Once again Christmas has provided an opportunity to keep in touch with far flung friends and relations via the postal service. This was largely a Victorian invention, along with some other aspects of Christmas celebrations promoted by Charles Dickens and Prince Albert. That century also saw the introduction of better records through which we can learn about our ancestors who lived through that period.

An often repeated comment about the population of Bicton has been the way in which it has been constantly changing. Indeed, the village and parish may be viewed as a 'stage' upon which the 'actors' have made their entrances and exits in 'Shakespearian' fashion.

In practical terms it is easy to see who was in the village at each census, or being noted in the parish registers, but harder to learn about such individuals who were coming and going 'off the local radar'. However, like so many things these days, technology is coming to the rescue.

Thanks partly to the growing interest in family history, many national and local records have been digitised and therefore made accessible through computer systems whose 'search engines' can flick through a mass of data very quickly. As demonstrated by TV programmes, the resulting individual stories can be of general interest and not just to the family concerned, since they can reveal much about the times through which that individual lived. Charles Dickens actually wrote fictitious life stories in order to illustrate some aspects of those times, particularly the social problems.

The real-life story of local girl Martha Lewis is but one of such stories which could be told.

She was born in 1827, the third child of Edward Lewis, gardener to Preston Montford Hall and wife Elizabeth. In 1841, their home was a new cottage built by the Wingfield Estate at the end of Drury Lane, soon after the road had been altered. By this time there were seven children, the eldest of whom, Anne, had already left home. Altogether it was a very typical Victorian rural worker's household from which eldest daughters left early to go into domestic service.

Martha followed and in 1851 was recorded as a housemaid in the large household of the vicar of Stratford-upon-Avon. There were six other staff, three of whom were also from Shropshire, including Elizabeth Parry from Bicton, who must have been a school friend. The 'mistress' of the house also came from Berwick House near Shrewsbury and therefore could have provided the Shropshire link for the recruitment of staff. All this was a good example of how some Victorian clergy lived like gentry.

As sometimes happened in such households, however, problems arose which families do not like to talk about... Martha returned home as an unmarried mother. Leaving son with Edward and Elizabeth at Montford Bridge, she soon returned to work however and, in 1861, was recorded as a ladies' maid in a similar household of the vicar of St Giles at Abbey House in Shrewsbury (Carline's old house on the site of Wakeman School). Perhaps clerical networks across the county boundaries were fixing this for her once again.

In the next five decades, by now in her 40s and 50s, Martha was recorded as a seamstress at the County Asylum in Shelton, no doubt for both household maintenance and occupational therapy for the inmates. The development of the sewing machine was an important factor now. By coincidence, by this time Elizabeth Parry, now a widow with one son, had also returned to Bicton to care for her father and run their small farm next to the new school (Hollyhurst).

During the next two decades Martha retired from the Asylum, but remained a dressmaker in ordr to earn a living. She occupied cottages, first in the Isle Lane, then Bicton Heath. Finally, she returned to Montford Bridge near to sister Anne, who had also returned to the old home where she likewise practised dressmaking. Anne died in 1914 at the age of 91, while Martha died the following year, aged 87, in the 'Berrington Workhouse Infirmary'. This had been the old Atcham Union Workhouse, now evolving into the geriatric Cross Houses Hospital, thus shedding its Victorian image. Both are buried somewhere in our churchyard.

Throughout their long lives, these women had witnessed a changing world, which after the war was about to change even more. We wonder how Charles Dickens might have spun their stories into one of his novels. Being single, they had to keep working to support themselves in a world in which marriage was the norm. Perhaps they lived for a long time because they escaped the strains of multiple pregnancies which marriage might have involved!

Meanwhile, a succession of girls were coming to Bicton from surrounding villages, especially those towards Wales, in order to work in the local 'Big Houses'. While 'place of birth' was recorded on each census entry after 1851, what happened afterwards would need similar computer searches. Some were known to have married local lads. In a similar way, the place of birth of an agricultural labourer's children gives a clue to the family's movements from job to job, so that only the very youngest appear to have been born in Bicton. The farmers who employed them show a similar pattern of movements as some tenancies were for only 21 years. Adding all these stories together could reveal just how mobile our rural population was during those Victorian times. The raw data is out there somewhere; it just needs a lot of clicks on the mouse to find it!

Special thanks must go to the volunteer helpers from the family history society at Shropshire Archives.

Census 1851   Stratford-upon-Avon   College Lane

Henry Harding	Hd	Mar	56		Vicar of S on A	Warks Hampton Lucy
Emily "	wife	Mar		53		Salop Berwick House
Georgina "	dau	Un		19		Stafford Aldridge
Emily "	dau	Un		18		Stafford Aldridge
William Hill	serv	M	37		Butler	Salop Willerby
Elizabeth Parry	serv	Un		26	Ladies Maid	" Bicton
Martha Lewis	serv	Un		23	House Maid	" Montford
Emma Jones	serv	Un		21	Kitchen Maid	" Baschurch
Harriet Pinfold	serv	Un		21	Ladies Maid	Warks Alcester
Elizabeth Williams	serv	Un		33	Housekeeper	N Wales Llangadian