



## **Cleeve Prior Chroniclers**

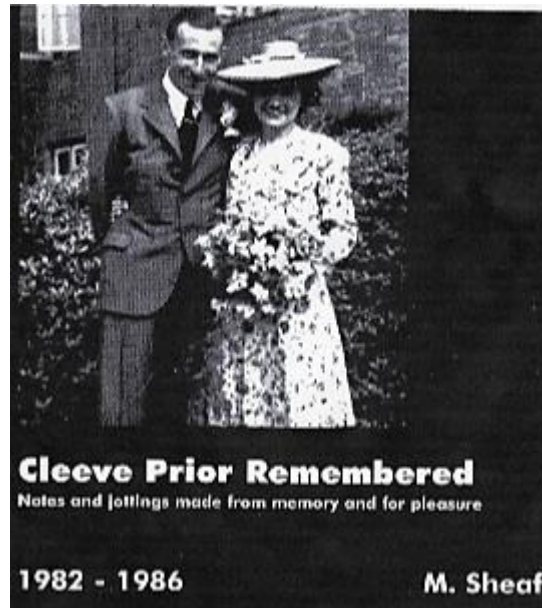
**Cleeve Prior Remembered- notes & Jottings made from memory & pleasure- Monica Sheaf**

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*“Notes & Jottings made from memory & pleasure- by Mrs Monica Sheaf”*

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**Thanks and  
reminiscences of my dear  
husband John Sheaf,  
farmer of Cleeve Prior**



One lovely May afternoon, I was driving along the Evesham Road to Cleeve Prior for the first time, around the bend where the Elm tree stood before falling victim, like so many others, to Dutch elm disease. I was later to learn that was known as “Gypsy Corner”. I did not discover the reason for the name for many years- there was really no corner, only a bend in the road, and I never saw any Gypsies! I have since discovered that Gypsies did camp on the wide grass verge one side in Littleton parish for as long as permitted by law, and when time expired they moved across the road to Cleeve Prior, thus keeping on the right side of the law.

The view of the village from here shows a quiet area in the Vale of Evesham, identified by plum plantations. Sadly, these, like the asparagus beds, have largely disappeared along with the glass houses and tunnels. So many orchards have been cleared, leaving



## Cleeve Prior Chroniclers

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ugly stumps waiting to be dug up by some giant of our present day mechanisation. Huge caterpillar wheels and digging buckets with winches to pull out the root, enabling the ground to be cultivated for the more profitable and easier to manage corn crops, to which so many market gardeners have turned.

But on my first visit the market gardening land was yielding its fruits, at a profit, of sufficient amount, to provide a living for those who were prepared to work hard for long hours in all weathers, in spite of the instability of market prices

Most clear in my memory is the beautiful church tower, the tallest village church in the land I was told. Its warm grey stone, dignified and peaceful, dominated the scene and seemed to be standing watch over all. A guardian of peace, and noting, perhaps sometimes sadly, changes going on all around it.



The grey stone, which seems to take on a warmth in the sunshine was quarried, I was to learn, on local land and the muck used, has a softness which renders it unsuitable for some purposes. Eventually the quarry was to fall in to disuse; flooding caused by the innumerable underground springs, which abound in this part of the Vale, soon won an unequal battle against the council, who eager to procure special matching stone for bridge repair, installed a pump, to run day and night. They hoped to keep the water sufficiently low for quarrying, but it was not to be, and now the old quarry hole and pit where the lime was found, have been taken by brambles and undergrowth. But this chapter in history is still remembered in the name Quarry or "Quar" Lane.

Like many of the old place names which have their origins in simple customs, Nightingale Lane was not named after the lovely chorister of the night, which certainly may be heard in this locality. It was named after five local girls, who when greeting their father, replete from a visit to the Kings Arms, would sit with him under an apple tree and sing country airs accompanied by the old man on his accordion. This tuneful, often daily, occurrence prompted people to say they lived in Nightingale Lane! And so the name appears in our present day post code.

Another curious old name, perhaps not so poetic, is "Till Tops", for that area is where Hoden Lane joins the main road through the village, but its derivation and origin is lost in the minds of the "Old Folk".

But Hoden lane has its memories. As when a Tup, recently purchased at market, broke out of its field and barred the road to an anxious mother, wheeling her perambulator from a distant farm on her way to the village school to collect her other child. But the



## Cleeve Prior Chroniclers

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---

way was barred by this ferocious ram, head down and threatening! What was a mother to do? Baby and pram could not be left and the little laddie at school would not know what to do finding no mother to meet him and might be run over and certainly frightened. But happily rescue is on its way when a stalwart farmer drives up in his sports car, recognises the ram as one he had transported from market the previous day when, with the ram sitting in the front seat, side by side with the driver, the animal held down by the new owner in the back of the car. He remembered the perilous journey only too well. And now here he was confronted by the ram, obviously escaped from a field and terrifying a village mother preventing her from carrying out her duty. Valiantly jumping from the car he confronted the ram, which seeing a new adversary, charged head down and collided violently with the bumper of the car. The stunned animal dropped unconscious! The farmer, not taking any risks of its recovering, promptly sat down on its head, allowing the housewife to continue peacefully up the village.

Her gratitude new no bounds, firmly convinced that the ram had been vanquished entirely by the strength and courage of the farmer, and nothing but this had enabled him to sit on its head. In actual fact it had been knocked completely unconscious and didn't immediately revive, allowing it to be returned to the field and safety for some time.



Cleeve Prior Village Fete

Driving cattle from one ground to another could prove a very hazardous task. Market gardeners are notorious for removing hedges. Their excuse for this callous destruction being that the roots of the hedge and saplings took considerable nourishment away from the crops. Certainly a fact. But it caused great problems when driving cattle or sheep, which would dart off the road at random into tempting acres of spring cabbage and sprouts, and had to be returned hastily to the road, hopefully before doing too much damage. A well trained dog could be a godsend. I have a memory of one farmer with such a dog, when driving a herd of some 40 cattle through the village, would walk majestically in front followed immediately by the cattle with the dog bringing up the rear, his eyes would never moving from his master and charges, and never one beast would leave the road. They were kept on the straight and narrow by the knowledge that if they strayed they would get a quick, decisive nip to keep them in line. On one such occasion a deeply impressed fisherman on his way to fish on the river bank, on seeing the beautiful beasts destined eventually for the beef market, was heard to remark to his pal

*"By gum, best I could do with a lamb chop from one of those!!"*



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This river, which encircled and guarded much of the farm land of Cleeve Prior, was an essential if unobtrusive part of the village. A life giving source of water for cattle turned out to graze in the meadows and on its banks, was much appreciated by cattle and Farmers.



The river during a more peaceful moment

Even in flood times, of which there were many, the river rising quickly and to unexpected depths, could trap animals whose owners had not been able to move them quickly enough, and it was a sad sight to see drowned sheep or even cattle being swept down the stream with the other dirty “flotsam and jetsam” in the flooded river. 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. It was hoped they were empty at the time.

An old custom in Cleeve was to name anyone who fell into the river as the village Mayor until the office was taken over by the next victim. One such nomination caused much interest. A farmer left his punt tied up, but it got loose and drifted on and somehow it ended up stream, so it must be fetched back to the usual mooring spot. The farmer and his young friend set off and sailed downstream; there was a strand of barbed wire, which was stretched from bank to bank at a farm boundary, to stop cattle wandering on to the neighbouring farm, as they were known to do. The punt was travelling towards the fence, when it was noticed just in time by the farmer, who ducked forward on the punt seat to travel under the wire, thus exposing his rear end to the wire which caught in the seat of his pants and lifted him in to the water as the punt passed. His struggle to his feet caused much merriment to his companion, which did not improve his temper and was not forgotten after their return home extremely wet and cross.

The next mayor I knew had gone fishing by the “light of the moon”, and wishing to get further out in to the stream hoping for a better catch, he undressed leaving his clothes on the bank & waded out in to the stream, but he was not allowed to enjoy his hopeful good catch. Another villager, out enjoying a stroll along “lovers walk”, spotted the ghostly figure in mid-stream and could not resist the temptation to remove the clothes lying on the bank. Our fisherman was left a wet and chilly walk home earning himself the title of Mayor of Cleeve.



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The river could be forded by the old weir which has since been washed away in an excessive flood. In fact there was a footpath from Cleeve, by way of a wooden plank over the river with a wire stretched from bank to bank as a handrail, then across the meadows to Salford Station, which was much used by villagers coming from Birmingham by train. They would then either walk to Cleeve or were met by their hosts.



The footbridge over the weir at Cleeve Prior



The bridge over the old lock at Cleeve Prior

On one such occasion a Cleeve Farmer took the pony and trap to meet a visitor of the train at Salford.



Pony and Trap



crossing the ford

On the return journey the visitor and the farmer's wife nursing her small son were enjoying the drive home, when crossing the river disaster struck. Was the current unusually strong or the river deeper? In any event the traces of the trap broke and the



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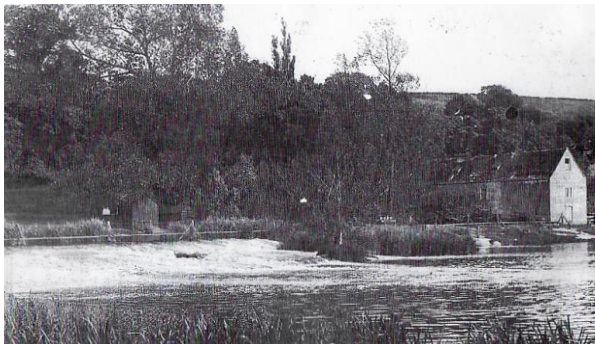
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pony walked out of the shafts which of course fell to the river bed. The Driver, still holding the reins, stepped absent mindedly after the pony leaving the occupants of the trap stranded in the middle of the river.

But help was at hand "Jack" luckily upon the bank shouted a cheery "Don't panic Mam I be a coming to help you". He valiantly waded out into the river to help the lady and baby, who doubtlessly thought it all a great joke for his benefit. He brought the party safely to the bank by the Old Mill, now disappeared, but with a history of being useful giving work and some can still remember the last miller.



Crossing the ford as it should be done



The weir and the mill at Cleeve Prior

A village competition was held to find the strongest man, sacks of corn were carried on the shoulders of the competitors up Jacobs Ladder, as the flight of stone steps up the hill opposite the mill was called. Some of these slab steps can still be seen leading up to the bridle path which runs along the hill to Marlcliff on the site of the old roman road.

Evesham Historical society record that when they dig down on the site of the old roman road, Roman tiles and evidence of this ancient highway are still clearly discernible. So "Mill Lane" is the obvious name of the road in to the village.

Also Frogland Lane takes its name from the many frogs which could be heard daily crossing from the overflow waste water, which flooded the lane from the orchard on until it found its way underground and across fields and expired near the Main Road at "Manor Corner".

Foxes were said to use this drain as an escape route, baffling many a huntsman by their sudden disappearance.



The hunt meets at the Kings Arms



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If Cleeve Prior, as the site of the Roman road suggests, was invaded by Roman cohorts it certainly had an "Invasion" in more modern times. As when Dunkirk evacuation, troops brought back eventually arrived in our village, weary men fell exhausted where they halted and fell asleep by the roadside. Eventually all the men were found billets and returned to their units, but there are memories of a field kitchen outside the Malthouse which is now the village Hall. Inevitably friendships were made as also happened later when children were evacuated from large cities were billeted in Cleeve Prior.



Bringing home the hay

Prisoners of war, German & Italian also came and played their part. Many excellent workers proving themselves as a great help to any farmers whose had been conscripted.



War help sharing lunch

Some even renewing acquaintances years later. How grateful they were to be included in the family for a mid-day meal when rations were stretched to provide for them in spite of the fact that they were provided with sandwiches from camp, but these proved very inadequate nourishment for hard work many were willing to perform. Lasting friendships were made.

Farms in Cleeve Prior each had a meadow on the side of the river, each producing good meadow hay which had to be brought home to the farm in Cleeve, often through the river at the weir crossing. Horse drawn Cart loads would come "home", hopefully without accident, but surely always an adventure. It could certainly be an adventure and hazardous driving cattle from Salford through Bidford and Marlcliff and Cleeve Farms. Sometimes through floodwater if river was in flood. On one such occasion a driver coming to the edge of the flood across the road, decided not to get his boots wet. Another pair could be hard to come by in those days. He sat down on the verge and removed his boots, crossing through floodwater in socks and then reseating



## Cleeve Prior Chroniclers

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---

himself and replaced his boots. Didn't the wet socks cause much discomfort? But the boots were saved!

On such an occasion wellington boots would have been more serviceable, but uncomfortable to walk for any distance. One happy user found that one of a pair of wellingtons was worn out and looking useless. Consequently, on his next visit to the market he visited his old friend the "Cheap Jack" from whose stall you could purchase everything from horse brasses to leather boots and Wellingtons. But of course he only needed one new boot. Hopefully, he related his problem to Cheap Jack who was wonderfully able to produce one correct size boot which he willingly sold to complete the pair!

I fear one would not be so lucky today, times change and the old village customs die out. But in Cleeve Prior the old village church still stands proudly and gently, caring for its people who love her and all that she stands for. People and, being a truly country church, animals too.



Laddy

One such was the farm collie dog well known to all who regularly accompanied farmer's children to and from school and on any walks around the countryside. Any strangers approaching the children would see the dogs "hackles" go up in a menacing and protective display, thus saving the farmer's wife any worry about the welfare of her young family.

Always the dog accompanied her and her family to church on Sunday mornings sitting patiently outside the door till the close of service. Except on one occasion, a lovely boiling summer morning. The church door was left open to allow sun and breeze to enter. Picture an old dog lying sleepily on the step, watched by the farmer's family from their pew inside. A fly buzzing around wakes the dog and flies in to the church. The dog hates flies and pursues it energetically snapping hopefully after it. The farmers family gets excited and apprehensive, but all's well and the dog returns to his patch in the sun to await their emergence at the close of the service. When the farmer's wife apologised to the vicar for the disturbance, she was comfortingly assured that the angels did not mind, so why should he. The family and dog returned home to dinner, hopefully cooking gently in the farmhouse Rayburn oven, to be dished up with appropriate local brussel sprouts with Pershore plum pies and cream, from the family jersey cow for afters.





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Article from the Evesham Journal



It read

The Vale of Evesham is not exactly the big country, and the Kings Arms saloon at Cleeve Prior, doesn't have a ..... wheel or sell fingers of red eye

But the village does have a minor cattle baron who rides tall in the saddle on his 97 acre "ranch"

He is Mr John Sheaf aged 89, of Bay Tree Farm, at West End Cleeve Prior, who rides out each morning, come rain or shine, to check his cattle on Pickerson Meadow by the Avon.

The way to the river is too steep and overgrown for any vehicle, so Mr Sheaf uses a horse, not just any horse, but "Ready Steady Go", a

Thoroughbred who a few years ago was gracing the turf.

Now he seems just as happy rounding up cattle

Mr Sheaf, who has lived and farmed in the village all his life, is no stranger to racing stock. His previous horses have included ..... a full brother to .....,

third in the Derby, and Wheatflake, the Grandmother of Crisp.

He said" I like thoroughbreds, I don't like camels. I've Always had horses. We used to use them instead of tractors and I learned to ride on a pony that pulled the trap"

Ready Steady Go has been with

## Round-up farmer is on a safe bet

Mr Sheaf for three weeks. He acquired him from .... In Shropshire, who can no longer ride after an operation and wanted a good home for him.

In the first week he discovered Ready Steady Go did not like a cold saddle, and threatened to jump the wall outside the living room when he wanted to go into his stable, and also liked to show off to villagers.

"But he is a wonderful old chap and a tremendous character" said Mr Sheaf.

The farm has about 80 Hereford cross beef cattle, Mr. Sheaf had more last year but sold more than usual because of winter feed problems



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Cleeve Prior is now officially designated a conservation area and its buildings as “ listed buildings” and thus hopefully giving some protection from modern expansion, although many houses have been built over the years, and saddest of them all, the old tythe barn converted into a not entirely sympathetic style of living house



Peace and Tranquillity

Still a measure of countryside, peace and tranquillity is preserved, the old church still stands guarding over its beautiful acres of Vale land

*May peace and tranquillity continue for future  
Generations of Cleeve Prior natives.*

**Monica Sheaf**