

If buildings could talk, what tales they would tell. Take Broadway. Today it teems with tourists and visitors charmed by its quaint buildings and pretty views. But the Worcestershire village played a key role in the English Civil War reports
Chris Mowbray.

Whoever controlled Broadway would also control which armies could reach Worcester from Oxford and London.

FOR a small place, Broadway seems to have played a strangely significant part in the English Civil War. Both King Charles I and Oliver Cromwell stayed in the village during the conflict and even lodged at the same inn – although fortunately not on the same night.

Charles paid three visits there during 1644-5 because, it seems, he was probably worried the lord of the local manor might betray him to the Roundheads. The evidence for such a theory is limited but compelling and it has everything to do with the character of the local landowner, his family history and the religious predilections of Charles himself.

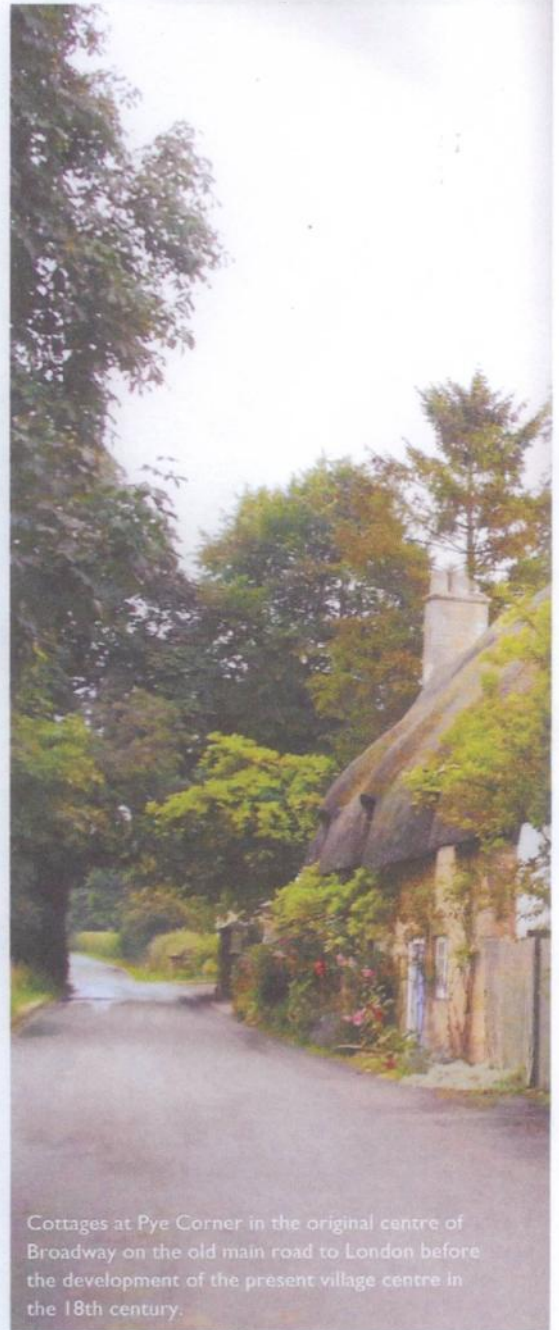
The King paid his first visit to Broadway in June 1644 as he rode through to Worcester to secure the Royalist garrison. Having completed this task, he went back through Broadway en route to his base at Oxford and spent the night at the home of a Mr Savage who was a local Royalist supporter. It seems likely that something he was told that night disturbed him greatly.

For the following May, he again passed through Broadway and stopped for the night. It is interesting to note that rather than stay in a private house this time, he put up at the Lygon Arms, now a luxurious hotel with a global reputation among affluent tourists, but then a more modest inn called the Whyte Harte. It was here that he met William Sheldon, the lord of the manor.

It was not surprising that the King should seek advice about the local situation from a man in his position. What was surprising, however, was the manner and place of their meeting. Instead of accepting hospitality at Sheldon's home, the King summoned him to neutral territory in a rented room in what was effectively the Travelodge of its day.

What did they talk about? No-one can be certain, but it is likely the meeting in an oak-panelled room over the kitchen was uncomfortable. To understand why, we have to examine events which occurred more than 100 years earlier.

The founder of William Sheldon's wealth was his great-uncle, Ralph Sheldon, a tenant farmer of the monks of Pershore who owned the parish of Broadway for more than 500 years. A History of the County of Worcester published in 1924 quotes earlier

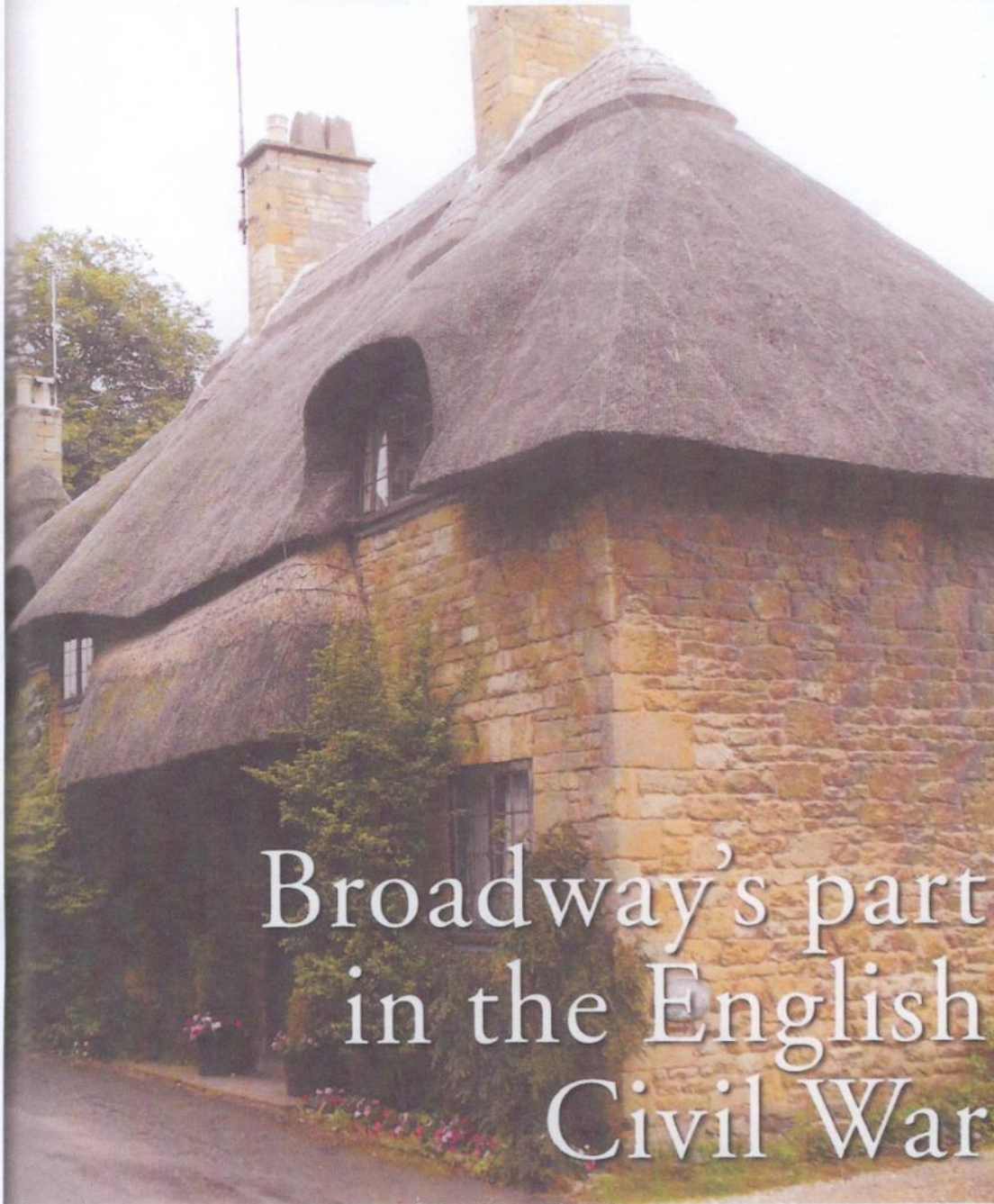


Cottages at Pye Corner in the original centre of Broadway on the old main road to London before the development of the present village centre in the 18th century.

sources which reveal that there was a bitter quarrel in 1533 between the Abbot and his tenants over land tenure and taxes. Several inhabitants of Broadway accused the Abbot of disregarding their common grazing rights and Ralph Sheldon seems to have been the ringleader. Just three years later came Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries and England's break with the Roman Catholic Church and, in the ensuing melee, Ralph Sheldon became first the lessee and later the owner of extensive church lands which included 'fisheries, fowling, warrens and woods'.

Charles must have known about this and that he was dealing with a man whose blood relative, only two

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Broadway's part in the English Civil War

generations previously, had been a rebel who profited from the demise of the Catholic Church in England.

Now contrast that with the views of the King. Although nominally head of the Church of England, it is well known that he had Catholic sympathies. Some historical authorities have asserted that one of the fatal flaws in Charles' campaign was that he cavorted too openly with Catholics in general and foreign Catholics in particular. Such actions when he was fighting for his throne only 40 years after the Catholic-inspired Gunpowder Plot, showed he was either recklessly arrogant or politically naive.

The meeting between Monarch and country squire

was therefore probably difficult. The former must have been fearful that he was dealing with an anti-Catholic and a closet Parliamentarian who might turn Broadway against him, while the latter feared being denounced as a traitor.

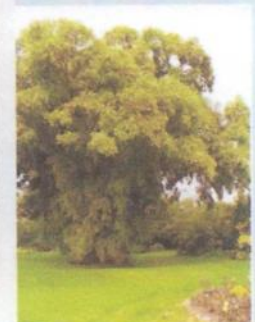
But would the capture of Broadway by the Roundheads really have made one jot of difference to the Royalist cause? The answer is yes because, small though it was, it was the gateway to the shire and therefore to Worcester which at that time was an important inland port with a tidal river giving navigable access to the sea.

Broadway, whose village centre was then more ▶

Top: The former Sheldon family crest on a later extension to the original Manor House erected in 1758.

Middle: A mighty willow shows the course of a former stream which once fed a monastic fishery in the grounds of the Manor House.

Bottom: A surviving section of the old pack-horse route which was used to move armies between London and Worcester.



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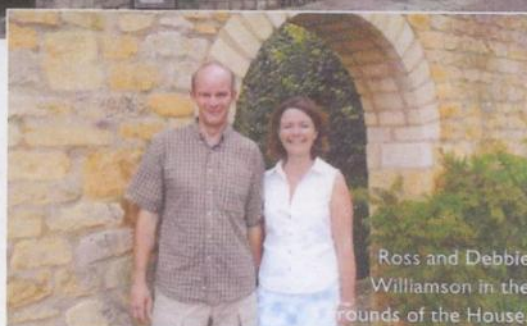
than a mile away from the current main street, straddled the old pack-horse route from Worcester to London at a point where it soared from the floor of the Severn Plain over 1,000 feet onto the Cotswolds. Such a taxing climb or descent needed fresh horses so there was a thriving trade in overnight accommodation. Whoever controlled Broadway would also control which armies could reach Worcester from Oxford and London.

Charles' caution with William Sheldon counted for nothing. The introduction of Cromwell's New Model Army in the same year led ultimately to defeat for the Royalists and in January 1649 the King was beheaded in Whitehall. The Royalist cause faltered on for two years longer until the defeat of Charles II at the Battle of Worcester on 3 September, 1651, and his flight into exile.

Cromwell spent the night before the battle at the Whyte Harte in Broadway where Charles I had interviewed William Sheldon six years before and was quartered on the first floor of the east wing. However, his taste of ultimate power was relatively brief because he died in 1658 and the Monarchy was restored in 1660.

William Sheldon continued to hold the manor until his death in 1680 when his lands passed to his daughters and the family name died out. His Manor House at West End was used as an agricultural building and gradually became semi-derelict, but it was reconstructed in the early 1980s and is now the centre of Broadway Manor Cottages, a holiday cottage business attracting visitors from all over the world.

Debbie Williamson, who owns the business with her husband, Ross, said: "It is lovely to live in a house with such an interesting history and I have enjoyed researching its past. It is a privilege to own a building like this and to be responsible for it." ■



Ross and Debbie Williamson in the grounds of the House.

Top - bottom: The rebuilt Manor House as it looks today. The Crown and Trumpet. The Horse and Hound.

EATING AND DRINKING IN BROADWAY

Barn Owl Bar, The Dormy House Hotel, Willersey Hill WR12

7LF Tel: 01386 852711

Broadway Brasserie, 20a High Street, WR12 7DT

Tel: 01386 858 435

Corners Tea Room, Cheltenham Road WR12 7BY

Tel: 01386 852142

Crown & Trumpet, Church Street WR12 7AE Tel: 01386 853202

Foxy Browns, 16 The Huntings, Church Close WR12 7AH

Tel: 01386 852155

The Great Hall and Goblets (brasserie), The Lygon Arms, High Street WR12 7DU Tel: 01386 852255

The Horse and Hound, 54, High Street WR12 7DT

Tel: 01386 852287

Hunter's, 47 High Street WR12 7DP Tel: 01386 858522

Roberto's Coffee House & Restaurant, 3 The Green, WR12

7AA Tel: 01386 858226

Rookery Barn, Broadway Tower, WR12 7LB Tel: 01386 852945

Russell's of Broadway, 20 High Street WR12 7DT

Tel: 01386 853555

Sheikh's Coach House, The Green WR12 7AA Tel: 01386

858546

Small Talk Cafe, 32 High Street WR12 7DT Tel: 01386 853676

The Swan, The Green WR12 7AA Tel: 01386 852278

Tisanes Tea Room, Cotswold House, 21 The Green, WR12 7AA

Tel: 01386 853296

