

A SHORT HISTORY OF CHELVEY

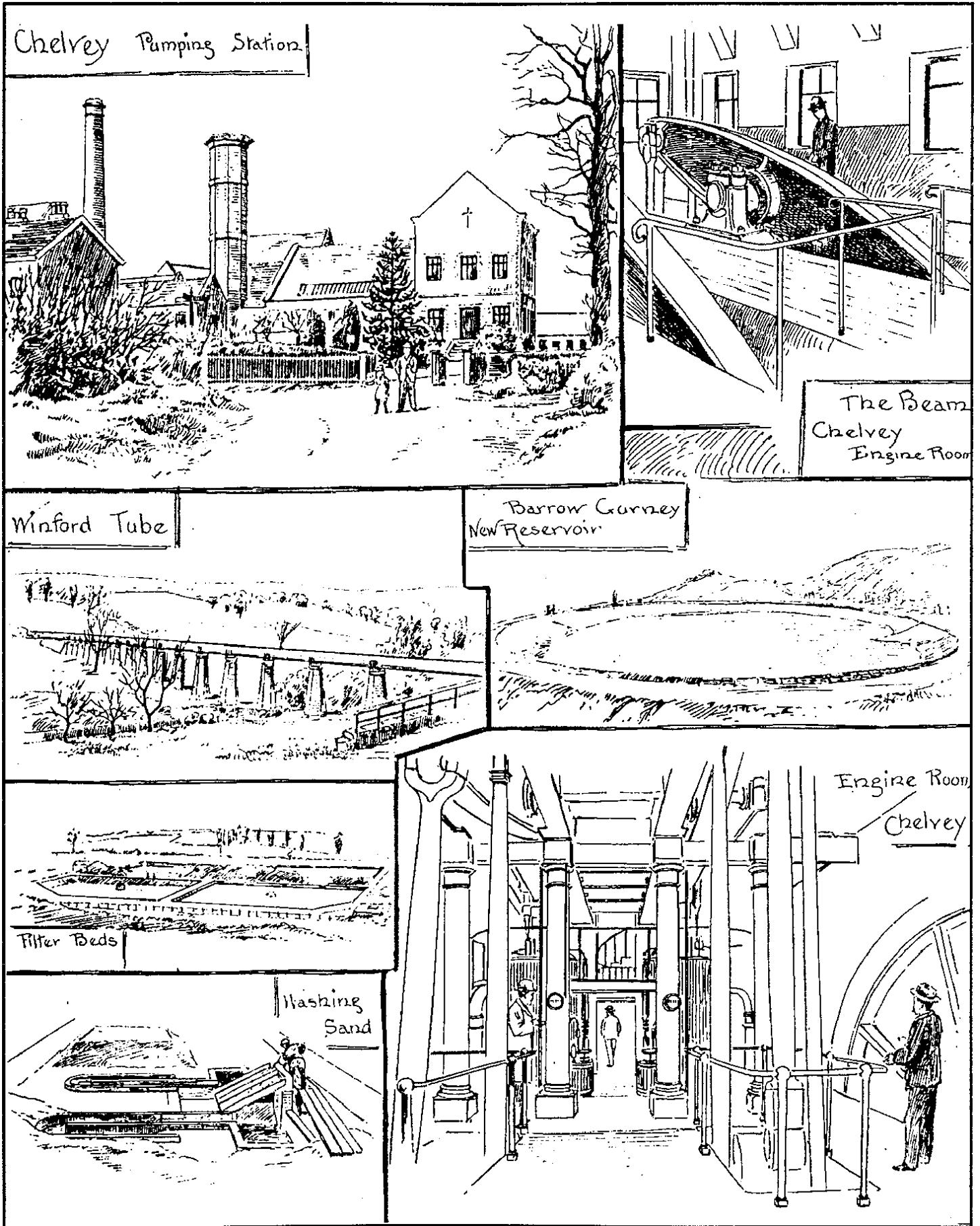
by

Norma Knight



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A SHORT HISTORY OF CHELVEY

The ancient, small parish of Chelvey (about 450 acres) lies 8 miles south-west of Bristol. It is bounded by Brockley to the south and west, Nailsea to the north and Backwell to the east. It contained two manors, Chelvey and Midgell.

The first written references to Chelvey and Midgell are in Domesday Book, but the names themselves indicate an earlier origin. Both are Old English names: Chelvey means a 'calf farm,' while Midgell, it has been suggested, was a midge-infested nook. The evidence for the origin of these two settlements before the Conquest is re-inforced by the dedication of the church to Saint Bridget. She was an Irish saint, reputed to have been baptised by St. Patrick, and a worker of miracles, including turning a bath-full of water into beer. Although her actual existence has been questioned, her cult had become widespread in Ireland, where she is known as St. Bride, and spread to other areas of Celtic influences in Wales and the West Country. There is another church dedicated to St. Bridget at Brean.

It would seem, therefore, that two thriving independent communities existed by the time the Normans arrived in England. Domesday Book records that in 1066 Midgell was held by a Saxon called Aelmar and Chelvey by Thorkell the Dane, who also held Backwell. Aelmar held land extensively in Somerset, but both he and Thorkell had disappeared by 1086. In the majority of cases, the holders of land in

1066 were replaced by Normans, but in the case of these two manors both were succeeded by Saxons, so it is possible that the original owners had died in the 20 years which had elapsed since the defeat of the Saxons under Harold at Hastings, rather than been dispossessed. The two new tenants were Leofwin in Midgell and Rumold in Chelvey, but both had Norman overlords. In Chelvey Rumold held the land from Matthew of Mortagne while Leofwin held Midgell from the powerful Bishop of Coutances, who was also the overlord of the adjoining manor of Backwell. All this may seem of little other than antiquarian interest, but there was a practical and long-lasting repercussion. In 1066 Thorkell held both Chelvey and Backwell. They were separate manors but may well have been farmed in common to some extent, especially in the low-lying meadow lands, where it was the practice to let the animals graze freely after the hay crop had been removed. But after 1066, with new and different overlords, it must have become necessary to mark the boundary between the two manors more clearly, and this possibly explains the curious zig-zag of the Backwell/Chelvey boundary which persists to this day, as a fair division of the valuable meadow land.

There is another entry in Domesday Book to the effect that the Bishop of Coutances held a virgate of land (about 30 acres) which had been taken from Chelvey, but whether this became part of his manor of Backwell or of Midgell is not clear.

What is evident from the remaining details recorded in 1086 is that the manors were small but independent of each other. There were 9 families in Chelvey and 6 in Midgell. In 1086 Chelvey was valued at 40 shillings and Midgell at 20 shillings.

One other effect of the arrival of the Normans is preserved in the church. Although there is no mention of a church in Domesday Book, that signifies only that it was not taxable. It is most likely that there was a small wooden structure which the new Norman overlords rebuilt in stone in the next century. From that church the south doorway is the main surviving feature. The font is also Norman, but re-cut later. In the following centuries later lords of the manor made further alterations and erected the simple tower in Perpendicular style in the 14th century.

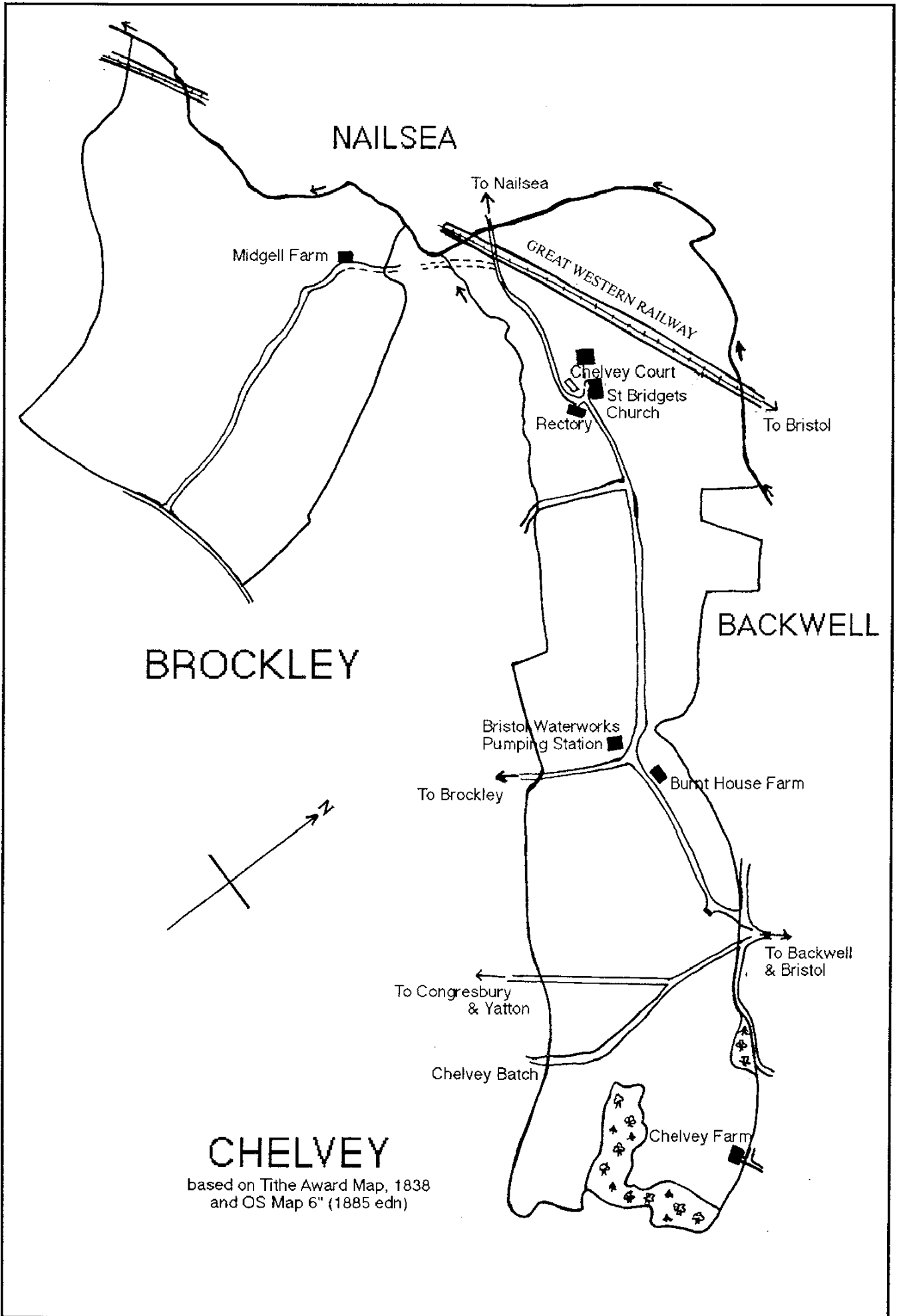
The twin foundations of medieval life, church and manor, had become established. By the 13th century the manor was in the hands of the Acton family and subsequent those of the Percevals. The population in 1327 included 9 families of sufficient wealth to be assessed to pay tax. The source of wealth was pastoral farming, which was organised by the manor steward. All problems of law and order in day to day affairs were judged in the manor court. The lord of the manor, as patron of the church, appointed the Rector to office. At some unknown date, Midgell has been absorbed into Chelvey. It was, in most ways, a self contained community.

The first major break in this pattern came

in the 16th century. It was not solely because Henry VIII wanted an heir that the Reformation took place in England. For many years people had criticised the Church, condemning the clergy for not being well enough educated, bishops for their lack of interest and the church itself for flaunting its great wealth. In a small quiet parish such as Chelvey with Midgell such momentous events as the Dissolution of the Monasteries could only have had a minor effect. The breaking of the link with Rome, the designation of Henry as supreme head of the church on earth in England and Ireland and above all changes in ritual must have been almost incomprehensible. We have no details of the reaction of the people to the removal of the rood screen and all the images, the lights, vestments and processional books, crosses etc. which every medieval church had. The churchwardens of Yatton have left detailed accounts which reveal how much was destroyed there.

The coming of the Bible in English was generally welcomed. Thomas Cromwell wanted all churches to have a copy and tried to fix the price at 10s. The printers wanted 13s 4d. At Yatton the churchwardens paid 9s 6d plus 8d for a chain. If Chelvey could not afford its own Bible, then it was not too far from the rector at Chelvey at least to see the new book.

Ralph Stakelyns had been appointed Rector of Chelvey before the Reformation, in 1517. The fact that he stayed until 1554 does indicate that he was in sympathy with the reforming movement. When he





St Bridget's Church, Chelvey 2006



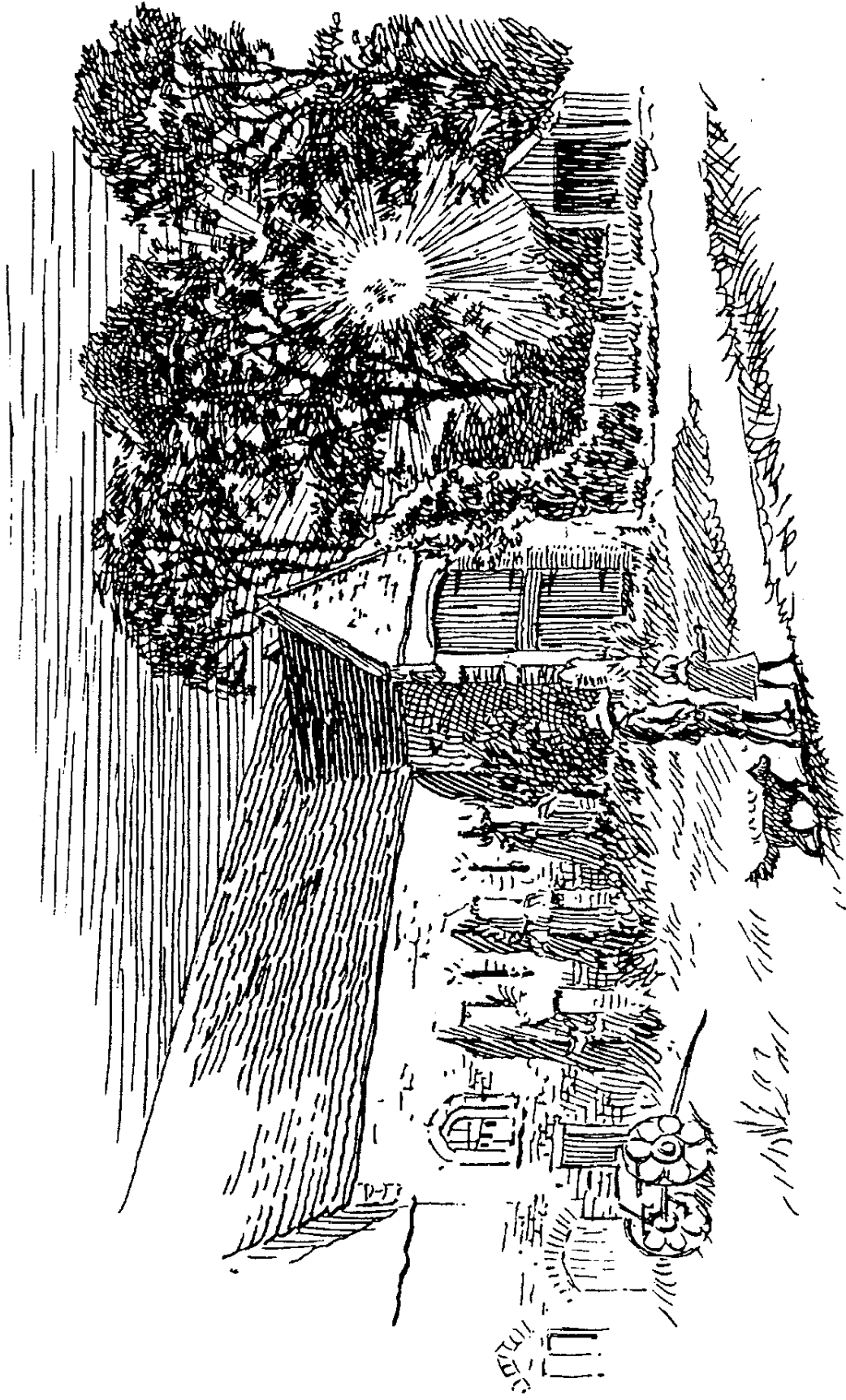
St Bridgets Church, Chelvey c1909

(M J Tozer Collection)



St Bridgets Church, Chelvey 2006

The Old Barn, Chelvey, Som.



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departed in 1554 it was because he had been ejected from the living following the return to power of the "Romish party" under the protection of the Queen Mary. As in other parishes there was then a restoration of Roman Catholic ritual but in the five years of Mary's reign it could not have been a full revival and in 1558 Elizabeth's compromise settlement ensured stability of practice for the best part of 100 years.

The one early reform which did succeed was the regulation of baptisms, marriages and burials. From 1538 every parish was required to register all baptisms etc. These early registers were quite often entered on separate sheets and many were eventually lost. In 1598 clergy were ordered to make all entries in a properly bound book and to copy into that book all surviving earlier lists. This explains why in many parishes the early entries are comparatively easy to read, as they were a fair copy done at leisure. After 1598 the writing usually degenerates into an almost unreadable scribble. Chelvey's registers survive from 1574 and make fascinating reading. They are among the earliest records of the ordinary people of the parish. Perhaps because this was a small parish there is frequently extra information provided. For example:

Item

Harvey the sonne and heire apparent unto Walter Strange gentlemen and of Elizabeth his wief was borne Sunday between the houres of two and three in the Morning being the xxj daye of February and was baptised the xxvth

daye of the same moneth of februarye 1579 and in the xxii yeare of the Reigne of Queene Elizabeth.

Item

Edward the sonne of Walter Strange and Elizabeth his wife was born monday between fower and five of the clock beinge the nynthe day of Sept. 1583 and was baptised the xvth day of the same monethe.

Mary Machill servant unto John Saunders of Chelvey was buried the xxviii of June 1584.

Names of Rectors, some not otherwise recorded, appear:

1583

Thomas Harvye p'son of Chelvey was buried xii May in year above written.

Henrye Sherlakers p'son of Chelvey and Brockley was buried ix Sept. 1587.

One Rector, exceptionally, recorded his family history:

Harvye Davis sonne of Hughe Davis was baptised and buried in feb 1588.

Benedicte Davies was borne in the p'sonadge of Brockeleye anno 1592 Septembre 3 being frydaye about six o'clocke in ye morninge.

Isabelle Davies was borne in the p'sonadge of Chelveye anno 1593 Decembre the first being Saturday about sunset.

Doritie Davies was borne in the p'sonadge of Chelvey on Moondaye about sunset & was christened the 24 of August being Barthewe daye anno 1596.

Hugh Davies p'son of Chelveye father of the foresayed Benedict Izabelle & Doritie is the younger sonne of Ivan Davies the younger brother of John Davies & Robert Davies esquiers of Gwisaneye in the p'sh of Molde in the countie of Flint.

Pendragon Davies sonne of Benedict Davies bap 27 June 1618.

Benedict Davies buried 1 March 1618.

Hugh Davies parson of Chelvey was buried the 3 March 1619.

Pendragon was not the only unusual name. Caesar, Cassandra and Jornedence all appear in the earlier registers but only one Bridget.

Early in the 17th century came the next major change in the parish. The lord of the manor, John Aisse, sold Chelvey and Midgell to his brother-in-law Edward Tynte, member of a family of importance in several neighbouring parishes, including Backwell, Wrington and Wraxall.

Edward Tynte and his son, John, began a phase of family aggrandisement, improving the church and manor house and buying land in adjoining parishes. Where did they get their resources? Perhaps they were engaged in trade with the New

World, to which they had access through Edward's wife, Anne, whose brother, Sir Ferdinando Gorges, was involved in the New England Company. Edward and John began with the church, erecting a family pew and providing some new benches, relegating the old rough medieval ones to the back.

Despite the problems of the Civil War (the Tyntes were Royalists and as such liable to heavy fines) by the time Charles returned to power in 1660 John had begun the massive reconstruction of the manor house. John had married Jane Halswell who was heiress to her family estate at Goathurst and possibly he felt the need to improve his own house. However, when in turn their son, Halswell (later Sir Halswell Tynte) inherited both estates he abandoned Chelvey in favour of Goathurst, where he built a new house in the latest style. The manor house at Chelvey (Chelvey Court) began its long decline into obscurity.

The 18th century began with another episode in the long battle against the sea. Chelvey, being so low-lying, was always in danger of inundation. By the 14th century a Commission of Sewers had been created for Somerset, with responsibility for the maintenance of the drainage ditches and sea walls. Sir Richard Acton of Chelvey was one of the first recorded Commissioners. Most recently, in 1606, a great storm had, breached the defences. Kingston Seymour had been under water for 10 days and water in the church there had risen to a depth of 5 feet. Then in 1703 there was another great storm.

Daniel Defoe in his 'Tour through Great Britain' noted that country people had 'set up marks upon their houses and trees, with this note upon them: " Thus high the waters came in the great storm" : " thus far the great tide flowed up in the last violent tempest" ; and the like.'

It may have been to confirm the restoration of the land to full use that Sir John Tynte conducted a survey of the manor in 1708. The map which resulted from this survey appears to be the earliest map of the manor and shows that Midgell was no longer a single unit but was divided between a number of tenants. By 1730 it was once more under a single tenant farmer, Stephen Bennet, and comprised about 160 acres. Chelvey Court Farm, tenanted by William Cottle (the Cottle Family were still there in the 20th century), covered about 168 acres. New House tenement included a field called The Old House, the site of the present Burnt House Farm.

The 18th century was the great age of the antiquarian turned local historian and the first contemporary descriptions of parishes appear. The history of Somerset published by John Collinson, vicar of Long Ashton, appeared in 1791. Collinson relied on his friend Edmund Rack, who had ridden through every parish in the county, for notes on the main features of each parish. The original notes were lost for many years and have only recently come to light. Some are in the Bristol Record Office but those for this area are in private hands in Backwell and are here reproduced for the first time.

" CHELVEY is a small Parish lying one mile to the Right of the 7th Milestone in the Road from Bristol to Yatton, being 7 miles west from the City of Bristol... It contains 9 houses & abt 50 inhabitants. Near the church is the Court House, a very large old stone structure consisting of more than 50 Rooms formerly the seat of the Tynte family. It had a Park, Warren & Swanery, all now appropriated to other uses. In this house are many good rooms well wainscoted with Handsome Cornices Gilt & Elegant Ceilings: but they are now all Lock'd up & the windows blinded: only so much of it being inhabited as is necessary, for the Farmers use who lives in it... The Church is a mean Gothic building... The pulpit is very mean & has a very old cushion & cloth fringed. The pillars that support the Arches between the nave & the Ayle are clustered & painted to imitate marble... There are 2 Doors 11 windows & 1 tolerable & 5 very ordinary Pews; all of very old wainscot & much decayed being not painted. Here is an old plain stone font painted Lead Colour but no singers Gallery or Railings around the Com'n Table.

In several windows is some old Painted Glass much injured. This church is badly paved, damp, & kept very dirtily particularly the Chancel which belongs to the Revd Mr Parsons of Bridgwater."

The picture of stagnation painted by Rack continued into the 19th century. There was one major development: the building of a new road (now the A370) through the parish. Prior to this the main road to Yatton has been through Chelvey Batch.

The construction of the new road involved the demolition of a farmhouse. A very short stretch of the railway from Bristol to Tauton passed through the north end of the parish, close to Chelvey Court, but otherwise there was little change. In 1839, out of a total of 450 acres, 273 acres were still used for meadow and pasture. The Rector's living was worth £100 a year and in 1840 it was reported that at Chelvey there was "seldom a sufficient number of communicants for the Communion to be administered". (It is interesting to note that there appear to have been 15 households in Chelvey and Midgell at the time of Domesday Book, 9 in the 14th century,

and only 7, including the Rectory, in the mid-19th century.)

Between 1865 and 1867 Bristol Waterworks erected a pumping station in Chelvey Lane.

In the 1880s the biggest change occurred. From 25 March 1885 Chelvey was annexed to Brockley for civil purposes and over 800 years of independence ended. Ecclesiastical union did not follow until well into the 20th century, so it may have been as an assertion of independence that the crumbling church was restored and re-opened on 3 April 1888 at a cost of over £500.

This short account of some aspects of the history of Chelvey to C.1900 is the slightly amended text of a talk given at the Annual Parish Meeting at Chelvey on 4th April, 1995.

SOURCES

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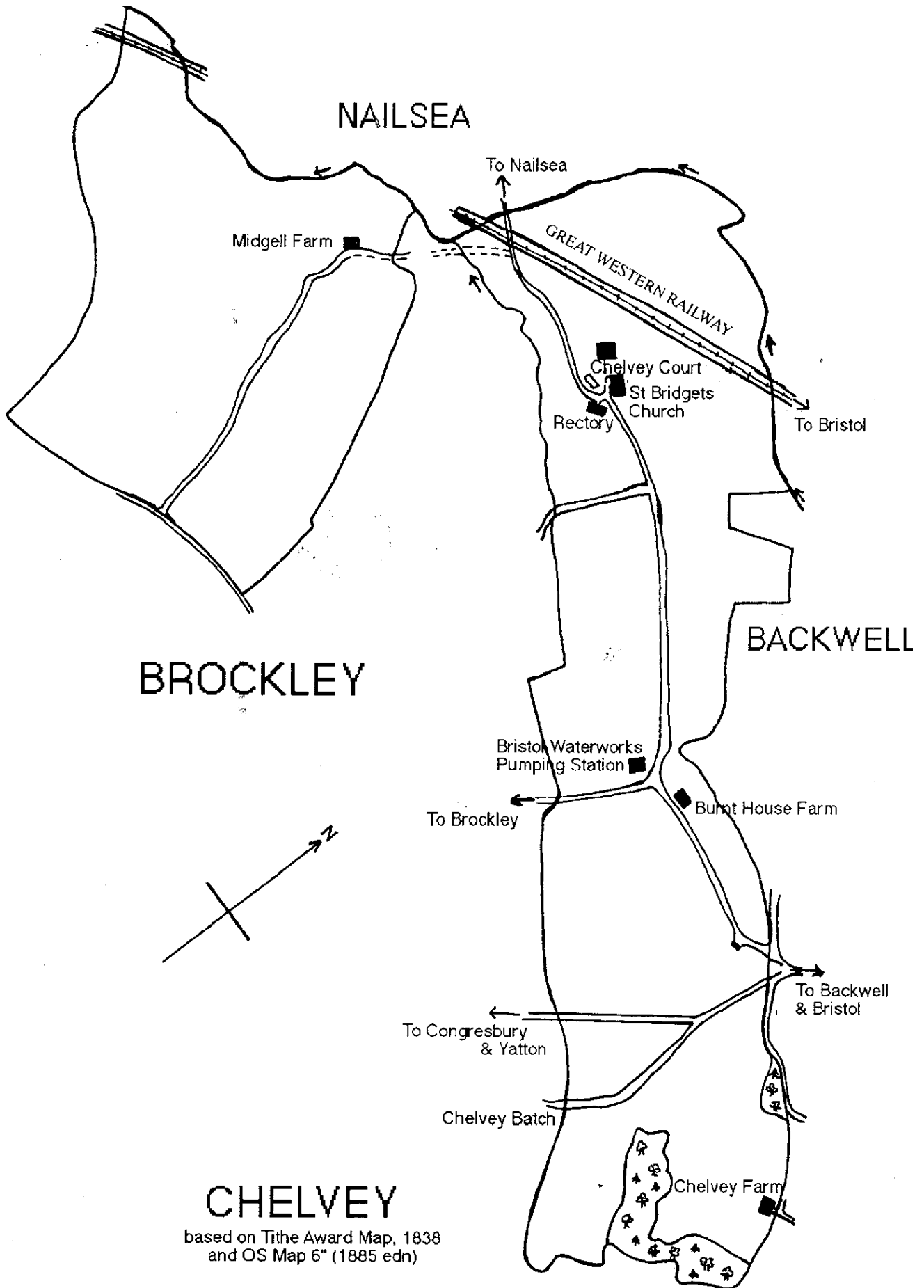
DD/S/WH; DD/RN (Kemys-Tynte papers)

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The Restoration of Chelvey Church, 1888 (booklet)

OS Map 6" (1885 edn.)

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CHELVEY
based on Tithe Award Map, 1838
and OS Map 6" (1885 edn)