

Removing the Heath

This year, 2018, has its own crop of anniversaries to celebrate, or at least remember: the great fire at Shelton Hospital 50 years ago; the opening of Shrewsbury's new technical college by the English Bridge 80 years ago, when, by coincidence, this writer was also born. The final German offensive occurred on the Western Front 100 years ago, which led to the last casualty on the Bickton War Memorial, Arthur Buson, age 21. Much earlier, 250 years ago in 1768 was the 'inclosure' of the Bickton portion of Bickton Heath.

This area, stretching from the village to the Welshpool Road, has been discussed often in these essays in connection with its 'deformed' glacial surface, pools and cottage communities. Though no longer an open wasteland, its distinctive field and settlement pattern is still recognisable within the Bickton landscape.

The 'inclosure' process (note the old spelling) involved an agreement between the local landowners by which they appointed 'referees' and surveyors to lay out new roads and boundaries of their new 'allotments' of land. These were awarded to each landowner in proportion to their existing holdings in Bickton and Calcott which had given them rights to the common grazing. John Mytton of Halston then held not only Grange Farm but also the 'Lordship of the Manor', which made him 'owner of the soil of the common land'. He had successfully claimed this role because of his family's long association with the former monastic 'granges' in Bickton and Cruckmeole, even though other heaths around Shrewsbury were controlled by the borough authorities.

To some, this could be seen as a legal fraud. Also his fellow landowners were further suspicious of his 'wheeling and dealing', when he proposed his own land agent to be one of the 'independent' referees! This was John Probert, who was an important local figure in his own right, working also for Lord Clive, whose Montford estate he was also about to reorganise. He occupied a grand house on Mytton property, still to be seen by the hospital entrance on Mytton Oak Road. As a busy man with 'fingers in many pies' he certainly left his mark on our local landscapes, so that we could well discuss him further some time.

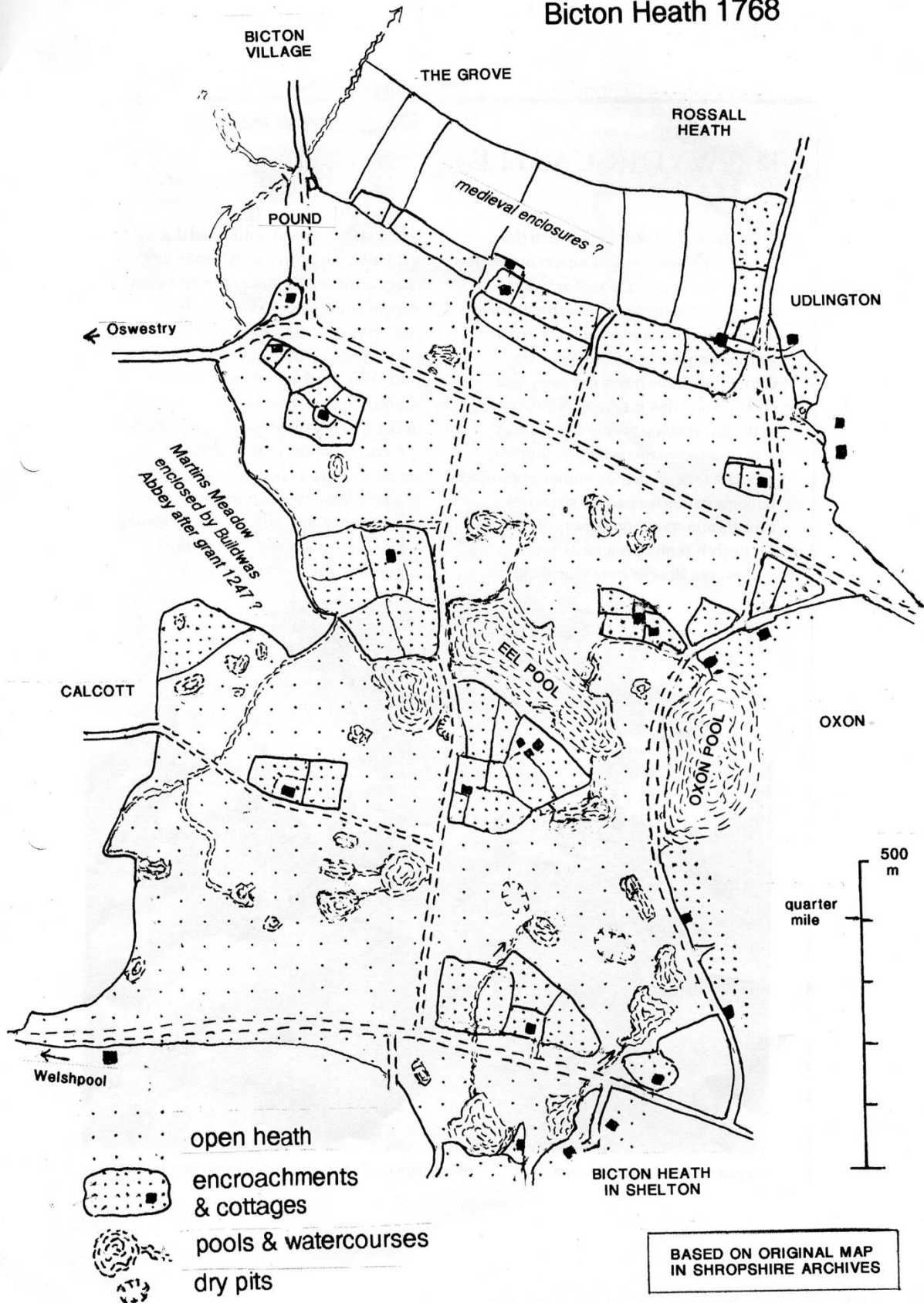
As 'Lord of the Manor', John Mytton was therefore allotted most of the cottages and encroachments around the heath younger than 20 years, as well as his 'Eel Pool'. Thereafter, he drew up proper leases and extracted rent from the occupiers, some of whose old cottages were also later rebuilt to a better standard, so no originals now survive.

New sections of minor roads were laid out with a regular width of 30 feet, as can be seen along Calcott Lane. The old drainage would now be dealt with.

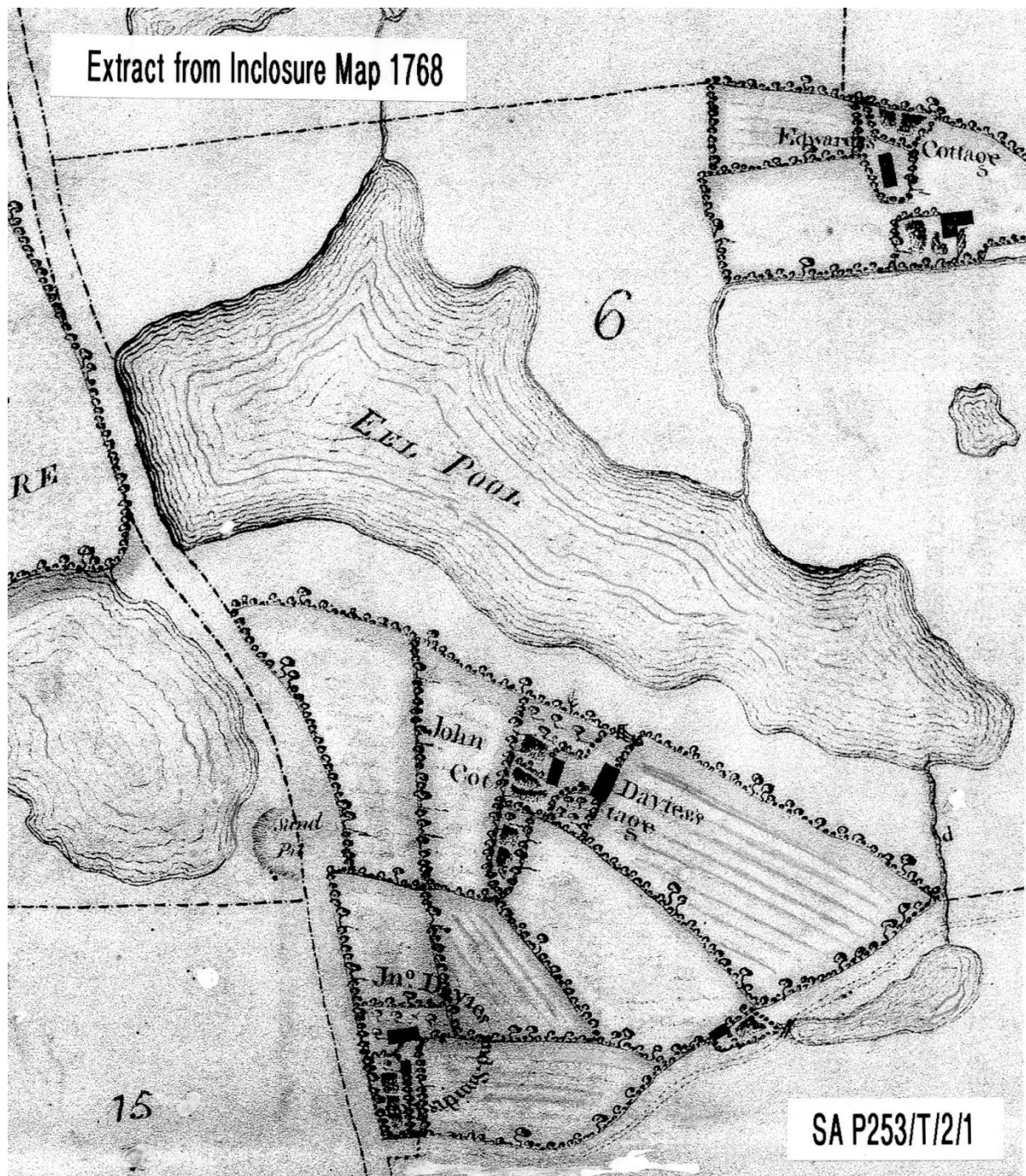
All this was recorded on a map which happens to be an excellent specimen of contemporary cartography. The fine penmanship can only be appreciated close up and therefore is best illustrated here by extracts, rather than the full sheet.

As this 'inclosure' was by 'private agreement' with no Act of Parliament involved, the final documents were deposited with St Chad's Church rather than with the County authorities. Other draft records survive in Shrewsbury School library, since the school had an interest in the tythes of Bicton.

Bicton Heath 1768



Extract from Inclosure Map 1768



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