

Recent discussions about proposed development around Bicton has focused on the issue of protecting open ground between the old 'farming' village and the newer 'suburban' village as well as the wider area between the whole village and the Calcott-Four Crosses clusters. The planning inspector upheld objections to the former and it is hoped that he would likewise support objections to development in the latter.

Such an area of flat land bordering the main road is very tempting to developers in the current 'planning climate'. However good their detailed plans may be, the location of such development would undermine the separate identity of the village, making it just another part of the suburban sprawl spreading from Bicton Heath (similar arguments relate to the gap between Bayston Hill and Meole Brace).

In this context, it is about time these history essays paid more attention to this area, especially Bicton Villa, which is so visible to all from the main road. By coincidence, the old photograph by Ernest Lewis, recently published here (Jan '17) has been identified as showing the Lee family at Bicton Villa – Henry and Isabella with sons Herbert and Richard and daughters Isabella, Helen, Gertrude and Rhoda. Other distinguished looking gentlemen were probably relatives or in-laws of one married daughter. The special occasion was most likely to have been the eightieth birthday of Henry in 1912. Their very formal appearance gives an impression of being a far grander household than one farming only 50 acres, but this was both the fashion at those times as well as the special aspirations of this family, for which they were known in the village.

So what was the story of this 50 acre holding and very special house...? Records in fact show it to be quite complex with a field pattern of different ages and many changes in ownership.

The northern boundary is an old hedge and ditch marking the boundary of Bicton against Rossall Heath, while the adjacent fields once had a series of narrow shapes suggesting enclosure from an extension of Bicton's medieval fields (Oct '10). Hedge lines were once slightly curved and about a furlong in length. To the South the rest of the land was once open heath stretching as far as the Welshpool Road. The map prepared at its 'inclosure' in 1768 also showed how cottages and encroachments had taken place all around it, including here (Dec '07) on the sites of Villa Farm, the Four Crosses and another site now lost. Since most were held by Mrs Jane Griffith, she was allotted extra land in the award, extending to the main road while the 'Four Crosses' cottage went to John Mytton.

Subsequent agreements over road maintenance (April '11) show that, by 1800 the Griffiths property had passed to William Smith, who may have been responsible for building the 'Villa' with its characteristic 'Regency' features. The parish survey of 1812 confirms that it was just a 'residence' rather than a 'farmhouse', as the name would suggest and was occupied by Thomas Purcell. It had been built adjacent to the existing cottages and shared their drive to the Holyhead Road. Around it farmland was mainly occupied by Thomas Clayton based on his farmstead off Isle Lane. The blacksmith shop of Philip Rowlands and also the cottages built for the Isle Woollen Mill had also appeared by this time (June '12).

By the next parish survey in 1830, William Smith had just died, John William Watson was a new tenant of the Villa, Thomas Clayton now farmed 45 acres, while the Four Crosses and blacksmith shop had been added to the estate after the sale of Mytton property in 1824.

The Smith estate passed to John, William's heir, who thus appears as owner on the 1843 tithe map. Otherwise very little had changed, apart from Mrs Allan, a widow, becoming tenant of the Villa with an extra five acres, no doubt for the pony so useful to country residents who could afford one.

John Smith, however, died soon after this and the estate was auctioned off, leading to many more changes under new owners. The Isle Estate took over the factory cottages, making them their 'Isle

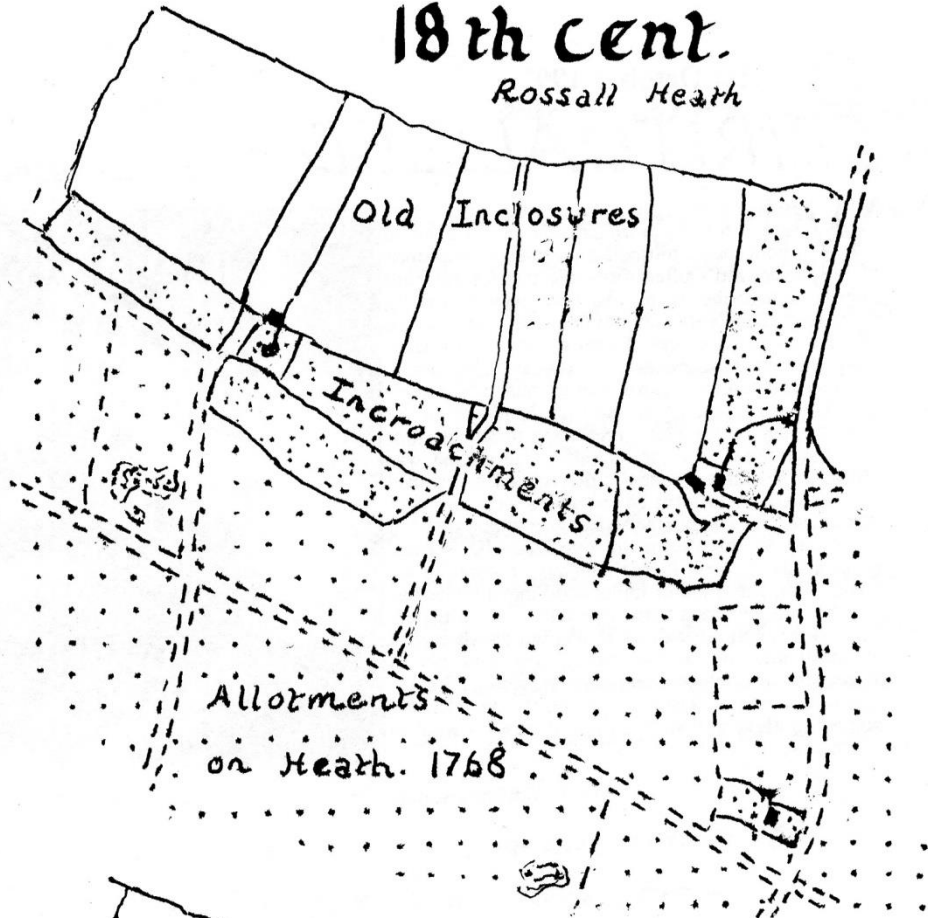
Cottages' along Isle Lane (June '12), Thomas Clayton's farmstead disappeared altogether leaving little trace amongst the hedgerows, so that 'farmstead' functions were transferred to the Villa and its adjacent cottages. At some stage the Four Crosses was also rebuilt. At the end of the century new cottages were built by the blacksmith shop.

From now on, directories and census records show successive occupants of this farm – Martha Hilton, George Pritchard and William Felton, before Henry Lee and his family came from Montford about 1890. They were to remain here for the next 30 years at least.

In 1926, when Thomas Edwards had taken the farm, George Dudley had already started his milk retailing business at nearby Laburnam Cottage. He subsequently took over the Villa and was to become a familiar figure delivering milk around the neighbourhood for many decades. In this way this story comes into living memory to at least the oldest members of the community.

# 18th cent.

Rossall Heath



# 19th cent.

