

JIM'S JAUNT

Swithland, Cropston & Thurcaston

by Jim Reay

With the exception of Sunday, pub and bus times combine to allow this walk on any day of the week. It commences by catching the 10.15 bus to Swithland from St. Margaret's Bus Station (Monday-Saturday Centrebus 154 from Bay SE). As the final destination closes at 14.30 Monday to Thursday, those wishing to proceed at more leisurely pace may prefer to go on Friday or Saturday.

I alighted opposite the traditional red telephone box, on Swithland Main Street, shortly before 10.50 and I turned left back along Main Street, crossing over the Leicester Lane junction, and carried straight on until I arrived, early doors, at The Griffin Inn. Opposite to the pub was an unusual two storey circular granite and slate rubble stone tower with a pointed Swithland slate roof; one of a pair, the other one is at the corner of the boundary wall of Hall Farm. Grade II listed buildings, they are

thought to date from the eighteenth century, and believed locally to be have been used as lock-ups. They are described in the Register of Listed Buildings as gazebos with the probable use as folly boundary towers.

Swithland wasn't referred to as village in its own right until 1209 although a settlement in this location certainly existed prior to this. In the Domesday Book of 1086 it was



The Griffin at swithland

categorised as Swithellund and described as part of the manor of Groby. The name is of Viking origin and means a grove cleared by burning, referring to the common practice of peasants adding to their holdings by grubbing up and setting fire to woodland. Words commonly linked with Swithland are Wood, Slate, and Reservoir. Swithland Wood is now part of the Bradgate Estate, managed by the Bradgate Park Trust and is a remnant of the original Charnwood Forest. The Wood was gifted to the people of Leicestershire in 1931 by the Leicester Rotary Club and is frequently referred to as Bluebell Wood, due to its annual profusion of springtime bluebells. Swithland Slate quarrying dates back to Roman times and was an important activity within the village between the 13th and 19th centuries. The distinctive slate was hewn from the two quarries in the wood, which have since flooded and reverted back to nature. Swithland Reservoir was one of a series of reservoirs constructed in the latter half of the 19th century to supply water to Leicester's rapidly growing population.

The Griffin Inn occupies the site of a former hostelry, however the present building itself dates back to the 17th century. At various times it has been used as a bakehouse, a brewery, a mortuary and a public house, part of Everards estate since 1947. The Local Authority describes the inn as a Key Unlisted Building and the open form of the village at this point means that it is indeed a prominent building within the village street-scene. On my first visit, I entered the bar where the row of seven hand pumps reminded me of one of the most poignant moments in modern British history, reminiscent of when crane jibs bowed their heads in silent tribute to Sir Winston Churchill, as his coffin passed down the River Thames aboard the Havengore launch. Seeing all the handpumps set at an acute angle, I was fearful that no real ale was available. The Bar Manager (known to one & all as J P) explained, he always cleans the pipes on a Monday morning. Observing my disappointed expression, he kindly offered to do a cellar run and bring me a pint straight from the



One of two gazebo folly towers in swithland

cask. Smile restored, I gratefully accepted his offer. The establishment consists of a main public bar to the front of house, to one side of which is the lounge bar and to the other side across the corridor is the drawing room, whilst to the rear of house is the restaurant. Across the back yard are the Old Stables function room, which occupies the former skittles long alley, and Odd John's Kitchen Café/Deli which first opened to the public in 2015. Real ales available were Everards Tiger & Original, Adnams Southwold Bitter, Brampton Tudor Rose and Wells Eagle IPA. The Real Ciders were Westons Old Rosie & Family Reserve.

Leaving The Griffin Inn I turned right along Main Street, past a row of bungalows and right again, as directed by the signpost "Bridleway to Hallgates/ Footpath to Cropston". I stuck to the bridleway, which was well trodden and easy to follow. When it joined Leicester Lane, I turned left and walked along the road until I arrived at the junction with Bradgate Road, where I went straight over onto the public footpath to Cropston. The path ran more or less in a straight line before emerging on Station Road where I turned right. The Bradgate Arms was on the left towards the end of Station Road, just after passing the wall-plaque, to my right, showing the site of the former Brewers Arms.

Cropston lies within the civil parish of Thurgate & Cropston with the parish church and village hall both located in Thurgate. The earliest part of the village with the older properties, including the two village pubs, grew around the crossroads of Reservoir and Station Roads. Cropston first appears in the 1130 Leicestershire Survey with the spelling of Cropston. Other name spellings have included Cropstone and Crapstone. Early residents were farmers or workers on the Bradgate Park



The wall-plaque on Station Road, Cropston



The Bradgate Arms, Cropston

Estate but over subsequent centuries they also worked as framework knitters or in the boot and shoe trade at Anstey. Appearing in the earliest baptism records of the parish are the Burchnall family, whose family home was almost opposite The Bradgate Arms. The Burchnalls had a brewery behind their house, where they brewed beer to be sold in the adjacent alehouse called the Brewers Arms. Richard Burchnall, who was born in 1784, had about ten children and one of his sons went on to run the Fish & Quart in Leicester. Cropston is probably best known these days for its reservoir, constructed in 1866 by flooding around 200 acres of land. I suspect that a certain Joseph Reeves, who was Bradgate Park's Head Keeper at that

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time, was none too pleased with the development as his cottage was submerged by the waters.

The Bradgate Arms dates back over 400 years and for 100 consecutive years, until relatively recently, the Jackson family were landlords. The latest Mr Jackson proprietor is said to remember elderly ladies coming in on an evening for a swift half and a good gossip, whilst having their white jugs filled with either pints of beer or milk at tuppence ha'penny, from the herd of cows kept in a field behind the pub. The pub's interior is rabbit warren-like with various individual adjoining areas including bars, a snug and a dining area in the comparatively newer rear extension. The rural ambience is enhanced by original exposed ceiling beams & joists throughout. To the rear is a large enclosed lawned garden with paved areas and open-sided octagonal summer houses, picnic tables and garden furniture. The pub also has a skittles long alley and Cropston Cricket Club's ground is in a field behind the pub. Folklore reminiscences tell of a once notorious local umpire who could always be relied upon to raise his finger in response to an appeal as opening time approached. This Marston's house had Pedigree & Burton Bitter plus Ringwood Boondoggle on offer.

I turned left out of The Bradgate Arms, soon followed by a right turn at the crossroads,



The Badgers Sett, Cropston

into Reservoir Road, to find The Badgers Sett immediately to my right hand side.

The Badgers Sett was formerly known as The Reservoir Hotel, and it could be said it owes its very existence to the reservoir that was constructed by a workforce of Irish navvies. Local entrepreneur Billy Booten set up a hut near to the then Manor House to keep the navvies supplied with food and drink. This became known to the Irishmen as The Shant, a name probably derived from shanty (literally, a crudely built hut). Billy's enterprise flourished and relocated into the Manor House itself when it became known as the Reservoir Hotel, although The Shant is a nickname still used locally to this day. The pub now trades as part of Mitchells & Butlers' Vintage Inns Estate. The entrance leads into the main public bar and leading around to the left of this is the lounge bar with an adjoining snug type room. To the right of the main entrance is a very large restaurant area, subdivided into smaller intimate dining areas. The pub also has a spacious garden furnished with wooden garden tables & chairs. Available real ales were Marston's Pedigree, Brains Reverend James, Sharp's Doom Bar & Atlantic Pale Ale.

From The Badgers Sett I retraced my steps back to The Bradgate Arms and turned right down a jitty between the pub and a bungalow at 13 Station Road. At the end of the jitty I turned right and followed Ridley Close round the slow bend to the left then went left into Waterfield Road and almost immediately right onto a public footpath. Again the route was easily followed as it was effectively directed by yellow way-marker posts and well trodden. The footpath soon merged with a bridle path which itself had been diverted around the edge of the field, but easily discernible. Before long I arrived at the very ancient looking Coffin Bridge that spans Rothley Brook. This grade II listed stone bridge is believed so named because the route was used for carrying the dead from the hamlet of Cropston to Thurcaston Church. If any Cropston residents are wondering why I call it a hamlet, the literal meaning of hamlet (in Britain) is "a village without its own church". About 150-yards on from the bridge, I diverged from the bridleway by veering onto a footpath to the left following the way set by the yellow way-marker post. The footpath ended adjacent to Thurcaston's All Saints Church, which would have been quite handy for erstwhile Cropstonite pallbearers. I turned left along Anstey Lane at the end of which The W heatsheaf was directly opposite on the corner of Leicester Road and Mill Road.

Thurcaston is derived from merging the Danish name of Thorketi with the Anglo-Saxon word

Coffin Bridge



Wheatsheaf at Thurcaston

ton, meaning settlement, and appeared in the Domesday Book as Thurkiteleston. The village's most famous son was probably the Protestant reformer known as Hugh Latimer who was born into a Thurcaston farming family in 1487. He became a Fellow of Cambridge's Clare College and, before the Reformation, was ordained Bishop of Worcester. After Mary I came to the throne, he was arrested in 1555, tried for heresy, and burned at the stake, becoming one of the three renowned Oxford Martyrs of Anglicanism. The other two were Thomas Cranmer and Latimer's friend Nicholas Ridley. Latimer's last words are quoted as having been: "Be of good cheer Master Ridley and play the man, for we shall this day light such a candle in England, as I trust by God's grace, shall never be put out." Traditional employment within the village was typically associated with agriculture, mostly sheep and cattle with a smaller amount of arable. In the mid-19th century some local villages diversified into framework knitting although this was relatively limited within Thurcaston.

The Wheatsheaf is a former coaching inn originating from the early seventeenth century and has traded as an Everards pub since 1919. For 105 consecutive years the tenants were the Wright family, who still live in the village though no longer at the pub. I can well remember visiting this pub with my dad, many years ago, and both of us being greatly amused by the antics of the resident mynah bird which lived high up in a cage behind the bar. The bird would mimic the noise made by the entrance door's squeaky hinges with uncanny accuracy. This, in turn, would attract the attention of the pub's dog that would seem bemused that no one had actually come in and start barking. The bird would then start calling the dog's name, impersonating the pub landlord's voice, which stimulated the stupid canine to bark even louder giving much entertainment and causing laughter from the pub's patrons. The dog never seemed to learn it was the bird that was winding him up. The pub consists of a public

bar, nearest to the car park entrance, and to the other side nearest Mill Road, is the lounge bar that was clearly once two rooms. These were most probably a smoke room and lounge, now combined into one open plan area with a snug type space adjacent to the way into the public bar. Genuine oak panelled walls, exposed ceiling beams and joist throughout augment a pleasant warm ambience. Out the back is a skittles long alley, and adjacent to the car park are a paved area with picnic tables and a tarmac area furnished with iron garden tables and chairs. The real ales were Everards Tiger, Adnams Southwold Bitter and Shardlow Mayfly.

Follow my footsteps for a really pleasant 2.5 miles walk taking in three villages and four pubs offering twelve real ales between them. The bus stop to begin my journey home was just outside the pub.

Cheers,

Jim Reay

EDITOR'S NOTE - The Fish & Quart was a popular former coaching inn on Churchgate. Converted into a nightclub in the early eighties and widely known as Brannigan's it is now called Epsilon.

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