

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

CLEOBURY MORTIMER AND THE SHROPSHIRE REA

SATURDAY, 20TH OCTOBER 2007

I have a 37 year old cutting from the Birmingham Post describing a ramble in the footsteps of an immortal postman in the valley of the Shropshire Rea (pronounced Ree) and this is the first time I have explored the Cleobury Mortimer and Neen Savage area, further north than we were four years ago, when we crossed the Rea at Neen Sollars.

The postman was Simon Evans, who also became a writer and broadcaster. For health reasons he had moved from Merseyside to Shropshire and for 14 years between 1926 and 1940 delivered mail on foot to scattered farmsteads in the Rea valley north of Cleobury on a daily thirteen mile round. As a Millennium Project his route was developed and opened as the Simon Evans Way, and we have a taste of it on this autumn ramble. His books included "Round About the Crooked Steeple" which is exactly what we are doing, and is a reference to the spire of St Mary's Church. He wrote:

*"I walk the valley of the Rea, and many friends I have with me,
A thousand birds that wake the morn, a whispering breeze amid the corn.
Against the sky the head of Clee, and trees that wave their arms at me.
Give me health and eyes to see, I'll ask no more of heaven."*

From our meeting point, with superb views of the Clee Hills, we take the lane to Neen Savage, a scattered parish, where a churchwarden will kindly open another St Mary's Church for us to see. The reconnaissance party were denied this as a recording of organ music was being made. As we approach Cleobury we cross the Rea at Walford's Bridge as the next bridge downstream was destroyed in this summer's floods. We pass the Old Post Office, with its Simon Evans memorial plaque, and The Wells, which was for centuries the source of the town's water supply.

Cleobury Mortimer derives its name from the great Norman family of Mortimer who established themselves here in 1086, and features half-timbered and 18th-century houses which line the tree-shaded main street. St Mary's Church is the jewel in the crown, dating back at least to the 12th century, having an elegant interior and the striking crooked steeple. This can be dated to the late 13th or early 14th century due to the unusual scissor joints used in its construction. The twisting is due to the timbers warping over the centuries, and this has given Cleobury membership of an exclusive club, the European Twisted Spires Association, of which the only other British member is Chesterfield.

After lunch, we pass through the churchyard and along Castle Ditch, between the moat and the site of the castle built by the Mortimers, which was later demolished by Henry II, then down Workhouse Bank and on past farms with names such as Cleanlyseat and Musbatch. This was the postman's outward route, with the river down to our right, which we eventually cross to complete our round, using a short stretch of the track of the old Cleobury Mortimer & Ditton Priors Light Railway.

When this line was opened in 1908 it carried road-stone from quarries on Brown Clee Hill, and it joined the Wyre Forest Line at Cleobury Mortimer Station by the Blount Arms, previously passed. Passengers in four ex-North London Railway carriages with centre corridors travelled with the same train as stone, goods and cattle, but their service was withdrawn in 1938. However, in 1957, a Royal Navy armaments depot opened at Ditton Priors, and engines with special spark-preventive smoke stacks continued to haul lethal cargoes down the peaceful valley for a further few years. The rails were lifted in 1969, and the writer of the 1970 article suggested what a splendid memorial to Simon Evans it would make as a footpath with a few parking and picnic areas at appropriate access points. It has taken another thirty years to create the Simon Evans Way, none of it along this line, but a perfect re-creation of his route.

ST MARY'S RAMBLE

SATURDAY, 20TH OCTOBER 2007

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- MEETING TIME:** 10.45am for start at 11.00am
- PLACE:** SIX ASHES PICNIC AREA, JUNCTION OF B4201 & B4363, north-east of Cleobury Mortimer (Grid Reference 683774)
- LENGTH OF RAMBLE:** 5.5 miles of country lanes, farm tracks and field paths.
- MAP:** O.S. Landranger Sheet 138
- HOW TO GET THERE:** Make for Hagley Road West (A456) at Quinton, or join A456 on Halesowen By-Pass and follow it through Hagley and Blakedown to Kidderminster. On entering Kidderminster go straight on at traffic lights, and at first roundabout follow A456 to the right, go straight on at second roundabout and next traffic lights, then straight on at third roundabout, signposted A456 Bewdley and Leominster. Follow A456 past Safari Park and at next roundabout take first exit, along Bewdley By-Pass. At next roundabout take second exit, keeping on A456, straight on at next roundabout, pass through Callow Hill and turn right on to A4117, SP Cleobury Mortimer. Pass through Far Forest, and one mile beyond the Blount Arms PH turn right along B4201, SP Highley & Bridgnorth. Six Ashes Picnic Area is in front of you at next cross-roads.
- DISTANCE:** About 27 miles. Allow 50-55 minutes from Selly Oak.
- REFRESHMENTS:** Will be provided at the Royal Fountain Inn, Cleobury Mortimer (on the left of the main road, opposite the church). The inn has no car park, so park on road outside or nearby, or follow signs to public car park. A selection of sandwiches and ploughman's lunches is available to order. Please consult the list in the church porch or at St Michael's; it gives details and prices. Please enter your order fully and clearly, and give phone no. in case of query. The list will be taken down after Evensong on SUNDAY, 14TH OCTOBER, but please **DO NOT** leave it until the last minute. June Sutton (472 4248) must know by then how many are coming, what you all want to eat, and whether you need a lift there and back. Enquiries about the ramble to Peter Washbourne (476 2406). You will be home in plenty of time to go to the Warley Male Choir Concert in Church.