

Churches around the loop

As we welcome new vicars to our village, we are reminded that Bickton is now part of a 'united benefice', which embraces six parishes containing seven church buildings (and one ruin). Domestically, vicars may be part of the Bickton community, but professionally their duties must be spread around the wider area, with the help of only one assistant. How different it must have been in Victorian times. Directories record that, after some parish reorganisation, the same area in 1870 was served by six vicars and four curates, still all products of Oxford, Cambridge and Trinity Dublin, except Richard Philp at Bickton.

It is no wonder that many Victorian clergy were able to devote their spare time to antiquarian research or observations of natural history. Even Charles Darwin was attracted to such a life for these reasons, before the voyage of the Beagle altered everything.

Geographically the six parishes are adjacent, yet separated by the great bend of the River Severn, hence the 'loop'. Parishioners at one end may have little opportunity or need to visit distant parts, although the 'unofficial north west by-pass' to Shrewsbury between Montford Bridge and Harlescott via Cutberry Hollow steers many people right through them. These parishes do actually share some common features thanks partly to their location on the rural fringe of Shrewsbury. Taken together their churches tell an interesting architectural story...

The oldest building is St Mary Magdalene at Battlefield which was founded as a memorial after the battle of Shrewsbury in 1403. For the next century and half a college of priests here offered prayers to the fallen, as well as serving the local community, thus replacing an earlier chapel at Albrighton Hussey. Most of this time the college had five members until closed down at the reformation, when its domestic buildings were removed, leaving only the church. The fine quality of the Grinshill stone has enabled its walls to remain with little alterations since. In the twentieth century its little parish was united with Albrighton and more recently the church has been taken over by the Churches Conservation Trust. There is still an annual service each July to commemorate the battle, however.

A later civil war affected St Mary the Virgin, Shrawardine in a different way. It had to be rebuilt in 1649 after suffering damage in the 1645 siege of the castle, using red sandstone from Nesscliffe.

Later, in the same century, the brick and stone chapel was built at Bickton, but this now lies in ruins, since its replacement by the present church.

Similar building styles of brick with stone dressings and round-headed windows appeared again at Fitz, when the medieval church of St Peter and St Paul was rebuilt in 1722 (the chancel was later rebuilt in 1905, retaining the original style). Likewise at the same time in 1722 a new matching chancel was added at Shrawardine.

Soon after, in 1737, St Chads Montford was also rebuilt using the same red sandstone and similar Georgian windows. Otherwise, the eighteenth century saw many churches suffering neglect and

therefore in great need of repair during the later 'Victorian' era, when architects showed more interest in the medieval styles while church leaders were receiving traditional liturgy. Also, locally, as with Bicton, former chapelries in outlying portions of ancient Shrewsbury parishes were now acquiring their own independent facilities, financed by their local landowners.

In this context, the chapel of St John the Baptist at Albrighton was rebuilt in 1841 of red sandstone in a 'Norman' style. A longer chancel was then added in the 1870s using the 'Early English' style, all paid for by W M Sparrow of Albrighton Hall.

The choice of red sandstone, when the superior pale Grinshill stone was available may be explained by a desire to give a more antique look, matching some real medieval churches, by now losing their protective render and exposing such stone.

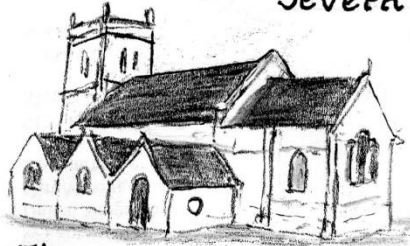
Next door, in the new parish of Leaton, created in 1859, the architect S Poultney Smith made sure his church of the Holy Trinity had the best Grinshill stone. It was all financed by John Lloyd of Leaton Knolls, the sole landowner, who at the same time was enlarging his parkland and diverting the main road past this site, while, by coincidence, the new Chester railway was also being built across his land.

The new church and vicarage appear rather isolated here since the original Leaton hamlet had for a long time been reduced to two large farms, while most people lived in cottage communities scattered around former common land, such as at Bomere Heath.

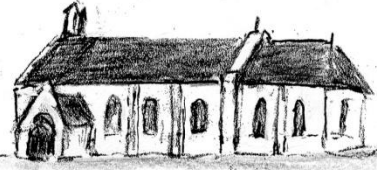
Although quite a striking 'Victorian' gothic revival building from the outside, one of its impressive features is actually the fine medieval style roof only seen from the inside. It is perhaps no coincidence that the same architect was also responsible for restoring Battlefield Church in 1861, giving it a splendid 'hammer beam' roof, as well as other timber fittings. The cost was covered by members of the Corbet family of Sundorne Castle.

Finally, this architectural tour brings us back to Bicton, where one can now appreciate the story which led to another fine 'gothic revival' Victorian church in 1886, also financed by local gentry, including the Wingfield family.

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Severn Loop



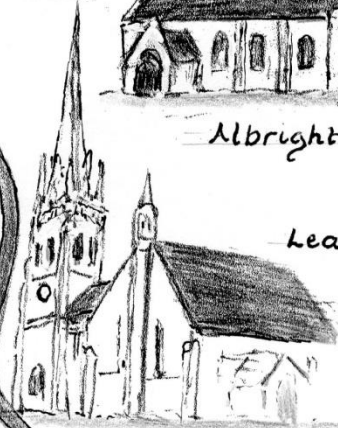
Fitz



Albrighton



Montford



Leaton



Shrawardine



Battlefield



Bicton

