



Bibury in the Cotswolds: 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 Beaganbyrig, 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)¹. 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. In the wider village more than 100 houses are on this list, out of a grand total of ????. The village centre has been a Conservation Area since 1971; and the whole village sits in a National Landscape (formerly AONB). There are currently around ??? inhabitants.

¹ 'A New History of Gloucestershire', 1779, by Samuel Rudder



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 exports².

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 ... a random assembly of old stone buildings around a riverside meadow ... was in fact for several hundred years an industrial zone producing some of the finest cloth available. The site handled all the processes from shearing the sheep to sending the finished cloth off by packhorse across the downs. And you can follow the flow of the work through the various stages of cloth production by looking at the surviving buildings.

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. Some people say the Cotswold breed of sheep

² ‘*The History of England*’, 2011, by Peter Ackroyd



arrived in England with the Romans; others say it was already here when the Romans arrived.

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 sight of the rolling hills dotted with sheep enclosures would have been very distinctive.

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 – the cottages that are photographed by tens of thousands of tourists every week. This was originally a wool store built in 1380. Some of the fleeces were exported as 'raw' wool along the packhorse routes to northern France and Belgium, some were spun to provide the yarn needed for local cloth-weaving. There's an ancient packhorse route running right past the building and up what is nowadays known as Awkward Hill onto the downs. It was only in the 17th century when wool exports were declining that the building was repurposed into a number of separate cottages.

There is no evidence of where the fleeces might have been combed and spun into yarn. In many wool villages the 'spinsters' were the village women who worked from home, so this may be what happened in Bibury.

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. It originally had internal doors leading directly into the mill.

The mill itself was a dual-purpose corn milling and 'fulling mill'. In this latter role, Fuller's Earth from alongside the river was used with water to clean, degrease and tighten up the newly-woven fabric. The finished cloth was smooth to the touch, weatherproof and insulating. Fulling was a very noisy mechanical process, involving beating the cloth with wooden mallets. The tall, buttressed mill building that stands there today dates back only to the 1600s, but 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, perhaps, 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. It must be one of the most complete and original medieval wool villages in England.



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

Woollen cloth production in Bibury and the Cotswolds had been rather a decentralised industry through medieval times. But by the 1600s the industry was consolidating around Stroud and other towns where fast-flowing rivers were able to power larger integrated mill buildings that could carry out all stages of cloth production. In part, this was a response to increased imports of new fabrics such as linen and silk, and lighter weight wool from Spain.

Wool production in Bibury, as in many Cotswold villages, declined. The village became once again mainly a farming village. The mill reverted to milling corn, and in 1913 even corn milling ceased altogether. Through the next century the mill building was adapted for other uses, including a rural museum. The village centre in the river area became a time capsule of a time when Bibury was a significant player in the Cotswolds' booming wool trade.

Location and travel

Bibury village is nowadays on the B4425 main road from Cirencester to Burford. But the Romans avoided this route when they were building their road network radiating out from Cirencester, because of the steep slopes into and out of the valley, and the marshy riverside. For the important east-west Akeman Street they chose a route offering an easier crossing point over the river Coln a few miles south of Bibury. Ironically, it was the less important road through Bibury that emerged as the major route in today's world, and the old Akeman street is mostly just a shadowy line on Ordnance Survey maps.

The Coln is a tributary of the Thames, flowing into it at Lechlade.

The steep-sided valley sides and marshy riverside areas had always posed a natural constraint on Bibury's expansion possibilities. The land to the north end of the village is naturally swampy, which would have naturally deterred development. The land to the south was owned initially by the Monasteries and later by wealthy landowners through to modern times, so unlikely to be developed.

The only way to go was across the other side of the river where a more gentle slope leads up towards what was originally known as Arlington Down. This where the medieval village of Arlington took shape; a separate village with its own shops, tradespeople etc.

The River Coln marked the boundary between the two villages. Nowadays Arlington is considered part of Bibury.



Going back to earlier times, there were numerous ancient packhorse routes that crisscross the Cotswolds, some covering very long distances. That was how goods were transported in the centuries before decent roads were built. Packhorse trains with a dozen or more horses roped together in a line must have been a regular sight on the Cotswold downs. One long-distance route that passed through Bibury was the 'Salt Way', used for transporting sacks of salt from the west midlands to Lechlade and London.

Bibury seems to have been something of a crossroads for these ancient routes, many of which are still visible today, and used as footpaths or bridle ways, or absorbed into the modern road network. There's a very pleasant one-day walk to be had following packhorse trails across the rolling downs. Dropping down into the shelter of Bibury village for the night must have been a welcome relief for the men and horses engaged in this trade after a wet & windy day traversing the downs. It is likely that the small stone footbridge across the Coln at the Eastern end of the main street was originally constructed as the crossing for packhorses. The main road bridge in front of the Swan Inn wasn't built until the 1770s.

Both Bibury and Arlington have given their names to towns in the USA. The township of Byberry on the outskirts of Philadelphia was given its name in the 1670s by four Quaker brothers from the Walton family who emigrated to America. They said that the land by the Delaware River reminded them of the village of their birth.

Arlington in Virginia USA got its name from Arlington, Gloucestershire when descendants of an Arlington family called Custis, who had emigrated to Virginia around 1650, named their large family home on the shores of the Potomac, Arlington House. After the Civil War the house became Government property, and some 200 acres of adjacent land later became the Arlington National Cemetery.

The Bibury Club

Bibury had a few decades of fame between 1800 and 1825, in the shape of the Bibury Club, the horse-racing world's top (and some say the first) private racing club in the country. It was exclusively 'invitation only' for gentlemen, who included Royalty, aristocrats and statesmen. HRH the Prince of Wales (who later became the Prince Regent, and then King George IV) was member number 2, and patron of the club.

It was 'one of those exclusive bastions of privilege, restricted by invitation to nobles and gentlemen', wrote Michael Tanner in his book *The Demon: The life of George Fordham*.



In '*A Cotswold Village*' J. Arthur Gibbs recounted how during race week the shopkeepers of Bibury would rent out their bedrooms to racegoers, while they themselves would sleep under their shop counters. The parties at the Swan Inn in Bibury became the stuff of legends.

The races were held on Bibury Racecourse, on the Downs near Aldsworth, three miles from Bibury. The club still exists, but hasn't been connected to Bibury village since the late 1820s. The old figure-of-eight course (new in 1800) is still shown on Ordnance Survey maps.

Varied spellings

In the centuries before widespread literacy and standardised spelling, the spelling of Bibury has varied. In the Domesday book it is referred to as 'Becheberie'. In an old monastic document from the late 13th Century there is a reference to the church of 'Begaberia'. In other monastic documents Bibury is spelt Bebury, and then Bibyry. The spelling Byberry has also been found in church documents from the 1600s.

A 'Monasterial' village that changed hands

Until 1130 the church and lands of Bibury belonged to the Abbey of Worcester. Then they passed to the Abbey of Osney near Oxford, which held it (and the dependent churches at Winson, Barnsley and Aldsworth) as a 'peculiar' until the Reformation (around 1540).

Bibury Church is formally known as St Mary's church, in recognition of St Mary's Priory in Worcester who had originally granted the land for the new village. It began as a Saxon church, built around the year 800. It was probably one of the first buildings to be erected in the village.

For the next 700 years it was expanded and modified as the village population grew. It can be regarded as a so-called 'wool church', financed by the wealth from the Cotswolds sheep and wool trades. Unlike most of the other Cotswold wool churches (Cirencester, Fairford, Northleach and Campden for example) it was not demolished and rebuilt in a grander style. It grew and evolved step by step.

The outline and some details of the Saxon church can still be seen, together with evidence of Norman, Transitional, Perpendicular and Early English additions, and some Victorian era changes. By 1500 the building was largely as it looks today.

Some writers have mentioned a monastery in Bibury, next to the church. But whether this is correct, or results from confusion over the church and lands belonging to Worcester Abbey or Osney Abbey for a total of some 750 years, has yet to be clarified.



As this brief overview suggests, Bibury is steeped in history, and there are many strands of this history that deserve researching. One of the objectives of Bibury Heritage is to bring these historic stories into the public domain, and provide a permanent reference source of interesting and reliable information about Bibury and its historic role in the Cotswold and national economy throughout the centuries.

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, author of ‘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), 19th century designer, poet and writer.

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*Illustrations to accompany text, taken from old black and white postcards
c.1900*

Arlington Mill
Swan Inn and stone bridge
Arlington Row
Buildings along riverside road
Cotswold Sheep

Roger Staton January 2026