

## A Religious Landscape?

A fair proportion of articles that I write originate in queries from residents, sometimes directly to me otherwise through the editor. Recently I was fascinated when asked if I could verify a possible legend that, if accurate, stems from before the Reformation of the 1530s. It was suggested that the Stone House in Washbrook Lane had once been called the 'Cleansing House' and was used by pilgrims, presumably heading for Coventry. Sadly to date I have not found any evidence about this, though I have been on religious pilgrimage many times and have experienced such rituals of purification.

The earliest reference available about the Stone House Farm seems to show the property was, in the 1430s, known as 'Dalby Hall', when what looks like a lease for three lives (usually 99 years), was granted to parents and a son belonging to a branch of the Dalby family living in Bickenhill. It was known as such until 1720 though the Dalby family had long since moved away. Names of leasees are often attached to rented property.

During the last era of pilgrimages the family of Virtue (alias Fortune) probably bought it and increased the farm's acreage through purchases - much of the land situated along a series of brooks. Interesting field names adjoining Bridle Brook for example were Holly Lands and Holly Meadow of about eight acres. Usually 'Holly' as in 'Hollyberry End' which

stretches from the Meriden - Fillongley border into Allesley, is interpreted as 'Holy' and does not refer to Holly trees. This kind of name often recalls a rent charge on the property which was donated by its owner to a local religious establishment.

Bridle Brook flows into Wash Brook and both into the Sherbourne. An earlier name for the Sherbourne, the Cune, may mean 'Holy River'. Are these clues to an earlier scene? At a more prosaic level, I am reliably told that local farmers used the Wash Brook streams as a sheep wash. As a child I recall this activity on relatives' farms to the north of here. Local residents may have followed the running water as an alternative to paths or bridleways. Is this the origin of Bridle Brook?

The Sherbourne flows to Spon End, near St James' chapel, where a well was believed to cure sore eyes. St James as a dedication was by tradition closely linked to pilgrimage. The church of St James, Packington Priors, owned before 1539 by Kenilworth Abbey, could well have been on a forgotten pilgrim route. An alternative venue for certain travellers from Allesley might have been Chapel Fields with its leper chapel of St Margaret. Lepers were refused entry into towns because of contagion. The Sherbourne continues from here into the city, where the Priory of St Mary attracted pilgrim visitors with its wide range of treasures. Our concept of

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pilgrimage is often coloured by Chaucer's poems, whereas it is established that most such journeys were no longer than two or three miles from home when undertaken by ordinary folk with limited objectives, unlike the gentry or upper classes who could afford a leisurely trip. The well-known Margery Kempe normally travelled only a couple of miles from home.

Until c1950 Slyberslade coppice lay on the Berkswell/Meriden border, just south-west of Allesley's boundary. It was known by a series of corrupted names like 'Slip and Slide' Wood but 'Slyber' really means a gap - in this case between the secular and religious. In other words it was on a pilgrim boundary or route. A mile from

the famous shrine at Walsingham, Norfolk is the similar-named slipper or slype chapel. It is also believed that Berkswell's Norman crypt once housed a significant shrine, though precisely what has been forgotten. Nearby was the holy Bercul's well. There was another healing well dedicated to St Laurence's near Slyberslade in Meriden parish.

Pilgrimage routes still play a part in the Coventry diocese worship today. One established in 2012 began in Corley, following the Sherbourne valley to the City. Bishop Christopher bestowed his blessing on it and walked it himself. This journey, repeated in 2016 and 2018, could well follow a medieval one.

*Doreen Agutter*

*The Sherbourne, looking towards  
Hawkes Mill Lane from Pikers Lane*

