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# The History of Shrewsbury's Rookeries

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Wood engraving by Thomas Bewick (1753-1828).  
It summarises the bird, its habitat  
and habits as well as any photograph.

## 1. Introduction

There have been no rookeries within Shrewsbury's loop of the River Severn for four decades, the last being that by the footbridge over the Severn to Frankwell, vacated in the late 1980s (Horan 1989 & JT, *pers. obs.*). In 1938 there were around 32 rookeries in and close to Shrewsbury town and now just three remain. (see Box 1). This account traces the recorded history and decline of these rookeries. All maps referenced are included at the end of the account.

## 2. Sources

### 2.1 Early Rook records

If we presume that Rooks were then as fond as they are now of breeding close to human habitations it might be safe to assume that there were rookeries in or close to what passed for Shrewsbury at that time. Bones allocated to Rook were excavated at Roman Wroxeter, 12km east of Shrewsbury and dated around 350-700AD (Meddens 1987). No signs of butchery were reported on the bones (Hammon 2011) but it could be that those found at Wroxeter were being taken as food, since Rook is palatable (e.g. <http://www.scottish-recipes.com/rook-pie.html>),

### 2.2 The nineteenth century and to 1938

There appear to have been a few rooks breeding in Shrewsbury in the nineteenth century and the references are centred on a large rookery, perhaps the only central Shrewsbury colony, comprising over one hundred nests. It was situated along the Severn at the Quarry between the Welsh and English bridges and initially concentrated at the eastern end (Map 1) – Forrest recalled them there in the 1860s and '70s. The birds were so numerous that from time to time some were shot to keep their numbers "within bounds" and it was regarded by some to be "dangerous" to walk beneath them though whether that was from the risk of droppings or falling twigs is not stated.

At some stage in the 1880s a storm blew down some of the favoured trees after which most nests were built towards the western end of the Quarry (Map 2) and things began to change. At around that time 'a score or more' moved towards town and began nesting at St Mary's church and two nests were found behind the Free Library (the same building as today). Lloyd also reported two nests here in 1938. Other birds apparently moved to Abbey Foregate, a site of which nothing more is known until Lloyd reported it in 1938.

A splinter group left the Quarry colony in the 1890s and moved 200 metres south across the Severn to nest in the grounds of Shrewsbury School, close to the chapel. References to a colony in Kingsland probably refer to this site. By the late 1890s the colony in the Quarry was dwindling while that at Shrewsbury School chapel grew. The colonies at St Mary's and the Free Library were still extant (Map 3). The noise from the small colony of four or five nests at St Mary's annoyed residents and that may have hastened their departure (date not known). On 26 March 1900 the three nests at the library colony were raided and dismantled by a gang of Rooks from elsewhere.

Also, at the turn of the twentieth century, there was the first news of another site near town, 2km north at Berwick where young hatched on 19 April 1903. By 1911, the Quarry site was almost deserted with only three nests, four the following year. The Shrewsbury School chapel site survived, but never reached the numbers at the Quarry three decades earlier (Map 4).

In 1936 there is a record of 27 nests at the School chapel, Lloyd suggesting that by that stage it was somewhat smaller than it had been. Three nests were reported on 15 March that year at

Sundorne, in the minute books of the recently founded Shrewsbury School Ornithological Society (SSOS 1936). This was another previously unreported site to the east of town., The SSOS was also the first to report a colony at the town's cemetery with 26 nests on 29 March 1936 and 25 in the following year.

The following chronology has been assembled especially from Forrest (1928) and with reference to the Caradoc & Severn Valley Field Club (CSVFC) *Record* and *Transactions* which began in 1892, together with additional historical comments by Lloyd (1939a,b).

### 2.3 1938 and the work of Llewelyn Cyril Lloyd (1905-1968).

Lloyd (1939a), as part of his substantial contribution to ornithology in the County, reported the results of his systematic 1938 survey of rookeries carried out within the area defined and discussed in Box 1. Lloyd's work pre-dates modern OS maps and the opportunity they offer to specify locations with grid references for both his boundaries and rookeries.

#### The area surveyed

BOX 1

Lloyd defined his 1938 field survey area as "a rectangle measuring 3.5 miles N-S. and 4 miles E-W, centred upon the town ... chosen so as to enclose the borough"; 14 square miles (36.26 sq. km). This is interpreted here as a rectangle centred precisely on St Mary's Church though his east-west orientation has been moved by this author by around 100m to include his rookery at Sundorne Pool. Lloyd mentions a colony at Shelton, just outside his rectangle.

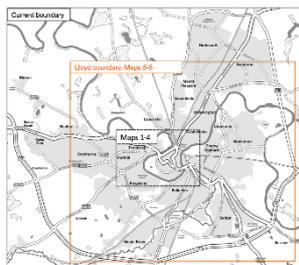


Figure 1

The rectangle used by Lloyd (1939a) for his study in 1938, defined in the text Box 1. The smaller rectangle is the central Shrewsbury area shown in Maps 1-4.

Lloyd (*ibid.*) identified 349 nests at 32 locations at which Rooks were breeding and 'lumped' them into 17 'rookeries' (see Appendix and Map 5) encountering the usual problem of defining 'a rookery'. His seventeen defined rookeries varied in extent; he listed ~~the~~ 12 which he regarded as 'compact' with the other five 'dispersed' (which would today be subdivided by applying the more recent convention of 100m as separating threshold). Thus, his Abbey Foregate site 2, with its components, straggled "over an area nearly a mile long and up to half a mile wide". Of the individual locations of the 11 component parts of Lloyd's site, two have been resolved with the help of Dr Andrew Pattison and are individually plotted in Map 5.

Meole Brace consisted of three groups 200 yards apart while Greenfields, Sundorne and Belle Vue were broadly alike in comprising two well-separated groups in each. He identified three sub-sites with only one nest each, something only recorded once among those reported to the Shropshire Rookery Survey of 2008.

Lloyd estimated the town's total Rook population in 1938 to be 820 individuals. These included an estimated 698 breeding adults (349 nests) and 122 non-breeders. The estimate of non-breeding birds (17.5% of breeding birds) is in line with the methods of Tucker (1935).

Lloyd was punctilious in his recording and subsequent analyses of sites, examining relationships with several environmental variables including for example their proximity to houses and to water. His paper is on-line at 'Histo' (Tucker & Tucker 2012): <http://www.pgt7.uk/sos/caradocTRAN/sos-caradoc1939-.html>

### 2.4 The Agricultural Research Council (ARC) enquiry of 1944

As related by Lloyd (1944) the ARC “were anxious to ascertain whether there had been any significant increase in the county Rook population during the war” perhaps in response to reduced pressure from keepers. So “in connection with the Rook investigation organised by Mr. James Fisher on behalf of the British Trust for Ornithology, I was asked to repeat the survey” (of 1938). Lloyd resurveyed his 1938 sites (*ibid.*) and found a decline of 30% over the five years, from 349 nests to 248. Regrettably he did not itemise the changes by site.

The results of the national 1944 study are unpublished, but the survey found the species to have increased nationally.

### **2.5 The 1975 BTO National Rookery Survey**

The BTO organised a national Rookeries Survey in 1975 (Sage & Vernon 1978) and the SOS contributed data from County volunteers, each allocated a 10km square and organised by Colin Wright, then the BTO County Representative. To improve coverage, the survey was extended in Shropshire into 1976 and reported 460 sites with 12,092 nests (Wright 1976), commenting that rookeries appeared to be moving out of Shrewsbury town.

From the Shrewsbury area the evidently less-than-detailed fieldwork reported only five colonies (Map 6). Within Lloyd’s rectangle, from NW to SE, they were Shelton (nine nests), Berwick Lodge (five), Smithfield Road near the bus station (nine), just east of the Column (10) and Longnor Hall (114) at the eastern end of Raven’s Nest wood near Emstrey.

### **2.6 Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Shropshire 1992**

The Atlas (Deans *et al.* 1992) published a tetrad map of the distribution of breeding records. Confirmed breeding was evidenced by an active rookery or, in an indeterminate number of instances, ‘fledged young apparently of local origin.’ The Atlas did not produce a list of rookeries and the Shrewsbury data are not considered further here.

### **2.7 The BTO resurvey of 1996**

In 1996 the BTO organised a national partial resurvey of sites reported in the 1975 survey. In Shropshire it involved an examination of 27 tetrads none of which were within the boundary of Shrewsbury currently under consideration (Dawes 1996).

### **2.8 The Shropshire Rookery Survey 2008 (SRS08).**

This survey (Tucker, unpublished) invited observers to contribute records of rookeries encountered during 2008 and the data were used to enhance the database for *The Bird of Shropshire* (Smith 2019 *in press.*). The records received were in effect a random sample of sites from around the county and 552 were logged in 2008 with a further 26 added during 2009-18. The work for SRS08 covered Shrewsbury in detail; Map 7.

### **2.9 Shrewsbury rookeries audit 2012**

In 2012 this author carried out a survey of Shrewsbury area rookeries and the data, not mapped here, are integrated into the Appendix.

### **2.10 Bird Atlas 2013**

Survey work for the Bird Atlas (Balmer *et al.* 2013) spanned 2007-11. This author organised the Shropshire Rookery Survey 2008 (SRS08) within that period and its records were complementary to the Bird Atlas.

### **2.11 The Shropshire Rookery Survey 2019/20 (SRS19).**

The work for this survey covered Shrewsbury in 2019 and the results are shown on Map 8.

## **3. The changes in the 19th and 20th centuries**

The following analyses trace the eight decades from 1938 to the present.

Maps 1 - 8 present the extent of the overall changes within Lloyd’s rectangle from 32 colonies in and around the town in 1938 (Map 5) to the three which remain today (including Bowbrook, Lloyd’s Copthorne).

The first notable event for Rooks in Shrewsbury was the late nineteenth century collapse of the 100+ rookery in the Quarry, the reasons for the decline being unknown. Lloyd discounted shooting as the cause and the waning health of the old trees, implicated by Forrest, received no support from Lloyd. The role of loss of foraging habitat is considered below.

Site/sub-site size	Lloyd 1938	SRS19 2019	'38-'19 loss
1-5	17	1	
6-10	6		
11-20	3	1	
21-30	4	1	
31-40	1		
>41 (max)	1 (87)	1 (52)	
<b>Colonies</b>	32	4	87.5%
<b>Nests</b>	349	98	71.9%

**Table 1**  
**The numbers of rookeries and total nest counts of rookeries within Lloyd's defined rectangle round Shrewsbury town in 1938 and 2019.**

Lloyd had no explanation for the decline between 1938 and 1944 (Lloyd 1944) adding that "Shrewsbury was one of the very few areas where the Rook population had decreased. Taking England as a whole, during the ten years 1933-1944, the Rook population increased significantly – probably more than 9 per cent." He later adds "In ...Cheshire, however, decreases were noted in both areas which were surveyed – 4.3 per cent in Wirral and 30 per cent in the Marbury area, a figure which corresponds strikingly with Shrewsbury's 29 per cent decline."

#### 4. The 21st Century

The decline in Shrewsbury must relate at least in part to the increase in the human population of the town, roughly doubling from around 37,000 in the 1930s to around 72,000 in 2011. That has led to the spread of urbanisation and corresponding loss of open/agricultural land and foraging habitat for the birds.

Agricultural land – "arable, pasture and parkland" – was estimated by Lloyd to cover about 67.9% of his study area. The author has re-examined the situation within Lloyd's rectangle and the current analogous figure is 25.1% 'open ground' remaining\*. This loss of open ground for foraging may at least in part explain the decline. It should be added that the most recent housing, industrial and commercial developments around Shrewsbury, since the preparation of the 2012 OS map, will have exacerbated the losses considerably.

The lack of large trees for nesting may be a contributing factor and casual observations might support this. Beyond that, Lloyd (1944) was correct in saying "The possible causes of such decreases are obscure and cannot profitably be discussed without a good deal of research and field-work which at present cannot be undertaken". The same is true today but see below.

\* *Open ground was assessed using the 1:25,000 OS map as revised in 2012, and including all types of farmland, school playing fields, parkland and other public open spaces but excluding wetland (e.g. the Old Riverbed).*

#### 5. Shrewsbury's Rookeries in 2019

The Appendix summarises the histories of all Shrewsbury's rookeries past and present while the brief biographical notes below relate to the three active sites within this survey's area in 2019 (Map 8). The colour scheme used on the dedicated 1:25,000 OS rookery maps, is explained in Box 2. The same colours are used in the Appendix.

The following three sites remain within Lloyd's rectangle:

- Site 65, Bowbrook was first recorded by Lloyd as site 9 Copthorne with ten nests. Not reported in 1975, in subsequent surveys it has settled to the remarkably constant nest-counts of 54, 50 and 52. The colony may initially have been situated somewhat east of its location today; it is some 300m west of Lloyd's rectangle as currently interpreted.
- Site 502, Weir Hill Farm, the smallest survivor in the study area, was first recorded in 2008 with eight nests, seven in 2012 and by 2019 was down to three.
- Site 55, Crematorium was until 2018 at Weeping Cross hollow, situated in the flooded depression close to the roundabout of that name on the Shrewsbury bypass. It was first recorded in 2008 with approximately 25 nests – it was a very difficult site to count. It held

around 49 nests in 2012, was still active in the hollow in 2018 but in 2019 the birds moved some 750m north to the Crematorium and had 28 nests.

**The Shropshire rookeries colour scheme**

**BOX 2**

**Black** refers to sites reported to the 1975/76 BTO/SOS survey with the number allocated by Colin Wright, the local organiser. The original hard copy list is with this author and will ultimately revert to the SOS.

**Red** refers to site recording in 2008, on maps and in the spreadsheet.

**Green** refers to site recording in 2019/20, on maps and in the spreadsheet.

**Blue** is used in Map 5, solely in this paper, for Lloyd's 1938 sites, Map 5 and the sites list in the Appendix.

**Acknowledgements**

My thanks to all the observers who have contributed Shropshire rookery surveys and nest counts over the last decade. They are too numerous to name, although my special thanks go to Geoff Holmes, often working with Graham Walker. Thanks, also to Dr Andrew Pattison who was able to pin-point the individual locations of the eleven component parts of Lloyd's Abbey Foregate cluster for Map 5. Rob Rees, Gerry Thomas, Graham Walker and Tom Wall kindly commented on early drafts. The BTO have sanctioned the use of Figure 2 from BBS data. The woodcut of the Rook is by Thomas Bewick (1753-1828), courtesy of the *Natural History Society of Northumberland*.

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## Appendix. Histories of Shrewsbury's Rookeries within Lloyd's area

Source	Ref.	Site (abbreviated)	NGR* (SJ)	SSOS		nests			
				1936	1938	1975	2008	2012	2019
Lloyd	1	Berwick Lodge	480147		87	5	13	x	x
"	2a	AF Merevale	497125		1	x	x	x	x
"	2b	AF Dun Cow and Brookleigh	510127		6	x	x	x	x
"	2c	AF Monklands	503124		4	x	x	x	x
"	2d	AF Nearwell	508122		2	x	x	x	x
"	2e	AF Chaddeslode	504121		4	x	x	x	x
"	2f	AF Woodlands	507121		1	x	x	x	x
"	2g	AF Belvidre Road	507122		3	x	x	x	x
"	2h	AF Near Monk's Mill	503122		12	x	x	x	x
"	2i	AF Wenlock Road	506118		2	x	x	x	x
"	2j	AF London Road (ca. Column)	509118		8	10	x	x	x
"	2k	AF Burnt Mill	504114		14	x	x	x	x
"	3a	MB Near Ice Factory	(486105)		9	x	x	x	x
"	3b	MB Churchyard	486105		20	x	x	x	x
"	3c	MB Near Meole Hall	(486105)		23	x	x	x	x
"	4	Berwick House	471148		32	x	x	x	x
"	5	Cemetery (MB end)	(488113)	26	27	x	x	x	x
"	6	Monkmoor Farm	518139		21	x	x	x	x
"	7	Kingsland (=SS chapel, plus)	484122	27	20	x	x	x	x
"	8a	GR Ellesmere Road	(494138)		6	x	x	x	x
"	8b	GR Approach to Broom Hall	(494138)		6	x	x	x	x
"	9	Copthorne (later Bowbrook)	461123		10	NR	54	50	52
"	10a	SU Sundorne Pool	(528164)	3	5	NR	NR	NR	x
"	10b	SU Pimley Manor	522143		3	NR	NR	NR	x
"	11	Gravel Hill (Showground entr.)	486137		5	x	x	x	x
"	12a	BV Old burial ground	(494117)		4	x	x	x	x
"	12b	BV The Limes	(494117)		1	x	x	x	x
"	13	Kemp's Eye	(496112)		5	x	x	x	x
"	14	The Mount	(4861340)		2	x	x	x	x
"	15	Free Library	493127		2	x	x	x	x
"	16	St Julian's Friars	(496123)		2	x	x	x	x
"	17	Bradford Street	(496123)		2	x	x	x	x
"	out?	Shelton Hall (see text)	-529109		12	9	x	x	x
BTO	169	Smithfield Road	491129		NR	NR	9	x	x
"	174	Longner Hall	5528108		NR	NR	114	x	x
"	175	Near Column	(508129)		NR	NR	10	x	x
SRS08	55	Weeping Cross (now Crematorium)	514104		NR	NR	NR	25	49
"	502	Weir Hill Farm	521123		NR	NR	NR	5	7

### KEY

AF = Abbey Foregate, MB = Meole Brace, GR = Greenfields, SU = Sundorne & BV = Belle Vue

SS = Shrewsbury School. SSOS = SS Ornithological Society (1936-1960s)

SRS = Shropshire Rookery Surveys of 2008 & 2019 NR = not recorded x = extinct

See Box 2 for the rationale of the colours

\*Grid Refs in parenthesis are approximate

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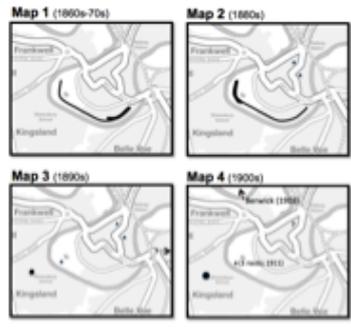
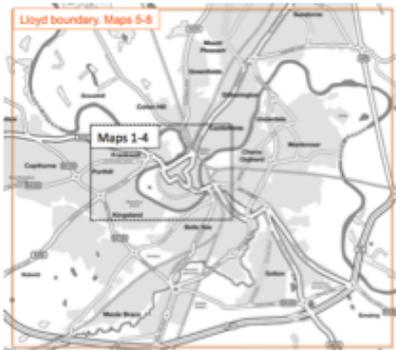
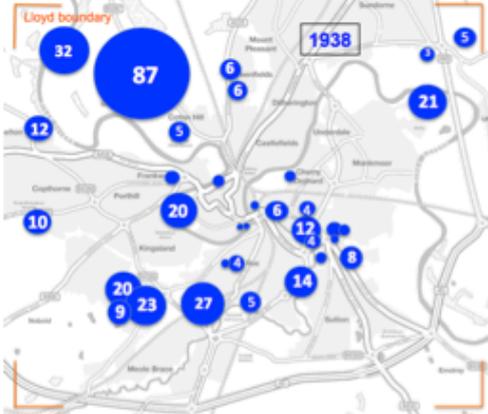


Figure 1. Maps 1-4

Map 5



Map 6



Map 7



Map 8

