

"Noake's guide to Worcestershire"

Prior's Cleeve, so called to distinguish it from Bishop's Cleeve, near Cheltenham. It was given to the Priory of Worcester by King Ethelred in 872, and hence the affix to its name. A bailiff and a collector resided at Cleeve on behalf of the monastery; the vicar of Cleeve presented to the Prior a pea-hen as a New Year's gift, and some of the tenants furnished the monastery with a boar, honey, &c. "Cleeve" is from "cliff," a part of the land projecting on a beautiful eminence overlooking the Avon and a delightful portion of the celebrated Vale of Evesham. The inhabitants are exclusively engaged in agricultural labour women as well as men. The principal landowners are Miss Webb, T. B. Tomes, Esq., Mr. Smith, Mr. Rock, and Mr. Bayliss; and the Ecclesiastical Commissioners are lords of the manor, in succession to the Dean and Chapter of Worcester. There were eighteen families here in the time of Queen Elizabeth; in 1861 the population numbered 340; acreage, 1,145. The common fields were enclosed in 1775. Cleeve is a vicarage, value 225; incumbent, Rev. J. Morton; patrons, the Dean and Chapter of Worcester; church accommodation, 141; free seats, 58. In the church is a Norman doorway (north), some Early English work, with windows of every succeeding style, and a good lofty perpendicular tower. Three or four years ago the chancel was re-built in the decorated style by Mr. Christian, the architect for the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, the old windows being reinserted. About the same time a painted window was inserted in the north side of the chancel to the memory of the Rev. R. D. Stillingfleet, the late vicar, by his widow; and an unsightly gallery at the west end of the church had been previously removed.

An ancient manor-house stands not far from the church. It has stone mullioned windows, hiding closets, and an extra-ordinary avenue of yew, a dozen feet high, cut into architectural shapes. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries this was the residence of the Bushells, who afterwards took the name of Fettiplace, and were the chief tenants of the manor under the Dean and Chapter. A portrait of one of them, dated 1616, still remains in the house.

Thos. Bushell was one of those gentlemen whom, in 1631, Charles I thought fit to fine for not taking the order of knighthood. This was probably that extraordinary genius who was so given to mechanics that he is said to have cut through mountains, carried air through them by pipes and bellows, drained water, established a mint for the King when his Majesty was deeply in want of money, hid himself for a year or more in a garret from the Parliamentarians, was always borrowing but never realising, and died 120,000 in debt. He once entertained the King and Queen at a house of his at Enstone, where he had cut curious caves in a large rock, with automaton hermits ascending from the ground with poetical addresses to royalty, while a sonnet was sung by some invisible agency in the pillar of a table, and other exploits achieved.

The "Ryknield Street" may be traced along the verge of the wide-spread terrace of Cleeve, where also there is a tumulus and a large square stone with a hole in the top, being apparently the base of a cross. Some years ago a number of skeletons were found in the soil here; and jars of Roman coins (some of them ancient counterfeits), a curious porcelain seal, and other remains, have been discovered at various times.