

BURLEY GATE – *just a spot on the map?*

Burley Gate is one of those places that travellers from Bromyard to Hereford pass through without a second thought – unless (a) they are caught in a speed trap for exceeding 30mph or (b) have a slight hesitation at the sight of the weathervane embellishment on the Burley Gate roundabout which was built in the 1990s at the notorious accident blackspot where the A465 crosses the A417.

Burley Gate is a mystery because it is neither a parish or a village, but could be a hamlet? Hereford Council call it a “settlement” which perhaps comes the nearest to describing its existence. It is situated in three parishes - Much Cowarne, Ocle Pychard, and Moreton Jefferies and has a diameter of about 1.5 miles and a circumference of c.4 miles although its boundaries tend to be rather fluid according to personal taste and post code vagaries!

The very name causes confusion because many people think that it derives from some form of gate or toll but no evidence has been found of any such restriction. The place-name experts say that the name “Burley” indicates a wooded area close to a fortification although early maps do not show any such feature. What is still there but heavily disguised under a regularly cropping field is “Bagdons Tump” which is on the maps of 1754 and 1835. This is on the right just past the roundabout on the A465 going towards Hereford. It has never been examined archaeologically so there is no indication of its origins or importance. What has been suggested is that some form of barrier may have been erected here to restrict traffic both human and animals (drover’s) on the old established main road from the Welsh mountains with the present A417 being a product of the late 18th century toll-road era. These drovers were a devious bunch and took great pains to avoid as many toll restrictions as possible. The nearest toll gate was at Stoke Lacy and hence to Bromyard (Piccadilly Toll) and on to the present A44. In order to avoid these a diversion was made by the drovers at Burley Gate to take the lane towards Much Cowarne and onwards to Bishops Frome, Acton Green and then back on to the main road. The Toll Commissioners took a dim view of this practise and in 1845 erected a toll gate and cottage on the lane at Red Wychend in Much Cowarne which stayed until tolls were abolished in the 1870s.

But enough of this divergence and back to the reason why Burley Gate existed. Historically it had always been overshadowed by its neighbouring villages but over a period of several hundred years it had built up an importance of its own due to the main road location from Hereford to Bromyard, Worcester and ultimately London. It is interesting to note that on John Ogilby’s 17th century map Bromyard was one of the main coaching stops on the road from Aberystwyth to London. Over the years Burley Gate built up services useful to both travellers and the local community such as the blacksmith and wheelwright who also acted as an undertaker! plus several small shops and from Victorian times a school and a Post Office. In 1900 Ruth Baily (nee Bourne) in her Diary mentions walking from Cowarne Court to Burley Gate Post Office to look at the displayed telegram giving details of the fighting near Ladysmith

during the Boer War. By far the oldest established building was the Burley Gate Inn which even today as a private house displays evidence of its three main periods of construction – Tudor, Georgian and Victorian. In 1795 according to the Hereford Journal it was housing an auction and another in 1802 when it was called the Plough Inn whilst in 1815 it was entitled the Jolly Crispin. By 1819 it had become the Mason's Arms which was probably because the landlord from at least 1817 until his death in the 1850s was John Hodges, the local stonemason whose son George lived opposite in the Blacksmith's cottage which was demolished in 1998 and is now the site of three houses. After this time the name Burley Gate Inn was used and continued until it closed in 1990.

Like the majority of the locality the chief employment was agricultural and brick making with much of the housing being tied to the estates of Cowarne Court and Moreton Jefferies which were not broken up until between 1918 and 1921 with many properties being sold to existing tenants whose families are still living in the area. In the Census of 1841 there were 17 family groups living in Burley Gate which included the scattering of cottages and farms at Wynns Green. The highpoint of 45 families was reached in 1871 reducing to 35 at the time of the Land Valuation of 1910. Expansion was slow and piecemeal until the 1960s and 1970s when the coming of mains water and electricity encouraged the building of 16 modern houses and bungalows. A further development of 15 houses and a new Community Shop on land towards the Burley Gate roundabout is currently in abeyance along with others in north Herefordshire due to phosphate leakage into the River Wye from the surrounding smaller tributaries. Today the Electoral Roll records over 80 adults living in the Burley Gate area of Much Cowarne parish. The old locality based employment has now been largely superseded by the modern practise of commuting and the influx of retired people moving to the area from further afield. Although the Burley Gate Inn closed in 1990 the Post Office and Stores is still flourishing from a Portacabin in the car park of the Village Hall as a Community Shop serving a much larger population than previously and currently feeling the benefits of increased use due to the Coronavirus pandemic. The school was located to adjacent new premises in 1972 while the former school endowed in the 1870s by Mrs.Higgins of the Moreton Jefferies estate is now (or was until Covid!) a well used Village Hall whilst the former Post Office and Shop which she also financed and had built in the 1890s was converted to residential accommodation in 2016.

Barry Lawrence. December 2020.

N.B.Article above compiled from previous notes for possible inclusion in the BDHLS Covid19 occasional publication "History as it Happens" No.11 and also in the local Community Newsletter and the Frome Valley News.