

The History of Far Forest

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The early history of Far Forest is rather confused because maps were not drawn and the delineation of areas depended on verbal descriptions.

At the Norman Conquest the Manor of Alvintune (later called Alton) which forms a large part of the present parish, as well as other adjoining land, was given to Ralph fitz Auscluf, Sheriff to the Palatinate Earl of Hereford. Ralph rebelled against the king in 1072 and his land was given to Ralph de Todenii III, who was lord of Rock. This Ralph gave part of the manor of Alton to the Abbey of St. Evrail in France, while retaining the hunting rights. The Prior of Ware was the abbot's commissary.

In 1292 Ralph de Todenii was in dispute with Edmund Mortimer who owned most of Wyre, over woods near Beach Hay. The dispute was settled in favour of de Todenii.

In 1425 a later Edmund Mortimer died and was succeeded by Edward, Earl of March, who later became King Edward IV, thus the bulk of the Forest became Crown land. In 1485 Sir Thomas Blount of Kinlet became Master Forester and Ryder of Cleobury Park, which was granted to the Earl of Leicester in 1563.

On a scale map dated 1869, Rousebine Coppice is shown as being surrounded by Crown land leased to the Earl of Dudley. This land is shown as being in the Borough of Bewdley, and was probably the former Mortimer lordship. This would explain the stone in the wall of the Old Schools (now the Far Forest Centre), marking the boundary between Rock and Bewdley.

There are very few roads in the Forest. Even when Prince Arthur's body was being taken from Ludlow to Worcester, resting the night at Tickenhill Palace, the coffin was carried along forest tracks.

If you walk through the Forest you often come to a house with a couple of fields. This tells you that almost certainly it was originally built under the ancient right that one could keep the land one could fence in 24 hours, provided that one could also build a shack with smoke coming from the roof in the same time.

There are very few houses in Far Forest earlier than about 1750. There is a timber framed house in Kingswood Lane, right on the edge of the parish and Cook's Green. The very fine cruck house, Silligrove, is just outside the parish.

What we now call the parish of Far Forest was made up of part of the parish of Ribbesford (that is - Cook's Green, Lynalls, Brand Lodge, the Oxbine, Dog-hanging

Coppice and the Lower Forest); part of the parish of Stottesdon (that is - Brand Wood, Kings's Wood, Whimper Hill and Upper and Lower Longdon). The rest of the parish was formerly part of The Rock (that is - Rousebine, the Parks, Alton Wood, Alton and Buckeridge Commons, Cross Bank and Callow Hill).

Most of the land which came from Rock Parish was formerly part of Alton and Buckeridge Commons which were part of the Manor of Alton. The commons were not enclosed until 1824 so there were few houses in that part of the parish before that date. The Wheatsheaf was not in the house now called The Wheatsheaf House but the house called the White House or The Lemmings, and Yarrons Farm was called Aaron's Farm. The Green Dragon was built later and has subsequently been demolished.



The Wheatsheaf

The houses that were built about that time were made of the local stone with heavy internal beams. The chimneys were brick built because the local stone perished in the heat. The houses have two front doors - one into the kitchen and the other into the parlour. There were seldom windows in the side or rear of the houses. Upstairs there was one bedroom and a landing which served as a bedroom.



The Green Dragon (now demolished)

William Elliot

There does not appear to have been a squire of Far Forest. At the time of the enclosures the principal landowner was William Childe, esquire of Kinlet, and later the families of Ravenscroft and Betts owned many properties. There are now no Ravenscrofts, but the

Betts family has been on the Forest for over 100 years. It is said that the slate roofed houses were owned by the Ravenscrofts, and many of the tiled cottages bear the initials of Mr A.K. Betts to show their ownership.

Churches and Schools

The early inhabitants of the Forest were very rough. It is said that some of the squatters were those who had found the attentions of the law in urban areas rather too pressing. There is a cottage just beside the County boundary near Furnace Mill that used to be called Catchems Hall. It is said that the criminals used to hop across the brook to avoid the attentions of the Worcestershire police and return when Shropshire became too inquisitive.

It was among these people that John Cawood, curate of Ribbesford from 1800 to 1814, and incumbent of St. Anne's, Bewdley from 1814 to 1852, worked. He was horrified at the godless state of the people and established a Sunday School at Yew Tree Farm, Station Road. Most of the people were living in a common law relationship and he used to promise a joint of meat to those who would regularise their relationship by marriage. It is said that Rev. Josiah Lea continued this practice.

It was John Cawood who in 1841 began to press for a church at Far Forest. A committee was formed and the church was built in 1844 from stone quarried in Shugars Lane, near Shugar's Farm. One of the local quarrymen was killed in this work. My predecessor told me that a shugar is a large building stone, but I have not been able to confirm this. The modern spelling is Sugar's Lane, and I am told by a former owner of Sugar's Farm that there is a Mr. Sugar listed in the title deeds. This would seem to be a more likely derivation of the name of the lane.

The architect of the church was A.E. Perkins, of Worcester, (the plans are in the County Records Office) and the builders were Fred Bradley, Richard Ganderton and William Bourne. There is still a William Bourne building in the neighbourhood. The cost was partly met by the Hereford Diocesan Society, and partly by the Society for the Promoting and Building of Churches, and partly by local donations. Dr. James Fryar, the medical doctor and surgeon from Bewdley, gave £900 and his assistant was George Jordan, who wrote 'Flora Bellus Locus', and collected and mounted every known plant within a 10 mile radius of Bewdley.

Originally the church was a chapelry of Bewdley, but in 1864 it became a separate Ecclesiastical District with the right to hold baptisms, marriages and burials. It was said that the need for burials was obvious because all the

burials were at Ribbesford, and the bearers used to find strength for their task by calling at the Wheatsheaf, the Plough, the Blue Ball, the Red Cow, the Royal Forester, the New Inn, Mopson's Cross, the Duke William (formerly the Lord Nelson), Harvatt's Place (now Tower Farm), the Running Horse and the Rose and Crown, before striking off across the fields to Ribbesford. By the time they arrived they were in no fit state for a solemn occasion.



Of the vicars of Far Forest I shall only mention three. Josiah Turner Lea, the third incumbent, was vicar for 46 years, from 1853 to 1899. He was a man of great wealth and a typical squarson. He used to run a soup kitchen for the poor of the parish. He was greatly loved, though with a considerable amount of awe.

His successor, George Frederick Eyre, was also a man of means (a member of the publishing firm of Eyre & Spottiswoode, official publishers of the Prayer Book). At his own expense he set up a farming co-operative, persuading 15 farmers to join him. He set up a dairy at Hedgwick House, adjoining the old vicarage, selling bottled milk, and also at Raven's Nest cottages at the top of Sugar's Lane. There was a well with a wind pump on the site of the Rustic Works on Cleobury Road, and water was fed by gravity down New Road to Raven's Nest. One lady remembers going after school to dress poultry. There was a shop in Kidderminster, one on Long Bank and also the Forest Stores to sell the produce. The Long Bank shop stocked all the requisites for smallholding, the seeds having the proprietary name of 'One for All'. Unfortunately the Foresters were suspicious of any innovation and it was thought that the parson was doing very nicely for himself out of it and support was withdrawn. Incidentally, part of the profit was used to provide a mortgage for the Church when the Old Schools were bought as a parish hall. Mr. Eyre owned the first motor car in the district, a De Dion Bouton. The agent who sold it beat Barnes of Kingswinford for the deal. Mr Eyre said that he would buy the one that got up Lemhill the better. Mr. Barnes' car unfortunately could not get up.



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The third vicar I shall mention was Erasmus Aubrey Davenport Naylor, here from 1931 to 1937. He was largely responsible for the village being connected to the Birmingham Water Supply, and even had to appear at the bar of the House of Commons to present his petition. The credence table was given to the Church as a memorial of King George V's Silver Jubilee.

Although Far Forest was always under the pastoral care of Ribbesford and Rock, the Non-conformist churches had their buildings in the parish before there was an Anglican church. The chapel in the woods at Buckeridge was used by Protestants in the reign of Queen Mary I, and was used by the Baptists from 1780 to 1914, baptisms being held in a pool in the farmyard at Buckeridge Bank, then owned by Mr. Ankrett. In 1919 the Baptists moved to the wooden mission building on the Cleobury Road, which had been run by Brethren from Worcester for about 20 years. The wooden building was replaced by the present building in 1970. The old Buckeridge Chapel had its own graveyard which was used by the parish for a short time in the 1920s, before the extension to Holy Trinity churchyard was consecrated.

The Primitive Methodists, nicknamed the Ranters, built a chapel at the top of Ranters Bank in 1836. It ceased to be used as a chapel in 1912. About a hundred years ago a local preacher mounted the temporary platform and announced that his sermon would be short, short as St. Thomas's Day. It was, for one of the congregation at that moment knocked the trestle from under the platform.

The Wesleyan Methodists built a chapel on Callow Hill in 1864. It is still in use. According to Bentley's Trade Directory, 1840, there had been a Wesleyan Chapel on Callow Hill since 1790, though the site is not positively known. Mrs. Humphries said that there was a building at Cherry Tree Farm, Chapel Lane which had lancet windows. It was demolished in 1977. Perhaps this was the old chapel.

As far as education is concerned, the village was lucky. Rev. John Cawood, whom we have mentioned earlier, built the school in 1829 on a site given by the Crown. This was known as the Old Schools, just opposite the old Vicarage. It is now a Diocesan Adventure Centre. We still have the old school log book, and very interesting reading it makes.

There was one boy who was kept at home to mind the cow, but his younger brother was sent to school to save wasting his school fees (a penny a week). There was an occasion when the headmaster told three boys to stay at home the next day as there was an Inspector coming

and teachers were paid by results in those days. One poor headmistress was sacked for inefficiency.

With the coming of the 1870 Education Act the school became a Board School instead of a Church School. In 1902 Rev. William Lea gave the Lea Memorial School in memory of his parents. This was a Church school, now of Controlled status. The land was bought from Mr. William Tolley. One lady told me that about 60 years ago her husband fell off a swing, 'The Giant Stride', one of those with a central pole from which came rods supporting a circular seat. He cut his nose very badly and was taken by a teacher to her father, who was an animal castrator, to have it stitched. A novel form of school medical service!

There were only three headmasters in the whole history of the school until Mr. Joyner retired at Easter, 1977. Mr. Jeans who became head of the Old Schools in 1880 moved to the new school and remained until he retired in 1924. Mr. Mole succeeded him and was followed by Mr. Joyner in 1954. Since then there have been Mrs. Heeley, who retired in 1982, Mrs. Gregory, who retired in 1997 and Mr. Max Davies, until his retirement in 2009. He, incidentally, was taught by both the author of this article and his wife!

Work and Trade

Before the middle of the last century the village was merely a hamlet without shops. At this time, in 1863, Mr. William Tolley of Hagley bought Fir Tree Farm, including all the land except The Sycamore, bounded by New Road, Plough Lane and the footpath from Plough Lane to the top of Sugar's Lane. The farmhouse was converted into 'The Original Stores' and the other house now 'Forest Stores' became a draper's for one of Mr. Tolley's daughters. This was the shop bought by Mr. Eyres for his co-operative. At one time between the wars there was a draper's shop in the end cottage of Fir Tree Cottages. This was run by Mr. George Pound. He worked in Birmingham, cycling both ways, and took over the shop from his wife in the evenings. The house at the top of Lem Hill and Ranter's Bank was a butcher's shop owned by a Mr. Mantle. At the top of the Bliss Gate Road, opposite the Royal Forester, there was a tailor's and later a butcher's shop. There was a blacksmith's forge at the Fingerpost and also at the top of High Tree lane on Callow Hill. The Simmonds family were cabinet makers and undertakers, having workshops at Inglenook and then at Belmont. The Simmonds kept the Post Office in both places. Later the Post Office moved across the road to Invergordon, where it was run by Miss Taylor, formerly a teacher in the village. The telephone was manually operated until 1952. I am told that if subscribers did not answer, Miss Taylor took a message and rang up later.

Photograph supplied by Charles Purcell



There was also a Post Office at The Willows, Cleobury Road, which was very well equipped for a small office. There was a telegraph line from Far Forest Station and the Forest first heard the news of the death of Edward VII from this office. The first telephone was two lines from Bewdley, known as X and Y lines. These were party lines and a man came from Bewdley asking for subscribers. He had to get four for each line. The number for Tower Farm was 20Y1. You had to count the number of rings to see whether the call was for you. In the 1920s the rent was low and you had a number of free calls.

The workhouse of the parishes of Rock and Cleobury Mortimer was in Far Forest. It was situated on the main road opposite the Original Stores, where three modern houses now stand. It was in use for about 20 years prior to 1839 (Shropshire County Council - Sale Records). The young paupers had to walk to Kidderminster and assemble in the Horsefair before going to the various factories. The children were beaten by the workhouse master if they were late. The master's house still stands. It is next door to the Village Hall.

Probably, although it was dreaded, the workhouse was very much needed for the people were very poor. Some people managed to subsist on a smallholding, though many of the men took other jobs. One could measure the social success of the Foresters by how they took their goods to market. The very poor used a wheelbarrow, then they progressed to a donkey cart, and finally to a pony and trap or float.

Mining provided work for many men, though not within the parish. Borings were made by the railway line near Park House in 1913 by a Durham firm using a coffee pot steam engine, and other borings were made on Whimper Hill and by Dry Mill, but none of these was economically viable. The men used to walk to pits at Rock, Pensax and Bayton and others went as far afield as Kinlet, Highley and Billingsley. One old man told me that he used to walk the seven or so miles to Billingsley and had to be ready with his lamp in his hand by 6.00a.m.

If he had not got his lamp by when the whistle blew, he was sent home and lost a day's work.

Many young people, boys and girls alike, used to fetch coal from the pits to sell each day. I have heard of the girls of one Forest family fetching coal from Billingsley, and having to off-load half the load when they came to a steep hill or pitch, going up, unloading, returning for the other half load and reloading at the top. If you know the road to Billingsley you will realise that there are many steep banks. One boy used to go from Bliss Gate to Pensax pit before school. His grandfather met him at Rock school with a 'piece', and he would take the load home while the boy went into school with his breakfast in his hand.

The railway provided work, not only in the building, but also in its maintenance. The Act for the building of the line was passed in July 1860, and the work was completed by 13th August, 1864, by the firm of Brassey and Field. Many of the labourers were Irish and were only paid monthly because they had a bout of drinking each pay day and so the work was only interrupted once a month. John Brinton, the carpet manufacturer, was a large contributor because he was thus able to get his workers to Kidderminster.

The water pipe-line from Elan Valley passes through the parish and the local men worked the section from Break-neck Bank to Hagley. Most of the line is 'cut-and-cover', a concrete lined ditch covered with concrete slabs, but our section is 'the siphon', a section of pipes to increase the pressure and flow. Mr. Tom Baston of Quarry Cottage told me that his father worked on the original line in 1904, and was responsible for the unloading of the pipes and their transportation to the site. The pipes were unloaded onto timber-limbers and were about 3ft.6ins. in diameter and were varnished inside and out. There was very little corrosion, though 'barnacles' grew on the pipe walls. A second line of the same size was put in in 1927 and Mr. Baston worked on that line himself. At the end of the Second World War a new pipe line was put in; these pipes being 6ft. in diameter. They were steel pipes one inch thick and lined with 2 inches of concrete. The pipeline bringing the water to the village was very poorly laid by a firm which estimated a price of £12,000, as against the engineer's estimate of £18,000. It was 6inch piping, much of it being lead which had crystallised. In the first year more water was lost than used, and much of the pipe had to be relaid. The original water-works site office on Sturt was taken down and re-erected as a bungalow on Ranter's Bank.

Of course, the forest provided work for many people. Incidentally, in the Forest there is the celebrated Whitty

Pear or sorb tree. The original, the only one known in the country at that time, was burned down in 1862. This was replaced with a sapling by Mr. Robert Woodward, of Arley Castle, in 1913. A very good account of this tree can be found in Dr. N.E. Hickin's 'Forest Refreshed'. To return to the work of the forest, trees were felled and then 'tushed' by heavy horses to the timber limbers. With our heavy clay soil, in wet weather the wagons often sank axle deep, and the horses were almost breasting the mud. Often both wagon and horses were taken to the sheep dipping pool at Furnace Mill for washing. I am told that one limber was completely smashed and washed away by flood water.



Many of the deep gullies in the forest were made by the tushers or wagons. Harry Tolley, who lived with his brother, late owner of the Original Stores, and great-aunt and uncle at 'The Sycamore', was one of the principal hauliers. He also ran a wagonette to take people to Bewdley and Kidderminster, and to take the Far Forest footballers, of whom he was the manager, to away matches. Another wagonette was kept by Mrs. Pain, at the Duke William. The driver was Ernie Wilson who lived at Keen's Farm. This met trains at Bewdley Station. Black Country and Birmingham people used to give notice by letter if they wished to be met. Thomas Pound was a haulier who used a steam engine.

Charcoal burning was an ancient craft practised up to the end of the Second World War. Before the discovery of coking, the Forest provided fuel for the Stour Valley iron works, the greatest concentration of iron mills



anywhere in the country. Robert Foley, in the reign of Charles I, was fined £5,000 for taking timbers that might have been used for ship building.

Many families have a long tradition of charcoal burning. The Cook family can trace charcoal burners back to 1780, and one member of the family was not so long ago working as a woodsman. During the burn the men lived in shacks like wigwams made of sacking, called booths - ancient plural Boothern, hence the common local name of Booton, and the place names Button Oak and Button Bridge. The charcoal burners had their own pub in the village, 'The Stepping Stones' once being a pub. It is said that its vast cellars used to contain wine and spirit smuggled up the Severn and the Dowles Brook.

Other related crafts were the making of split-oak baskets and besoms. The last basket and besom maker on the Forest was Jack Brown who sold many of his baskets or 'wiskets' (oval baskets with a hand-hold at each end) for coaling ships especially at Suez. Some people still make besoms for their own use. Some of the very fine birch twigs were de-barked and made into tiny besoms to brush the 'flights' or fluff from new carpets in carpet factories. Other bundles of birch twigs were put into the vinegar vats at Stourport to give colour to the liquid.

Many of the women worked in gangs peeling the bark from oak saplings. The poles were used to make rustic furniture and the bark was sold to the tanneries at Bewdley for leather tanning. Afterwards the bark was put round strawberry plants where it provided both fertiliser and protection against pests.

Mr. Quayle spoke of women taking large bundles of bracken, bound with withies, carrying them on their heads and selling them for 4d. for cattle bedding.

Local Customs

One centenarian told me that when she was a girl, they used to sell the first picking of blackberries so that they had money enough to buy sugar to make jam with the second picking. The fruit was sold to a dealer named Ashcroft in Bewdley to make dye. A man who used to live on Pound Bank told me how he and his brother used to go down to Furnace Mill to cut bundles of 12 bean sticks which were sold for a penny a bundle so that his mother would have a shilling to give as collection when she was 'churched' after the birth of the new baby.

Few people bought bread. Friday was the baking day and every house had its own bread oven. Some people maintain that bread baked on Good Friday does not go mouldy, only dry, and it was grated with a spoonful



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of treacle as a cure for stomach upsets. A baker in Kidderminster told me that one old lady used to buy one hot cross bun for that purpose. Some people kept a hot cross bun to protect the house from lightning. Another cure, Mr. Ted Smith, formerly of The Sycamore, told me that the old Foresters used to catch and skin adders, then fry them, using the fat to make 'ether oil' (adder oil) as a cure for snake bites and boils. 'Ether' must not be confused with heather for that is always known as 'yuth' or heath. Bracken was always known as 'fiarn' of fern. Mr Smith also told me that alder catkins were boiled to make a drink to cure boils, and holly bark, when boiled, made bird-lime for catching birds.

The Forest was always a lawless place. George Griffiths tells, in 'Going to Markets and Fairs', of how he and two friends were sent to collect rates from the Forest, and found no men. The women, however, were very fierce and threatened all kinds of terrors if they returned. They adjourned to the Mopson's Cross for food and refreshment. One of the party, a rabid teetotaler, thought cider was non-alcoholic and suffered for his mistake. When the rate collectors returned with a troop of soldiers, they found that the rate money was to hand. There was a General Election pending, and one of the candidates tried to buy votes with the rate money. He must have wasted money, for very few Foresters would be forty shilling freeholders in 1840.

At the turn of the century, I am told, it was a regular fixture for the young men to go to the Beach Hay cross roads on a Saturday night to fight the Bayton men. In one house the knuckle dusters were, until recently, still hanging on a beam as a reminder of those days.

The first policeman living in the district was named Dovey, a great-grandfather of the late Mr. Geoff Hinton. He lived where Friar's Garth now is. It is within living memory that the village bobby was set upon, killed and his body thrown over a hedge one dark night. Years ago there was even a gallows at Gibbet Bank. Local legend tells that the last man hanged there killed his step-daughter and buried the body near Park House. It was found by hunting hounds. A former owner of Cherryholme, Pound Bank, pointed out to me a beam in the cottage which is reputed to be the main beam of the gallows. Mr. Ernest Bradley tells me that there was a cottage, which has since disappeared, below James Place, which had a gallows beam. Either story may be correct, perhaps even both, for there are two substantial beams in a gallows.

Other interesting names are Gorst Hill, the gorse covered hill, and Thumpers Hole. This last was a public

well and the local cider-makers went there to crush their fruit - hence the thumpers!

In another village there is a Dog-hanging Meadow, where a hound who killed a child suffered the same fate as a human would have done. I wonder if that is the origin of Dog-hanging Coppice? (*Ed.: Note from John Bingham - Dog Hanging is possibly a hunting term, a place where dogs used in the hunt would be set off from, or to 'hang back' the dogs before they were released on the quarry*). Pound Bank leads to Horton's Pound where there used to be a pound or pinfold for impounding stray animals.

Just as a tale-piece - I have collected a number of local words. The past participle of buy is 'boughten' e.g. 'boughten loaves'. People are anxious to find what is 'agate' or happening. One 'sizes' cinders, never sieves them. A 'bye-tack' is a field lying beyond the farm boundary. A 'tallit' is a loft or granary above another building. 'Soldiers' are the small red cherries which drop off before ripening. One never lets a house; it is always 'set'. Some old people use 'civver' for 'cover', and 'behappen' for 'perhaps'. A gap in a hedge is called a 'glat'. In my native area hedges are laid. Here they are 'pleached', and there is no finer sight than a well pleached hedge which has been 'heathered', or plaited at the top. Where hedges run down to a stream, there is a barrier across the stream to stop cattle straying into the next field. This is called a 'yarrin'. The rack on the living room ceiling for the flitches of bacon is called a 'cratch'.

The log-tailed tit is always called a 'cannon-bottle', perhaps from the shape of the nest. The whitethroat is always 'Billie Whitethroat' and a wren is called a 'mummie-ruffin'. The word 'surree' is dropped into conversation very frequently. It is the equivalent of the American 'sirree' or the antique 'sirrah'. But no Forester has ever heard these words. He has only 'yeard' them.

Finally you may know that I did not live at the Forest or in the Forest, but 'on the Forest'.

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Most of the information has been collected by talking to parishioners, but nothing has been included that has not been authenticated by at least one other person, except where the informant is mentioned by name. Photographs supplied by William Elliot unless otherwise stated.

Written by Reverend William Elliott (vicar of Far Forest Church 1970-1985) on 1st May, 1978, with small revisions in 1981, 1986 and 1999.