

NEWSLETTER

**Redditch
History
Society**

February 2021 Volume 2 / Issue 7

February 'Lock Down' Issue

Update

Hi, well here we are again....

Hopefully, you will have had, or will shortly have had, your Covid inoculation.

In this 8 page issue of the Newsletter we are trying to keep you involved with the fantastic history of our town.

Don, our Chairman and also Chairman of the Open University History Group, has written an article on the meaning of History Societies and why they are important.

Pete has written an article on someone who had a vision in the 1960s of creating a zoo at Redditch, which was, thankfully, replaced by the, more useful, sports centre promoted by local councillor Frank Cardy, which has been such an important factor in the health and well being of the towns residents.

I have looked at the Walks described in the 1927/8 edition of the town guide and described how it looked then and how you can walk it today.

On the following page I have looked at the anniversaries which can be attributed to 2021, and how it is possible to look at any year and find a wide variety of related dates.

This year is a time for optimism and I am looking at the Heritage Open Days at Forge Mill Needle Museum in September 2021 which I hope to have more details in the March Newsletter. This is organised by the volunteers at the Museum, which includes members of the Society, and the Society will be having a small exhibition at the event which will be a 'taster' for our exhibition in November at the museum on the early history of the area.

Latest updates on Heritage Day 2021 can found at <http://www.redditchmuseum.org.uk/blog.htm> and you can still find our 2020 'virtual' Heritage Day at <http://www.hod2020.redditchmuseum.org.uk/>

Last month we had a question concerning the early Redditch 'Order of Druids' group. Brian Thomas sent me an interesting link to a question from Alan Foxall in the Worcester News in 2001 <https://www.worcesternews.co.uk/news/7738562.in-search-of-the-lost-druids/>. I had a look on Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_Order_of_Druids and in Victorian times it appears to be a cross between the Freemasons and a Friendly Society.

I hope that you find this issue interesting and we hope that in the March edition we may have more details on restoring our 2021 meetings. However, things are moving so quickly it is difficult to make predictions.

Anthony Green,

Society Secretary; February 2021

History Societies

Ron Gallivan of the **Redditch Military History Society** produces a monthly 'Lockdown Special' which is related to that month. For February, it is the story of the two HMAS SYDNEY warships.

This is only available from an attachment from Ron's e-mail update.

I have made this latest one available as a pdf (Ron produced a word file) on our website at [www.redditchhistorysociety.org.uk/download/LOCKDOWN_SPECIAL - FEB 2021 RON.pdf](http://www.redditchhistorysociety.org.uk/download/LOCKDOWN_SPECIAL_-_FEB_2021_ROM.pdf)

If you are interested in receiving his e-mail and the Society, please contact Ron at ronnieg33b@hotmail.co.uk,

The February 2021 edition of the monthly newsletter from the **Alcester & District Local History Society** is now available. Their site downloads have not been updated recently, so I have made it available on our site at [http://www.redditchhistorysociety.org.uk/download/ADLHS FEBRUARY 2021.pdf](http://www.redditchhistorysociety.org.uk/download/ADLHS_FEBRUARY_2021.pdf).

For more details of the ADLHS and contact details please visit their website <http://www.alcesterhistory.org.uk>



2021 - an Anniversary Year!

by Anthony Green

Well, of course, every year is an anniversary of something, that goes without saying.

Dates and history are inseparable. If it is not possible to attribute a date to an artefact or activity, then it is almost worthless to an historian. Artefacts and activities need to be placed in context with their time. On a personal level, I was born in 1943, and looking at what was happening at that time I can understand the problems and aspirations of my parents and how my future evolved over the following years.

That is enough of philosophy, lets have a look at some anniversary dates related to 2021.

This is not, by any means, an exhaustive list but related to items which I think are interesting. Anyone can do a similar search and find a list suited to their interests. That is what attracts me to history as no-one has the same view of what the past means to them.

50 years ago – 1971

- Maggie May/Reason to Believe by Rod Stewart was in the hit charts for most of the year.
- The UK and the Republic of Ireland both switched to decimal currency.
- British Leyland launched the Morris Marina.
- The name 'Kingfisher' was adopted for the Redditch shopping centre.
- The Arrow Valley Park was created.
- Margaret Thatcher ended free school milk for children aged over seven years.
- The House of Commons voted in favour of joining the EEC (now EU) by a vote of 356-244 (joined Jan 1973).
- Oil overtook coal as the most consumed fuel in Britain for the first time.

100 years ago – 1921

- Chequers becomes an official residence of the Prime Minister.
- Dr Marie Stopes opens the United Kingdom's first birth control clinic in Holloway, London.
- British and Irish negotiators sign the Anglo-Irish Treaty giving independence to the Irish Free State.
- Redditch Football Club joined the Birmingham & District League.

200 years ago – 1821

- John Constable completed his painting The Hay Wain
- The Guardian newspaper was founded as The Manchester Guardian,
- George IV was crowned king of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.

Although the date of 1821 is too precise to fit in the important dates in Redditch, it is surrounded by important dates.

The Tardebigge Canal from Birmingham was opened to the Old Wharf in 1807 and the extension to Worcester, via the tunnel, completed by 1815.

The Turnpike Road, the Pershore Road, was opened in 1826, providing the first new road since the Romans. These nicely surround our date and provide an insight into the important changes happening in the town.



500 years ago – 1521

- Pope Leo X excommunicates Martin Luther.
- Pope Leo X bestows Henry VIII with the title Defender of the Faith.

In 1521, Henry was a 'hero' in the Catholic religion. However, by 1534 he had broken with Catholicism, made himself Supreme Head of the the protestant Church in England, and separated England from papal authority. This led to the dissolution of the monasteries and gives us our wonderful Bordesley Abbey ruins close by the Forge Mill Needle Museum and Bordesley Abbey Visitor Centre site.

These are, of course, just a few random dates which I have found. There are many more which are relevant to our history, but I hope that in this overview, I have shown the importance of dates and how they are fundamental to our understanding of history.

'Do we still need 'History Societies'?)

by Don Vincent

'Do we still need 'History Societies'?) might seem a strange question for the hon. Chair of Redditch History Society and the hon. President of the Open University History Society to pose.

Yet in reconsideration it is exactly the question we should all be pondering.

Tied into the question are other questions, for example. What is history? What use is history? Does it matter if I ignore history? How should I 'do' history?

Add on the notions that we can obtain all the information we need online. Then one might see why many might well pose the opening question.

What is history? What use is history?

History might be said to be the sum total of what we, the human race, are. History, despite much of the teaching in our educational establishments, is not confined to the great and the good, or even the great and the bad.

It is us, every last one of us. It is our lives, our experiences, our actions, even our thoughts.

Without our history we are merely an animal.

Does it matter if I ignore history?

History is experience and, without regard to our history, we will continue to make the same mistakes. Even something trivial like boiling the water to make tea is based on our experience, our history.

We will continue to die from the same situations whether they be war, disease, famine; take your pick.

Not only will ignoring history mean we will lose experience, but it will also enable others to adversely affect our lives.

It will put others, who may have no concern for our well being, in a position of dominance over us.

It will enable others to misconstrue the facts, to put their slant on situations and the remedial measures for the future. If we ignore history, we could be smoothing the path for authoritarian regimes.

Well known people had ideas of history.

"The further one looks back the further forward one can see" Winston Churchill.

"Those who forget history are condemned to repeat it" George Santayana.

"History is more or less bunk. It is tradition. We do not want tradition. We want to live in the present, and the only history that is worth a tinker's damn is the history that we make today." Henry Ford.

What is your opinion on these three quotes?

How should I do history?

The snappy catch answer is carefully. Choose your sources, both primary and secondary carefully. Do not confine one's period of time too rigidly. Do not confine one's area of study too rigidly.

Events that happened in the early nineteenth century had their roots in the eighteenth century and their canopies in the twentieth century.

Events that happened in faraway lands had a resonance in Redditch in the thirties. Apply rigid rules to spoken words and / or the printed word. Apply the well-known method of questioning. i.e.

Who said it?

What did they say?

Where did they say it?

When did they say it?

Why did they say it?



'Do we still need 'History Societies'?' Continued

We might apply these five questions to Chamberlain's return from Munich on 30th September 1938.

The first three questions pose little problems. The fourth question is not a matter of date but a matter of situation. The fifth question is the most important.

Various commentators have decided that Chamberlain was duped, that he was foolish, and that Hitler had conned him.

Now consider the situation in the UK with regards to armaments and other war machinery, with regards to the size of a trained fighting force.

Now consider that Chamberlain might well have been playing for time, if the UK had declared war on Germany in 1938 it would have lost.

Not might have lost, would have lost. With regard to Redditch ask yourself when certain factories were built.



When Chamberlain was Chancellor of the Exchequer (1931 –37) and the Prime Minister (1937 – 1940) It was recognised that transportation of munitions etc. from the industrial midlands to London and the south would be a problem.

During Chamberlain's time every lock on the Grand Union Canal was doubled in width. This enabled two barges instead of one to pass through the lock at any one time.

Here its worth noting that British canals were narrower and contour following, not easy to target from an aircraft. German canals were wider and tended to be straight cut through contours lock on them and they took you straight into the city.

It could therefore be argued that these were not the actions of a duped man. Of course, they alone do not prove that Chamberlain was not. However, examining the situation in a scholarly manner provides a new slant on the often-accepted version of events.

Above I mentioned sources of which there are many not all as trustworthy as they might be.

Primary sources are those composed at the time of happening; diaries, Government papers such as Royal reports, census results etc. These are normally found in archives.

Secondary sources are those composed after the event and can be found all over the place. Here we must mention Wikipedia. A tool which when used properly is a boon for the amateur historian. Its not an exaggeration to propose that Denis Diderot, who along with d'Alembert produced the Encyclopédie between 1751-72, would have marvelled at its scope.

However, it is a tool and should be treated as such. For example. Let us suppose I wished to find information on the battalions that make up the Royal Regiment of Scotland. The information provided is truthful since it is common knowledge taken from Government publications.

However, the reasons why these battalions were reformed and why they were so named might be a little unclear. So, do not take everything that you read as gospel. Perhaps one day all the countries archive documents will be digitised, searchable and online for free.

However, do not hold your breath. Another source is of course museums. However, just looking at inanimate objects will impart little knowledge without some method of explanation.

I could look at the Staffordshire Hoard all day and, without explanation, it would mean little, apart from its beauty. To be truly worthwhile a museum must seek to inform not just display.

So, do we still need history societies?

Yes, we do its only through social intercourse between members that we can broaden our knowledge.

That we can listen to informed comment on various topics and discuss those comments and, perhaps, propose alternative views and ideas.

It is through history societies that we can question long held beliefs and, perhaps, to correct such beliefs. History societies enable us to find new areas of study, perhaps to find new areas and disciplines.

Not only that they get you out of the house and that is getting evermore needful if we are not to become introspective.

LIFE WITH THE LIONS

An Extraordinary Redditch man

by Peter Harris

Not many people would dare to put their pet Cheetah in an Evesham Street shop window, but there is only one Colin Cooke. At the time the Redditch Carnival committee was offering a prize for the best shop window display. Colin won hands down, although the judges preferred to arrive at their decision from the outside of the window! Such was the entrepreneurial skill of our subject.

Born in Crabbs Cross of humble beginnings, Colin earned his pocket money looking after a small general store in Salop Road fetching, carrying, and serving customers.

During the war he watched the red glow in the sky as Coventry experienced the bombing of Hitler's Luftwaffe.

Nearer home he helped search the ruins of Orchard Street, which was bombed one night, killing a number of old residents, including a small baby.

From some of the money he earned at the Royal Enfield, he was able to pay for singing lessons from a young Mavis Bennett, Redditch born and known worldwide.

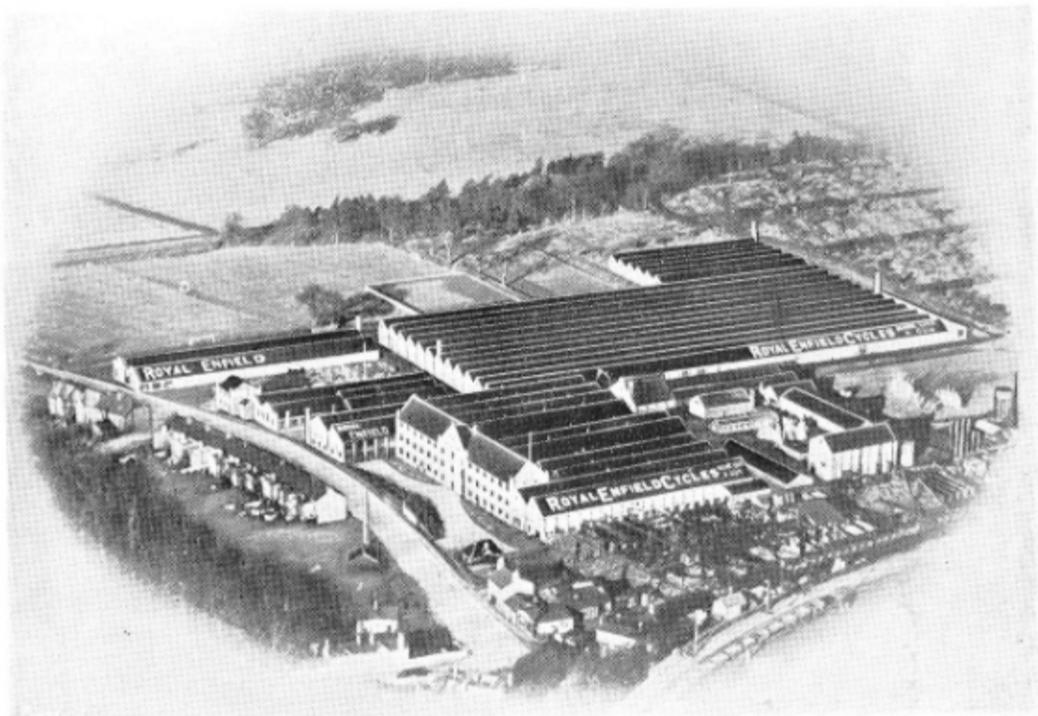
He was an exceptionally talented boy soprano until his voice broke. Here he is aged 96, singing his favourite aria 'Santa Lucia' in perfect Italian.

Eager to earn money to support his family, he became an apprenticed engineer at the Royal Enfield factory in Hewell Road. Wages were low and if you were more than two minutes late you were locked out. He was good at his job which he enjoyed.

When war broke out Colin volunteered as both a night Security Guard and a Fire Warden. His Royal Enfield boss did his best to keep him, but the call came from above.

Colin wanted to join the navy, but probably because of his small stature he was sent down the coal mine at Cannock Chase. Being pitch black the only company he had was a candle and the blind pony pulling the five loaded coal wagons.

Colin of which he was in sole charge. Colin's love of animals and his pony gave him comfort from the loneliness.



BIRD'S-EYE VIEW OF THE ROYAL ENFIELD CYCLE WORKS.
Publicity Image from local town guide

LIFE WITH THE LIONS continued...

Several jobs after demob saw him open his first shop, 'Josephine' in Evesham Street, selling high class women's clothing and millinery.

The shop was a great success. This was complemented with C&R Trading, pay a bob a week and have your goods immediately.

Life was good. Now living in a big house in Glover Street he looked to his love of animals and set up Cookes Pets Ltd. Importers and Exporters of exotic animals.

From here in the heart of the town he would supply you with your needs, be it an elephant, a penguin, a butterfly a lion or monkey etc.

At one time it was reckoned he had upwards of 3,000 exotic birds on the premises.

It was here that he kept his pet cheetah of carnival fame, often seen out with it on a leash, perfectly harmless and safe to stroke.

Such was the success of the businesses in the 60's that Colin set about planning a zoo.

It was to be located around where the Abbey Stadium is today. Top attraction were the lions and giraffes on the hill area which is now the crematorium.

Disbelieving councillors had been invited to a lion enclosure and invited to shake hands with the biggest lion. They declined as Colin calmly walked in, stroked the lion, and gave it a big hug.

Planning permissions were given but later rescinded. Colin was disappointed as he was already planning another private zoo of his own at a Cookhill property he was thinking of buying.

Colin moved his family to a large property at Norton, between Alcester and Evesham.

He had decided to leave the animal business due to the cruelty happening at the time with crates of dead monkeys arriving in this country by plane.

Buying and selling fine antiques had been his pet passion for many years. The new house was completely renovated and filled with many valuable pieces and furniture.

Meanwhile he still had many exotic birds and animals including a fully grown lioness. This was his daughters' pet, sitting in an armchair in front of the fire, the lioness resting its head and paw on her knee.

One day however, the daughter having gone out for the day, Colin was left to feed it. Entering the enclosure with a plastic bag of sheep's heads, he threw a couple down the run for the lion's tea.

The animal stuck its head out and went to grab the bulging half full bag, which Colin pulled away.

Seeing its dinner disappear, it was not happy. It jumped up at poor Colin and sank its teeth into his shoulder, its one paw ripping down Colin's back.

Colin managed to stick his elbow into the animal's jaw forcing it to let go. He beat a hasty retreat, locking the door after him.

Such were the lion's claws that the two jackets he had on became four halves. Covered in blood, he drove to Evesham hospital.

How he explained that one to matron I do not know!



*'Josephine' looking up from Littleworth in the 1960s
Photograph Vincent Green*

Following a 1930s Abbey Meadows Walk. by Anthony Green

When the 1928/9 Town Guide was produced, Redditch was a small town and most residents moved around either on foot or using a bicycle (probably made at the Royal Enfield).

Deliveries, such as coal, milk, bread and groceries, were usually performed with a horse and cart, and private cars were very rare.

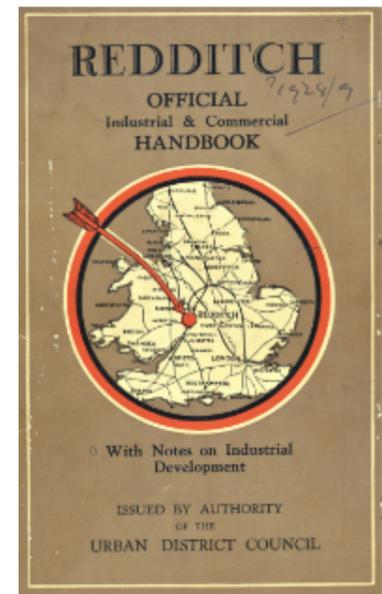
Although we tend to think of walking and cycling for pleasure as a modern activity it is clear, from the Town Guide, that this is not the case.

In the town guide there are a number of walks and cycling routes described for local residents and visitors.

There were no maps, simply a descriptive text, which they expected that readers would be able to follow.

I have chosen the first, and simplest, of the walks, which has been least affected by modern developments and I have shown how it looked at the time and how it looks today.

The following is the Abbey Meadows Walk as described in the Town Guide.



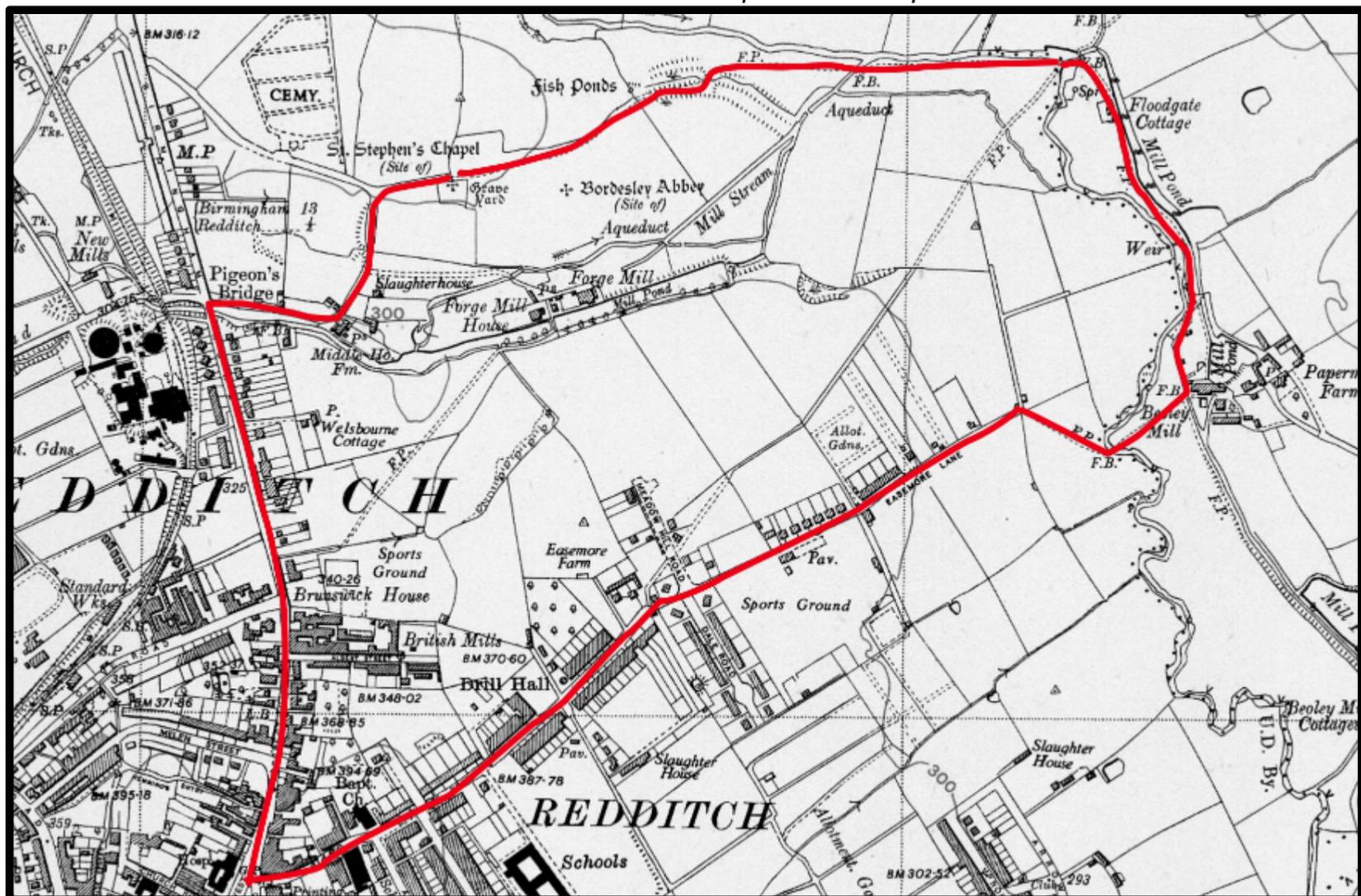
From Prospect Hill down the Birmingham Road to near the "Three Arch" bridge, then to right down short, narrow lane, past Pigeon's Bridge, and follow the lane past the "Old Chapel Yard" into the fields.

In the first field and near to the path will be found the mounds marking where stood the ruins of the old Cistercian Abbey of Bordesley. (These were excavated in 1864. The pavement excavated from the chapel in the south-east angle of the south transept, and the sole monumental tablet, dated 1713, which escaped destruction in the old chapel of St. Stephen's, near the Abbey, were placed in the vestry of St. Stephen's Parish Church.)

Follow the footpath to the footbridge over the Arrow, with a view of the old Forge Mills on the right.

When near the Floodgates turn along the path to the right and return to Redditch by Easemore Lane and Road.

Below: route shown on pre-WW2 map



1930s Walk today continued....

The description of the route as 'near to the path will be found the mounds marking where stood the ruins of the old Cistercian Abbey of Bordesley' reminds me of when, in the 1950s, we used to go to the Abbey Meadows for our conkers.

We used to cycle to the end of the lane and leave our bikes next to the gate - I can't image that you could do that today without having them 'nicked'.

Near the gate, in the hedge, there was a crab apple. Each time we went we were silly enough to try to eat them and every time they were inedible. We were always optimistic that suddenly they would turn into real apples. We were probably hoping that being small that they would turn into the Doddins that we used to have from an old lady who lived down our road.

We then went down to the Horse Chestnuts, which are now next to the Abbey ruins and must be very old. Horse Chestnuts live for 300 years, so they could date back to the 18th Century.

Walking down we went past the earth mounds in the ground. We had no idea what they were, they were just a feature of the meadow.

We had no idea that there was a right of way over the field and we were always concerned that we might be stopped.

In particular we observed men working at the Forge Mill. We had no idea what they were doing, and it is only now that I realise that they were scouring needles and had absolutely no interest in some kids running across the farmer's field.

I have learnt a lot about this area since I have been a volunteer at Forge Mill Needle Museum, and it is great to relate it to my childhood.

The route today, due to the protected status of the Abbey precinct, follows closely the original route as described in the guide.

There is an initial problem, as the site of Middle House Farms lies more or less on the 'Sainsbury' island. So, unless you wish to cross some high-volume traffic, I have continued the route along Birmingham Road, through the underpass, and back along the road past the cemetery.

If you do not wish to start from the town centre, there is a circular route around the Abbey Precinct on my Redditch Walks site at http://www.redditchwalks.org.uk/index_hm_files/arrow%20valley%20north%20walk.pdf

Below: route shown on 'Google Earth' today

