

Bicton before WW1

Fans of Michael Portillo's TV rail journeys will be familiar with his technique of travelling with an old guide book, seeking out what had survived from that period. By implication the subsequent changes are also recalled, including those brought about by wars and social attitudes.

The nearest equivalent for our local study would be a walk through the village in the footsteps of the 1911 census enumerator along Bicton Lane from the Holyhead road to the Woodlands. Some stories along here have already featured in these essays (Dec 08, Dec 14), but by combining census data with trade directories and folk memories we may appreciate the community as a whole.

Our starting point, the former Bicton School (now Evolution Centre) was both home and workplace of 30 years for headteacher George Blakemore, 53, his wife Sophie and their family of eight. Six of these were still at home, although by now of working age. The eldest girls had in fact become assistant teachers, while another was a clerical assistant in Shrewsbury, showing how the typewriter was now offering more opportunities for female employment beyond domestic services. Shrewsbury shops also offered apprenticeships for the boys, altogether hinting at the increasing role of urban work in this rural community, a short cycle ride away.

Another factor keeping them all together may have been Sophie's desire to maintain a close family life in compensation for the one she never had herself. Unkind village gossip would comment how she had been rejected and brought up by relations, until sent away to work. Perhaps now the sheltered home life was to leave son Denis unprepared for the pressures of WW1, with tragic consequences... (Nov 15).

By contrast, across the road in the Old School House, Mary Lewis, 74, was now in an almost 'empty nest', since the recent death of husband William, a bricklayer, and the dispersal of their seven children through emigration and marriage (Dec 08). Son Frederick was, however, returning from New York, but was at this moment recovering in Liverpool Hospital from the effects of his building work there. With room to spare, Mary had taken in a young farm worker as lodger. Thanks to son Earnest we still have some surviving photographs of people around the area at this time (Jan 17).

The Lewis family here had always been good friends and neighbours with the Blakemores, but relationships with Charles Lewis, 59, another bricklayer, next door in one of the Grange Cottages during the last 20 years is less clear. Charles and William had been brought up together at the parental home in Montford Bridge, but Charles suffered the social stigma of being the illegitimate son of William's sister Martha (Jan 16). At a time of large families Charles and wife Charlotte had raised only one daughter, perhaps because of some health problems.

Neighbour George Yewberry, 36, and his wife had only recently moved here from High Ercall taking up new farm employment. They were in a way typical of such workers. They were soon to be joined

by parents and siblings and, as a result, the family contributed two names to the Bicton War Memorial (Nov 14). Their work was probably at the Woodlands.

Across the road at Hollyhurst, another newcomer was William John Edwards, 37, and his wife of three years taking over the long term home of the Parry family. As part of the Bicton Hall estate, originally Jenkins, now Wingfield, the little cottage was probably 'tied' to his work as gardener there. Before they filled it with their own children, there was still space for the wife's mother and sister.

On the opposite corner, Lyndhurst was once the home of George Proctor, foreman gardener at the Shelton Asylum. Following his death, son William, 49, and wife Ann had recently moved in with mother. They may also have enlarged the building, providing space for the first of a sequence of lodgers and a new enterprise 'tea rooms'. In the new bicycle age this location was ideal for catering for visitors out of town.

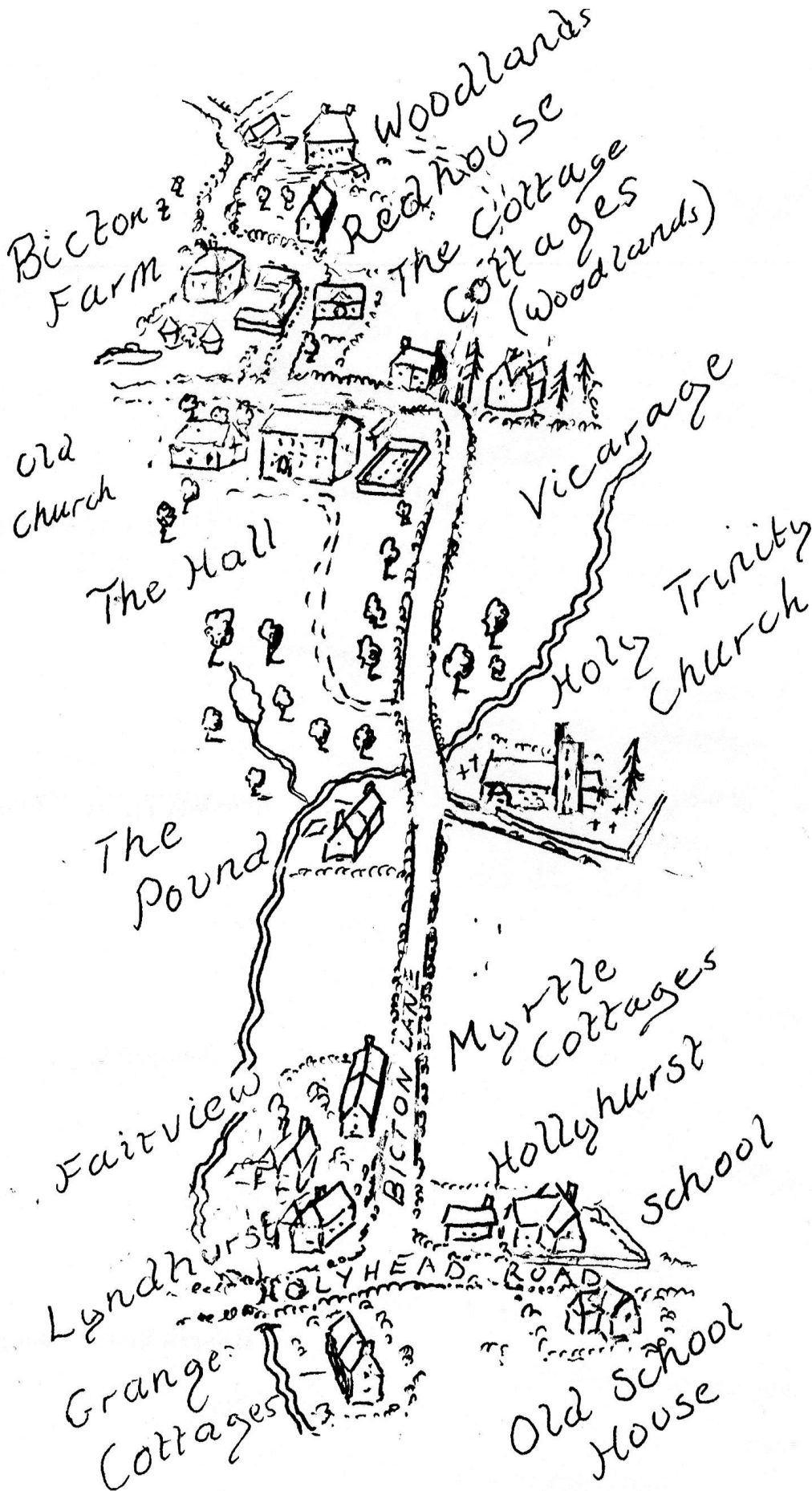
Fairview, the house next door, had been divided some thirty years before so that it was never clear which half a census entry referred to. Anyway, by now half was occupied by another gardener, James Cartwright, 69, and his wife. Once they had six children, but now the nest was empty except for one unmarried daughter and a niece. He probably worked for Miss Milbank at the Hall, who was also involved with the 'Oxon Nursing Association', a charity which employed Ann Webster as parish nurse in the other half of Fairview. The cost of this service was covered by subscriptions.

Myrtle Cottage, built 1869, also had two parts, the modern 'Rose Cottage' end being occupied by yet another gardener, Frederick Chambers, 50, with wife and two children. They were already here in the previous census and thereby further illustrate how specialist workers and tradesmen moved house less often than typical farm workers.

The impact of Bicton School from the 1860s and the general mood of the Country for improving literacy was reflected in the use of the rest of the cottage as a parish reading room. In this same year, in Shrewsbury, the Priory School was being opened, bringing more opportunities for brighter children to gain access to a wider choice of careers not available in traditional rural life. The modern age was developing!

Now we reach the end of the cottages and, in best Michael Portillo style, we will leave the rest of the route for another day. In the meantime, reflect upon changes since 1911, not just in the fabric of the buildings but the typical households within; family size, lodgers, relations, employment etc.

Special thanks to the Family History volunteers in Shrewsbury Archives and the 'oral tradition' passed on by Dorothy Lewis.



**Old School
House**



Mary Lewis