

## Environmental Understanding for All

Normally in November we reflect upon some aspect of the Wars, particularly some special anniversary, but the deaths of local lads Denis Blackmore and John Brown at the 'Ypres Salient' in 1917 have already been dealt with in these pages (Nov '10). However, there are plenty of other anniversaries this year, apart from the winter of 1947 and the great storm of 1987. One closely related to Bicton, worthy of happier celebration, is the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the opening of a 'Field Centre' at Preston Montford in 1957.

That story still has a wartime connection in that the parent organisation, the 'Field Studies Council', arose out of wartime meetings between enthusiasts and academics in 1943, and so we duly celebrated its 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2013 (Jun '13). From the start, the National Trust also became involved and, after the War could offer some of its properties as bases for residential environmental education, which was to become the core of the 'new organisation's' work. Thus 'Field Centres' were opened at Flatford Mill, Suffolk; Malham, Yorkshire; Juniper Hall by Dorking and Dale Fort, Pembrokeshire.

Such was the success of these in catering for the growing demand from 6<sup>th</sup> Form biology and geography students that it was decided to establish more centres in other types of properties and locations. In 1957, Preston Montford therefore became the first of a new generation of such centres, based in its 'Queen Anne' mansion beside the River Severn. To many, the surrounding landscape was rather 'ordinary' but, from the start, the Warden, Charles Sinker and his staff set out to demonstrate that this could make it more relevant to their students.

The original house had been built by Samuel Adderton, a Shrewsbury draper, shortly before his death in 1707 (another anniversary!). In the following generations, marriage settlements passed the estate to the Hills of Hawkestone, who later sold it to John Wingfield of nearby Onslow. As each estate just used it as a spare property to be mainly let out, the original structure was little altered.

Eventually, it passed into the hands of a police charity which opened a 'probation home' here in 1947 (another anniversary). However, changing Home Office policy meant that it closed down at the very time the FSC was looking for a base in the Welsh Borders.

In this way the Centre inherited existing accommodation, including some wartime huts, and only needed an extra classroom in order to function. The down side, however, was that this was all rather basic, with some changeover days involving shifting the beds around to fit the gender ratio of the next intake. Also, the main house could not offer female showers, but money was always short to improve the situation. Income was dependent upon student fees rather than Government subsidy, except indirectly through local authority support for their own students.

Apart from the small team of teachers and support staff, the Centre sometimes housed research students linked to universities, whose results added to the overall 'local knowledge' which was a feature of each centre (Bicton News readers have also been sharing some of this). The local teaching areas were not just the home estate with its grassland, river and ponds, but also contrasting features on the Stiperstones, Long Mynd, the Ellesmere 'Meres and Mosses' and even the streets of Shrewsbury. The small coaches provided by 'Vaggs' of Knockin Heath proved most useful, being suited to narrow lanes and dirty boots.

In school holidays traditional adult courses in a range of natural history and geological topics were often run by visiting specialists. In this context, there was the centre's special relationship with Birmingham University's 'Extra Mural' department, which ran summer schools excavating Roman Wroxeter. Courses on 'Industrial Archaeology' also featured and claimed to have invented that very term.

During the winter months without students, the staff always had plenty to do by way of maintenance of equipment and buildings, especially those old huts, and in which everyone 'mucked in' without those petty demarcation issues more common in normal schools (or shipyards) at the time.

As the years rolled by, the estate continued to develop: improved access to river and ponds, better weather stations and yet more trees. In 1973 Charles Sinker became the overall director of the FSC and thus the underused stable block was gradually turned into 'Head Office'.

At the house, a new dining room was slotted into some existing walls and a start made on new accommodation to replace those old huts. Eventually the new A5 made this possible as it completely changed the landscape in that corner of the estate. Now there are yet more trees and a new teaching pond, replacing the original lost under the embankment, where its soft sediment and old hydrology gave the engineers quite an expensive headache.

Over the years successive generations of staff have made their own contributions to 'bringing environmental understanding to all'. In line with changing times, they now use more IT and have greater concern for details of 'health and safety' in a way not known in the pioneer days. Also, the very success of the FSC in promoting field studies has created competition in the industry, so that old style accommodation is unpopular with customers. Thus recent work has brought even Samuel Adderton's old house up to 'Premier Inn' standards.

Indeed, there is plenty to celebrate this year, which will include an 'open day' on November 18<sup>th</sup>, when the wealth of current activities will be on display.



1960s biology students



1960s geography tutor