

St Mary's..... the Parish Church of Selly Oak

A RAMBLE TO TWO OF THE WONDERS OF BRITAIN

BANK HOLIDAY MONDAY, 3<sup>rd</sup> MAY 2004

Our starting point for this Spring ramble is a little closer to home than recently, and a notable landmark from miles around, i.e. Tardebigge church between Bromsgrove and Redditch. The church of St Bartholomew stands on top of a green hill and the slender spire rises to 135 ft. It was built in 1777, replacing a church which had collapsed a year or so before, but there has been a place of worship here for over a thousand years. The Saxons chose the site and the rather strange name could well have come from the Saxon "Tyrde Biegan" - Tower on a Hill.

Tardebigge is not a village, only a hamlet, but near the church is the thriving C of E School, started by the Earl of Plymouth, who lived at nearby Hewell Grange. Until the 1820s the Magpie Inn stood on the site of the present school, but was then closed by the Plymouth family. In the churchyard there used to be an offshoot of the Glastonbury Thorn, which has been known to bloom at Christmas, and from here there are extensive views of the Clees, the Clents and the Malverns.

From this superb vantage point we drop down to the Worcester & Birmingham Canal by Tardebigge Top Lock, the deepest narrow lock in England with a 14ft fall. This is a result of an experiment with a lift system in which craft would be raised and lowered in massive tanks, the idea being that lifts would be cheaper than locks and save on time and water usage. The test rig was run very efficiently for three weeks in 1811, but the committee had grown sceptical about the robustness of lifts generally, so they decided to build a greatly reduced number of locks compared to the original proposal instead.

So the Tardebigge Flight of thirty locks, the longest in Britain, which carried the canal down 217ft to Stoke Prior, was built and the canal opened throughout in 1815. A flight of fancy? - certainly not! Along the whole line of 30 miles there are 58 narrow locks and five tunnels. By comparison, some of you will remember five years ago we visited the Hatton Flight of 21 broad locks on the Grand Union Canal.

We shall return to the canal for a walk up the flight later, but cross it now and make for the second great masterpiece of British engineering on this walk, the Lickey Incline, which we view from the bottom. This runs for two miles on a gradient of 1 in 37, the steepest stretch of main line railway in the country, and built against the expert advice of George Stephenson and I K Brunel, but another eminent engineer, Joseph Locke, said it was feasible to construct such an incline and work it with locomotives rather than cables. The promoters chose to ignore the problems faced by the canal company nearby and experienced an operational nightmare of their own.

After lunch, we wend our way back into the country until we meet the canal again and follow it north-eastwards past lock-keepers cottages, Tardebigge Reservoir and a former pumping house. At Tardebigge New Wharf, now a British Waterways' yard, a meeting at the end of the Second World War between author Tom Rolt and waterways lover Robert Aickman resulted in the Inland Waterways Association being formed.

That body has helped save the canal network during its transition from commercial to recreational use, and for its survival we should be truly thankful.

**ST MARY'S RAMBLE**

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**WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW**

- MEETING TIME:** 10.45 am for start at 11.00 am
- PLACE:** TARDEBIGGE CHURCH CAR PARK, off Alcester Road (B4184) between Bromsgrove and Redditch (Grid Reference 997692)
- LENGTH OF RAMBLE:** 5.75 miles of fairly easy walking, comprising field paths, country lanes and canal towpath with some stiles.
- MAP:** O.S. Landranger Sheet 139
- HOW TO GET THERE:** Follow A38 to Lydiate Ash motorway junction, then continue on A38 to Lickey End motorway junction. Take third exit, signposted "Burcot B4096".
- Pass through Burcot, forking right at mini roundabout to pass Garden Centre. Continue with care on this narrow road and pass the entrance to H.M. Prisons.
- Then turn right by Tardebigge Hotel, signposted "Tardebigge". Take second turning left, signposted "Tardebigge Church", then first right up lane to car park.
- N.B. There is no direct access to Tardebigge from A448 Bromsgrove-Redditch Highway.
- DISTANCE:** About 12 miles. Allow 30 minutes from Selly Oak.
- REFRESHMENTS:** Will be provided at The Ladybird Inn, Aston Fields, Bromsgrove (on B4184, near Bromsgrove Station), not a rural pub this time.
- A selection of sandwiches and ploughman's lunches is available to order. Please consult the list in the church porch or circulated to St Gabriel's and St Michael's; it gives details and prices. Please enter your order fully and clearly.
- The list will be taken down after Evening Worship on **SUNDAY, 25<sup>th</sup> APRIL**, but please **DO NOT** leave it until the last minute.
- Peter Washbourne (476 2406) must know by then how many are coming, what you all want to eat, and whether you need a lift there and back.