

Rossall Roundup

Several earlier essays have already touched upon the township of Rossall on the eastern side of Bickton civil parish, but so far the story of the 'Hall' has not been dealt with properly.

That part of the township west of Isle Lane was once heathland, while the original farmland was confined to the eastern side, where it was bordered by glacially deformed ground against Udlington and Shelton as well as the steep bluffs and wide meadowland bordering the river. Indeed the name may have been derived from Rhos, the Welsh term for such meadows (similar to Rous Hill in Shrewsbury). It was also called 'Down' Rossall to distinguish it from 'Up' Rossall, better known as the Isle.

At Domesday 1086, this land was farmed by five smallholders as tenants of St Chads Church, in the similar way to those at Bickton. One presumes they shared a typical communal 'Open Field' system but clear evidence has not survived.

The Black Death in the fourteenth century probably undermined the medieval system here, as elsewhere, leading to the concentration of holdings into fewer hands and the loss of any original 'village' layout. Out of these changes the Stury family emerged as the principle occupiers for the next few generations.

Thomas Stury, in particular, entered the records in the 16th century, when he had a fight with neighbour, John Cole, down in Shrewsbury. The issue was probably a long running dispute over the use of the Heath, which was also being claimed by both Cole and the successive Sandfords of the Isle (Oct 08). Thomas finally drowned when he fell in the river while crossing from Berwick in 1596.

By the late 17th century, we can gain a better idea of the township, other than from those constant arguments over the Heath. The Hearth Tax of 1672 recorded one 'eight hearth' big house and five single hearth dwellings, which must have been little more than cottages. Neighbouring townships usually had some two-hearth 'farmhouses', but here a 'big house' was clearly dominant.

By now, the Stury's had run out of male heirs, so that the ownership of the estate had to change while different tenants were now already occupying that house. Wealthy men became involved, including Edward Gosnell, a London merchant, who had suffered in the Great Fire of 1666. As his family already had connections with Shropshire it was an obvious choice for an escape from the problems of London.

In these circumstances he acquired Rossall and quickly replaced the old, timber house with a brick building of the very latest fashion now being built in post-fire London. In doing so, he was a pioneer in introducing this style to the country, stimulating other local landowners to follow suit during the following years. Samuel Adderton's Preston Montford Hall and Lord Newport's Guildhall in Shrewsbury being local examples. Edward was actually Mayor of Shrewsbury in 1679 and obviously moved in the same political and social circles.

One attractive feature of Rossall, apart from its proximity to Shrewsbury, had been its delightful site where the new hall could stand on a high point overlooking the river valley and the deformed glacial ground, which together provided a romantic parkland vista. To the north, another 'kettle hole' lent

itself to holding an ornamental pond and sheltering a partially walled kitchen garden. Beyond, the normal, flatter farmland was worked by two tenanted farms.

Edward's family, however, were not so keen on all this and after his death in 1703, sold it on to other gentry who continued with further sales during the rest of the eighteenth century, perhaps as much for property investment as a place in which to live.

In this way, Grange Farm was added to the Jenkins' Bicton Hall estate in 1763 while the home farm and the Hall passed to Cecil Weld Forester, who changed its name to Ross Hall (there is a story that he once entertained the Prince Regent here). Then, in 1829, he sold it to Henry Wentworth Fielding of nearby Berwick (later known as Wentworth Powys), who let the hall to various tenants. For instance, in 1830 John Morris held it before the Morris brothers took over Oxon estate but by 1843 the tenant was Ann Fielding, probably Henry's mother.

By now the heath had been enclosed adding more normal farmland to the estate, leading eventually to the development of Rossall Heath Farm.

In the 1850s it was all change again as John Harley took over the whole estate including the Jenkins' farm. Now the Hall became a real family home rather than just a property investment and in the following years two sons and three daughters were raised here. Unfortunately a further generation of possible heirs failed to appear in due course.

John died in 1883 aged 91 and was buried in Bicton's new churchyard, where, one by one, he was joined by his wife Ann and his unmarried daughters (graves against east wall), the last of whom had 'downsized' to Rossall Grove by 1922.

All this was the beginning of the end for the Hall. It was sold on to the Stott family in 1943 who improved some aspects of the estate, but found the Hall had problems which were difficult to deal with in the prevailing economic climate. They therefore felt obliged to demolish it in the 60s and finally sold the remainder of the estate in 1970. Had it survived a little longer, modern attitudes and investment might have saved it.

Public footpaths now cross over the old park – why not take a stroll through its special landscape?

Rossall Hall 1962

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