

Bicton before WW1

After a break, we continue our Michael Portillo style exploration of the pre-war village by following the path of the 1911 census enumerator along Bicton Lane. We thereby discover what survives from that period and, by implication, what has changed, both in the buildings and the lives of the people.

Leaving behind the cottage community of gardeners and tradesmen by the main road (Jul 18), we enter the old farming village beyond the new church. Here, at the edge of the former heath (May 18), stood a small enclosure, or 'Pound', for stray animals, hence the name of a small farm here. For two generations at least, it has been occupied by the Paddock family, first Thomas now Alfred, 48. In a way, he was a link between the two halves of the village, since he was also a carpenter, supplying amongst other things, the coffins for burials at the church opposite. With a family of wife, four children and mother-in-law, life was a bit cramped. The house had actually been three cottages in a row, so life must have been even more congested in the past.

Next, up a long drive, we encounter a contrasting situation at the Hall, which was once the home of Richard Jenkins, but since his death had become part of the Wingfield estate. Thus it became home to a series of tenants, first the Cotes sisters and then, for the last 15 years Miss Edith Millbank, 62, from Yorkshire. She employed four female staff, all of whom had changed since the previous census in a way not unusual in those times. In the wider village, she was appreciated as a sort of 'fairy godmother', which we have recalled in previous essays (Dec 11).

Further up the lane, the typical 'Victorian' vicarage housed the Revd. Frederick Edwards, 73, incumbent since c.1890. He was also single and once helped by his sister, he also employed two domestic staff, who were frequently changing (earlier girls included the Rosier sisters who subsequently married into the local Lewis and Glover families). By now, he also had help in his duties from a succession of curates. In general, such clergy still lived like minor gentry.

Next door, a pair of cottages belonging to the Woodlands housed John Thomas, 26 and John Ralfs, 27 and their wives. Since they had only just started their own families, there was also room for a young lodger. In a way typical of such workers they were all new to the village, replacing workers who had moved on. They were both part of the milk business run from the Woodlands.

The next household up the lane occupied a rather unusual building serving also as a stable and coach house. Here, first Charles Newitt, 72 and now son-in-law William Davies, 29 were based as coachmen and gardeners, probably serving the Hall. Another building also once stood here, which must have been given the name 'Cottage', was occupied by Miss Jelleco and her school (Sep 11). Later it became known as the 'White House'.

The rest of the old village included the three large farmhouses, each of which had its own individual story, arising partly from different 19th century landowners (Sep 09). Now, there occupants exhibited different family structures.

At Redhouse, the long standing tenant was John Roberts, 63, helped by wife and four grown up children. Originally there had been seven, but one had died while two had left for other work. Altogether it was a typical farming family, which had started earlier in Buttington.

By contrast, at Bicton Farm, the tenant was James Paddock, brother of Alfred of the Pound and therefore another member of this long established local family. Aged 40, he was still unmarried, but the house was well filled by an unmarried sister and three nieces as well as two young farm workers as the farm had no cottages of its own. The Wallader nieces were particularly glad to be here with Uncle James since their own home in nearby Calcot was such a cramped cottage.

Indeed, all this again highlights the contrasting sizes of farmhouses and cottages at this time. There would be little in between before the development of typical 'suburban' houses.

At the Woodlands, George Percy Mead, 45 lived as a 'gentleman farmer' specialising in producing milk from a herd of Jersey Cows. He really came from a medical background but opted out when still a student after meeting Annie, a nurse at St Thomas' Hospital, London, who had been brought up on the Bowen James farm at Ensdon House. Together they clearly had the necessary finance to buy this property. They had no children however, probably because Annie's own birth had caused the death of her mother and may have put her off the idea (Jan 13). They employed just two living in staff, while most farm and dairy workers lived back down the lane.

Thus we come to the end of the village and reflect upon what the census recorded, particularly the different roles within the population owning and working the land. One important component not recorded by the census was, however, the muscle power provided by the horses, who, like the people were to be affected by the coming war.

Many of the stories touched upon here have already been covered in greater detail in earlier history essays for which 'offprints' are available on request.

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