

David Pannett's History of Bicton part 12 - 'Further Tales from the River Bank' - Continued from the January newsletter

In spite of all the bends and gravel banks discussed last month, the Severn was once an important trade route linking Shropshire with Gloucester and beyond. It was, and still is, a 'free navigation'. The inns at Montford Bridge could serve both road and river traveller and were often an important interchange for both. For instance, in the seventeenth century there was even a warehouse linked to the iron industry dispersed along the Welsh border and in the Forest of Dean.

The barges would drift or sail downstream with the current, but upstream they were pulled by gangs of 'bow haulers', which are shown in several illustrations. Timber from Wales was floated down as rafts or 'floats'.

The fluctuating flow of the river, fed by rapid run-off from the Welsh hills, was both help and hindrance to navigation. Prolonged low flow in dry spells often made it difficult to maintain traffic and perhaps for this reason, many barge owners had several craft of different sizes, which could be used as appropriate. The penalty for misjudging the situation could be to have a cargo 'stuck in the mud', going nowhere for a long time - as was the recorded case of a load of charcoal at Montford Bridge urgently needed for the forge at Eardington in 1853.

Another episode, which illustrates this problem, was recorded by Thomas Telford when he was rebuilding Montford Bridge in 1792. A barge had been laid up at Shrawardine, but when the water rose, the crew prepared to set sail. However, their Captain had gone off to secure another of these boats, leaving them with the problem of waiting for him or setting off on their own. Such was the importance of catching the 'spate', they chose the latter but then found they lacked the skill to pass through Telford's temporary bridge without wrecking it!

By this date, such barges were carrying timber, which at an earlier time might have been floated. Such, 'floats' could be difficult to handle and one was the probable cause of another accident at Montford Bridge in 1582 when three local men were drowned.

River trade all but finished by the 1850's, as better roads and railways proved more reliable. Some of the last local traffic may have been the distribution of 'Criggion' road stone from the Belam Bank quarry at Crewe Green.

Also, for a brief period around 1838, bricks and tiles may have been transported from a brickyard near Bickley Coppice. (No pit remains since the most suitable weathered clay would come only from shallow surface diggings - but a field name gives a clue to its whereabouts).

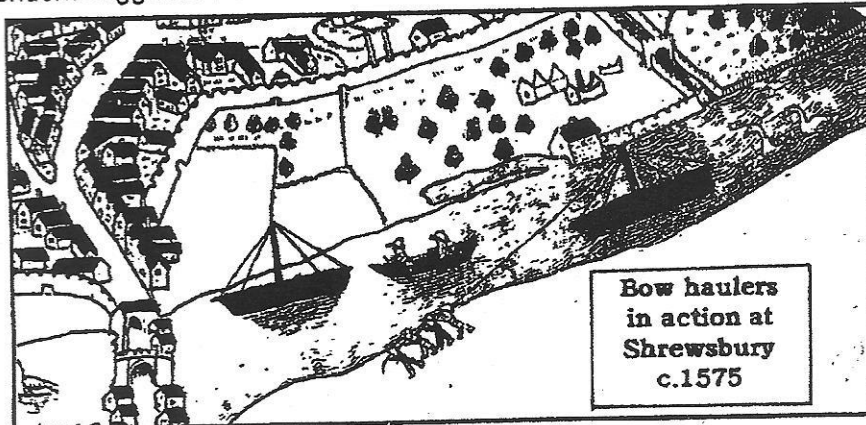
The variation in flow and size of the Severn channel made it impossible to build conventional water mills like those on the nearby River Perry and other tributaries. Significantly, throughout the Middle Ages, the Isle estate was linked to Yeaton Mill on the Perry. The Isle was, however, later on, the site of an exceptional textile mill powered by the Severn via a tunnel across the neck of the great loop.

Shrewsbury had for a long time been the centre of a textile trade, marketing woollens woven by numerous 'domestic' workers in Wales. (Montford Bidge was also home to John Griffiths, a weaver, in 1610 and, probably, to 'Richard the Weaver' drowned in that 1582 accident). Samuel Adderton, who built Preston Montford Hall, was but one of the Shrewsbury drapers profiting from such trade. By the late eighteenth century, the new factory system was developing nationally and locally with the famous flax mill at Ditherington (1797) being one example.

About the same time, the woollen mill was built at the Isle. It lasted until 1824 when the owner, Edward Holt, died. A corn mill continued on the site until the 1850's since when all traces of industrial buildings have disappeared, leaving only the owner's house.

A row of six mill-workers cottages once stood in the Isle Lane, significantly just across the Bickton boundary. They were replaced by other estate cottages, which likewise illustrate the typical habit of estates, keeping their workers well away from 'the big house' (cf Preston Montford).

Perhaps we should keep quiet about the history of this mill in case another correspondent suggests we build a 'carbon neutral' hydroelectric station here!



Road plan to prevent flooding

The West Midlands summer flooding in 2007 affected more than 450 businesses and 184,000 households, with an estimated cost of up to £372 million.

Due to climate change the River Severn is likely to flood more often and more severely in the future, while the roads will become vulnerable to structural surface deformation due to melting. And carbon emissions must be reduced.

Therefore, Shrewsbury's North West Relief Road should cross the River Severn on top of a flood prevention barrier, with an excavated reservoir and silt settlement sump upstream.

Then Shropshire County Council and Shrewsbury & Atcham Borough Council would not have to fiddle, tinker and pose with silt banks by the English Bridge and Welsh Bridge, flood prevention barriers for Frankwell and Coleham Head, and a 12 mile long U-shaped ring road with 10 roundabouts.

Name and address supplied

Example of wild ideas appearing in the press

