

Drunken Bidford

The story goes that William Shakespeare was once involved in a drinking match in Warwickshire. Roused from his stupor the following day, the bard neatly rounded up his impression of the little villages close to his place of birth:

Piping Pebworth, Dancing Marston,
Haunted Hillboro, Hungry Grafton,
Dodging Exhall, Papist Wixford,
Beggarly Broom and Dunken Bidford.

The rhyme did not appear in print until the Gentleman's Quarterly published it in 1749. But it is, of course, perfectly true, like all the other Shakespearean tales: the poaching, the womanizing and the Catholic leanings, as well as not having ever existed at all.

It's an intriguing little poem, nonetheless, with a pedigree of three centuries at least, even if it's unlikely ever to feature in the collected works. It tells of two hamlets - Grafton and Broom - struggling to make ends meet (or meat), whilst another was happy to carouse late into the night. Why was Bidford so prone to alcoholic excess ?

Bidford-on-Avon - with its population of some 5,000 people - is the largest of all this catalogue of villages, and probably by definition to be considered as a town. It had, after all, a chartered market and an annual fair from way back in the 12th Century, most likely held in that bit of the town to the north of the parish church, where the High Street widens markedly.

A celebrated and ancient bridge, battered and bruised by the centuries and by over-ambitious lorry drivers, delivered trade and customers across the Avon to the town. It's still a perilous crossing today, despite the traffic lights.

Bidford's market had become defunct by the end of the 18th Century, overtaken by the larger one in neighbouring Stratford, which was only seven miles away. But what it contributed to the course of the town's history and development remains.

Where there is a market, there are farmers and traders, and there is also thirst, and the need for sustenance, and perhaps, overnight accommodation. Even today Bidford has more pubs than the all the other villages in the list combined. On a recent visit I counted four, all lined up along the High Street. If you're considering one of those alcohol-free days recommended by the government, better to head somewhere else.

Ironically, however, the most striking public building in the town, despite its Shakespearean associations, is no longer a public house. The Bard is rumoured to have done some of his drinking in The Falcon, a large, three-storey building that dominates what was once the market-place. At least part of The Falcon hails back to the 16th Century, though its timber framing is cunningly concealed behind stonework and a high garden wall.

Richard Churchley, in his excellent little pamphlet on the Bidford drinking houses, catalogues a succession of Falcon publicans and brewers through to the end of the 18th Century, the first of whom - James Copland - might conceivably have pulled a pint for William Shakespeare.

But when the market folded, so too, it seems, did The Falcon. By the 19th Century it had become, first the parish workhouse and then the Bidford Institute and Working Men's Reading Room. Today it houses apartments. Lucky residents, I say.

Running a public house has not always been a full-time occupation, at least if there was a family to help out behind the bar. A couple of The Falcon's landlords were also farmers, and doubling up was likewise true of The Frog, or Frog and Bullrush, as it was called until recently.

As the name suggests, The Frog sits directly on the riverbank, with a fine view from the restaurant across the Avon and the river meadows. The earliest owners - of what was first called The Boat Inn - were wharfingers, and ran a coal wharf down by the water.

It's easy to forget that the Warwickshire Avon was once a busy trading river. Yet the remains of a little jetty down by Bidford church, and the locks half a mile upstream, remind us of its former commercial importance. No doubt The Boat once watered those busy freight-men, before other modes of transport took over, and coal barges were eased out by pleasure craft. The landlord of the pub was quick to cash in on the new traffic, and changed the name of the place, sometime in the 1870s, to The Pleasure Boat instead.

Unlike The Falcon, The Frog is still very much in business today, as is The Bull's Head, back in the old market-place. There's nothing grand or pretentious about The Bull's Head. It has stood its ground while the Bidford around it has steadily Cotswoldified. (A few doors down the street the local bread shop now calls itself an "artisan boulangerie".)

Indeed, the Bull's name may reflect the earlier use of the premises as a butcher's, and the earliest identifiable owner combined the two livings. The slaughterhouse was still there in the 1860s, a decade or more after the place switched from meat to beer.

And so the beer, much like the River Avon itself, continues to flow through Bidford, many centuries after Shakespeare or "Anon" gave it the label we are familiar with. And after a few pints, perhaps even the famous bridge does not look quite as bendy.