

Among those dark, Satanic mills...

Stephen Roberts explores the surprising industrial heritage of Blockley, one of our prettiest villages

ROLLING hills, verdant pasture, golden stone cottages, the chiming of church bells, and 'old maids bicycling to Holy Communion through the morning mist'; the Cotswolds conjures up such images.

Dark Satanic mills, belching smoke, factory labour, and industrial workers filing home to their tenements; this is assuredly another place. Or is it? One wouldn't normally expect the words 'Cotswolds' and 'industry' in the same sentence, but fact can be curiously than fiction.

Blockley lies some three miles north-west of Moreton-in-Marsh, in Gloucestershire. As I descended into the village centre I had an inkling of this place's past, for here was the Blockley Brook, a pretty babbling stream today, but once the raw power sustaining at least a dozen mills.

This place certainly dates back to Anglo-Saxon times with the Domesday Book of 1086 recording an evidential 12 mill-wheels on either the brook, or its tributary, the Cole Brook, and we know that the lords of the manor, for a millennium, were the Bishops of Worcester, who once had a palace here. This was clearly a place that mattered. Those mill-wheels would later power silk mills, making thread for Coventry ribbon weavers, an

iron foundry, plus collar, soap and a pair of piano factories. The industrial history here is a revelation. There's more to the Cotswolds than just the old wool trade, which bestowed riches hereabouts.

Come the 16th century, Warwickshire poet, Michael Drayton, a contemporary of Shakespeare, was eulogising about Blockley's springs in his *Polyolbion*, a narrative poem, and 'chorographical description of all the tracts, rivers, mountains, forests and other parts of Great Britain', and greatest of all his works.

By the time of the Napoleonic Wars most of the mills were converted to silk 'throwing' and a veritable army of workers moved down from Coventry to help work the frames. These folk needed homes and their terraces can still be seen, one of the best being early 19th century Northwick Terrace. Throwing or 'throwsting' involved drawing silk threads off the skeins (a length of thread or yarn, loosely coiled or knotted) and on to spindles for transporting back to Coventry, which was the local centre for silk ribbon.

The Rev. FE Wits, wrote in August 1836, in his *Diary of a Cotswold Parson*, of this splendid village, set in its deep valley, with steep hills, and woods. The



The Old Mill, now a private house

handsome church of St Peter and St Paul that he described, in the centre, on its knoll, continues watching over the village flock, as it has done since 1180. Adjacent to the church, Wits admired the home of one of the silk 'throwsters', plus other comfortable dwellings, using local yellow freestone from quarries on nearby Bourton Hill.

There was an air of prosperity, with a new Dissenting Meeting House of 1836, which closed in 1971, and is now a private residence (those Coventry silk workers attended apparently). Wits informed that the mills' produce was sold in Coventry, and some in London; Bengal and Turkey silk being manufactured into silk thread. With all this going on, it is no surprise to learn that Blockley was one of the first villages in England (if not the first) to be illuminated by electricity in the late 19th century.

It all sounds very entrepreneurial and, well, industrious, but there was a downside, with 'young females and boys from eight to 10 years of age' employed. I saw more of that 'descent' as I wandered

'It is no surprise to learn that Blockley was one of the first villages in England to be illuminated by electricity in the late 19th century'



Russell Spring, donated to the village around 1850

the village; Milton Court in the High Street, site of the old workhouse from 1740, plus the site of the old village stocks, marked by a plaque on a wall.

The silk trade disappeared after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, so the mills reverted to flour, flax, cider, woodcutting and threshing. There was still belated glory ahead though, as General Dwight D ('Ike') Eisenhower (Supreme Commander for Operation Overlord, the invasion of Normandy), came to stay at Northwick Park, a 16th century mansion owned by the Spencer Churchills. Winston was there too. General George Patton also came to Blockley, meeting Ike at today's Paxton House, which adjoins the Old Post Office in Bell Street.

As I ambled around, I pondered that few visitors probably hazard the remotest guess at this industrial past. The scene is of tranquil, unspoilt village, set in a secluded valley, hiding past secrets from prying eyes. Clues are there though, with the great number of springs feeding the



Colebrook Cottage, the former village police station



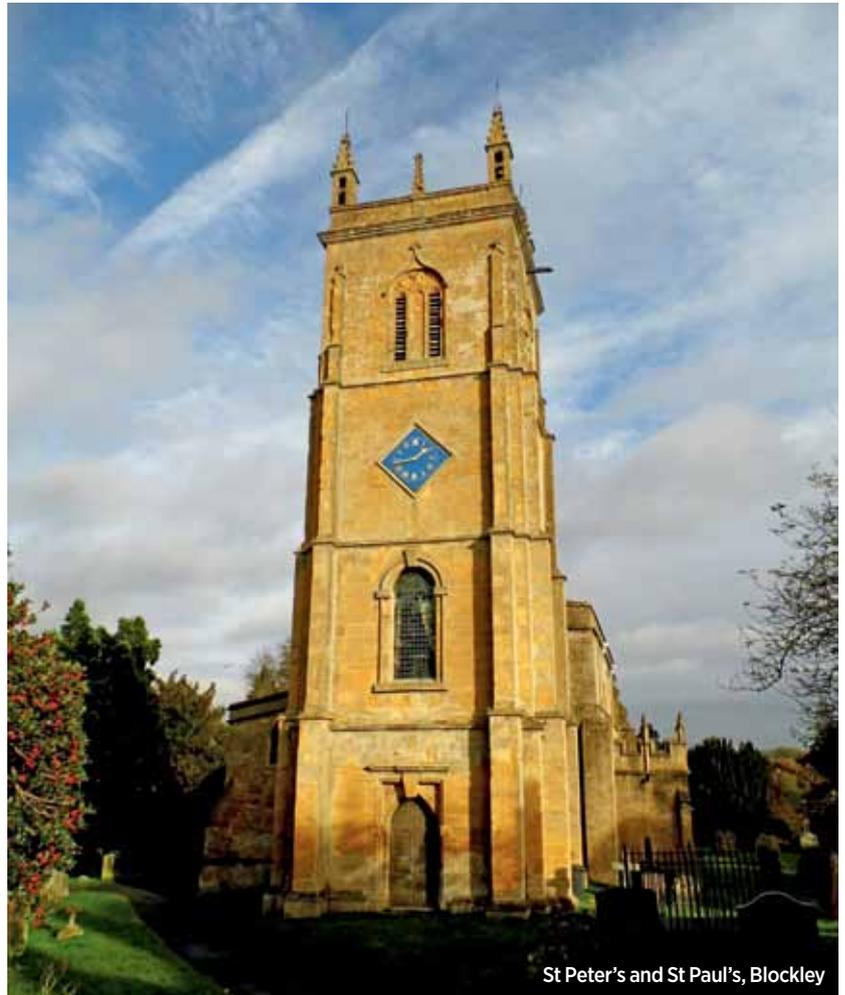
Today's village shop and café

Blockley Brook, providing that never-failing head of water in days gone by. You turn a corner, you see water, particularly in Mill Lane, where the road becomes an 'island' between the main stream and mill tailrace from the Old Mill, one of several converted into homes to drool over. There is also the Russell Spring, a pure drinking supply for the village, donated around 1850, by Lucy Russell, owner of Malvern Mill, which she ran as a silk mill between 1800 and 1853. The spring continues to gurgle within its elegant Grecian stone casing, with Lucy's mill over the road.

The mills may have closed and the itinerant workers departed, but this place has not fossilised, in spite of the loss of the shops, plus most of the pubs, that were once here. The 16th century former 'Bell Inn', which remained a hostelry until 1970, is now cottages. A stone 'plaque' records the position of 'The Old Royal Oak', a onetime beer and cider inn and there was once 'The Red Lion Inn', now a private house, the 'Pear Tree', now lost in a row of cottages, plus the former 'Railway Inn'. The Blockley 'pub-crawl' is not quite what it was.

The Square, undoubtedly one of Blockley's prettiest cubbyholes, decorated by views of church and vicarage, provides testimony for some of those vanished concerns. Bay and bow windows are a sure-sign that these were once shops; bank, bicycle-hire, pharmacy and ironmonger's. It's still possible to imagine them, given the raw material of the buildings. Further on I found what had once been a grocer's, an ironmonger's, a butcher's, replete with its own slaughterhouse, an old bakery, another grocer's, a clothier, wool shop, flower and fruit merchant, a fishmonger, then music teacher's 'establishment', another bakery, which became a bank, a Co-operative Stores, another butcher's, which became an antique shop, a pharmacy and store, morphed into a draper's and haberdasher's, and of more recent vintage, a garage and filling station.

If you think you've seen the church and



St Peter's and St Paul's, Blockley

'If you think you've seen the church and 15th century vicarage before, that could be because they appeared in Father Brown, the TV series, based on GK Chesterton's novels.'

15th century vicarage before, that could be because they appeared in Father Brown, the TV series, based on GK Chesterton's novels. The vicarage doubled-up as the eponymous priest-cum-amateur-sleuth's residence. You may also have spotted the raised pavements. There are five.

When I turned up I was delighted to find a village store, Post Office and café, all thriving in one building, close to the church. That was lunch sorted and in a fascinating building too. Formerly a stable and coach house, dating to 1709, it has latterly been a fire station, telephone exchange, builders' yard, the local branch of the Legion, and a library. Full marks for re-use, especially with the village's nursery school ensconced on the first floor.

Here was one village hub, but there are others: two extant pubs (the 18th century Crown Inn, with its fine coaching arch, which doubled-up as a courthouse, and the Great Western Arms, reminding us there was once a station here); meeting halls and public rooms, including the Little Village Hall, dating to 1792, previously the village's original Baptist chapel; bed and breakfasts; and a thriving school. Small businesses also abound on the Northwick Industrial Estate; today's inheritors of those old manufactory traditions. ♦



Malvern House, where Malvern's 'Abbey School' began in 1880

REFERENCES

The Shell Book of English Villages
(Ed. J Hadfield, 1980)

The Diary of a Cotswold Parson,
1783-1854
(FE Witts, Ed. D Verey, 1978)

Walks in Blockley Village
(Blockley Heritage Society, 2011)

Chambers Biographical Dictionary
(1974)

Northwick Park
(www.northwickpark.org)