

David Pannetts' history of Bicton - Part 10 **Landlord and Tenant on the Heath**

By the mid nineteenth century the majority of Bicton's population lived in cottages and smallholdings scattered around the former edge of the heath (September instalment). Here, some enjoyed additional land for gardens and even a few acres for part-time farming.

The 1851 census, records over twenty agricultural labourers, three gardeners, four bricklayers and at least 28 associated housewives. A basket maker probably worked from home, as well as launderers, and a nurseryman. Other miscellaneous categories included a retired farmer.

Such was the turnover of the population it is hard to relate this census to the Tithe Map of 1843. This map does however, show that half of the thirty odd cottages and smallholdings now belonged to the Wingfield Estate, now expanding it's holding in Bicton. (June instalment).

How did this pattern come about?

The story starts with 'squatting' on the heath, by which people built a cottage, enclosed some land around, and then paid a 'fine' to the 'Lord of the manor'. Locally, the Borough of Shrewsbury had most manorial rights within the Liberties of Shrewsbury (the outlying parts of the town parishes) and through their records we learn of several encroachments from the sixteenth century onwards. The roadside waste at Preston Montford, for instance, was first occupied in 1580 and by 1770 had been filled up with five cottages (May instalment). By contrast, Rossall Heath had no such cottages, but the landlords were allowed to enclose parts for crops on a temporary basis from time to time. In the 'Township of Bicton', however John Mytton of Halston successfully claimed these manorial rights from the Borough on the grounds that it was really part of his Manor of Crowmeole, (hence the significance of Mytton Oak!)

At the enclosure of the heath in 1768, (September instalment) John Mytton was allotted a share of the land in lieu of his manorial rights. It included most of the cottage encroachments lining Shepherds Lane, part of Gains Park and 'islands' of closes in Lower Calcott occupying a dry patch of sand and gravel between peaty hollows.

In another 'island' by the Welshpool Road, John Wright had been running a nursery. The new allotment boundaries were also arranged to tidy up the

irregular outlines and also include John Mytton's Eel Pool. (Much to the disgust of other landowners, John Mytton had nominated his own agent as one of the 'independent' arbitrators working all this out!)

There was now a new relationship between landlord and tenant. Originally cottages would have been 'self built' with only ground rent/fine due to the Lord of the Manor. Now, as a conventional landlord, Mytton would assume responsibility for the house as well. As a result, some adjustments took place, removing some older structures and replacing them on better sites nearer the road, as in the case of 'Old School House'.

His John Mytton was succeeded by his own son, who unfortunately died at the age of only thirty in 1798. The heir was now the grandson John, aged 2, who growing up without the steady influence of a father, turned into the famous 'Mad' Jack Mytton. After a troubled youth, he finally inherited the estate at the age of 21 and blew his fortune away, before the effects of drink caught up with him in 1834 at the age of 38. It is therefore no surprise to find the Mytton land in the hand of others by 1843, including John Wingfield of Onslow. By the same chain of events he had also acquired the Nag's Head Inn and adjacent shop at Montford Bridge built upon the Bicton share of roadside waste (July instalment).

In the early nineteenth century there was an active discussion about providing land with cottages as an answer to rural poverty. 'Too much' and the worker might be too tired to work properly for his employer, 'too little' he might not grow enough vegetables to feed his family. Significantly, landlords who were liable to pay poor rates had a vested interest in providing a measure of self-sufficiency to low paid workers and especially widows.

Three are recorded as tenants of the Mytton Estate in 1812, while Margaret Wright still occupied John's nursery², although it was worked by Issac Mullock. Clearly smallholdings were a form of social security and had a place in the rural economy.

Fast forward to modern times and a few more land sales later: Many small cottage enclosures, too big for a garden, too small for a specialised enterprise, have been infilled with houses, giving the mixture of old and new which characterises Lower Calcott and Shepherds Lane. In this way, considerable suburban growth has taken place without taking up normal farmland. At the same time, machines have replaced all those agricultural labourers and many 'housewives' go out to work!

1 Sale 1824




2 John Wright buried 1809

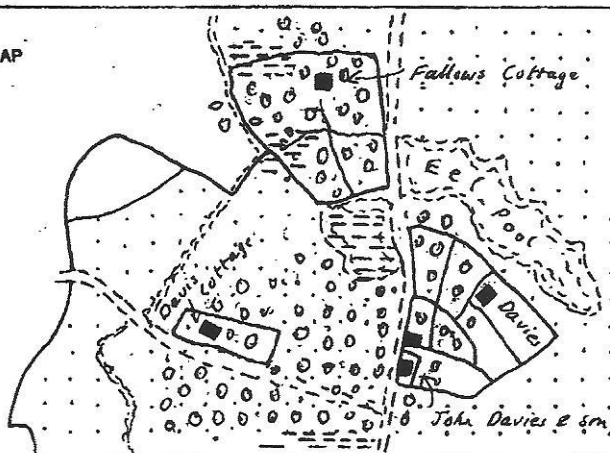
LOWER CALCOTT

a settlement on Bicton Heath

1768 INCLOSURE MAP


Cottages on the heath

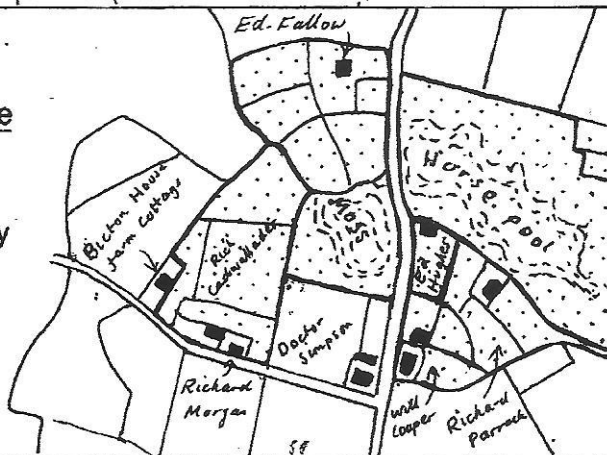
-  open heath
 -  sand & gravel
 -  peat
- (GEOLOGICAL MAP)



1812 SURVEY



The 'enclosed' landscape

-  Mytton property



1843 TITHE MAP

Landlords' improvements

-  Wingfield property
-  former cottages

