

**David Pannett's History of Bicton Part 11**  
**Tales from the River Bank**

The old township of Bicton was bounded by two and a half miles of the River Severn, but now that the modern parish includes Preston Montford, the Isle and Rossall, the figure rises to 9 miles. The 'Severn Way' long distance path avoids all the bends by taking a short cut through the village.

From time to time, correspondents in the local press express their views on the management of the river, ranging from damming it to protect Shrewsbury from floods, to dredging it to allow the passage of pleasure boats. In doing so, they betray ignorance of the local environment and therefore we need to clarify some aspects now, since the landscape of Bicton and its history is deeply involved.

'Climate Change' is also frequently mentioned and it is significant that the character of the valley is the product of dramatic changes during the last 15,000 years. The relationship between the different elements forming the surface of the landscape can also be understood from the boreholes made by the engineers at Montford Bridge.

The present river channel is bordered by a thick layer of 'silt' building up the floodplain, which actually fills an older river channel created during the closing stages of the last 'Ice Age'. It was this super 'meltwater' channel, heavily charged with sediment and vast amounts of water from the ice and snow, which cut the wide meandering valley around the parish. Even today during a severe flood, when over 200 cubic metres per second pass under Montford Bridge, we can get an impression of its size as it covers the floodplain.

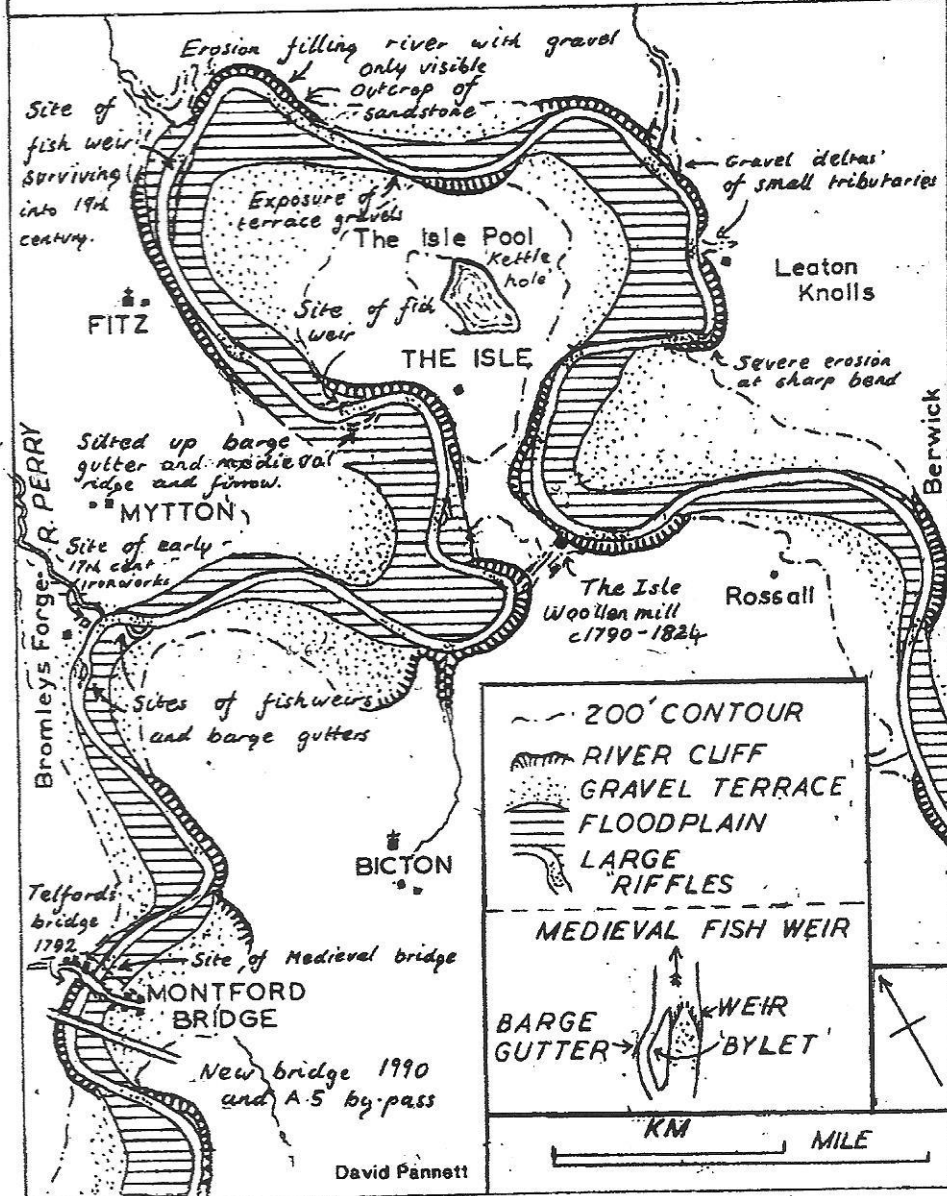
Like all meandering rivers, it cut steep banks on the outside of each bend, while depositing on the inside, where its level spreads of gravel now form 'terraces'. (The flat site of the Bicton half of Montford Bridge is a good example). The bends became particularly sinuous around the Isle, because here the river could easily erode the fine, soft, sandy filling of yet another deep 'sub glacial' channel running from Walford to Shrewsbury.

This was cut by meltwater trapped under a thick ice sheet and then backfilled with sand as this thinned.

Below Rossall the river actually runs along this feature and, as a result, engineers will have quite enough trouble designing foundations for a new bridge for the proposed North West Relief Road, without getting mixed up with 'flood barrages'! More reliable solid rock (sandstone) appears at only two places in these nine miles of river.

The present river, much shrunken in our drier, warmer, 'interglacial' climate should now create its own smaller scale meanders, but instead is obliged to follow those old bends as they are so deeply cut down into thick glacial

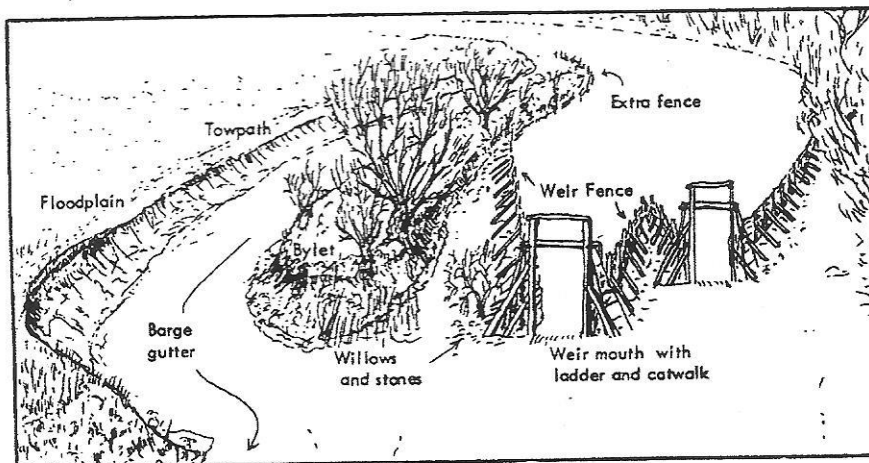
# The River Severn around Bicton



its bed  
deposits. Instead, it simply deforms into shallower 'riffles' and deeper pools, providing contrasting habitats for fish, which anglers know all about. Their positions are fairly stable, being related in part to deposits of gravel introduced from cliffs and tributaries, which the river cannot move on. As a result, they provided sites for fords and fish weirs over the centuries, as well as barriers to navigation during low summer flows.

In the Middle Ages some estates built timber and hurdle fences in a funnel shape across the river in order to catch migrating eels. However, since these blocked the 'free navigation', barge gutters were cut to bypass them. Parish and property boundaries followed the same route and their lines have survived even though the weirs have long since decayed and many gutters silted up. This explains the odd river pattern near Bickley Coppice associated with the weirs at Bromley's Forge and Mytton. Legally a patch of woodland near the scout camp is still part of Mytton! A part of Fitz is likewise attached to the Isle. The Fitz weir survived into the nineteenth century, but otherwise many in the county disappeared in the seventeenth century following damaging floods, typical of the 'Little Ice Age'. We were then experiencing four centuries of more frequent severe weather, including frozen rivers, from which we are now recovering (climate change again).

The Severn is indeed an interesting river to explore, providing you have suitable craft and plenty of time to paddle around all those bends. The commercial boat traffic of the past is another tale, which we must leave until another month.



Sketch of typical fish weir on the River Severn (not to scale)