



*St. Stephen's Gate House Chapel.
Image from Forge Mill Needle
Museum*



*The demolition of Bordesley Abbey,
Image from Forge Mill Needle Museum*



*Forge Mill across the mill pond.
Image from Forge Mill Needle Museum*

Before the 12th century, Redditch did not really exist. The area being on the fringe of Feckenham Forest and the river Arrow meandered through its flood plain with wide marshy areas on its banks whilst Tardebigge was the nearest community of any importance.

It was to this area that a party of 12 monks came from Garendon in Leicestershire and found a daughter abbey. They were granted land by Waleran de Beaumont, Worcester in the area known as Bordesley. These were Cistercian white monks of the order that had broken away from the Benedictine order to return to the simple life originally laid down by St Benedict. These were skilled artesians, water engineers and the waterlogged site was ideal for their purpose.

They cleared trees from the area and used the timber to build their first wooden gatehouse. They set about diverting the course of the river Arrow cutting off the marshy areas and its source of water and so draining the area. They established fish ponds to provide food and constructed water driven iron forges to shape the tools the monks needed to supply surrounding areas.

Gradually as the area drained they constructed a pebble raft as foundation for the abbey complex. This followed traditional designs with not only accommodation for the brothers to live and worship but for visitors in a nearby hospital complex. A community grew up around the abbey gates and a second place of worship, St Stephens Chapel was built aside the gate.

A network of farms or granges was established providing income from rents and farming and grew to the eighth wealthiest Abbeys in the country. Some time in the period it is rumored that Batchley Brook which ran down from Tardebigge, south of the Abbey site to the Arrow picked up a reddish tint from the iron content of the clay and so was often called the red ditch. Soon the name stuck and Redditch at last had a name.

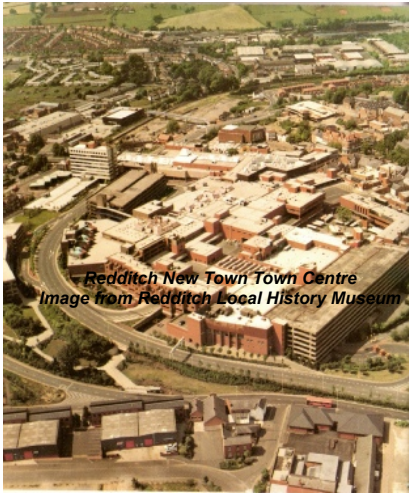
But life in the Abbey was never easy, subsidence and collapse necessitated constant rebuilding whilst plague visited the area at least twice causing the number of brothers to fall back down to around twenty. They lost the iron mills to fire and floods and the importance of the Abbey declined.

The final blow of course came as a result of Henry VIII's dispute with Rome which dissolved the monasteries and pensioned off their inhabitants. Soon the Abbey was razed to the ground, the stone being robbed out for local building and the wood from the roof to support wars overseas.

The community around the gatehouse struggled on for many years but gradually moved away to higher ground about a mile south of the site. In 1803 the local residents petitioned Parliament and authority was given to build a new church in the center of the new community. St. Stephens gatehouse chapel was now plundered for stone for a new building which, in 1805, was rebuilt again with public subscription to what is today in Church Green.

In the 18th and 19th centuries through a combination of factors needle making began to flourish in the villages south of Redditch. The arrow provided power to many water driven mills and gradually these converted from grain and iron working to the lucrative process of needle scouring. By the end of the 1800's needle making had consolidated in the town of Redditch and some 95% of the world's consumption of needles originated from the area. Soon the needle makers diversified into fish tacking, fishing tackle and springs and notions, engineered metal products of all kinds. Redditch was now an industrial town and cycle, motor cycle, battery manufacture grew alongside the established light engineering.

World war two saw another development with not only local established firms increasing production to support the war effort but new armament, gun and component factories came to the area with a corresponding influx of skilled workers. Sadly the immediate post war boom turned into a slow decline in the late fifties and early sixties and there was a risk of Redditch going into another period of decline. The fate took a hand once again and in 1964, after years of debate, an order was



designating Redditch a “New Town”. So the next twenty years saw an unpa programme on investment, building and promotion of the area with the Devel Corporation delicately balancing new jobs to housing.

The Development Corporation, sometimes to the dismay of local residents, se their task to quadruple the size of the town. Luckily they resisted the temptatio time to build upwards and Redditch was spared the ill-fated tower blocks so mar endured in the 1960's.

They also sympathetically built the new housing estates maintaining natural f where possible and a road system that is still the envy of many fifty years. However, in Hindsight, the corporation did not get every decision right and the local community centres in Woodrow, Church Hill, Winyates and Walkwood h stood the test of time.

Perhaps the most controversial decision that had to face was the siting of th centre. They had two options, redevelop the existing town centre or build a new a new site. Either option was bad news for the existing town centre and in hindsi redevelopment of the existing town centre was the lesser of the two evils. A ne centre would have meant the slow decline of areas such as Evesham Street an incentive to redevelop surround streets. These streets were dated and in decli would have been lost in due course anyway. So the redevelopment of the E Street and the surrounding area ensured that adjacent areas such as Church Gre Market place survived. Only the redevelopment of Alcester Street has proved mistake where we now have characterless modern buildings where moderni ones would have better suited the town.

As we move past the 50th anniversary of the designation of Redditch as a ne does the need to ensure Redditch Town Centre is more than an enclosed M higher on the councils agenda. The beauty of Church Green on a warm sun needs to be extrapolated to an inviting community & family friendly area evenings. This is the next challenge for a town that has had to adapt and chang needs of its residents change.