

# Warwickshire County Preface

Download as PDF

## Landscape, Geology and Building Materials

The landscape of Warwickshire is undramatic, as befits the county's midland disposition. Its gently rolling, fertile heartland is watered and drained by two principal river systems, the Cole-Blythe-Anker and the Arrow-Alne-Avon. The Avon valley effectively divides the county along a diagonal line, running north-north-east to south-south-west. To the north and north-west, including the forest of the Arden district, Warwickshire was well-wooded in the Middle Ages, in contrast to the woodless Felden of the south and south-east. Two of the county's defining boundaries are strikingly man-made. That to the north-west is relatively recent and is constituted by the industrial cluster of the West Midlands towns; Birmingham, Solihull and Coventry were part of Warwickshire until thirty years ago but are now a separate entity and their departure has left a gaping indentation in the modern county's west flank. The second and more ancient of the county's built borders, Roman Watling Street, has always fixed Warwickshire's north-east extremity and, as the A5 trunk-road, still marks the county's boundary in an unusually straight edge for over 20 miles. Uniquely, three of medieval England's major highways, including Watling Street, between them spanned the length and breadth of the county, intersecting on or near its borders to delineate a sprawling triangle which, in the Middle Ages, contained within it much of Warwickshire. The geological map of Warwickshire is dominated by the Triassic Keuper Red Marls which underly the broad body of the county. Within this is a central core of Permian Breccia and Sandstone. This in turn is skirted to the north and north-east by the Coal Measures of the Carboniferous era, the Warwickshire Coalfield, to the north of Coventry. Beneath this are the harder Cambrian shales and quartzites, revealed along the Nuneaton Ridge. Warwickshire's bedrock is relatively soft and includes none of the country's finest building stones. Freestone was imported from accessible quarries beyond its borders to the south and east. The county's geology has lent itself as much to the development of industries such as road-metalling, coal-mining and mixed farming, as to building in stone. The prevalence of clays and marls led to the early development of brick and tilemaking. Warwickshire's coal field was already being exploited in the Middle Ages, from at least the 13th century in the Nuneaton area. The most widely used local building stone in Warwickshire, selected for Kenilworth Castle, for example, and for many of the Norman fonts in the county's parish churches, is the red Triassic Keuper Sandstone which underlies much of the south-east of the county. A diagonal swathe of it is exposed where the valley of the River Avon cuts through from Coventry to Stratford. Higher ground in this southern part of the county is largely formed by bands of Jurassic limestones, ironstones and clay, yielding the warm brown Hornton Stone quarried around Edge Hill and widely used for churches in this area, such as Burton Dassett and Warmington. Glacial deposits of sands and gravels cover much of the county's surface. Where these superficial deposits are deepest, water was more readily obtained, one factor determining the location and density of early settlement.

## History

Although no important urban centres developed in the county during the Roman period, the stamp of the occupation is still discernible in Warwickshire wherever the ancient road network remains in everyday use. Roman settlements along these highways, such as at High Cross and Churchover on Watling Street, did not enjoy the longevity of the roads themselves. Similarly, the walled Roman towns at Alcester, Chesterton and Mancetter never became major centres. Industry in the county under the Romans was small-scale, involving such activities as metal smelting and tile manufacture. The geographical division of the county by the valley of the Avon was mirrored by another notional one, again running diagonally across it, but in the opposite direction, from the north-west to the south-east. This was the diocesan boundary established c. AD 673, effectively the eastern frontier of the Hwiccas tribe within seventh-century Mercia, which ran through the middle of Warwickshire, partitioning it between the dioceses of Worcester and Lichfield. Warwick became the most important town in the part of Warwickshire included in the diocese of Worcester, Coventry in that of Lichfield. In the late ninth/early tenth century the first defensive 'burhs' in the region, including that at Warwick, were under construction, during a period which saw the marriage of Ethelred of Mercia to King Alfred's daughter Aethelflaed and the progressive subordination of Mercia to the West Saxons. Within the diocese of Lichfield, Coventry's importance was underscored when, in 1043, Leofric, earl of Mercia and his wife, Godgifu, established an abbey there, dedicated to St Mary. Its first abbot, Leofwine (d.1066) was also the last Saxon Bishop of Lichfield. In 1068, fairly early in the post-Conquest period, King William constructed a motte and bailey castle at Warwick, the mound of which substantially survives. The earliest masonry walls of Warwick castle date from the twelfth century. The only substantial Romanesque secular building in the county is the ruined castle keep at Kenilworth of the late twelfth century. The Domesday Survey of 1086 records that the most richly endowed of Warwickshire's religious houses at the time of the Norman Conquest was St Mary's Abbey at Coventry. The most powerful lay tenant of the post-Conquest period was the Norman count, Robert of Meulan, who became one

of Henry I's four closest associates. Count Robert's holdings in the Survey were matched by those of Thorkil of Warwick, one of few English landholders not to have been summarily dispossessed at the Conquest. The pattern of settlement revealed by the Domesday Survey shows Warwickshire to have been divided demographically as well as physically by the Avon and the Anker. The wooded region to the north-west of these river valleys was sparsely inhabited in scattered hamlets. In the fertile, open country to the south and east, there was, by contrast, greater prosperity and far denser settlement. The majority of the king's manors, as well as those of Count Robert, were in the well-wooded region north-west of the river Avon, whereas those held by the abbey of Coventry lay mostly to the south-east. In 1075, the bishop's seat at Lichfield was relocated to Chester and remained there until 1095, when permission was obtained from the pope to transfer it to Coventry. The abbey at Coventry duly became the cathedral priory and served as such throughout most of the twelfth century. Thereafter, the title of the see was changed yet again and it was only in 1918 that the present diocese of Coventry was created.

## Major Buildings

The county's most substantial pre-Conquest masonry structure is the central tower of Wooten Wawen church, a rare survivor from Warwickshire's predominantly timber and largely lost body of Anglo-Saxon architecture. Warwickshire has no cathedral. The most important monastic church in the county, the Benedictine Abbey of St Mary's in Coventry, served as such for a time, and was rebuilt at some point after the Conquest, but was completely destroyed with the dismantling of the monasteries in the sixteenth century. Four other Benedictine houses for men were founded in the county in the eleventh to twelfth centuries, at Monks Kirby, Wolston, Alcester and Alvecote, but nothing survives above ground of their original churches. Warwickshire was well-endowed with Benedictine nunneries. No fewer than five were founded in the twelfth century but comparatively little of them has survived. Of Henwood, near Solihull, nothing remains and at Wroxall and Pinley, nothing of twelfth-century date. Polesworth, a pre-Conquest house refounded in the twelfth century, has a Norman arcade and cloister doorway and Nuneaton has fragments of the Romanesque crossing and cloister. Of three Cistercian abbeys founded in the county in the twelfth century, there are no remains of that date at Merevale, a few intriguing details at Stoneleigh, while at Combe the Norman chapter house façade survives. Three twelfth-century houses of Augustinian canons were established but only excavated traces of Romanesque Kenilworth remain and nothing of the original period at either Arbury or Studley.

## Lesser Buildings

The proportion of Warwickshire's medieval churches retaining Norman fabric — just 83 from a total of 212 — is particularly low which is perhaps an indication of the county's subsequent prosperity and ability to rebuild later in the Middle Ages. A handful of Warwickshire's Romanesque parish churches have survived relatively intact, for example Berkswell, Beaudesert and Stoneleigh and, on a smaller scale, Ryton-on-Dunsmore and Wyken. Many more retain portions of Norman fabric: nave arcades on cylindrical piers, as at Bickenhill and Butler's Marston; chancel arches, as at Barton-on-the-Heath, Burton Dasset and Corley. Norman doorways are numerous but none so elaborately carved as that at St Nicholas, Kenilworth. The county has very few decorated tympana, of which Halford, with its seated winged figure, displaying an extended scroll between outstretched arms, is the most notable. Without a surviving Norman cathedral or major monastic church, it is hardly surprising that Warwickshire also lacks Romanesque architectural sculpture of great importance. It does possess, however, one carved Romanesque object of very high quality, namely the font at St Peter and St Paul's, Coleshill. With its delicate treatment of figures, foliage and drapery, the Coleshill font stands alone in the county. Two other fonts, at Oxhill and Stoneleigh, also bear figures set beneath arcades but are not otherwise comparable. A third, at Curdworth, has figures and intriguing subject matter, but is crudely rendered by comparison. The majority of Warwickshire's Romanesque fonts are cylindrical, often tapering toward the base, and sparsely decorated. It is hardly possible to identify the work of specific Romanesque sculpture workshops in the context of Warwickshire, when relatively little from the period has survived, but the three relief panels bearing a very similar representation of the Lamb and the Cross, occurring at Tysoe, Whitchurch and Studley, all located in that part of southern Warwickshire lying within the medieval diocese of Worcester, may well represent the output of one such team.

Jill A. Franklin, 2003.

## Select Bibliography

- J.C. Cox, *Little Guides: Warwickshire*. London 1930, 3rd ed.
- W. Dugdale, *Antiquities of Warwickshire*, 1656 revised, W. Thomas, London 1730.
- F.T.S. Houghton, 'Warwickshire Fonts', *Trans. of the Birmingham Archaeological Soc.*, Vol. 43, 1919, 41–61.

- N. Pevsner and A. Wedgwood, *The Buildings of England: Warwickshire*. Harmondsworth 1966.
- M. Salter, *The Old Parish Churches of Warwickshire*, Malvern 1992 *The Victoria History of the Counties of England: Warwickshire*, 8 vols, London 1904–1969.