

Vale hovels will become special heritage hubs

Three of the Vale's unique hovels are to be turned into visitor attractions as part of a two year Market Gardening Heritage project. They include a chanced-upon time capsule with a whiff of the Marie Celeste mystery. Intrigued? We were...

WHEN a Vale market gardener strode out one day, leaving his specs on the book he was reading, he didn't have a clue that he would cause such a stir decades later.

The mystery grower, who closed his Cleeve Prior hovel door some time in the 1980s, never returned to collect his stuff, including tools and those glasses.

Now his artifacts and story are to be forever immortalised as part of a major project to document and celebrate our Vale market gardening heritage... providing researchers and our readers can help track down him or his family.

The astonishing discovery of the time capsule, which was buried under brambles, is one of the early highlights of the Heritage Lottery Fund and Historic England-funded project.

It's run by Worcestershire Archive & Archaeology Service (WAAS), in partnership with Cleeve Prior Heritage Trust, Vale Landscape Heritage Trust, Worcestershire Farmsteads Project and Cleeve Prior Parish Council. Heaps of other local organisations are getting involved too.

It is being fuelled by legions of volunteers who are being trained by WAAS to survey the hovels, record local memories on what market gardening was like in its hey day and help with research.



Blue sky thinking... a hovel at Lenchwick. Photo by Vale Market Gardening Heritage project.

At the end of its life, next summer, the project will produce a host of archivable materials that will be an interactive record of the Vale's rich market gardening history for all time.

"It's not just about the growers themselves, but about the associated businesses and the whole Vale way of life they fed," explains archaeologist Nina O'Hare, the WAAS Community Project Officer, based at Worcester's The Hive.

"Traditionally most of them were supported by their wives and children and

those who weren't directly involved often worked in related industries, ranging from transport firms to canning factories, tool making or in greengrocers.

"The Vale should be immensely proud of its market gardening heritage. Through sheer hard work it became one of the key fruit and vegetable growing areas of the country, specialising in asparagus and leading in the use of new techniques and crops - such as medicinal herbs during WWI and now the current juneberry crop near Pershore, which is the first in the UK.

"It's an immensely rewarding project to be part of, not least because it will involve such a lot of the current Vale community," adds Nina, who plans, amongst other things, a Local Heritage Education Pack for schools.

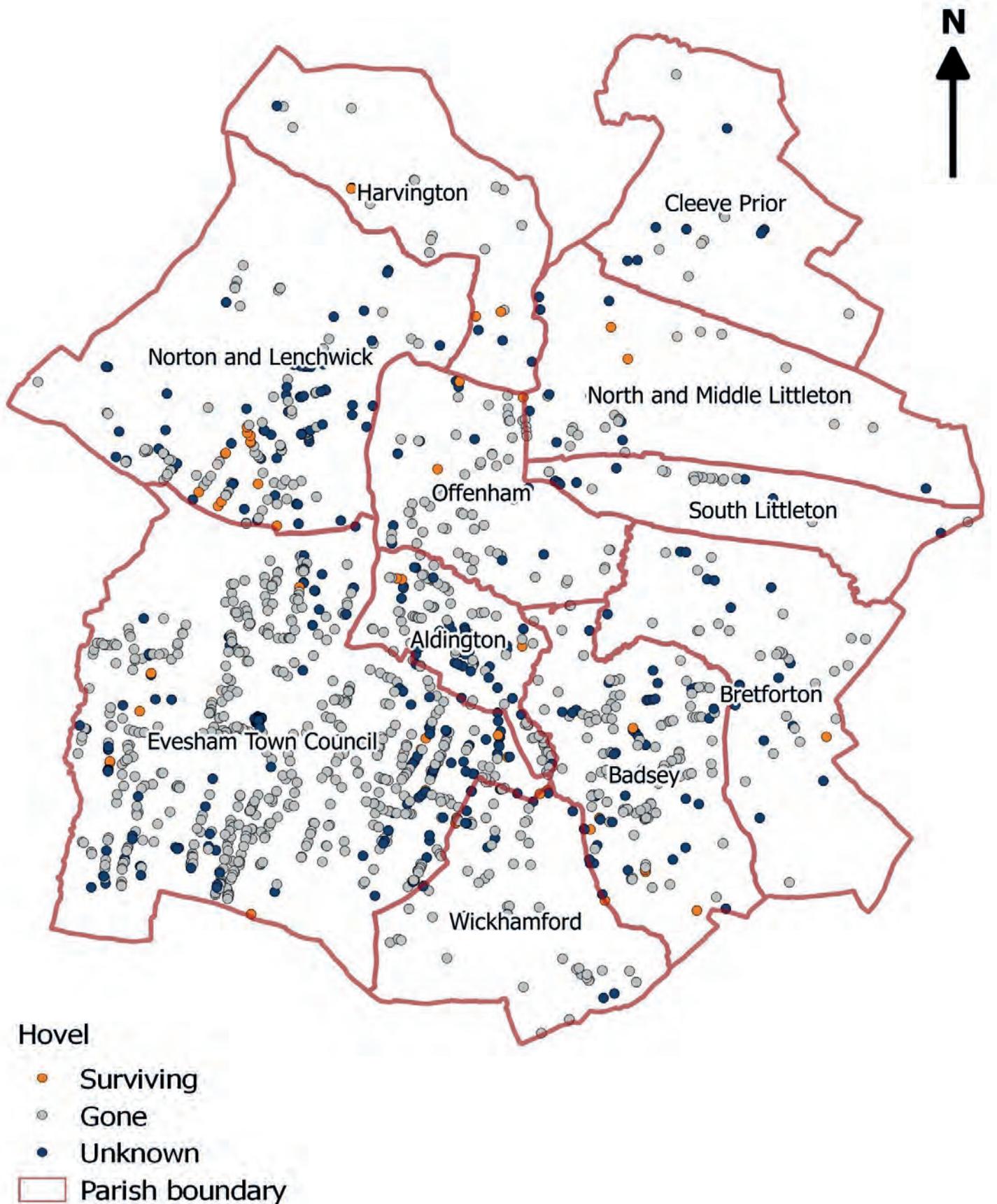
To kick off, volunteers have been busy searching for those unique little buildings known locally as hovels, or 'ovels. Just a few remain of the 1300 that once stood proud at the end of each market gardener's ground.

Each was self-built in materials ranging from bricks to wood and corrugated iron... anything the practical chap could lay his green fingers on.

"They are each different, which is what's so lovely about them," says Nina.



Hovels known from historic maps



"It's such a shame that a lot of them are falling down, have disappeared altogether or have been built on. There were a lot on the outskirts of Evesham town, for instance, much of which is now housing development."

But three are to be restored: our mystery man's in Cleeve Prior, on land owned by the village's Heritage Trust, and two in the Littletons, belonging to the Vale Landscape Heritage Trust.

They are to be transformed into heritage hubs accessible to the public, who will be able to read all about the history and, hopefully, the former incumbent, via interpretation boards and an augmented reality smartphone app.

"It will allow people to directly experience and explore this heritage, as well as inform newcomers and visitors to the area, who

may not know of its rich history," adds Nina, who is eager for more volunteers to come on board.

"We're also looking for people happy to share their market gardening memories and if someone owns a hovel in the Evesham

"The Vale should be immensely proud of its heritage, leading in the use of new techniques and crops"

area, and would be happy for us survey it, we'd love to hear from them too."

You can email the team at explorethepast@worcestershire.gov.uk or telephone 01905 766352 to offer your

help. Website www.explorethepast.co.uk includes details of a raft of project-related events already on the cards.

They include a training session for volunteers on April 25 at Evesham Library and a Badsey Walk (April 27, 1-4pm) to explore the historic heart of market gardening.

A Pensham Walk (May 30, 1-4pm) will discover how villagers' relationship with the land has changed over time, from 17th century tobacco growing to the rise of market gardening and future of horticulture at the neighbouring Pershore College.

There will also be a market gardening memories event at Evesham Town Hall on July 6, 11am-2pm).

The mysterious Mr Wheeler



Artifacts may hold the key

WHY didn't the Cleeve Prior market gardener ever return to collect his belongings? Hopefully somebody somewhere knows because everyone is exceedingly eager to discover all they can about Mr ER Wheeler.

He left some fascinating clues. He was clearly a marrowfat pea lover (evidenced by

many empty tins). He enjoyed a good read (unfortunately that book he left is now in tatters) and he was a Birmingham City fan (presumably, as there was a programme there).

Ian Robinson - Cleeve Prior resident, and Chairman of the village history group, the Chroniclers (www.cleevepriorchroniclers.com)

- has been painstakingly going through the piles of abandoned stuff, now in a secure lock up, ever since he was invited to explore by the village's Heritage Trust two years ago.

The Trust (www.cleevepriorheritagetrust.co.uk), which preserves and looks after 27 acres of land and old orchards, uncovered the treasure on a routine tidy up.



Brian Taylor (left) and Ian Robinson outside Mr Wheeler's time capsule.

"We knew something was there, but we had no idea what an exciting find it would be," reveals Trustee and Chairman Brian Taylor, who's lived in the village since 1977.

"It's a microcosm of how small growers went about their business and reflects the interdependence of various organisations and businesses."

Ian was startled by the wealth of material within.

"I was expecting just to find a few old newspapers and debris, so it was astonishing to see what was there," adds Ian, a villager for 27 years.

"Actually, we didn't realise it was anything but an old shed until local lady Lin Hawkins, who has lived here all of her life, said it was the last of the hovels that once lined both sides of the road all the way to the Offenham crossroads."

Ian's still sifting through piles of receipts, tags, paperwork, punnets and equipment, including wet weather gear and scales for weighing potatoes.

He has pieced together what lay beneath the fertile ground of Mr Wheeler's ground, using the documents left behind.

He grew, among other things, asparagus, artichokes, mint, plums, potatoes,

gooseberries and blackberries and they were hauled off to Covent Garden, Birmingham and Coventry markets.

Ian's done a bit of digging himself. Thanks to local man Don Archer he can tell us that market gardening came to Cleeve Prior in

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the mid twenties, when acres of the Manor Estate were sold to the county council.

Much of it was taken up by market gardeners and aye, there's the rub. You might think it would be pretty easy to unearth Mr Wheeler's story by quizzing villagers. However, most market gardeners had grounds all over the Vale. It is suspected our man might have hailed from the Littletons.

If readers have any inkling of who he was, Ian and the team would love to hear from you. You can email him at cleevepriorchroniclers@gmail.com.

Meanwhile, the Heritage Trust is busy preparing the ground around Mr Wheeler's hovel, which also sports a jaunty verandah and is next to a well, which is to be opened up.

The volunteers have already rescued his vine, which produced a gallon of wine last year and as I wrote this, his asparagus was shooting up again.

Hopefully Mr Wheeler would approve. Certainly villagers are toasting what his heritage hub will bring.

"We should mark local history and we welcome anything that will increase the footfall here," says Brian, who invites readers to pop along any Tuesday to see the Trust at work.

"It also fits nicely with our ultimate goal, which is to try to use our facilities primarily for education.

"We aim, eventually, to put up remote cameras around our orchards to get footage of the wildlife for natural history tourism."

"What's really special," adds Ian, "is that ER Wheeler's story will be celebrated for ever - when we find out who he is!"

LYNNE POWELL
Photos by Ian Tustin