

October 2015 Walk – Yardley Gobion and Grafton Regis



Once so many kings and queens passed through this village it became known as 'Little London'. Later a dancing beer on a long chain led by its Russian owner passed here. 'Blind Barley' playing his concertina, whilst being led by his dog had followed close behind; and once an injured soldier who had sung, 'three cheers for the red, white and blue' had begged for pennies as he passed through this village.



Opposite the church, an upside-down flag hung in listless air.

Such noise and bustle has long ago disappeared from the High

Street. Women who once called, 'Hello m'duck' to friends no longer sit on doorsteps pillows whilst weaving lace in the better light.

Howard Charles in his book written in 1889 for travellers warned that road passing through Yardley Gobion is unfavourable, "...there are some long hills, and the road is made of soft stone and has a very uneven surface," he stated, before adding ominously, "in wet weather it is very bad."

The day was overcast as we listened to Chrissie explain the history of the village, after we had gathered in The Coffee Pot's carpark. The unusual word, 'Gobion' turned out to be the name of the family who had the right to charge rents here, whilst 'Yardley' meant a place where rods could be cut from coppiced trees, in what was once the favoured hunting ground of Angevin kings.



A barrel organ had played as gypsy caravans bright with colours sold their wares. Whilst vagrants destined to spend the night in workhouse knocked on people's doors asking for boiled water so they could brew their tea in tin cans, as they steeled themselves for the payment of a night's stay at 'The White House' which was measured by the heap of stones broken to mend the rutted road, before they were allowed on their way.



Nearby villages who regarded their own citizens as somewhat superior called Yardley folk, 'skegs'. A 'Skeg' meant 'a foolish person. One person from a neighbouring village who knew of 'skegs' and 'erks' was Peter Munday. As a child in 1944 one night from the top of 'Meeting Hill' he saw flames near the Coffee Pot Inn. A Wellington Bomber on a training flight had crashed below him. Killing its entire crew of Canadian airmen. Peter's full description is not for the fainthearted. A bronze plaque in front of St Leonard's church notes the names of those who sadly died so young.

A light shone inside the church, but there no sound of any congregational singing. People from the workhouse had once sat here behind the font. Sadly, the large area of the churchyard without headstones was the place where many were later buried.



Leaving the sandy-coloured thatched cottages of the village behind, we ambled along Grays Lane, tightly hemmed in by walls and a straggling hedge. A narrow footpath at the end later led us through a plantation of Christmas trees. Whilst waiting to clamber over a stile we inhaled their fresh pine scent.



A sign instructed us to walk diagonally across a field. John Clare when walking across such fields often found traces of 'nine-peg morris' 'nicked upon the green' evidence of how a shepherd boy had whiled away his time. Shakespeare's Titania bemoaning bad weather spoke of:

"... nine-men's-morris... filled... with mud,
And the quaint mazes in the wanton green
For lack of tread ... undistinguishable."



Our route was across this recently harrowed field, though not mazy, through lack of tread our path was indeed barely distinguishable. Recent rain had made the clay sticky, but luckily there was so much broken chaff and limestone that although we were going uphill the walking here was fairly easy.



“Watch your step,” Ruth warned, pointing to a stile. “The bottom step is slippery. I’ve just taken a tumble.”

This warning was passed on to others. Shamblers threw walking sticks over the stile, in order to free their hands before scrambling over.



We had begun to walk along a field lane before we realised there was a problem. Ruth had hurt herself more badly than we had thought, and hobbled painfully in our wake. Concerned Shamblers began to hatch helpful schemes.

Happily for Ruth, some people living nearby came to her aid. A cold compress was administered and she was driven back. This helpful couple restoring our faith in human nature and well-deserving of our heartfelt thanks.



Our route next stretched by hedgerows thick with darkening elderberries where birch and ash barely held their loosely falling leaves; the lowering sky muting their beauty. Lost in thought, we crossed Standbridge Brook.

“Another field,” somebody moaned, even though it was somewhere near here where Edward IV after a day’s hunt had met Elizabeth Woodville beneath an oak tree, and later married her at the nearby hermitage.

Luckily for us, there were no galloping, lovelorn, royals to be hastily sidestepped; only the traffic on the busy main road. Soon we meandered through Grafton Regis enjoying the frivolity of its topiary and before long we were walking on the soft grass of the towpath beside the Grand Union Canal. The water reflecting a grey sky and an even darker reflection of trees.





Sensitive to the body language of fishermen slumped in hooded jackets, with eyes fixed sullenly on orange floats in the muddy-green water before them, we muted our chatter. We glanced quickly at maggots dyed pink squirming in pots beside them. Glad that we wouldn't have to touch them.



Blackberries growing in the hedgerow offered a refreshing treat. Further along, we heard the 'put-put-put' of narrowboats' engines. The slow-moving boats having heeded the sign by Kingfisher Wharf where small birds flittered through the trees, piping high notes. In the company of many 'old ducks', we crossed the canal before making our way back to the Coffee Pot.

After boots and thick walking socks had been safely stored, we entered the inn. On the big screen Ireland was battling Argentina for the Rugby World Cup. The pub lively with chatter.



Soon platters of food were set before a very appreciative walking group. One especially pleased to find Ruth already ensconced there, and also delighted to be joined later by Jean and Peter who told the tale of almost eating their dinner with The Ramblers in a completely different village pub.

Outside it had started to spit. Before long it was drizzling.

'Spizzle', someone suggested, inventing a word that any local skeg or erk could be proud of. Even the German prisoners of war who found themselves incarcerated in the old workhouse and called such rain "der Sprühregen" would have understood the term and all it implied for their work in muddy fields: a land no longer enchanted by the passing fancy of any faery king or queen.



With many thanks to Chrissie and Mike for organising a walk in such a delightful, quiet backwater.