

At both the national and local level, there is, at the moment, a lively debate about new housing. Bicton is but one of the rural villages around Shrewsbury facing pressure for new developments which may threaten their existing character.

Apart from government policies, some of this demand arises from newcomers wishing to move into Shropshire in general and its rural areas in particular. Their motives include the regional differences in house prices, whereby the cost of a house in the leafy commuter belt of London, such as Surrey or Buckinghamshire, can be double that for an equivalent building in Shropshire. Selling there and buying here could finance retirement or balance transport costs while still working.

Even before the age of railways, the motor car or telecommunications, such regional differences were already apparent. For instance, when reforms to the franchise were being discussed in the early nineteenth century (when Richard Jenkins was local MP) voting rights were extended to householders in properties worth more than ten pounds per annum. Reformers pointed out however, that this would include many skilled tradesmen in London, while excluding some professional classes 'out in the sticks'. They also pointed out that all would be solved if everyone had the vote, but they still had to wait a lot longer! More recent suggestions of a 'Mansion Tax' reveal the same problem!

Locally, Bicton's proximity to Shrewsbury made it a very desirable area, where nineteenth century businessmen could escape the town environment, while retaining their shops and offices there. Some built villas amongst the smallholdings of Bicton Heath, or occupied farmhouses such as at Udlington. Wighting the surveyor, Pritchard the grocer and Richard Sandford the solicitor have already been discussed in this series. A new generation of such families are continuing this tradition.

As traditional farm employment declined in the twentieth century, many cottage dwellers were able to find alternative work in Shrewsbury, thanks in part to improved roads and bicycles. In the 1920s, 'Midland Red' also started a regular bus service from Montford Bridge and the very first motor cars were appearing in the village. Indeed, nationally, such improvements in transport were opening up the countryside to many more urban workers. For instance, the promotion of new settlements by the Metropolitan Railway west of London is well known.

In view of all this, it was no surprise that a group of 'suburban' houses was built in Bicton in the early 1930s, lining the main road and Villa Lane. Their bright red bricks, grey slate roofs and steel window frames were typical of the period. Meanwhile, suburban expansion was taking place around Shrewsbury where both local authority and private builders were introducing new ideas of low density detached and semi-detached houses instead of those Victorian and Edwardian terraces.

After the last war, further development took place along Bicton Lane and Church Lane, continuing some of those more varied interwar designs. Indeed the cartoonist, Osbert Lancaster, coined the phrase 'By-pass variegated' to sum up their character around our big towns.

By contrast, the adjacent Church Close represented a complete change in design. First of all it was an 'estate' with its own road, fewer variations in design, open plan front garden spaces and room for cars. Gone were the traditional privet hedges, replaced now with isolated trees, including conifers, providing decoration if not privacy, so different from traditional villages.

In the 1960s, the firm of Frank Galliers continued this on a large scale with 'The Oval'. Now it could be debated whether Bicton was still a rural village or just another suburb of Shrewsbury! A trick of development is to leave a gap in the building line to allow for expansion. In this way, after a pause, Brookside was added in the 1980s, filling in a plot which had been almost cut off from surrounding farmland. The style mimics old estate cottages except for the gardens!

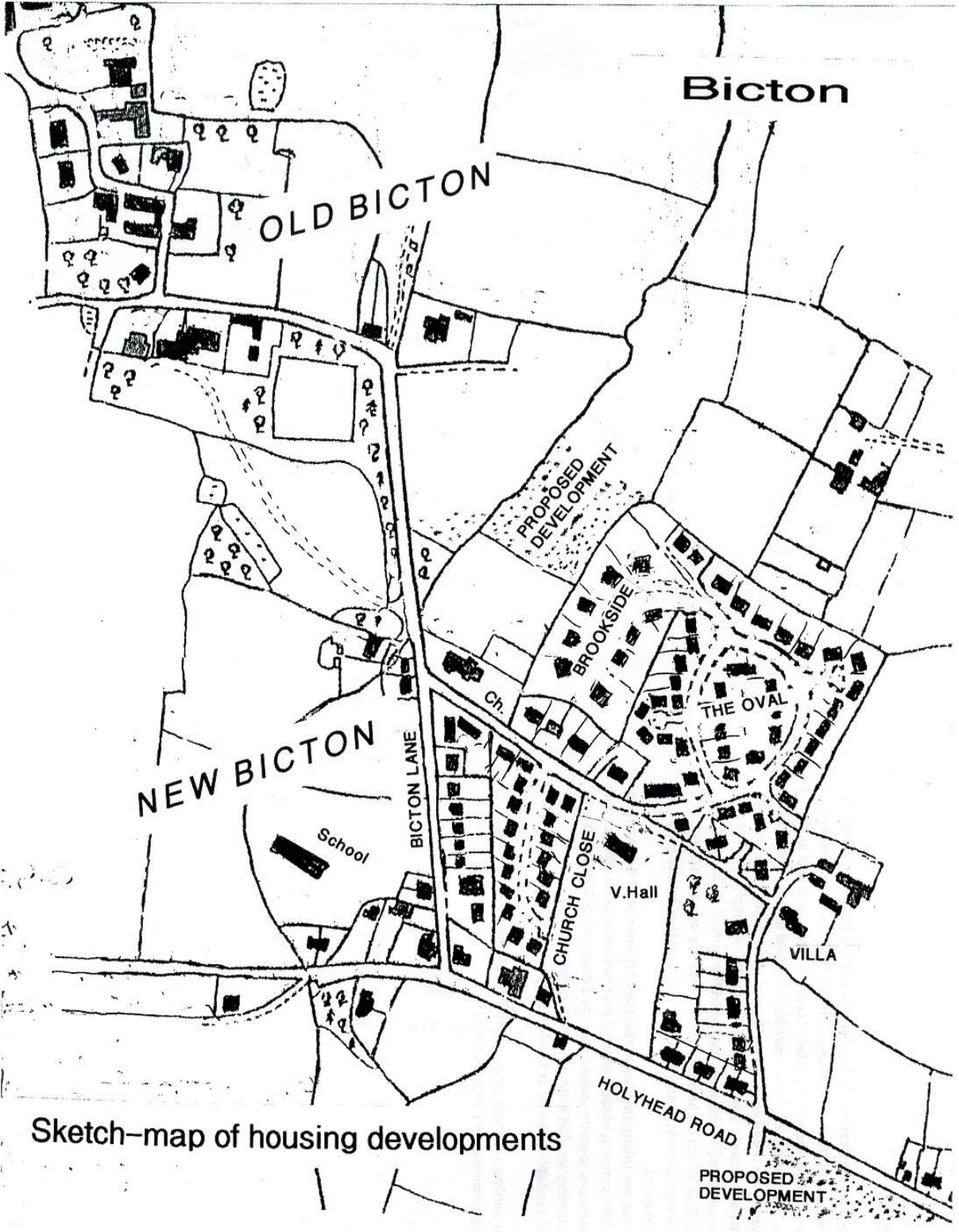
Further development, at a higher density, has been proposed for the next field towards Bicton Lane, provoking much heated debate.

Over the years, the planning system covering Bicton has been changing along with the reorganisation of local government. Initially, the civil parish was part of Atcham Rural District, with its own delegated powers of 'development control'. Following the amalgamation with the Borough of Shrewsbury, planners drew up new 'structure plans' for such controls. In particular, land around Bicton was classified as 'green', meaning development would be severely restricted.

A challenge to these restrictions came around Shepherd's Lane, where the County Council was selling off its former small-holding land, when such farming systems were becoming obsolete. Government pressure was also forcing local authorities to shed unnecessary assets anyway, especially where a profit could be made. With this in mind, the council proposed some housing on part of it, but came up against the Borough's restrictive structure plan, so they had to settle for an agricultural land deal instead.

Meanwhile, the opening of the new Shrewsbury By-pass in 1991 meant our local busy A5 was downgraded to the quieter B4380, thus undermining the trade of businesses along the road, including Merton Nurseries, opposite the Four Crosses. The proprietors here recognised that the site had no future and therefore entered protracted discussions over alternative development, with no more success than the County Council. Eventually however, permission was granted for the meeting hall of the Mount Trust, since it was 'non residential' and could claim to be some sort of 'community activity'.

Now we have a 'Unitary Authority', which is also being pressed by the government to tear up the old restrictive rule book and allow housing. The results of all this are now 'written in the landscapes' for all to see, while that failed County bid for housing is coming back to haunt us, but on a bigger scale!



Sketch-map of housing developments

PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT

