

The TILLINGBOURNE VALLEY

an illustrated map

The great little 'Tillingbourne' springs out of the woods 800 feet up on the north slope of Leith Hill. It has since earliest times, meandered peacefully throughout its ten miles along fertile green pastures, under large canopies of alders and willows that thrive in this wide beautiful valley. Overlooked by Greensand hills to the south and chalk downs on the north, never more than a few feet wide, it eventually empties itself gently into the River Wey at Shalford.

Always belying its size by having supplied the motive power for dozens of mills for manufacturing and processing of iron, wire, gunpowder, paper, leather, cloth, corn and pottery. Nowadays only the flour mills at Albury and the tannery at Gomshall impede this little river's silent and serene journey, for industrial purposes. Its crystal clear, sunlit water, strung together like jewels on a necklace, the prettiest of villages of Abinger, Gomshall, Shere, Albury and Chilworth. A picturesque valley admired and explored by to-day's visitors just as it was in the past by William Cobbett, John Aubrey, John Evelyn and other travellers who have chronicled their delight in this unique ribbon of English countryside.

This 18th cent. watermill on the 'Tillingbourne' is one of the most interesting in Surrey. It is an attractive timber-framed building with brick walls to the first floor and tile hung side walls. The sacks of corn were raised into the mill by sack hoist in the large over-hanging storey. Originally owned by the Godwin-Austen family, of the K2 Himalayan mountain fame. It was a working mill until 1914. By 1932 it was in such a bad state of repair that the family agreed to hand it over to a philanthropic 'brotherhood' known as the Ferguson Gang who collected enough money to have it restored and then present it to the National Trust.

All the principal mill machinery, made mainly of wood, remains intact and the storage area has been converted to a residence. It is open most of the year.

It is here that the 'Tillingbourne' was made to work it's hardest. Dammed in several places to supply power for up to 18 mills at any one time from the 17th cent, mainly for making gunpowder and bank-note paper. The powder mills had declined for various reasons, financial and political by the 1800's. Fortunes were revived during the 1914-18 war making cordite, employing up to 600 workers. But by the 1920's the whole workings were abandoned. Some ruins still remain alongside the water-courses, with many large mill-stones scattered beside the river. The alder trees, which grow here in profusion were burnt to make charcoal for the gunpowder.

A romantic little lake, well visited, in a haunting setting overhung by great trees. The water, like the atmosphere, is clear and cold, so clear that the weeds on the bottom can be sharply seen. The depth of water is deceptive. The pool has a legend about a drowned girl in Prince (later King) John's time. The story was expanded by a local author, Martin Tupper, in his novel called 'Stephen Langton', published 1857. Langton was Archbishop of Canterbury in King John's reign and was in his youth a monk at St Martha's. He lived in Albury at sometime. The outlet from the pool, the Sherbourne, flows down to the 'Tillingbourne' directly southwards.

This ancient trackway is believed, by some, in parts, to be the oldest road in Britain. Its popular name comes from religious travellers going, mainly, from Winchester to Canterbury. Long before them the 'road' was used by Ancient Britons, Phoenicians, Romans then Saxons and Normans travelling westwards from Dover. From Cornwall came tin miners along it, as did the Welsh drovers with their sheep. The whole area of this valley is crossed and re-crossed by footpaths, bridleways, green lanes, drove roads, forest tracks, smuggler's routes and the North Downs Way.

This village of three churches has since earliest times, sat alongside the 'Tillingbourne'. Modern visitors wonder at its Tudor chimneys (19th c. Pugin) and rural charm, stopping for food and refreshment at the Inn. Missing perhaps one of Albury's most delightful structures, tucked away in Albury Estate yard. The Pigeon House, is Elizabethan and rare, only a few freestanding ones, such as this, are now left in the Kingdom.

William Cobbett riding through Chilworth in 1822 writes in his Rural Rides, "This valley, which seems to have been created by a bountiful Providence as one of the choicest retreats for man, where no rigours of seasons can ever be felt."

The Romans discovered that by keeping pigeons you could have a readily available supply of fresh meat, especially during the winter. The pigeon nearly always returns to the same place to roost. So by providing sleeping and nesting facilities, they were able to keep a good stock of birds. After the Norman invasion pigeon houses became so widespread, it was laid down that only the Lord of the Manor could possess one, and only one. There was, seemingly, no restriction on size as some had up to 2000 nesting boxes. As late as the middle 17th cent there were over 25,000 of these houses in one form or another around the country. Freestanding pigeon houses, such as Albury's Elizabethan one, are now very rare. Albury's survival is due to its neighbour at Weston House, Dr Maurice Burton, and the members of the Albury Trust. A remarkable by-product of the Pigeon House was that the droppings were collected and used in the making of gunpowder!

The 'Tillingbourne' flows unhurried through the beautiful expanse of woods and meadows which make up the Albury Park Estate. The earliest reference to the house is in 1645, then the owner was a future Duke of Norfolk. Although the Estate is mentioned in the Domesday Book and records go back to 1042.

"this, certainly, is the prettiest garden I have ever beheld... the terrace is by far the finest thing of the sort I ever saw." William Cobbett, 1822.

The beautiful gardens were laid out in the middle of the 1600's by John Evelyn, the famous diarist, who lived but a few miles upstream at Wotton. He included in his design ornamental canals alongside the river, some 12 acres of vineyards, a long terrace with a yew hedge and walk a quarter of a mile long, some of the features still remain. In 1819 the Estate was bought by Henry Drummond, a notable banker. It was he who commissioned the architect Pugin to remodel the house in 1845. Pugin was assisting in the rebuilding of the Houses of Parliament at the time. It was he who was responsible for Albury's ornamental Tudor chimneys, 63 here on the house all different. There are many wonderful examples in the village. The Park contains many rare trees and shrubs. Several growing to a great size. A black Italian Poplar standing near the 'Tillingbourne' has reached 140ft, and must be one of the tallest trees in England. The house is now owned by the Mutual Households Assoc, and has been converted to apartments for retired people. It is open to the public from May to Sept. on Weds and Thurs 2-4 pm. The Estate is still owned by the Duke of Northumberland.

The large village green is bisected by the 'Tillingbourne'. The name of the village derives from the former hammer pond, which existed here to work the furnace for the iron industry as far back as Tudor times. Present day fame is due to the commemorative clock to the iron masters, which has 'Jack the Smith' striking the bell with his hammer every hour.

This small village of Gomshall is home to a mill (now a gift shop and restaurant), a tannery, pottery, picture gallery, 2 pubs, 2 garages and a large mobile home company. Gomshall Mill, with the 'Tillingbourne' flowing through it, has its foundations going back to Domesday Book times. The present timber framed building dates from early to mid 17th cent. Supposed later to have contained 4 corn mills. The building was refurbished in the 1950's and transformed into the, now popular, restaurant with gift shops. Features remaining include the large water wheel. Along the road eastwards are the pottery and gallery, westwards is the Tannery, which also has its origins in the Domesday Book. The present building (offices) is 16th cent, the houses beside the road are Victorian. The tannery building on the south side of the 'Tillingbourne', nearby is an old attractive pack horse bridge over the stream, was rebuilt after a fire with many extensions. The barn is a piece of early industrial archeology.

Sitting on the south bank of the 'Tillingbourne' overlooking the remains of John Evelyn's delightful gardens this Saxon church was until 1840 Albury's parish church. In that year Albury Park's owner Henry Drummond, a banker and sometime MP, financed the building of a new Parish church about a mile to the west where the new village lay.

The villagers had been 'persuaded' by a previous Park owner to move out of the Park so as not to disturb his privacy. The old church fell into disrepair and in 1921 a group of local people set about restoring it. Eventually, in 1974, the Redundant Churches Fund took it over. With the help of a few dedicated locals the church is opened in the summer, and on clement winter days, for visitors to look over it. The church has several Norman windows, a Norman tower with an unusual 19th cent cupola. The 13th cent. north door has its original strap hinges and a massive wooden lock with its foot long key. The 16th cent porch is reputed to be the best and most perfect remaining in Surrey. There are brasses and a wall painting. Also an overdecorated memorial chapel by Pugin. Altogether a unique building in a delightful setting. Henry Drummond also financed another church, in 1840, for a religious sect known as 'Irvingites' of which he was a founder member. The many pinnaled, ornate, yellow-stoned building became the 'cathedral' of this Catholic Apostolic movement. Services in the church ceased in the 1920's. The building can be seen beside the road between the Park and the A25.

LOCAL SOCIETIES

Albury Trust
Tel. Shere 3486
Albury History Society
Tel. Shere 2513

Shalford Conservation Society
Tel. Guildford 63468

Shere & District Rural Preservation Soc
Holly Cottage, The Glade, Holmbury St Mary.

Shere, Gomshall & Peaslake History Soc
Tel. Shere 2979

Surrey Archaeological Society
Spring Grove, Water Lane, Cobham.

Surrey Industrial History Group
High View Road, Guildford.

Surrey Local History Council
Jenner Ho., 2 Jenner Road, Guildford.

LOCAL ANNUAL EVENTS

Abinger Hammer: Teddy Bears Picnic - May
Medieval Fair - June
Shere: Charity Pram Race - June
"Fair in the Square" - June



Albury History Society

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