

## Landscape across the River

As usual in summer we encourage readers to get out and about and perhaps appreciate our local landscape in a wider context. For example, Montford parish just across the river is worth exploring as it once had many similarities with Bicton, but also major differences caused by land ownership.

In the mid eighteenth century, when a spirit of improvement was developing in the country, the Montford estate was acquired by the famous Robert Clive, who was seeking ways of investing some of the profits of his Indian adventures. The estate, formerly owned by the Bromley family of Shrawardine Castle, included the townships of Montford, Forton and Ensdon, as well as Shrawardine. Estate maps show that each of these ancient villages and hamlets then consisted of several farmsteads whose land lay scattered and intermixed in small fields all around following piecemeal 'inclosure' of the medieval 'open fields', in a way similar to Bicton. The 'inclosure' process was probably going on at the same time c.1700 in both places.

Shrawardine also contained the site of the medieval deer park occupying some glacially deformed ground and by now converted to farming. To the north of Forton lay a heath whose 400 acres spread into adjacent Fitz and around which many cottage smallholdings had developed, including a seventeenth century ironworks at Bromley's Forge.

Around Montford Bridge similar holdings included the Pheasant Inn and a blacksmith's shop, each exploiting some roadside waste.

In general, therefore, the estate, like Bicton parish, contained a mixture of types of settlement very typical of lowland Shropshire, the whole pattern being held together by a system of 'customary' or manorial tenures.

Around Montford village itself, the fields of its six tenant farmers were still spread over the main landforms left by the Ice Age, each of which had been used in different ways during the middle ages. The best arable fields had occupied the level sandy outwash plain towards Montford Bridge, while grazing land filled the damp, marshy hollows towards Shrawardine Park. The river valley provided extensive meadow land to the south, where there was also a fish weir and ozier beds.

In 1771, after gradually extinguishing the old manorial tenures, the new landlord was able to re-let the whole area as three compact farms on 21 year leases and new management clauses. Thus Lodge Farm (294 acres), Barley Farm (224 acres) and Wier (sic.) Farm (268 acres) were laid out in the 'marsh', arable field and riverside areas respectively, with the two public lanes radiating from the village acting as boundaries. Within the village old farmsteads were amalgamated or reduced to cottages.

At the same time Ensdon was reorganised, creating Beam House and Ensdon House farms out in the former fields. The latter also served as an 'upmarket' inn by the turnpike road, suitable for the landlord on his visits. Forton Heath was also 'inclosed' soon after, giving some extra land to both smallholdings and newly reorganised farms.

At first, the new farms inherited the old field pattern around Montford, but the way was now open for further improvements. The marshland of Lodge Farm presented the most urgent problem so a

new system of drains and straight hedges soon appeared here, together with a plantation on the dampest ground.

By the middle of the nineteenth century both Lodge and Barley Farms were held by members of the Matthews family and later the united farm passed to Henry Minton, member of a family already tenants at Forton. They became famous stock breeders, gaining many prizes at agricultural shows and, with the cooperation of the landlord, they continued to improve both buildings and field pattern thus leaving fine monuments to this period of Victorian 'High Farming'. In the same way, the larger graves dominating the churchyard record other leading farming families, especially Gittins and Bowen-Jones.

This church, vicarage and glebe lands (church lands) also became caught up in this mainly agricultural story. The original vicarage was deemed unsuitable for the new generation of clergy, related to the squires, and was rebuilt more than once before being replaced altogether on a new site. In modern times this was found to be too big and was again replaced by a smaller version by the church. After all that, the church no longer needs it now that our shared clergy team are based in Bicton and Bomere Heath.

That Victorian prosperity was, however, overtaken by a period of acute agricultural depression throughout the early years of the following century. Also many landowning families suffered personal losses in the war and therefore it was no surprise when many estates were sold off, including this one in 1918. Although many tenants took the opportunity to buy their farms, the economic climate was against them, so that a new commercial landlord stepped in to take over large parts of the old estates and bring much needed new investment in buildings and workers' housing.

Farming continues to change with increased mechanisation, while the old 'service centre' at Montford Bridge is becoming ever more a 'residential' community. Thus 'history' marches on, reflecting not just the soil, but the 'owner of the soil'.

