

One of England's most complete & unchanged medieval wool villages

Bibury (pronounced as if it was spelt Bybury) is a medieval village that grew up next to the River Coln, in a sheltered location where the river cuts through the rolling downland that characterises this part of Gloucestershire.

There's evidence of human settlement in the area going back 2,500 years. On a hillside between Bibury and Ablington are the remains of an Iron Age hill fort known as Rawbarrow, covering eight acres. 500 years later, the Romans were here, perhaps not surprising given that nearby Cirencester was the second most important Roman town in England, after London. In the late 1800s the remains of a Roman villa and workshops were discovered next to the river near Bibury Mill. They were partially excavated in the 1980s.

But the beginnings of Bibury as we know the village today were in the late Saxon period, around 800, when Wilfrith, Bishop of St Mary's Priory in Worcester, granted land by the river Coln to Earl Leppa and his daughter Beage. One explanation of how the name Bibury evolved is that it derived from Beagan-byrig, or Beaga's enclosure. Another explanation is that it derives from the old English 'bece' or 'beke' (a stream or river) and 'berie' (a flat piece of ground). The location of the church, on a choice piece of flat land in a loop of the river, certainly fits with this theory.

The word 'beck' is still used for a stream or small river in some areas of Northern England.

A big attraction of the new settlement's valley-floor location would undoubtedly have been the shelter from the prevailing winds, the numerous fresh water springs near the river, and the river itself as a source of fresh fish. Even today, the River Coln is noted for its fishing, notably for Brown Trout.

The majority of the houses in Bibury village centre (around the church and close to the river) are on the national Statutory List of Buildings of Special Architectural or Historic Interest. The village centre has been a Conservation Area since 1971; and the whole village sits in a National Landscape (formerly AONB).

Riding the wave of the medieval English wool boom

The story of the village from its foundation to the late medieval period very much echoes the story of the Cotswolds' medieval wool industry. The highly-regarded wool from the Cotswold sheep that were kept on the open downland surrounding the village provided the raw material for high-grade woollen broadcloth used in cloaks, military uniforms and weatherproof outer wear. Bibury shipped out raw wool and finished cloth to customers in England and northern Europe.

It was said by European weavers centuries at that time that "The best wool in Europe comes from Britain ... And the best wool in Britain comes from the Cotswolds." In the mid-1400s, when the English economy was booming, exports of raw wool and finished cloth accounted for 80% of total exports.

Two factors that helped England's wool industry were that the wolf had been wiped out in England some time in the 1300s or 1400s, and the country had been kept free of invading armies. "England ... alone in Europe, could afford to run vast flocks of sheep and so enjoyed a monopoly of the rich wool trade," wrote historian W. I Croome in 1964.

Wool was so important to the national economy that in the late 1600s when English wool production came under threat from imported fabrics including linen and silk, the Government enacted the 'Burial in Wool' acts. These mandated that the dead (apart from plague victims and the poor) must be buried in woollen shrouds. Non-compliance incurred a fine of £5 – possibly equivalent to around £800 today.

It was Bibury's role as a wool village that shaped the village centre – the view that you get if you stand on the riverside pavement and look across the river. What looks today like a charming rural scene was in fact for several hundred years an industrial zone producing some of the finest cloth available.

See Bibury as a medieval wool factory

The source material for Cotswold woollen cloth was the celebrated Cotswold sheep. These were large, slow-growing animals that grazed on the open moorland surrounding Bibury.

At night the sheep were herded into protective enclosures known as 'cots' on the downs ('wolds') and that's how the name 'Cotswolds' came to be applied to this area of Gloucester.

The sheep were herded from the downs into the village for shearing. One of the possible routes descended from Arlington Down to the village centre, arriving right next to the building nowadays known as Arlington Row. This was originally a wool store built in 1380.

The resulting yarn was woven into 'broadcloth' in the three-storey building attached to Arlington Mill, the watermill powered by water from the River Coln. Nowadays the weaving house is known as Weaver's Cottage.

The mill itself was a dual-purpose corn milling and 'fulling mill'. The Domesday Book records that there was already a mill there as early as 1086.

The final stage in production was to transfer the rolls of cloth to the lines of wooden drying frames that covered Rack Isle. They were unrolled and attached to the frames by 'tenterhooks' that kept the cloth taut and prevented it from shrinking as it dried.

Incredibly, this cloth-making zone has changed very little since the medieval period. That's what makes the centre of Bibury so charming – and so important for our heritage.

Arlington Row and Rack Isle are owned by the National Trust. Arlington Mill and the attached Weaver's Cottage are now in private hands.

The end of the wool boom

By the 1600s the industry was consolidating around Stroud and other towns where fast-flowing rivers were able to power larger integrated mill buildings. Wool production in Bibury declined and

the village became once again mainly a farming village. The mill reverted to milling corn, and in 1913 even corn milling ceased altogether.

Location and travel

Bibury village is nowadays on the B4425 main road from Cirencester to Burford. The Coln is a tributary of the Thames, flowing into it at Lechlade.

The steep-sided valley and marshy riverside areas naturally constrained development. Settlement developed across the river in what became Arlington, once a separate village. The River Coln marked the boundary between the two.

Bibury was also a crossroads for ancient packhorse routes, including the 'Salt Way'. The small stone footbridge across the Coln at the eastern end of the village may originally have been constructed for packhorses. The main road bridge in front of the Swan Inn was built in the 1770s.

The Bibury Club

Bibury had a few decades of fame between 1800 and 1825 through the Bibury Club, one of the earliest private horse-racing clubs in the country. HRH the Prince of Wales (later King George IV) was member number 2.

"It was one of those exclusive bastions of privilege, restricted by invitation to nobles and gentlemen," wrote Michael Tanner.

Varied spellings

In historical documents Bibury appears as Becheberie, Begaberia, Bebury, Bibyry and Byberry.

A living heritage

Bibury is steeped in history. One of the objectives of Bibury Heritage is to bring these stories into the public domain and provide a reliable reference source for residents and visitors alike.

Those of us who live in the village are indeed fortunate to be the current custodians of such a heritage.

What people have said about Bibury

"Bibury is indeed a pretty village Not a cottage is in sight that is not worthy of the painter's brush; not a gable or a chimney that would not be worthy of a place in the Royal Academy". J. Arthur Gibbs, A Cotswold Village, 1918

"Bibury is surely the most beautiful village in England, lying down in the winding valley beside the clear Coln" William Morris (1834–1896)

Roger Staton January 2026

