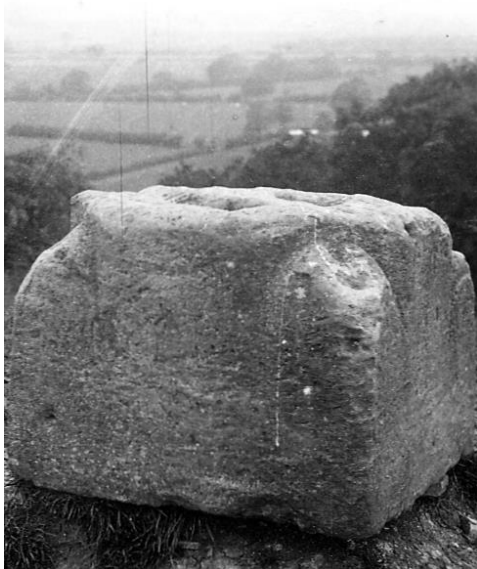
The most notable event in history involving Cleeve Prior as a crossing point was the Battle of Evesham, when Prince Edward sent part of his army to the ford to ensure that “De Montfort’s” army did not escape along the south of the river and across at Cleeve to Kenilworth.

Both forces eventually met at Greenhill and De Montfort's forces were crushed. There were many dead & wounded on both sides and some of the dead were reputedly buried near the Mill site. When the mill was demolished several skeletons were found which were presumed to be from this early battle, and these were reburied on the site of the Owen stone on the top of the Cleeve escarpment.



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What is the Owen stone?



The book Gloucestershire Legends by F. S. Potter recounts- *Between Marl Cleeve and Offenham, on the left bank of the Avon, is a long, and almost straight ridge, which slopes down abruptly to the river and its meadows. Along its brow runs an old (reputedly Roman) road; and where this is crossed by a way leading from the village of Prior's Cleeve to Cleeve Mill, is a prehistoric barrow, upon which is a heavy mass of stone, evidently the base of a fourteenth century wayside cross. The presence of this stone is accounted for by a legend.*

*“Once upon a time, the Devil perched on Meon Hill (in Quinton, Co. Gloucester), and looking towards Evesham, was annoyed by the sight of its Abbey, then in great prosperity. There being a big stone at hand, he kicked it at the Abbey with malicious intention; but Evesham bells beginning to ring, it swerved to the right, and fell where it now lies.”*

So what do we know of Cleeve Mill.?

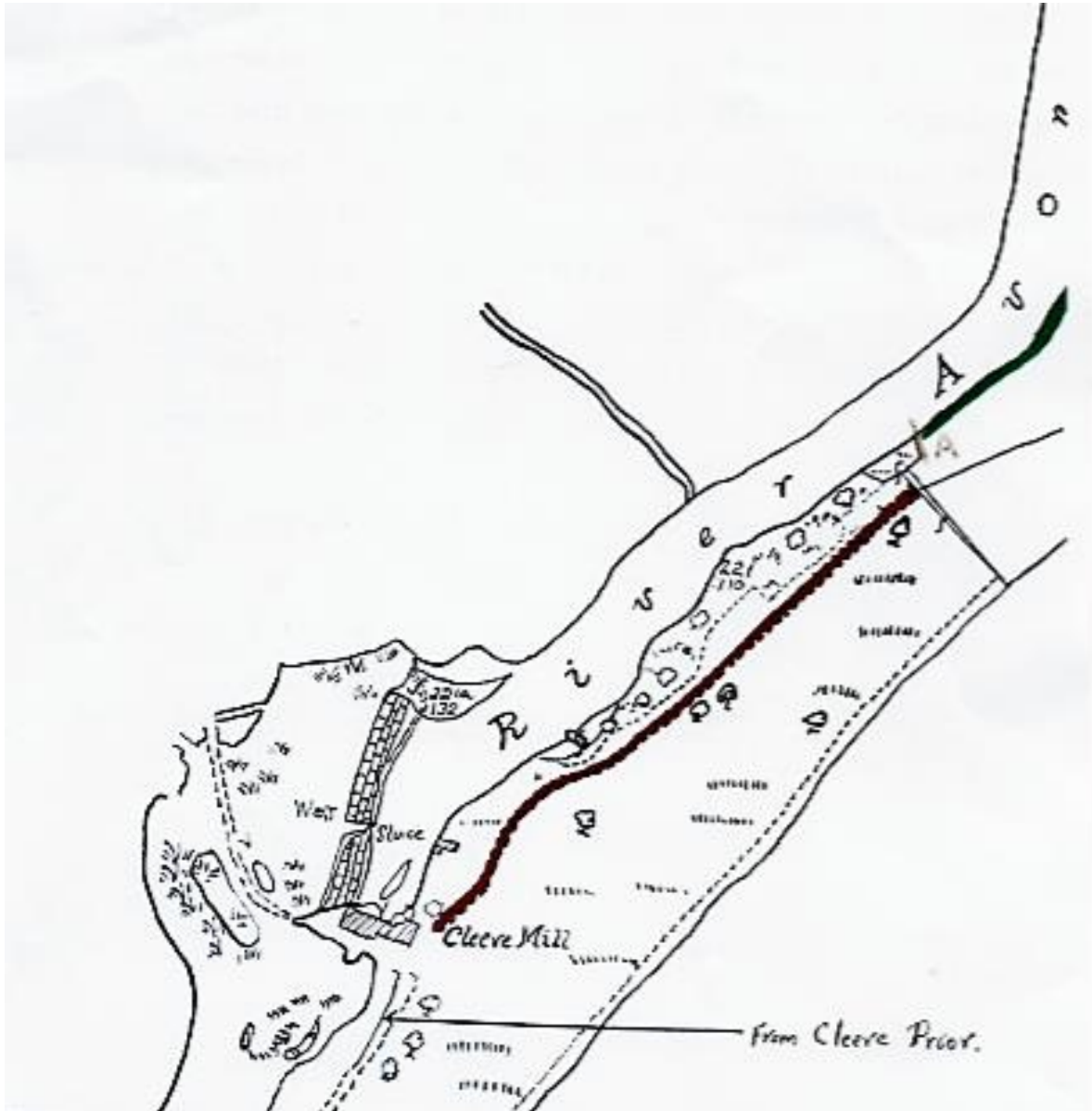


At the time of the Domesday Survey the church in Worcester held a mill in Cleeve whose rent was recorded as being a sextary of honey, which was about 6 gallons. The Church also owned the Village, and as part of the manor it was let to the son of Thomas the miller in 1237 for life. By this time the rent had twice been altered, once during the early part of the 13th century when the rent was 3 marks, about £3 along with 40 'stiches' of eels annually [25 x 40] Later the rent became 4 marks in quarterly payments. The history of the mill after this date is difficult to trace until the 1600's, but as the weir was of Saxon construction it is believed all the mills over the years have stood on the same site.

For those who know the river well, it is hard to believe that when the mill was working and in its heyday, the course of the river was nothing like it is today. The map below is courtesy of the Birmingham Anglers archive, and shows the river, the Mill and the weir as late as 1966.



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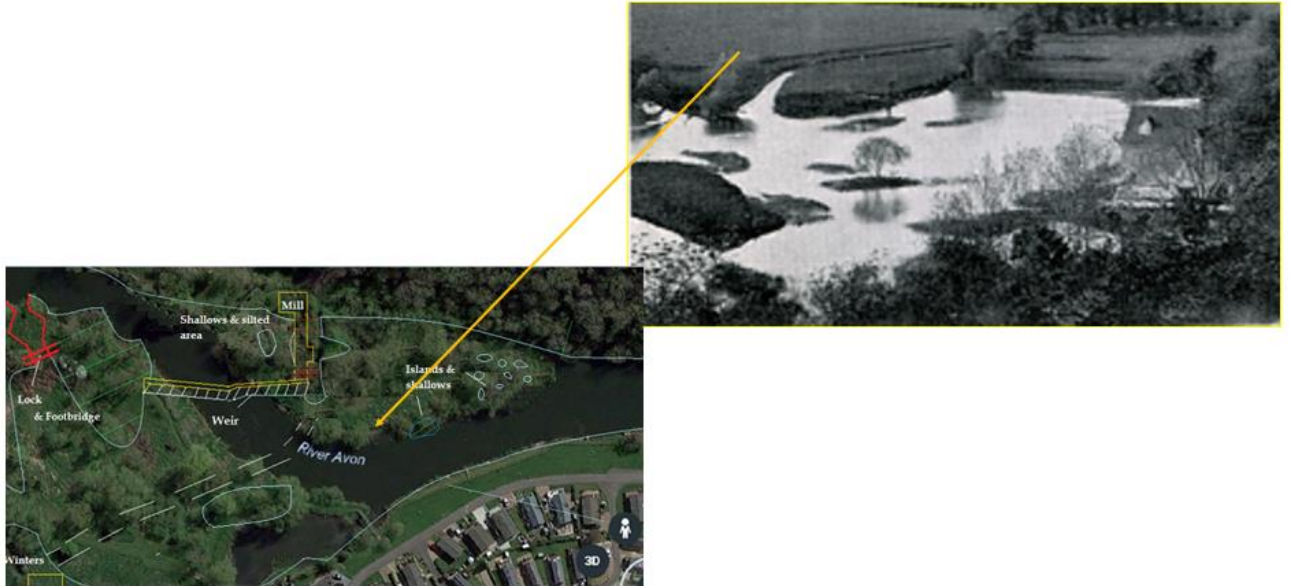


We have also endeavoured to illustrate this courtesy of Google Maps over which we have overlaid the early landscape, supported by early photos of the area.

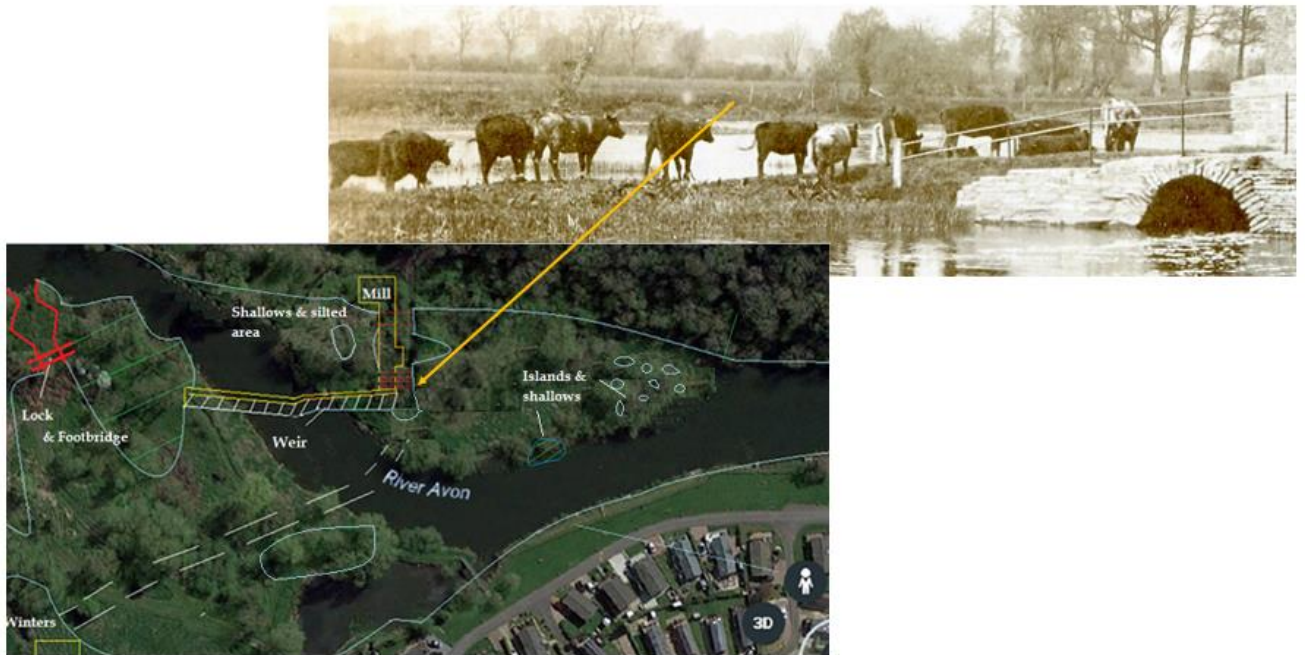


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So what did the river look like when there was a working mill?



The first thing we notice is the size and course of the river with islands spread across its width. The original bank is shown by the blue lines.

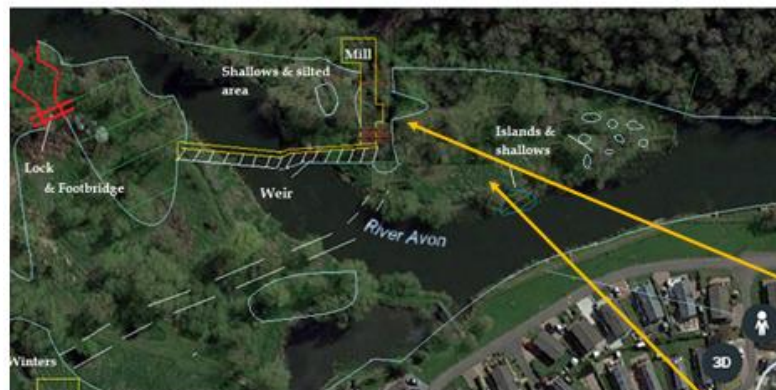


The mill and the crossing were the centre of village life, especially for the farmers, who grazed their prime dairy herds on Worcester meadows, and had to regularly bring them back across the ford for milking.





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The large building alongside the crossing was a large two wheeled water mill, with a cottage for the head Miller. We see at the river end of the building two arches which show the outfalls from the waterwheels, further along there was a third and larger tunnel behind a large sluice, which could be opened in times of flood to let the swollen river water past the mill taking the pressure off the two mill wheels. The waters from all three tunnels would



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cascade back out into the river bed below the weir, which was shallow enough for carts & cattle to cross for most of the year. We see in the picture above how steeply the road falls as it drops down in to the river



We see here the mill from above the weir, which we can see to the right hand side topped by the footbridge & handrail. The arch midway along the building, is above the sluice. The land in front with the tree at an angle, is actually an island which through silting eventually joined to the bank. The tree can still be seen today alongside the exposed foundations. The bottom left image gives an idea as to where the mill and river in the original picture fitted into today's landscape.



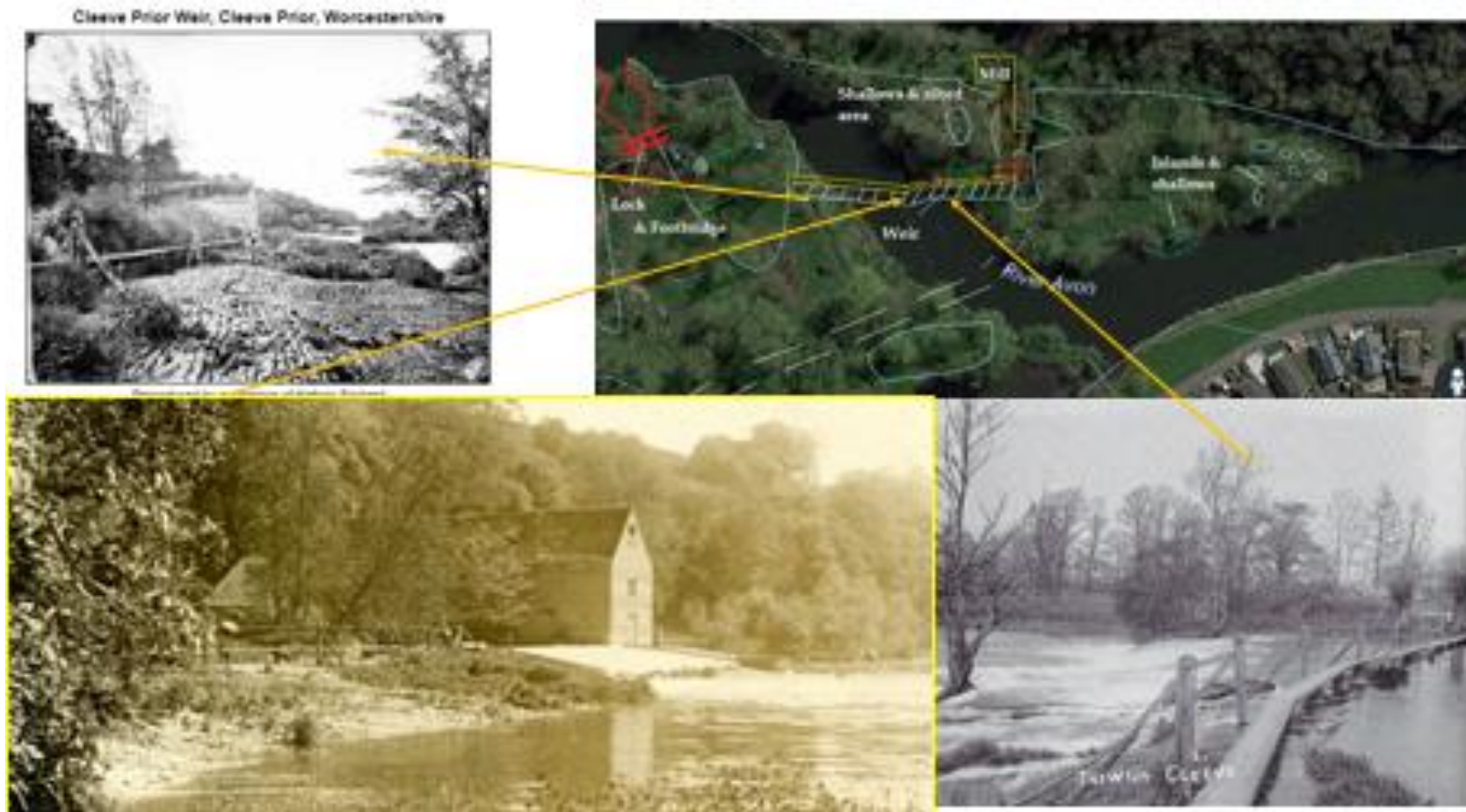
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This picture shows us the extent of the weir, running from the mill on the right to an island on the left. In the middle we see a large sluice and fish trap, which would have served the same role as that previously described at Welford on Avon



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The weir was originally of Saxon construction, the top left picture shows it in the 1800's, faced with cobbles, The plank walkway can be seen on top of the weir, in early days the handrail was a loose rope, strung between wooden posts. In the early 1900's this was replaced with metal rails & posts, and was the last job carried out by the village blacksmith before he retired.



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The Island at the end of the weir was formed by the Cleeve Prior lock, which had been cut into the bank to allow the river traffic to pass downstream. The lock itself is famously diamond shaped, so that the early steam paddle steamers did not wash away the banks. There was a wide entrance in to the lock and a foot bridge over the lower lock, allowing the continuation of the footpath, from the weir over the lock and across the fields to Cleeve Prior Halt & Salford Priors Station.



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Cleeve Prior Lock, Cleeve Prior, Worcestershire



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### Cleeve Prior Lock

Top Left we see a picture of the lock from 1880 when it was still in use,

Below we see the lock today. Bottom left the wing wall sticking out in to the river. Bottom right the diamond shape of the downstream lock face.





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## Cleeve Prior Mill

The Mill was a source of employment and was vital to the economy of the village. We know that in June 1672, still owned by the Manor, the mill was run by Thomas Bennett & a John Bennett still held the rights in the 1700's. They employed the Oldacre family to run the mill, with 21 year old William Oldacre taking over from Charles in 1771

You had to be strong to be a miller, and one of the Oldacre's was known to carry a sack of flour from the mill, up the parish steps to the bridle path and then in to the village. The distance was about half a mile and the weight of the sack two & half hundred weights

The Sheaf family who ran Bay tree Farm, tell us of a village competition which was held to find the village's strongest man, when competitors were timed carrying sacks of corn on their shoulders up the parish steps opposite the mill. I don't think we will resurrect that one in the village today.



Other customs they shared with us is that of choosing the next "Mayor "of Cleeve Prior. Yes Cleeve Prior had a mayor, but this was not an official position, it was the title given to the last person from the village to fall in to the river, a title you only lost when the next person fell in.

Back to the Millers. We know that William Oldacre was living at the Mill in 1832 even though he was now 82, and from 1841 the millers were a William Robbins, and Anthony Burrows.

By 1851 the mill seemed to be growing in importance, Robert Taylor, had become the head Miller and the census shows he employed servants, as well as Joseph Newman & John Ankers who were also listed as millers with Charles Ankers a millers waggoner.

By 1861 Robert Taylor was gone and Joseph Newman is now living in Mill Cottage, as head miller, also with servants, William Hemming as a miller and John Enstone the Millers Carter.

Historically the youngest son of the family living in the Manor was responsible for the Mill and this was John Smith Holtom. In 1862, as yet unmarried & presumably living at home with his parents, he has the title of miller. We do know that as miller and a prominent person in the village he also took on the role of village overseer & constable along with:

George Cannaway	44	the baker
Robert Lyne	45	the Blacksmith
Charles Hemming	26	the Cabinet maker employing a joiner & 3 boys



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The Constables and 'Overseers' were appointed at the start of every financial year. Parish Constables kept law and order in the village but had limited powers. They came into being when the manorial rule ceased and their role disappeared when village policeman were created as part of an organised police force. In this area of Worcestershire this change took place in the 1860s. The Overseers reported to the Parish Councils, and were appointed to look after the poor, and to represent the village when reporting in to the Rural Sanitary Authority (later Rural District Councils). On most census's there were registered poor, in 1901 we still had Ann Taylor, who lived on Main Street, receiving relief from Evesham union

Still digressing I want to share with you the fate of George Cannaway, as it was reported in the Evesham Journal -April 21<sup>st</sup> 1866 as this was connected with the river



*"An Inquest was held at the Kings Arms Inn on the body of George Cannaway, baker of Cleeve Prior, whose body was found in the River Avon on April 12<sup>th</sup> ..*

*Charles Newman of Cleeve Prior, said he knew the deceased & worked for him. He last saw him alive between 8 & 9 o'clock on 12<sup>th</sup> April. He was leaving the yard and going in the direction of the house. The deceased had been low spirited for 4 – 5 week but the witness did not know the cause of it. About 2 o'clock the witness went to look for the deceased thinking it strange that he did not come home for dinner. The witness went to the Mill and thence along the river side about 200yds, where the witness found a hat which led him to believe that the deceased was in the water. The witness then got assistance from the village. Mathew Vicarage, wagoner, deposed to finding the body after a search of about an hour and assisted to carry it home. John Careless of Cleeve Prior, Maltster, said the deceased was brought home and his pockets searched and were found to contain £49.8s.2d and some trifling articles which he now held. The Jury returned a verdict that the deceased drowned himself while in a temporary fit of insanity"*

£49 8s 2d was a considerable sum in the 1800's and at 2017 rates would be worth about £5700, an unusual amount to have in your pocket when you are committing suicide

Back to the Mill and John Smith Holtom who had by 1869 purchased the house & farm known as the Laurels on the Main Street, and on the 1871 census he still had the title of miller although he was also a farmer and landowner. He seems to have expanded the operation at the mill, as he is listed as employing 6 men & 1 boy.





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One of the millers was Luke Waters who on the census is shown as 24 and an imbecile, we lose track of him in the village after this but in 1911 we know he was in The Worcester County & City, Lunatic, Asylum, at Powick.

In 1881, the Mill work force has increased by 3 with Joseph Newman's sons now listed as millers

By 1891 it appears the bubble has burst. John Holtom and his wife have both died leaving 4 daughters who are being cared for by John's sisters Sarah and Emma, Sarah is now shown as the head of the family on the census.

With John no longer around to manage the Mill, a mill manager Sidney Smith has been appointed to run the mill business, and he boards at the Laurels.

Joseph Newman is still the miller but the sons are no longer working at the mill and there are no servants just a granddaughter who is 15 yrs. old

The decline of the mill's importance carries on into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and by 1901 there is no miller and we see the cottage rented out to 2 brass founders from Birmingham.

On the 1911 census there is no record of the mill so we presume by now it is standing empty

### The 1900 Watershed in Cleeve Prior

Apart from not having a miller in 1901 we see over the next 10 years the dynamics in the village start to change. Whereas in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the village was totally insular, self-sufficient and surviving on a rural economy. We start to see the effect of improved communications on the village life & its inhabitants.

Transport had improved from Birmingham and people were starting to move into the village, including Birmingham industrialists, accountants, civil servants, jewellers & commercial travellers. More importantly we see first people setting up home in the village, because it was just a beautiful place to live. There was Cyril Perkins the Organist to Birmingham City Council living at Felton's, in Mill Lane, and George Halford, the Composer and friend of Edward Elgar, in Mill House, both with second homes in the village. We see The Newlyn Artist Edwin Harris coming to live at Nancot in the village, where he subsequently died in 1905, and the Gertrude Myers convalescent home, being established for the recuperation of ladies after their operations at the women's hospital in Birmingham.





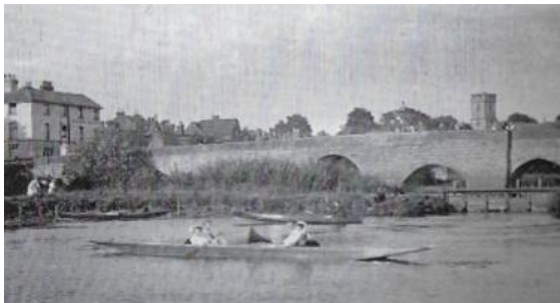
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### The Avon and the Pleasure Industry

Bidford was initially the centre of this pleasure boom and during the summer months, the riverside at Bidford was thronged with visitors from Birmingham. Bidford Bridge was a congregating point especially on Saturday nights



Courtesy of Along the Avon From Stratford to Tewksbury, and the River Avon a Pictorial History by Josephine Jeremiah



A lot of the activity centred on the White Bear/White Lion pub and the Pleasure Boat Inn, now the Frog Inn, but also there was the Hollands pleasure Gardens on the meadow. The above picture was taken c1912 and shows a punt complete with a wind up gramophone. Hollands were based on what today is the water meadow, and we can see from the advert below the entertainment that the visitors could enjoy



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Telegraphic Address: Bidford, Warwickshire.

**HOLLAND'S PLEASURE GROUNDS.**

**W. M. HOLLAND,**  
 ✻ CATERER, ✻  
 Steam Launch and Boat Proprietor,  
 BOAT BUILDER, etc.,  
**Bidford, Warwickshire.**

The Largest, Coolest and most convenient Dining  
 Saloon in the Neighbourhood.  
 CAN SEAT OVER 400 AT A TIME.

Hot Dinners and High  
 Teas a Speciality . . .

The Finest Steam Launch Service on the  
 River.  
 Good Boating and Fishing. Special Terms for  
 School Parties.  
 Swing Boats and other Amusements.  
 Spacious Grounds for Games of all Kinds

Rowing Boats for Sale or Hire by the Hour,  
 Day or Week.  
 Bell Tents for Camping Out.  
 Boats repaired, cleaned and varnished  
**BOATS CAREFULLY STORED.**

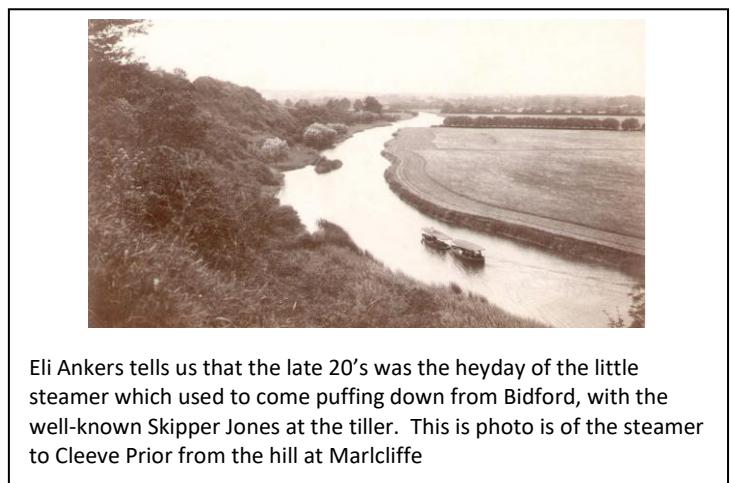


Verity Fincher wrote down reminiscences of her childhood holidays, the Hollands Pleasure Gardens and taking the Steamer up the river to Cleeve Prior

*As a special treat once every summer we were allowed to go in the steamer to Hollands Pleasure Gardens where we could have tea from little tables set out on the lawn and which we found quite a novelty.*

*The steamer only made two journeys a day and was very popular, especially with the visitors from Cleeve and it was for us a great treat. This part of the river was almost unknown to us. Although mother often rowed us across from our side so that I could paddle and hopefully learn to swim, never once did it occur to my parents to get the boat lifted out of the river and transferred to the upper reach so that we could explore this different part.*

*How I agree with Ratty that there is "nothing, absolutely nothing, so good as messing about in boats".<sup>1</sup> I loved it, I loved the bank full of flowers and the willows and alders bending over as if to look at their reflections; the sunlight dancing on the river and putting my hand in the cool waters and let it drip between my fingers and watching the wake it left behind. The steamer however had rails round it so I could not do this. I could only look and watch.*



Eli Ankers tells us that the late 20's was the heyday of the little steamer which used to come puffing down from Bidford, with the well-known Skipper Jones at the tiller. This is photo is of the steamer to Cleeve Prior from the hill at Marlcliffe



## Cleeve Prior Chroniclers

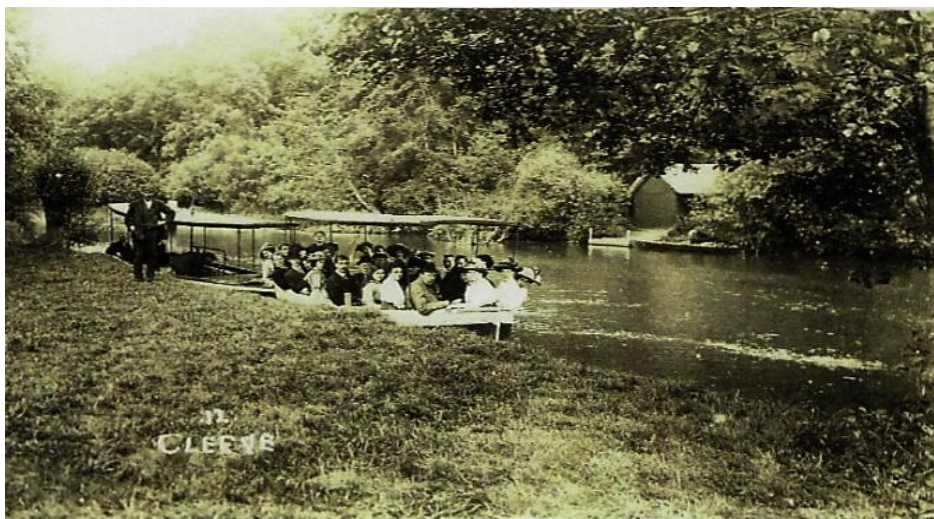
*The Hollands Pleasure Gardens were quite small, though much bigger than Winters, but you could buy a proper tea there and sit on the bank or on little white chairs round the table, but more important than this there were “swing boats”. How my brother and I loved them. He was a very unusual boy, a great chatterer about nothing in particular, and very easily excited. The swing boats made him almost uncontrollable. I am sure if mother had known about them we should have never been allowed to go.*

*To get the best results you should have the same weight on each side, so it was not much use my brother and I going together. He usually climbed in one by himself and waving and gesticulating he swung the boat so alarmingly that the attendant came and made him get out or go with another boy which he refused to do. While this was going on Maud [our maid] had found a child of my own size and we started off more sedately. I was not much use with strange children and sat there mutely while Maud showed us how to use the ropes. I was used to a swing and did not mind going high.*

*More often than not the child opposite me became frightened and the swing boat had to be brought to a halt and she was taken out sobbing and clinging to her mother while I demanded, and did not get, my money’s worth. Sometimes my brother would get inside and then the boat swung about and both of us laughed so much there was no chance of a proper ride.*

*We didn’t care; we felt free and became over excited and in the end only the thought of fizzy drinks and cakes and buns calmed us down. My mother would not have approved of my riding in a boat with a strange child. There was always the chance of “catching something” or hearing “bad words” and our own behaviour would not have suited her either. I think Maud understood this and so did we, as what we had been doing was never alluded to at home and mother thought we had just been for a quiet ride in the steamer and tea at the other end.*

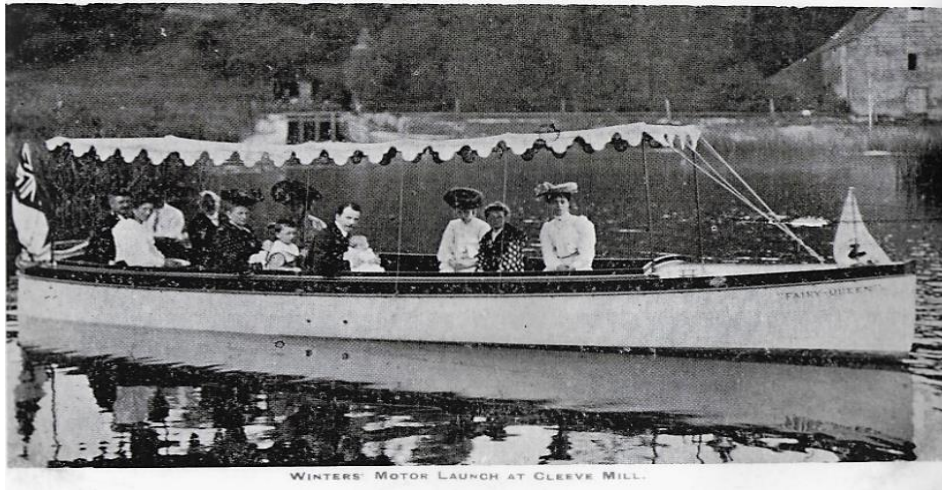
Courtesy: [www.ourwarwickshire.org.uk](http://www.ourwarwickshire.org.uk)





## Cleeve Prior Chroniclers

The boats coming down from Bidford to Cleeve Prior had to tie up at the special landing-stage, before coming down through the old Cleeve lock, and we see below the Winters Motor Launch "Fairy Queen" .



The picture is taken with the mill and sluice in the background. Once through the lock the tourists had access to the Winters facility, which was on the Salford priors side of the river.



Winters had a tea room a boat yard and boats for hire to people coming across the fields from the railway at Salford Priors, and this also became the destination for the day trips from Bidford on the pleasure boats that came down the river.



## Cleeve Prior Chroniclers



The visitors could also reach The Cleeve Mill and the Tea rooms on the opposite bank by crossing the simple plank bridge over the top of the weir

Through the link included here we can see a video of two ladies walking over [the weir](#) on the foot bridge.

The Wilshaws who owned Pleasure Boat pub, saw a business opportunity in running a steam boat from the back of their pub down to Cleeve Prior and use the old mill as a tea room. That way they would get the tourists money in both Bidford and at Cleeve.



Above we see one of the Wilshaws adverts for the café at the old mill and this was one of the adverts with the Mill opening for the season around Easter time. It is interesting to see that their history knowledge was not extensive as the doomsday survey was 1086 not 1060



## Cleeve Prior Chroniclers



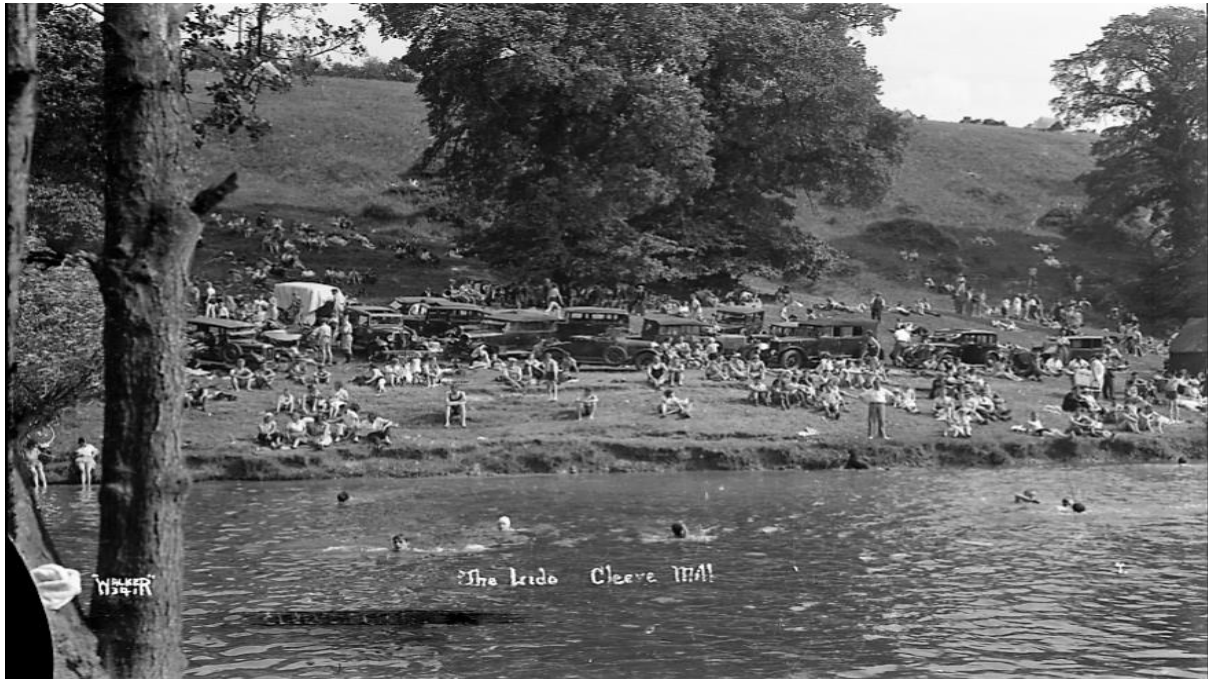
The scene in the Mill Tea Rooms...freshly painted, polished wooden floors with rugs down the central aisle, table cloths with flowers on the table and features made of the old grinding stones and the mannequin waitress



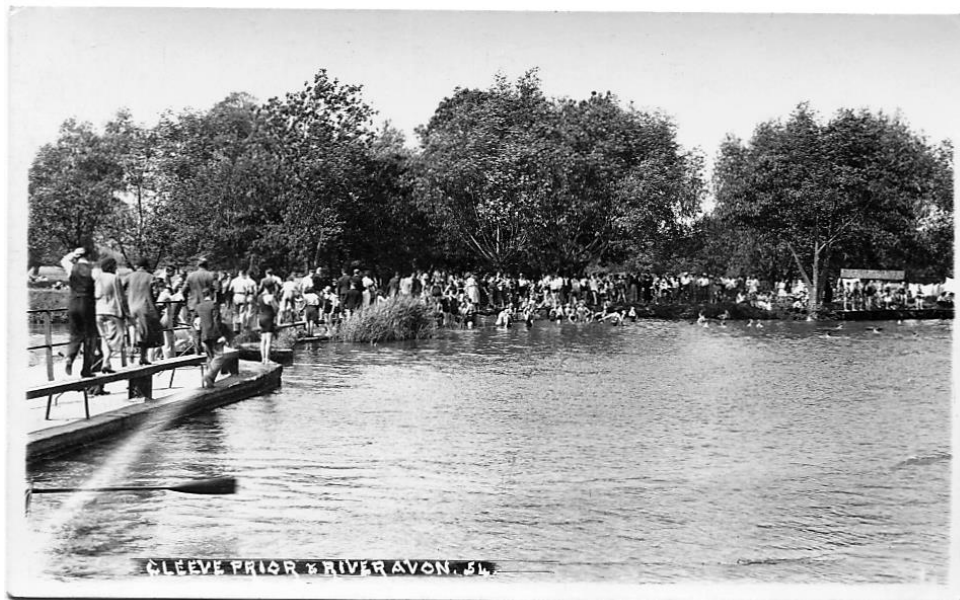




## Cleeve Prior Chroniclers



The whole location became very popular with people from Birmingham and Coventry, and the grassy areas around the mill used to be covered in tents with people camping. It became known as Cleeve Prior Lid.



Cleeve Prior became a Mecca for day trippers especially from the towns. We are still told today of peoples parents coming to the river here at weekends especially on the train or even their bicycles. It is hard to comprehend the number of people visiting the village, but the pictures below illustrate the size of the crowds, and from the number & types of cars, their affluence.



## Cleeve Prior Chroniclers



This increased trade brought added income and employment to the village.



The Mill gave the opportunity for other businesses to thrive. There was a thatched hut near the mill, which sold soft drinks and ice cream to the visitors. The shop was run by Mr. Stevens who also had a shop in the village, in the house that is now called Squirrel Cottage

Authors: Simon Davies & Ian Robinson



## Cleeve Prior Chroniclers



Another important role was the village boatman and this for many years was the responsibility of Jack Taylor. He was also the village pig man, who slaughtered the individual villagers pigs, which they all kept in sty's at the bottom of their allotment gardens. He would hire out the flat bottomed boats, similar to those in Bidford, with cushions & a gramophone to enable the visitors to go up the river.

Car parking was on the open land around the mill, and it was controlled by a gate across mill lane outside what is now the nursery. This is where the money was collected from visitors coming by road



The river was also a facility for a lot of the villagers who had boats near the mill. And Peter Pollitt tells us of his memories of the river:



## Cleeve Prior Chroniclers

*“My Grandfather who was Mr. Harris bought Sharrow in 1917 for £300 from another Mr. Harris who owned land in Cleeve Prior Home Farm. It is about 3-400yrs old, and it was a weekend and holiday home.*

*Before he bought the house, my Grandfather got his wife and daughter to come down by train to Salford Priors which is on the wrong side of the river. They asked the way to Cleeve Prior and they had to walk across the fields. It was raining and dark and they had to cross the river over a plank across the top of the weir.*

*I was born in 1921 and I came to stay regularly as a child during weekends and in the summer until I was about 12 yrs. old. I remember the old mill. It had two big wheels but it was not working. There was a weir built across the mill and this brought water up to 5-6 feet. Before the weir was collapsed the old farmer living there used to drive his shire horse across at the ford.*

*The land close to the mill was very busy during weekends. There were steam boats and river trips. Most of the activity was on the Cleeve Prior side and several people including my Grandfather had boat houses.*

*People came from Birmingham at the weekends and there could be up to 40 cars parked by the riverside. People also swam in the river. There were also landing stages for punts and a café at the mill which was always very busy.*

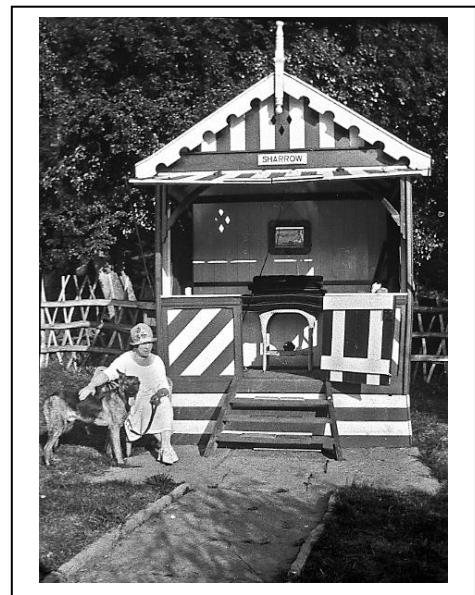
*A man from the village was always there at the weekends. He was a self-appointed car park attendant and he got tips from everyone. He had a huge beard which covered his face and he terrified me as a child.”*

*There was an incident as he was one of the first to get an outboard motor for his boat. He used to go blasting down the river making a lot of noise. He left the motor in the boathouse but it was stolen, so he got a much bigger one and made even more noise.*

*I was the only one who swam in the river with our two Alsatian dogs. One of the dogs was called Wolf and he was my best friend and very important to me. My father trained him and he was my minder.*

*After WW2 the mill had gone. There is a story that soldiers had practiced putting up baily bridges and knocked it about and that local people had helped themselves to stone for houses.*

*Interview with Dr. .Peter Pollitt. 9<sup>th</sup> June 2014*





## Cleeve Prior Chroniclers

### The End of Tourism



The river was the lifeblood of the rural economy with the water meadows the best land in the village being fertilised every time the river went in to flood. But the damage from these floods was eventually going to lead to dire consequences for the village.

The problems caused by flooding were evident over the centuries



In the Evesham Journal 5<sup>th</sup> February 1881 we read

“Destruction of the footbridge -On Sunday afternoon ice carried down by the flood, broke down the bridge at Cleeve Prior. The road is now impassable to foot passengers”

There was further flooding in 1912 and we see above the pictures of Bidford water meadows, the boat to the right is actually sailing over what are normally fields





## Cleeve Prior Chroniclers

# Sept 1924



### THE REPAIR OF CLEEVE WEIR.

Nothing much has been heard recently of the activities of the committee who has in hand the matter of the repair of the weir at Cleeve Prior, and it is extremely satisfactory to learn that though it has been quiet it has been busy. The result of the activities is that it has obtained a sufficiency of promises of financial assistance as to warrant it in asking for tenders to carry out a complete scheme of repair. This contract has been secured by Messrs. Greenly & Sons, of Tenbury Wells, Worcestershire, and we are informed that the work will be commenced at once. It is to be hoped that the weather conditions will prove kind and that there will be no hindrances from floods. The District Council may be relied upon to render all the assistance possible. Residents of the district, and indeed all lovers of the Avon, must not run away with the idea that no more financial assistance is needed. This is just the time when as much help as possible is required, and residents of the neighbourhood should show their appreciation of the work of the committee by attending in large numbers the whist drive and dance which is to be held shortly and of which details are given in an advertisement. Those who live too far away to attend, but who nevertheless realise what the maintenance of Cleeve Weir means to Bidford, can play their part by sending a donation to the treasurer of the fund.

We hear from Eli Ankers own reminiscences

*"In the bad winter of 1922 we had a storm, it was a real catastrophe, because the flood water swept away part of the weir and the ford at the same time. So we was cut off from Worcester Meadows on the other side of the Avon that was part of the village since mediaeval times. Water meadows they were, see, we always got lovely crops of hay off them. Old John Sheaf, he told me as how those farmers who had land on the other side of the river, his father & Don Archer's among them, had tried to rebuild the ford by dumping gravel in from a punt, but it didn't do much good."*

With the weir gone, the boating suffered, Eli also recalls reading the parish minutes relating how Dr Crawford from Bidford brought a deputation to a public meeting in Cleeve to try and get the village to raise the money to rebuild the weir. He says

*"It was going to cost £1000 or more, a lot of money in those days. Well they must have succeeded because in March 1926 it had been rebuilt and had stood the test of the winter floods"*



## Cleeve Prior Chroniclers



Johns sheaf's wife Monica later tells us

*"in flood times, of which there were many, the river could rise quickly, trapping animals whose owners had not been able to move them, it was a sad sight to see drowned sheep or even cattle being swept down the stream with the other dirty "flotsam and jetsam".*

*It was even recounted that a dog kennel with the dog sitting on top, was seen to go by, but not by me. I have seen caravans in the meadows nearly submerged by flood water and portable toilets moved several yards from their position, I hope they were empty."*

Jack Ankers used to tell stories of seeing rabbits climbing trees to escape the flood water living off the moss growing on the bark

1939



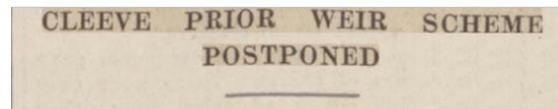


## Cleeve Prior Chroniclers

We know from the Evesham journal that the winter floods of 1939 started the final demise of the weir when part was washed away, causing the river levels to seriously reduce at Bidford, thus limiting the use of the boats. The Evesham RDC accepted that they had the responsibility of maintaining the bridge over the weir, but were not able to do anything until the weir was repaired.

It was accepted that if the breach in the weir was not immediately repaired, the remainder would be washed away, and a fund was started raising £500 towards the repairs.

Evesham Journal 1939



The Evesham journal closely followed the story as it was important to the vale, and later that year they reported the scheme had been postponed

***“The scheme for the repair of Cleeve Prior weir has been postponed in anticipation of an early cessation of the war. A Fund for the restoration of masonry swept away by this years floods was launched in the summer in the hope of saving the districts boating and bathing amenities, about £300 of the £400 required for the work was guaranteed. If the war lasts any considerable time the fund will be closed and the subscriptions returned.”***

Nothing else is heard and with the war lasting further 6 years, the importance of the river diminished.

With the weir and footbridge gone, the Lido phase at Cleeve Prior was over as the water levels had drastically dropped and the boats could not travel up and down the river



We know from post cards that during the early years of the war members of the RASC were stationed in the Mill as well as the old barn, now called Shearwood, belonging to the Laurels, they were reputedly here to practice practising bridge building on the river presumably at Cleeve Prior as there was good access and it was so wide. The ford was now deeper & the animals were having to use a new ford to cross to the Worcester Meadows, upstream near the mouth of the Arrow, where the river levels were a lot lower.





## Cleeve Prior Chroniclers



The army occupation was short lived and after they abandoned the mill in 1940, they did not leave it in a very good condition. With the mill becoming too unsafe, Mr Wiley, the then owner of the Manor, had it demolished and used the stone to build a house between Cleeve & Marlcliffe then called Temple Cottage, now known as Greystones.

### The Rejuvenation the River Avon





## Cleeve Prior Chroniclers

After the demolition of the Mill, life on the river now went quiet. The first move to return the waterway to a navigable condition started in March 1949, when the *Evesham Journal* published an article on its history and decline. This generated interest in its restoration and the *Lower Avon Navigation Trust Ltd* was formed in 1950, with over £4,000 raised towards the initial works by May 1952. With the involvement of the Royal Engineers, increased public awareness, and further public appeals, they raised over £50,000 by 1962, and the 7 locks from Tewkesbury to Evesham were restored to working order, re-opening the Lower Avon,

In 1963. An anonymous benefactor gave £80,000 towards the restoration on the Upper Avon, and work commenced in 1966, with phase one, covering the section from Evesham to Bidford Bridge, which was declared open in June 1971. The estimated cost for the complete restoration was £250,000 which was raised by public subscriptions, and a small grant from the Department of the Environment.

The project, which involved the construction of nine new locks, reopened 17-miles of navigation which had been derelict for over 100 years. It was finally completed in June 1974, when Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother returned to Stratford for the official opening.

**Our story would not be complete without understanding who actually owned the land around the mill and the river over the last 100 years up to the present day**





## Cleeve Prior Chroniclers

To understand the history of the mill and the surrounding land you have to understand the history of the farms in the village. In one of his accounts of his family history Don Archer tells us how Top Farm was part of the 1000 acres of farmland belonging to the Manor. The old farmhouse later called Prior House, was part of that estate, and it consisted of two sets of farm buildings, one now called Top Farm & the other Cleeve Barn. The Farm had 175 acres comprising one field adjacent farm house called the Paddock, with the rest spreading up Froglands lane to the Warwickshire border at Marlcliffe and down to where the Mill stood, with a river frontage of almost a mile.



When Don took over the farm as tenant on the death of his father, Chris Grey, from the Manor, guided him through his early years.

In March 1945, with Don still as tenant, Chris Grey sold the Manor to Mr AE Wiley Chairman of Ansell's Brewery. The Manor lands were expanded over the next 16 years but with his impending retirement, Mr Wiley started to sell the estates off in various lots. The first to go were the Worcester Meadows which were sold to a George Edward Goodman, the owner of Moor Hall Farm, at Wixford, whose lands we believe, bordered those of the Manor on the Warwickshire side of the Avon

The Mill itself was then attached to Top Farm and In January 1955, Arthur Wiley sold it in its entirety to Wrekin Brewery, an old Shropshire brewery now absorbed into the Ansell's Company



## Cleeve Prior Chroniclers



The final piece of the jigsaw was when the manor itself was sold to the Lloyd Brothers who kept it going as a much smaller farm, till the 80's



In February 1964, the brewery sold the farm to Don & his sister Mrs E.E. Archer, and In 1966 we see the first mention of the interest in fishing on the river when the Archers entered in to a lease with Yardley Wood Social Club giving them the right to fish on the river.

There is now a surprising twist in our story as a new landowner started to buy property and dominate the village. They were the Birmingham Anglers.




## Cleeve Prior Chroniclers

This organisation had been started in 1883, and by the 1970's it was reputed to be the largest the largest fishing organisation in the world with a membership of nearly 70,000 members and 1200 affiliated clubs. Their first acquisition was the fishing rights from the Yardley Wood Social Club, closely followed by Worcester Meadows from George Goodman and the final piece of the jigsaw was the purchase of Top Farm in 1968 from the Archers for £35,500.

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## Cleeve Prior Chroniclers

In 1972, the farm outbuildings and workable farm lands, were sold to Tony Farmer, with the trustees of BAA holding the mortgage

The balance, the Worcester Meadows the escarpment, river bank & Mill were retained by the BAA, but in 1973 the farm house, now called Prior House, had already been sold off to a Peter Newman.



Top Farm was eventually split up into parcels, with land sold for the racing stables, and the farm buildings sold for conversion to houses, with residual pockets retained by Tony Farmer for his own use.

It appears that at some stage the Birmingham anglers owned the old Brades house on the hill as they subsequently sold this and the escarpment to Mr & Mrs Baker who own it today.

The Worcester meadows were sold to Bomford & Evershed, which became Sandfields Farms Limited, after liquidation, leaving The Birmingham Anglers with the old Mill site and the fishing rights on the river.