

# The Village of Alspath alias Meriden

In the heart of Arden Forest and according to Warwickshire's Tudor local historian Michael Drayton, in the heart of England, you can still look out from the hill on which the church of St Laurence stands, in a conservation area, to substantial woodland. Close Wood on the horizon is in Great Packington parish while Chantry and Church Woods and Meriden Shafts lie in this one: other woods beyond are in Kinwalsey(Kinesy) Fillongley and Maxstoke on the East Warwickshire plateau.

The original heart of Saxon Alspath (Aelle's way) crowned the hill top with a fine vista over the valley to the West and sloping more level ground to the East. This was part of an estate belonging to Lady Godgifu (Godiva), the Mercian Countess, made famous in Coventry's legend. In the village she is recalled in 'Godedithe's Mede', a field on the right hand side of Eaves Green Lane and mentioned in our Domesday Book entry, 1086 as are all these trees.

Meriden is also a Saxon name meaning pleasant (myrig) 'U' shaped valley (denu). The road through the village follows the line of the parish boundary once it reaches Forest Grounds indicating a route existed here maybe 100 years before the Norman Conquest 1066, the period when parishes were created. By tradition there was a Saxon church here too. Documentary evidence tells us it was dedicated to St Edmund, a favourite Saxon martyr and saint. Until 1974 Meriden lay in Warwickshire on the boundary of two sub-divisions or Hundreds: Hemlingford, centred on a place in Kingsbury and Stoneleigh, later Knightlow a meeting place near Napton on the Hill.

Soon after the Norman Conquest a knightly family naming itself after the village became its lord. The stone church in essence dates from c.1180 when Ivo of Alspath by then an old man rebuilt it with a fresh dedication to St Laurence. During the Civil Wars of Stephen and Matilda (c.1139-44) he had committed crimes especially against the Church and as death neared he wished to make amends. Maybe he felt he had already been punished as he had no male heir, only 5 daughters, a catastrophe for a fighting man at that time. The basic outline of the church is his design and Norman features can still be traced among its stones. Dr Kittermaster, the 19<sup>th</sup> century village artist, drew a Norman window near the tower lost in a Victorian Restoration while another in Cosins' unique book in Birmingham Reference Library shows a north-facing Norman, arched doorway.

After Ivo's day the village was divided into 4 or 5 estates (manors), each one inherited by a daughter, the principal one being centred on Alspath Hall a double moated site. The others were Meriden Hall, Walsh Hall, Moat House Farm and Marlbrook Hall (Farm)/ Old Fillongley. In the church are two medieval effigies. The sandstone one to the left of the chancel arch is a mid 15<sup>th</sup> century soldier of the Botiler family from Alspath Hall while that in beautiful, costly Derbyshire alabaster to the right is of John Wyard, Lord of the Walsh Hall estate, who had fought in the 100 Years' War.

By early 1600s the hamlet of Meriden with its many inns, alehouses, farms and crafts had superseded Alspath. A significant drove route from Wales dividing at Meriden Pool continued either up the Hill to Coventry market or traversed Berkswell Road, then called 'Warwick Lane' to Warwick, Northamptonshire and London or even the Continent.

It is believed the term 'Pool' derives from the Welsh word 'Pwl' meaning a Pond where animals drink reminding us of the Welsh drovers who stopped here. Meriden is even commemorated in a Welsh poem about droving.

Meriden's economy thrived on its inns and associated businesses like baking, butchery, or wheelwrights, coopers and smiths' shops. The inns became even more significant when the road from London was turnpiked in 1724.

Conversely upgrades by Thomas Telford to Holyhead 1821/2 and 1830 reducing the height of the hill top and leaving us Old Road, came too late. The railway by-passed the village by 1838 and Meriden dwindled in significance and prosperity until the car, airport and NEC revitalised the hotel trade. Hauliers put the village on the map from 1920s to '50s but the A45 by-pass drew lorries away again after 1959.

Over the centuries the Heath on which there was a Victorian Race course, had billeted many soldiers; sometimes to dramatic effect as at the start of the English Civil War in 1642 or on the way to attack Bonnie Prince Charlie, 1745. Trainee airmen flew there late in the Great War, 1917/18.

With its 15<sup>th</sup> century sandstone cross on the Green as well as the Cyclists' Memorial 1921, Meriden lays claim to be the 'Centre of England'. Oral tradition is hard to substantiate and the earliest written statement to that effect is mid-Victorian. The Cross was moved from its original position near the Methodist chapel probably when Telford widened the road and again to its present site in 1953. As Meriden was the half way point between London and Chester in coaching days, this may account for the belief to take hold.