

Thou shalt not steal etc... pity no one told the vicar!

A new book details gruesome punishments for men of the cloth caught flouting the Ten Commandments

If the clergy of the 21st century ever think they have things tough, with shrinking congregations and multiple churches to look after, then it could be said that life for the men of the cloth has always been difficult – and at least most today don't face being pelted with apples on a regular basis or starved to death by their parishioners.

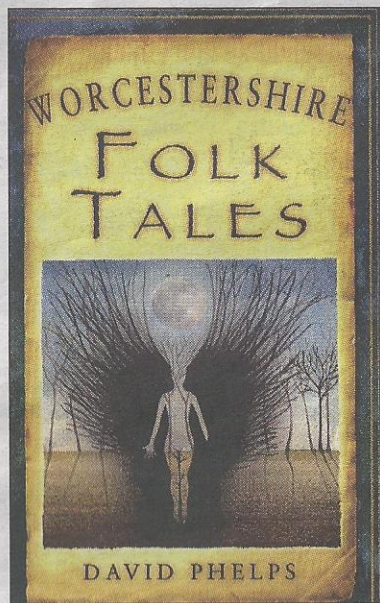
Yet that was the fate 300 years ago of a couple of Worcestershire vicars – although it could well be argued they were only getting their comeuppance after some most un-vicar like behaviour.

Their stories appear in a new book by historian David Phelps, who lives at Sunningdale, Knightwick, and having retired from the civil service has turned his hand to unearthing fascinating old yarns.

"The only problem is if you go into a village pub these days expecting to see some gnarled old chap sitting in the corner who will tell you a fund of old stories over a pint, you are more likely to find a group of blokes who only want to talk about football," he said.

And while David has not entirely dismissed the rural "local" as a source, he has found leafing through libraries and history centres to be more fruitful.

The results of his latest labours can be found in his fourth book *Worcestershire Folk Tales*, a



collection of 30 chapters detailing the fascinating, the frivolous and the downright fearsome.

Into the former category falls the story of the naughty vicar of Romsley, up in the north of the county. The Rev John Clerk by name, he committed something of a sin one hot Sunday in July when to quench his thirst, he took an apple from a tree in a farmer's orchard and began eating it.

As luck would have it, farmer William Tomkins suddenly

appeared on the scene and to disguise his theft, the vicar stuffed the part eaten apple up his sleeve. Where it remained as he walked with the farmer to church.

Unfortunately, while delivering a particularly vigorous sermon, the Rev Clerk threw his hands in the air and the apple shot from his clothes and landed smack on farmer Tomkin's head.

The clergyman was immediately identified as a scrumping thief and this led to the annual tradition of "Crabbing the Parson" on the day of the Romsley Wake, when the villagers would bombard their vicar with crab apples as he came out of church.

This continued until the middle of the 19th century, when church authorities banned it for encouraging "begging, drunkenness and licentious behaviour".

Considerably more gruesome was the fate that befell the Rev James Lee, vicar of St Leonard's in the village of Broughton Hackett, just east of Worcester.

During his time in the parish, he managed to break all the Ten Commandments, some of them quite spectacularly. He eventually turned his eyes in the direction of the beautiful young wife of farmer Sam Taylor and became a frequent visitor to their home at Chequers Farm while the husband was out.

However, Sam became wise to what was going on and confronted

the Rev Lee when he turned up one day after church.

When Sam momentarily turned away, the parson picked up a mattock and hit the farmer over the head, killing him instantly. He then burned the body and thought he had got away with his terrible crime.

What he did not know was that Sam Taylor had an identical twin, who turned up a few weeks later looking for his brother after not hearing from him for a while.

The twin walked into St Leonard's church just as the Rev Lee was delivering a Sunday morning sermon. The vicar assumed he had seen the ghost of the man he had murdered and collapsed on the pulpit floor, babbling out his crime.

The villagers took terrible revenge. They shut him in an iron cage and suspended him from a large oak tree near Churchill Mill. Next to him, but out of reach, was another cage containing food and drink. There, the Rev Lee was left until he starved to death.

"If you doubt the truth of this story," said David, "go and ask to see the parish register of Broughton Hackett. You will find the pages for this period of Queen Anne's reign mysteriously torn out."

● *Worcestershire Folk Tales* by David Phelps is published by the History Press at £9.99.