

Beginnings

A move from city to rural area means a period of readjustment for any family and so it was with ours when we prepared to relocate from Warwickshire to Leicestershire in the late 1970s. The novelty of renovating house and garden, finding schools and services, best routes to work, closing down the home of nearly twenty years amongst family and friends – all this absorbed energy and focussed the mind. The actual moving coincided with the worst winter experienced for decades and for nearly three months we had to prove that we were made of the right stuff to survive the rigours of life in the country. Then came the freedom to explore and the nearest neighbours were welcoming. The years passed and gradually there was more time for socialising and enjoying the stories told around the coffee cups or wine glasses in each other's houses. We settled in. The realisation came gradually that our new home had no locus. The postal address was Coalville, two miles distant, as were Whitwick and Shepshed; the telephone number was a Loughborough one; a sign in a nearby road proclaimed Oaks In Charnwood. Describing our location to people we were told 'Oh you live on the Forest' or 'at the Oaks'. There were some eight or ten visible dwellings within walking distance and we became aware of others tucked away along tracks. There were no facilities for the residents of 'The Oaks' but there was a substantial Anglican church named after St James the Greater and an active Cistercian Monastery, the Abbey of Our Lady and St Bernard, or Mount St Bernard Abbey as it was more familiarly known. How did they spring to life in this rugged landscape with isolated dwellings? And a Parish Council had been inaugurated as long ago as 1894. These were passing questions while we made the most of the social life and enjoyed being directed to places and items of interest in the neighbourhood; it seemed there was a lot more to this place than first appeared.

In 1995 I took early retirement on medical grounds and a diminution of family responsibilities brought the opportunity for me to apply for and be accepted for a place on the Advanced Local History course at the University of Nottingham; the task for the first year was "The Landscape of your Parish/Village". Fellow students were from Nottinghamshire and the name Charley as a place was unknown to them but all had heard of, or visited, the Monastery. A 'Charley' search of the University's data base of printed sources drew nothing.

It was some months into the first year that a new tutor drew my attention to a final year student's dissertation entitled 'Church Planting in Charnwood Forest', an account of the origin of three Charnwood churches, one of which was St James the Greater in Oaks in Charnwood. Reading it, I was daunted by the depth of Terry Sheppard's research and his professional presentation.

In 1998 I duly completed the course with my dissertation 'Castle, Cloister and Criminal', an account of the 19th century Reformatories at Castle Howard and Mount St Bernard Abbey.

It was some two years later that Terry and I met.