

Stewponey

Back in the middle years of the last century, and for some time before that too, a day trip from the Black Country meant a bus ride to Kinver Edge. Here the good folk of Dudley and Wolverhampton could stretch their legs and picnic, just as energetically as their neighbours did at the Lickeys.

Time passes slowly, when you're a child, and I vividly recall that seemingly endless journey, and my impatience to be out and about. One landmark signified that the travelling was almost done, the point where the bus began its last descent towards Kinver. It was the Stewponey Inn, or, to give it its full and grander title, the Stewponey and Foley Arms Hotel.

The Stewponey stood at the junction of the A449 and the A458. Alas and alack, there is no such way-marker there today. Back in 2002 a heartless property developer bought up the Stewponey, razed it to the ground and turned the site into up-market apartments instead. A little of my past, and that of many others, I'm sure, was deleted at that moment.

A curious name had the Stewponey. It sounds like someone had taken the horse-meat scandal to a whole new level. But as far as I know, no ponies were harmed in the making of this story, and a fair few still graze the fields nearby.

Antiquarians have wrestled long and unconvincingly to uncover the origins of this unique name. Some say that it harks back to a Spanish port by the name of Estepona, and that the inn was opened by a soldier who had fought in the Peninsula War. Others suggest that the name was a corruption of the Latin phrase *Stouri pons* - bridge over the Stour - which lay nearby.

What we can say, at the very least, is that the name goes back as far as the mid-18th Century, and probably further.

Rev. Sabine Baring-Gould opted for the first of these derivations. You will have heard of the good reverend, if only for the fact that he wrote the words of "Onward Christian Soldiers", among many other hymns. Sabine-Gould was also a minor novelist, and happened to set one of his tales (published in 1897) in exactly this spot.

Bladys of the Stewponey is the unlikeliest of historical novels. The eponymous Bladys is the unfortunate daughter of the landlord of the Stewponey, who is named as the prize in a bowling competition. The match is won by the local hangman, who whisks the unhappy Bladys off to be his wife.

But Bladys escapes his clutches, and hides out in one of the famous Kinver rock houses. The novel then becomes a tale of good against evil (not surprising, given the author), with enough black magic and dastardly deeds to keep a popular readership on the edge of their seats.

Bladys of the Stewponey would have been consigned to that great library of forgotten novels, had not someone decided to turn it into a silent film. Released in 1919, this must be one of the first films ever to feature the West Midlands as a location.

Directed by L. C. MacBean and starring Marguerite Fox as the heroine, much of the film's funding came courtesy of a Kinver-based industrialist called Benjamin Priest, who owned a nuts and bolts factory in Old Hill. Many local residents were roped in as extras. The movie got a few outings at the local cinemas (of which there were not many) before disappearing into a can forever.

Sadly for the then landlord of the Stewponey, his free publicity stretched no further than the film's title. The director chose as his location the considerably more picturesque Whittington Inn a little further down the A449. And that fine building - a Grade 1 house of the 15th Century - still lives to tell the tale.

Nevertheless, the real Stewponey Inn eloquently tells the story of our transport revolution over the past couple of centuries. In its early days it would have profited considerably from the thirsty canal trade, for across the road is the junction of two of the Black Country's coal-carrying waterways. The Staffs & Worcs came this way in 1766, to be joined shortly afterwards (in 1779) by the Stourbridge Canal. From the Stourton junction the boats could head for Birmingham or Wolverhampton.

By the early 20th Century, the day-trippers from the Black Country could have taken the Kinver Light Railway here, which passed immediately in front of the Stewponey. But the heyday of Kinver's electric tram was brief, and the tracks were taken up in 1930.

By the inter-war period the Stewponey was about to enter a new era as a roadhouse pub, a vast and welcoming car park occupying the place where the railway tracks had once been. Rebuilding took place in 1936, and the new inn came complete with a lido or outdoor swimming pool for the hardy day-trippers. Swimming had been the one outdoor amenity that Kinver Edge could not offer.

But time caught up with that innovation too. By the early 1960s the Stewponey lido lay empty and neglected, as did similar pools across the West Midlands, the fashion for outdoor pools having been overtaken by holidays at Weston and Rhyl. And with this the old wayside inn entered its dotage.

Kinver Edge stands as it always did, and quiet flows the canal to Stourbridge and Wolverhampton. But the Stewponey remains only as a novel, a film and block of flats. Sorry, I think you're supposed to call them apartments.