

Leominster and the Black and White Trail.

A damp and misty start did nothing to reduce the charm of the black-and-white villages of Herefordshire, through which the History Group travelled and stopped in, on the 'Black-and-White Trail', which was started in 1987, to promote and encourage tourism in the area.

Having picked up our Tour Guide, Justin, from Leominster, we then proceeded via country roads to **Dilwyn**, our first stop and the smallest of the black-and-white villages. En-route we passed **Monkland**, glimpsing Monkland Church which dates from 1100, a former Benedictine Abbey, dissolved during the Dissolution of the Monasteries. The organ in Monkland Church is listed by the British Institute Of Organ Studies as an instrument of importance to our national heritage.

Most cottages in **Dilwyn** date back to C16 or C17 or earlier and Justin explained that the black-and-white features are relatively new. Until the Victorian era half-timbered houses retained their natural unseasoned oak and limewash colouring, but the Victorians 'improved' the look by changing to the contrasting black-and-white finish. Some dwellings have now reverted back to the original colouring, and modern half-timbered homes sympathetically follow this trend. Many are built by the local Border Oak Company, which continues the black-and-white convention by building half-timbered houses using traditional methods, all over the world.

Dilwyn has a community-owned pub, a 'free' school and a village green. On the village green there is a poignant memorial to a young WW2 airman, who, to avoid killing a villager as he crash-landed his damaged plane, swerved into two oak trees on the village green, sacrificing himself. The stumps of the two oak trees are now fashioned into carved rustic seats.



The village also has a church, built in 1295, but later extended and raised. A Norman tower and font, and medieval glass in a small chancel window are among the interesting features of this building.

The Group enjoyed a coffee break in the 'Old Forge', by the village green, admiring the interior of the old cottage in which we were entertained. The delightful cottage garden added to the appeal of the venue.



As we then proceeded to **Stretford**, Justin explained that the main industries of the area are agriculture, tourism and the produce of the many orchards eg cider. The fertile soil also provides the ideal environment for gardens, and Justin pointed out that two famous gardeners, Monty Don and Sir Roy Strong, have chosen to live in the area and showcase their gardens.

Stretford Church is set in a farmyard, and is now owned by the Churches Conservation Trust. Herefordshire has the most preserved churches, managed by the Trust, of any County in the whole of England. Originally built in the C13, the church has a roof dating to 1540 and two massive early C16 timber screens. Other treasures in this unusual church include a Jacobean pulpit and two C14 stone effigies of couples. The church is dedicated to St Cosmas and St Damian, the patron saints of physicians and surgeons. A medieval story of miraculous surgery is attributed to them and the story is told in the church. While in the church the Group also had the opportunity to ring the church bells, a first for many.



Stretford is also the home of Tyrrell's Crisps, Chase Vodka and Williams gin.

From Stretford we continued to **Weobley** (pronounced Webley). Weobley was the centre of the medieval wool trade and gained its wealth from the wool trade. The village was prosperous enough to return two MPs to Parliament, until the citizens refused to pay the 2s (two shillings) per week to support them, after which only one MP was returned. Weobley is one of the largest black-and-white villages and was founded by a Mercian Prince, Wibbe, in Saxon times. The medieval settlement is almost intact, having somehow bypassed the Industrial Revolution, and a village Heritage Trail covers all the most important and interesting aspects of the village.



Weobley Church has one of the tallest steeples in Herefordshire and the church dates back to 1086 and is mentioned in the Domesday Survey. The magnificent C14 spire is the only one in the county to be supported by little flying buttresses, connected to pinnacles rising from the tower. The first stone church on the site was built in the C12 and replaced an earlier wooden building erected during Saxon times. Among the interesting features of the church are the fine marble memorial to Cromwellian supporter and Parliamentarian Col John Birch; medieval stained glass; a scissor beamed roof and a Norman archway. There is also a tomb to a Devereux, killed by Owain Glyndwr.

From Weobley the Group continued to **Eardisland**, passing **Kinnersley Castle**, an Elizabethan house remodelled from a medieval castle in about 1588. The house has beautiful Elizabethan chimney stacks. We also drove through **Lyonshall**, **Sarnesfield**, and **Pembridge**. During medieval times, at the time of the Plague, the village of **Lyonshall** moved away from clustering around the church at the top of a hill, to a site some distance from the church. **Sarnesfield's** claim to fame is that the churchyard contains the grave of John Abel, Charles I 'King's Carpenter'. John Abel was the builder of Grange Court, Leominster and many other Herefordshire buildings.

Pembridge church has a distinctive detached bell tower, and also contains the 'Pembridge Effigies', which are effigies of ordinary medieval people in contemporary dress. The detailing of their clothing is quite remarkable.

Charming black-and-white cottages line the long main street of the village, the busy A44. Of particular interest are the two medieval farmhouses at each end of the village, one, West End Farm, being the oldest building in the village and dating back to 1424.

On arriving in **Eardisland** the Group had a brief stop to explore this charming village. Eardisland was considered by Sir Nikolaus Pevsner as 'an uncommonly pretty village'. It is a very pretty black-and-white village, containing a C18 dovecote, a Community shop, a C17 Manor House, the oldest AA box in the country, dated 1920 and numbered '123', and black-and-white millstream cottages flanking the River Arrow. The village is surrounded by orchards. The dovecote contains over 900 nesting alcoves in the upper storey and may be visited during the shop's opening hours.



After a brief stop in Eardisland we continued by coach to **Leominster**, Herefordshire's largest market town. This was our last stop. Again, its prosperity was built upon the medieval wool trade, principally from the Ryland sheep. There are many signs of the

town's former wealthy status, among them the magnificent *Grange Court*, a wonderful timber-framed building, built by John Abel, Charles I 'King's Carpenter' in 1633. For those who appreciate creative crafts, *Grange Court* holds a wonderful collection of 31 embroidered panels, created by the 'Leominster in Stitches' group. The panels depict the growth and change in the town, from the origins of the priory Church in 660AD to the Queen's Diamond Jubilee in 2012. On the exterior, there are fine carved wooden decorations and a curious mixture of English and Latin inscriptions above the windows.

Among other fine features of the town are *Corn Square*, surrounded by elegant Georgian houses, jostling side-by-side with black-and-white buildings, and *Broad Street*, lined by imposing Georgian façades.

The Priory Church of St Peter and St Paul has an interesting history. The Anglo-Saxon community was endowed in 660 by Leofric, the notorious husband of Lady Godiva. The establishment was mentioned in the Domesday Survey of 1086, when the 'Manor of Leominster' covered almost 10,000 acres and included 16 surrounding villages. The Priory Church contains an old ducking stool and has fine Norman arches and a magnificent Norman doorway.



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