

ALCESTER & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

FEBRUARY 2024

www.alcesterhistory.org.uk



Henley Street, Alcester (looking towards the Town Hall). Taken before WWI. The two houses top left were the police houses demolished about 1914. The house below was Thomas Skinner's. The entry between two blocks led to Skinner's Needleworks. It employed 5 workers in 1904 stamping and eyeing needles. Thomas died in 1918 and the works closed. (From ADLHS Archive)

FROM THE CHAIRMAN:

Next month is the Society's AGM. We have not received any nominations for a Secretary yet. If you would like to support the Society and join the Committee, please consider putting your name forward to me. If you would like more information about this, do call or email me.

Alan Godfrey

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LAST MONTH'S MEETING

The speaker in January at Alcester & District Local History Society was our committee member, Dr Richard Churchley. His talk followed the development of the needle industry in England and how the West Midlands became the world centre for the manufacture of needles, and the associated products: pins, bicycle spokes, springs and fish hooks. First, he dispelled many of the myths which surrounded needlemaking; including that needles were first made in Long Crendon, Buckinghamshire, before being brought to the Arrow Valley (in fact it there was no evidence that Long Crendon workers moved to Studley or Redditch until the early nineteenth century); or another myth that the Huguenots brought needlemaking to England, but there is no evidence to this either.

It was recorded in 1629 that William Lea was indicted by the Needlemakers Company for the "use of an unlawful engine". However, by 1640s William Lea and his son, Richard, were producing needles in Studley and employing five apprentices. By the end of that century needles were being widely made in Studley, Sambourne, Feckenham, Sernal, Alcester, Tardebigge, Stoke Prior and Worcester. The needlemakers were from local farming families as well as blacksmiths and publicans. In addition, they recruited employees and apprentices.

Before 1700 needles made in iron or steel and were handmade; the basic equipment being just a hammer and a block. This was a cottage industry where all the family played a

part. From probate records the value of the needlemakers' tools and stock can be seen: John Barr of Coughton left working tools to the value of £2, George Bird of Sambourne left 15/- worth of tools in 1711, Richard Bell of Astwood Bank had stock of "wire and needles" to the value of £66, and Henry Barr of Feckenham in 1735 left "needles of all sorts" worth £35.

Why was this area chosen? It was away from the influence of the London guild. Many of the places chosen for needlemaking were on heathland, which was poor land for agriculture; there were nearby markets for gloves and cappers etc. who used quantities of needles. Raw materials: iron and charcoal were available locally. Also, trade via the River Severn and using the trade networks in Birmingham and the Black Country were possible to ease supply routes.

Before long mechanisation meant that the cottage industry migrated to purpose-built factories or used the water power provided by local water mills (already being used for milling wheat). This conversion was not always accepted easily, there were riots and machinery was smashed, as workers feared losing their jobs. Workers in these factories began to specialise in a single operation out of the total process; or focussed on producing specialist needles. The result was the number of needles made rose dramatically from 10 million in 1790 to 100 million (per week) in 1866.

Alcester also played an important part in the growth of needlemaking. Many of the cottages in Malt Mill Lane were occupied by needlemakers and their families. The Minerva Works was founded by the Allwoods and was a major employer in the town. Excelsior Works was operated by the Alcester Needlemaking Society (part of the Co-operative movement), and the Guillaume family moved from Dijon, France to set up a needle factory in Malt Mill Lane in the mid-nineteenth century. In addition, there were many other smaller needle businesses.

Some needlemakers owned pubs: Francis Morrall, a Redditch needlemaker, owned the Griffin Inn (formerly the

Needlemaker's Arms), situated next to his factory in Green Lane. The "griffin" was the Morrall logo which appeared on needle packets. Needlemaking was thirsty work, and the factory owner was keen for the workers to spend their wages in his pub!

Charles Dickens wrote an article about Redditch's needle industry in "Household Words" in 1851. His report was generally favourable about the working conditions in John James' Victoria Works, although he did not actually visit the factory himself.

Richard was warmly thanked on behalf of the Society by Chairman, Alan Godfrey, for a fascinating talk on a subject with a local theme.

Alan Godfrey

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE GREYHOUND

This was the fine jettied house in Henley Street, Alcester, with the word "Greyhound" still visible on the door of No.31, but it actually occupied No.29 as well. The inn had a long history of victualling, according to our records, from the 16th century until the 20th. Our earliest reference is in 1595 (WRO: CR 1886/1681) when Sir Fowlke Grevyle of Beauchamp Court issued a lease of the inn to Fowlke Richardson as landlord. Richardson's probate in 1602 shows the inn as having eight rooms and a cellar, with a barn and stable as well but during the next seventy years the house must have been enlarged, for in 1671, when Stephen Round the innkeeper died, the Greyhound's Head (as it was called then) had twelve rooms and a cellar, plus brewhouse and dairy. Between 1602 and 1671 the Rounds, John first, then Stephen managed the inn, being also described as "yeomen". Mary Round continued after Stephen died. The Rounds were one of the families to have left tokens, a sort of substitute money issued by shopkeepers when coinage was short, as it often was in former times and as recently as the 19th century. One of the Round's tokens is inscribed "Stephen Round at Ye Grayhounds Head In Alssester ½d" with the head of a greyhound, according to *Token Coinage of Warwickshire by Davis*.

Indications are that it was a busy place in the 17th century - both Constables' and Wardens' Accounts at the Warwickshire Record Office show payments made for beer for official occasions and the Manor Roll reminds us that in 1620 the Greyhound was "at the market place", so its trade must have been considerable.

By the 18th century William Whistle was the victualler, as shown by records at Warwick (WRO: CR 1886/78). He is also known to have been at The Red Horse just down the street, so he must have moved to The Greyhound in the early 18th century.

For some unknown reason *the Universal British Directory of 1792* does not list the inn. In 1811 it was still the Greyhound's Head, but from then on it becomes just "The Greyhound". We know the licensees of the inn from Trade Directories from then on: 1829 Joseph Foxall, 1850 and 1860 George Allwood (of the noted Alcester needlemaking family), 1873 William Harvey, 1888 Elizabeth Harvey; 1893 W. Munslow, 1898 and 1905, J. Welch, 1906 A. W. Tomkins.

In the Worcestershire County Record Office is a delightful poster dated 1859 which advertises a "Herculean Feat" to be performed at the inn on a Monday afternoon, when one John Sheffield would display his talents, namely doing nine feats in half an hour, including:

running a coach wheel half a mile, leaping over ten hurdles, picking up 15 eggs with his mouth and putting them into a basket, running half a mile etc. This feat has never been accomplished by any other man.

The origin of the name of the inn can only be guessed at; it is fairly common in hunting country and a greyhound's head adorns the crest of the Greville tomb of 1560 in Alcester Church. The dog is found on the armorial bearings of the Lords of Salford Priors and Bidford. We may take our pick! By 1906 the end of the inn's long career was nigh. At the Petty Sessions in that year, it was described as "defective and unsanitary" and in 1907 its days of drink and public jollity ended when it closed its doors for ever. It then started on a new incarnation, in which

it continues to this day, as a rather smart and desirable private house.

Edward Saville

[This article appeared in *Local Past* for December 2005]



The Greyhound Inn just before it closed on 8th March 1907.



FUTURE MEETINGS:

- 14th February – Reporting Birmingham: 250 Years of a Provincial Press – Andrew Reekes
- 13th March – Annual General Meeting, followed by: The Alcester Railway Co: the Story of the "Coffee Pot" Line – Stephen Godfrey
- 10th April – On the Way to London: Local Roads from Anglo-Saxon Tracks to Turnpikes – David Ella

NEXT MEETING:

Our next meeting to be held at the **Sixth Form Centre, St Benedict's High School, Kinwarton Road, Alcester B49 6PX** on **Wednesday 14th February 2024** at 7.30pm. The talk is "Reporting Birmingham – 250 years of a Provincial Press" and the speaker is **Andrew Reekes**.

Annual Subscriptions are now due and the cost remains unchanged at £5.00 per member. Please put your subs in a sealed envelope, bearing your name and address.

Alan Godfrey

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