

**Eminent Kidderminster Victorians – Joseph Kitely 1807-1880**

Of Joseph Kitely, it could be said, with just a pinch of hyperbole, that he might claim to share in Christopher Wren's celebrated epigraph 'if you seek a monument, look around you' (or in Kitely's case - take a short stroll around the town.) Kitely was closely associated with the construction of three buildings – two still standing – which might be said to still define the town. Even more significant is that each was constructed at a time that the town was facing a genuinely existential crisis. One was a very specific response to that very crisis – the others a recognition of the fact that even in times of crisis, you must try to shape the future to your ends.

Kitely also impressed his peers in being the very epitome of a self made man – one who by dint of application and endeavour rose from humble beginnings to the highest status the town could offer. What is just as significant is that Kitely himself knew well that access to education was the vital element of his own success and sought to ensure that route would be available to successor generations in the town.

Kitely was apprenticed to the carpet trade at fourteen but it would seem to have been a clerical worker rather than a weaver. He moved on to be overseer and by 1839 had raised sufficient capital to acquire looms and premises and set up on his own account. His reputation in his chosen trade was that in 1850 he was appointed one of Kidderminster's Local Commissioners for the Great Exhibition of 1851 (others included George Crump and James Hooman). Three examples of Kitely's own product were on display at the great event.

His temperament and abilities were also recognised that he was soon both a Town Councillor, elected as a Liberal, and Poor Law Guardian serving as such from the 1840s and found himself elected as mayor for the first time in 1852. He was to serve in this position on another two occasions through the 1850s. This was a period of the most dramatic change for the town and as Mayor he had to wrestle as technological change dramatically changed carpet manufacture and generated in its wake a huge social impact.

The technological change was the introduction of steam powered looms for the weaving of Brussels and Wilton carpets replacing handlooms on which Kidderminster had built its reputation. Ironically the steam powered looms had first been displayed by their American inventor at the Great Exhibition where Kitley and other Kidderminster weaving companies had confidently displayed their wares. Their pride in this success possibly distracted them from the implications of the new looms and they passed on the opportunity to adopt the new approach. The firm of John Crossley in Halifax were not so blasé, Crossley swiftly acquired the rights to use the new looms in England and left the Kidderminster men obliged to pay him for licenses when they realised the folly of their decision.

By the time Kitley was first elected mayor, the implications of the new looms for the town and for the handloom weavers in particular were fast becoming evident. It is striking then that one of Kitley's early initiatives was to call a town meeting to consider the creation of a new facility – a corn exchange and public rooms. The appetite for these public rooms was prompted by a sense that the town was falling behind in public facilities – more like an isolated village than of a town of 20,000 said Kitley at that meeting. The proposal was hugely supported and steps were swiftly put in train to set up a company to fund and manage the premises and to acquire a site on which to construct it. By December, as Kitley was beginning a second period as Mayor, the foundation stone for the building was laid.

Before then though he had had to manage the town through a bitter strike – and this had perversely been prompted by the move to build the much heralded Public Rooms. Representatives of the weavers at the initial public meeting had queried how the mill operatives might be able to avail themselves of the benefits the public rooms would bring.

Out of their anxiety a follow up event was convened to explore and resolve grievances between carpet masters and weavers which concluded with a spirit of fellow feeling. It was not to last – it left unresolved the issue of a wage cut imposed a quarter of a century before which still rankled. In fact it rankled sufficiently, together with the profound anxiety caused by the issue of the steam looms, to provoke a strike. By July, with 1500 men on strike and the mounting threat of grave disorder Kitley called on the support of the army and a troop of Royal Scots Dragoon were stationed in the town to maintain order. Kitley, a carpet manufacturer himself of course, made it known that he felt it inappropriate while the dispute was in progress to participate in the committee of mill owners. The strike ended in August with a comprehensive defeat of the weavers and paved the way for the rapid adoption of steam technology by more of the carpet masters.

Just as he was concluding his second term of office as mayor, Kitley was again wielding a ceremonial trowel at the laying of another foundation stone. This time it was for public baths and wash house. This was the culmination of an initiative begun some three years earlier when Kidderminster became an early adopter of legislation allowing local authorities to build and operate such facilities using treated income. The development included a small swimming pool and only about a dozen other towns in the country had undertaken this small step to improve public hygiene. However more comprehensive measures to provide sewage and clean water to householders were well still over a decade away.

The baths opened in summer 1855 by which time the Corn Exchange was operation and plans were in place to open the public rooms – and their magnificent new organ- with a grand music festival in October.

While these initiatives gave evidence of a town trying to move forward into a future, the dire straits of the handloom weaving industry were all too evident. People were leaving the town to seek new opportunities and efforts to assist emigration of distressed weavers culminated in a

huge town meeting in 1855. The meeting chaired by Lord Ward, the town's principal freeholder was able offer little consolation but heard from William Boycott, himself a Tory Radical in the mode of the young Disraeli, who was presenting himself as the defender of the suffering weavers.

Although of limited benefit to the weavers one consequence of this meeting was a proposal from Kitley and fellow mill owner William Grosvenor which aimed to rescue the carpet manufacturing industry in the town. This was for Ward to finance the construction of new workspace better suited to accommodate the new looms and their steam which would allow the new technology to be taken up at a lower risk. Ward obliged to the extent of an investment of some £20000 which built what became known as the Lord Ward Sheds and in effect this Kitley initiative provided the basis from which the town might recover and eventually thrive.

This however did little to relieve the suffering if the weavers and there was to be a final devastating event triggered by that distress which was to occur during Kitley's third period as Mayor. There was a general election in Spring 1857. The sitting member Robert Lowe who enjoyed the support many of the manufacturers was opposed by Boycott, the weavers champion. As the result was announced the cumulative rage of the weavers brought about a murderous attack on Lowe and his party. A torrent of rocks and stones rained down on the hustings and Lowe himself suffered a fractured skull. Kitley who was returning offered to read the Riot Act to disperse the mob and the dragoons were again summoned to the town to restore and maintain order.

At around this time Kitley stepped back from carpet trade. He took on the lease of the Lord Ward's Sheds which he held for some years before the premises were taken over wholesale by his former colleague Grosvenor.

Kitley also had less involvement in town council politics after the early 1760s but continued a major contribution to public service as a poor law guardian and as a magistrate for very many years.

His lifelong belief in the importance of education is underlined perhaps by the fact that as a younger man he was instrumental in creating purpose-built premises for the Old Meeting House School (in the 1840s) and that thirty years later towards the end of his life he was striving for better educational provision for the children of the workhouse.

He lived for many years at Summerhill- a house around which the Gainsborough Hotel was eventually built and latterly at The Lakes.

He died in 1880 held in the highest esteem as a man who had left – a still very evident – impression on the town and community to which he had devoted so much effort and imagination.

## **Mike Loftus**

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## **Worcester Civic Society**

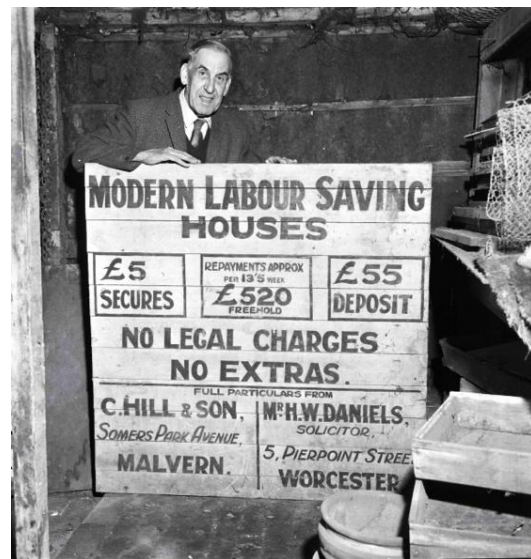
Readers may be unaware that the Worcester Civic society have in their care & protection the Worcester news newspaper archives which contains 254 bound volumes of the Berrow's journals dating from 1801 to the 1990s-Over 400 boxes of black & white negatives dating from 1968 to 1992-80 boxes of colour negatives dating from 1992 to 2002-then 415 image discs from 2002 to 2012 and finally 1,500 glass plate negatives from 1936 to 1965- The grand total of images held must be well over a million alongside 100 boxes containing folders of photographs and press cuttings.

All of the archives were saved from destruction by members of the society in 2020, a team of dedicated volunteers meet every week in an effort to make all of the contents of the archives accessible for members of the public to come along and conduct their own research using the folders within the boxes and/or the Berrow's journals. As yet we are not online but in time we are working towards that goal. If anyone would be interested in viewing the archives, as a group or individually just send an email to the Worcester Civic society or call 07980 653044.

As part of the National Heritage open days 2025 events there will be an illustrated talk on Saturday 20th September at 10.30am 'The Saving of the Worcester news archives' at the Friary walk shopping centre 'History & Heritage pod area' in the centre of Worcester followed by two guided tours at Midday & 14.00hrs-There is no charge, but booking is advised for the tours.

I have attached three images showing the run-down state of the Countess of Huntingdon's chapel featured in the WN in 1976, a pre-war builders sign found in an attic at Malvern in 1971, and The W.L. Cotton car showroom when it was in Foregate street Worcester before 1968

**Chris Wilkinson-Archives officer.**



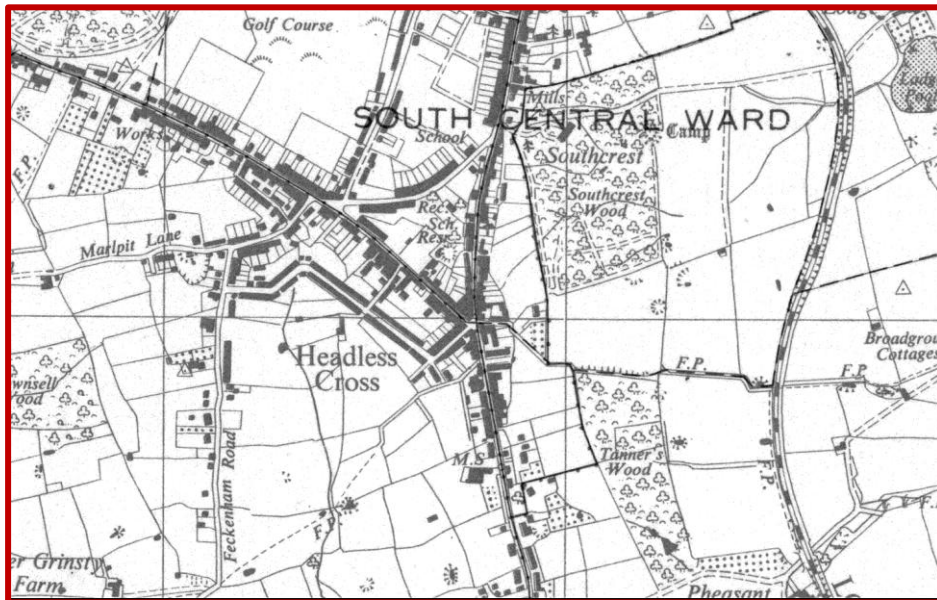
The original W. L. Cotton showroom in Foregate Street before the expansion in 1968 to their open car display area in Farrier Street.



**Anthony Green, of The Redditch Local History Society, leads with an introduction to an article on Headless Cross**

**From Redditch Local History Society Newsletter May 2025**

**Rookery Boy at the Shops by William Purser - Introduction**



Headless Cross grew up on the ancient British route along the ridgeway (now Evesham Road) and was at the junction of another ancient route climbing from the valley from the west (now Birchfield Road).

The name is derived from the Anglo-Saxon, heao, leah, heath clearing. This then became Hedley, then Hedley Cross, Hedleys Cross and finally Headless Cross. (from The Place Names of Worcestershire, English Place Names Society Volume IV)

William grew up in Headless Cross during the war and the early post war years, and left the area when he was 18, never to return, except for the occasional visit.

The map above is an image from the Ordnance Survey 2-inch map of 1947 and is therefore very much of this period, when Headless Cross was relatively separate from Redditch.

At that time, the buildings, and shops, in Headless Cross were mainly around the junction of Evesham Road and Birchfield Road and the large housing growth we know today was only a glimmer in a developer's mind.

For reasons unknown to me, there are very few photographs of Headless Cross, and I am very grateful to Chris Jackson for allowing me to use three from his collection.

William now lives in the north-east of Scotland but remembers vividly growing up in Headless Cross and produced another fascinating tale of the period.

He would love to hear from anyone who remembers him and this period, and I will happily pass on any contact details.

**Anthony Green**

## Rookery Boy at the Shops – by William Purser

The shops in Headless Cross offered a small boy a variety of adventures; there were too many to be visited all on the same expedition and some items could only be bought when the shop had them, when they were "in".

Bread was perhaps a daily purchase but did not have to be shopped for. It was delivered by the baker, Mr Bonnacher, who arrived in a small black van hauled by an equally small horse. The boy liked his loaves which nearly always had a black crust over the top.

The nearest "shop" was Mr Bridgeland's, the butcher. Small, approached by two steps down into a gallery hung not with pictures but sides of beef, pig carcasses, great loops of sausages and most fascinating of all, trays of dark, squishy things known as offal. Hanging along one wall were knives and axes sufficient to begin a small war, all shiny bright. Customers waited while their order was sawed, chopped, sliced, weighed and wrapped so the boy had lots of time to see them in action and enjoy the sounds they made.

The tiled floor was covered in thick sawdust, presumably to absorb the odd blood splash.



This is a classic view of Headless Cross centre.

Directly ahead is Evesham Road in the direction of Redditch.

To the left is the beginning of Birchfield Road.

There was no need for an island or traffic lights, just a lamp post in the centre.

Most of the shops in Headless Cross were in and around this centre.

(Thanks to Chris Jackson for the image).

A later memory is that of the elder Mr B marching through the town, up Mount

Pleasant to his shop resplendent in his trade-mark starched blue and white striped apron ahead of his son, Cliff, who would be leading by the nose that year's champion in show, a massive bull, garlanded with his prizes. Small boys then enjoyed the spectacle and did not speculate on what happened next.

On the corner between Birchfield Road and Evesham Road was the greengrocers, run by Daisy and Noah Gardener.

Once inside what would now be called an "open plan" shop the smell of root vegetables - damp, mould, and green leaves, mostly cabbage probably, took some getting used to.

Everything was piled in heaps here and there so being served called for a sharp eye and nimble feet as Daisy, who was no ballet dancer, swerved around customers and heaps, usually accurately. Each item was placed in a big metal scoop then weighed, using brass weights which the Boy was allowed to place on the scale.

Since everything was seasonal the choice at any time was limited; summer was the best time to be in the shop when the fruit was in season and boys might be given a strawberry or two if they waited their turn and didn't get in the way.

Perhaps the high spot of any such expedition was a trip to the grocers, an Aladdin's cave of smells and even tastes if one's favourite assistant was behind the counter. "Dry goods" such as

fruit, sugar, tea, flour were in wooden bins along one wall, scooped out into "sugar paper" bags and weighed to one's request. Butter was sliced and patted with two wooden spatulas, weighed and slipped into grease-proof paper according to how much was asked.



*Rectory Road made a triangle of roads around Headless Cross, running from Evesham Road (Mount Pleasant) to the junction between Plymouth Road and Birchfield Road.*

*It was mostly residential properties with the exception of the 'famous' fish and chip shop.*

*(Thanks to Chris Jackson for the image)*

This was all very well and good, but the best was yet to come.

Boy could never decide which order he looked forward to most: cheese or ham.

Great cheeses stood like a small mountain range along the wall behind the counter; once chosen - were they not all Cheddar? - one would be heaved onto a board and a great wire would be drawn down through the block.

The wire fascinated: it ended in the handle, a slice of wood at right angles to the wire, the fixed end of which was hidden, attached to the board somewhere.

It was the sight of a wedge of cheese falling away from the block onto a sheet of grease proof as the wire sliced its way through which intrigued.

However, the ham and bacon slicer surely took the prize. The ritual began by the customer being interrogated: "smoked or plain", "thickness?"

Then a great wedge of ham would be hoisted onto the machine and the necessary adjustments made as to thickness. Then the ceremony began.

With a gentle whine the razor-sharp blade whirled and ham-or-bacon slices were tidily cut off the big piece which was steadied by the assistant. The smell of freshly sliced ham lingers on.

Cheese and ham operations took place a few inches from the nose of the boy and fragments of both fell conveniently close, to be tidied up.

Close to the grocers, on the same side of the road, was a fish n chip shop where hot fried fish and heaps of chips would lie in wait for customers, all at small boy height.

To watch ready-peeled potatoes being chipped into a bucket was an extra treat. A cone of scratchings for a penny (240 pennies to a pound) or three-pennorth of chips were a treat, doused in salt n vinegar and almost too hot to hold. Larger orders came wrapped in an outer layer of newspapers; it was from these that Boy learned of the wider world and aspects of it which his parents preferred him to remain ignorant of.





*The co-op, which was the Headless Cross branch of the Alcester Co-Operative Society, was probably the largest shop in the area.*

*This was actually a publicity photograph from Royal Enfield, for a 'ladies' bike', which I believe is the 148cc Cycar introduced in 1932. For its time Cycar was an extremely modern design and predated post war bikes such as the Ariel Leader.*

*(Thanks to Chris Jackson for the image).*

The one shop which the Boy never entered was the Co-op; quite why not he never fathomed, although he often heard the phrase ".and she shops at the Co-op.." Perhaps it was only for enemy aliens, another phrase which he often overheard and wondered about...

The community was well-served with pubs which of course Boy never entered, officially; a school friend introduced him to the mysteries of the public bar and beer engines made by Gaskell and Chambers, Birmingham.

The names intrigued: the White Hart - what on earth was that? The Gate Hangs Well, the Scale and Compasses...

Each shop did more than sell essentials. They were places for news to be exchanged, gossip to be nurtured; they were a sort of face-to-face internet. And for small boys, with a list in one hand and the urgent need to get to the best conker tree in the neighbourhood before the Chapel Street gang, they could be purgatory.

### **Droitwich History & Archaeology Society**

The coming months will be busy for the Droitwich History & Archaeology Society. We shall be manning a stand again at the Droitwich Spa SALT FEST in Vines Park at the end of August. Last year it was voted the best Community stand, and once again, our amazing, laminated display of images and maps showing the historical development of the town will be there for you to browse, share your own memories, or discover something new about our history. The history stand can be found close to St Richard's statue and close to where the remaining brine spring flows into the River Salwarpe.

The first speaker meeting of our autumn programme will be on Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> September when David Clarke will remind us of the time when the penalty for stealing a loaf of bread to keep the family fed could result in life-changing results. His talk "Sentenced to Beyond the Seas: the true story of eight Worcestershire females convicted to death or transported in the 1780s", will start at 7.30pm in the Community Hall, Heritage Way, Droitwich Spa, WR9 8RE. Visitors and friends are always welcome to our meetings. Admission members £3.00 and friends and visitors £5.00.

Another exciting event to come is the Millennium Exhibition displayed in the upstairs Gallery of Droitwich Spa Library in Victoria Square from Friday 6<sup>th</sup> September to Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup> October. Through pictures and text, the Exhibition tells the story of 2,000 years of Droitwich's history, with a glimpse at the Ice Age mammoth before taking visitors through the Iron Age, Roman, Medieval, and Tudor periods right up to the start of the current century.



Additional free-standing displays (to be advertised) are planned, and will include opportunities to read bound copies of the Droitwich Evening News 1989; learn more about the history of Droitwich canals; see items from Willow Court research project; and study large scale maps and images from the history society's collection.

Unless booked for another meeting, the Gallery will be open according to current Library access arrangements.

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### **Alf Tabb – Miniature Cycle Maker**

You may have seen BBC1's classic programme "The Repair Shop" on 11 November 2020 (repeated 14 Oct. 2023), which featured (amongst other treasured items) the 60 year old miniature cycle brought in for repair by Alf Tabb's two granddaughters. Christine (Hopkins) and Pauline (Samways) who proudly told Jay Blades and Dominic Chinea about their much loved grandfather, well known in Kidderminster for making and riding tiny cycles, wearing his trademark top hat and sequinned waistcoat. Alf rode until he was 86 years old, and although 6'2" with size 10 feet, made it look easy, and made it into the Guinness Book of Records. The ladies mentioned they had a further 6 of Alf's miniature cycles at home.

When the repaired bike was returned to Christine and Pauline, complete with faithful copy of the original maker's name plate "Ride an ALF TABB Cycle" in yellow lettering on a green background, and a new saddle made by Susie Fletcher, they challenged Dom and Will to try, but they were unable to ride it.

Alf was born in London March 1883 where his father owned a cycle making company. His first job was as a newspaper cyclist at the age of 13. In 1921 he married and moved to Kidderminster with his wife Alice, where he set up a cycle workshop business. In 1938 he built a 15 inch cycle and hung it as his father had done outside his shop in the Horsefair as an advertising gimmick.



He often challenged people to ride his bikes, offering them a £5 reward. Alf had perfected the knack of riding tiny bicycles with his knees in tight trousers to avoid getting in the wheels. He taught his daughter Peggy Boynton to ride and both were in demand for local events with their skills and Alf also appeared on TV shows, including ATV when Chris Tarrant failed to ride one. Alf held the World record for riding the smallest bike in 1971. He could still wow audiences when he rode it on stage during the Kidderminster Mayor's Ball in 1974. Alf died in Kidderminster in 1976, aged 93.

The 24 December 2009 issue of Kidderminster Shuttle recorded a lively debate in its letters column of a campaign to have some of memorial to Alf in the Horsefair. Peggy was delighted with the idea, as Alf worked there until he was 72. However it appears there was another local candidate, Johnny the Cobbler but sadly neither has a memorial there.

Alf did finally receive some recognition in the naming of a new small housing development, Tabbs Gardens next to Holy Trinity School on the Birmingham Road.

**Diana Clutterbuck: June 2025**

### **Worcestershire – The Delectable County**

On 3 December 1944, Stanley Baldwin was present at the stand down of the Home Guard in Stourport-on-Severn. This was the 11<sup>th</sup> Worcestershire and included some 700–800 men from both Stourport and Bewdley, who gathered at the Haven Cinema where they were addressed by the local dignitaries including the Mayor of Bewdley and Baldwin himself, who said he remembered Mr Eden's broadcast, which had led to the creation of the LDV (Local Defence Volunteers, the original name of the Home Guard) to deal with the threat of invasion. Now that had gone, the stand down was inevitable, but Baldwin found it moving because 'we are as it were one family together from the most delectable corner of the delectable county of Worcestershire. We know each other. Most of us were born and bred in the county.' He took pride in them because they had given their leisure even though they were working men. They had been determined and made themselves efficient, ready for an invasion. 'We watched you with growing admiration. What you have made yourselves by these five years of hard work and self-sacrifice can never stand down.' He declared, 'We are proud of you.' The men then marched round the town. The salute was taken in Vale Road and after dismissal, the companies were provided with tea by the Women's Voluntary Service.

Baldwin was born in Lower Park, Bewdley, in the north of the county and had moved to Wilden a few miles south when he was three. He had been away to school and to university before joining the family firm of ironmasters in Wilden. He married Lucy Ridsdale in 1892 and made his home, first at Dunley Hall and then at Astley Hall, both in beautiful parts of the county. He was a keen walker and found the countryside a real tonic for the soul as well as the body.

Beautiful countryside became even more important once he had entered the murky world of politics. He was elected as MP for the Bewdley Division after his father's death in 1908 and quietly worked his way up until he became Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1922. The following year, after Andrew Bonar Law resigned as Prime Minister, Baldwin took over the leadership of the country.

Clearly the job was demanding, but Baldwin still found time to be in his constituency. He attended Bewdley's first carnival in 1926 and was present at flower shows in the villages around his home, especially Astley and Martley.



**May Day celebrations in Gardner's Meadow, Bewdley**

At the 1927 Stourport Flower, in his opening speech, Baldwin said he was happy to be there looking in on friends. 'What a change after the strenuous life of the Metropolis to leave London and come down there to the peace of Worcestershire to have the chance of meeting youth from various cities spending a day's holiday... He hoped they would take back to their places in the town some of the beautiful countryside; beauty for themselves and for other people.'

During his premiership, Baldwin had to deal with a general strike, a coal strike, a rise in unemployment and the abdication crisis. He kept a cool head in all these difficulties and because he put country first, his reputation sometimes suffered. This was particularly so after he retired in 1937. He was accused of not preparing Britain for war, but even though he knew the nation wanted peace, he had quietly been bolstering the armed forces.



**Stanley and Lucy in Astley Hall**

Baldwin lived out his years of retirement at Astley Hall in his beloved Worcestershire, but arthritis curtailed his ability to do the long walks he had always enjoyed, so the final years had their difficulties. His dear wife Lucy died in 1945 and Stanley followed her in 1947. Their ashes are interred at Worcester Cathedral.

A new book *Born in Bewdley Stanley Baldwin* is now available price £9.99. It does not dwell in detail on the politics; rather it includes much information about Baldwin in his favourite setting, that of Worcestershire and of Bewdley in particular.

**Fenella Flack**