

The Leighton Connection

Anyone from Bicton travelling along the Welshpool Road through Shelton, on the no 70 bus or Park and Ride, would have noticed the gradual redevelopment of the old Shelton Hospital. Now new houses mingle with mature trees, while spacious hospital wards have been converted to luxury apartments within the original Victorian asylum!

Nearby, a replacement health centre, now offering modern approaches to mental problems, has been named 'The Redwoods' after those Victorian trees, while the redevelopment by Shropshire Homes is now called 'Leighton Park'. That link with trees is obvious, but perhaps many people may be puzzled by 'Leighton'.

The answer lies in the history of the hospital, which was founded as the County Asylum for pauper lunatics in 1843 when Sir Baldwyn Leighton of Loton in Alberbury was chairman of the Atcham Poor Law Union. He aimed to run this organisation and its workhouse at Berrington to the highest standards, blending compassion with efficiency, but soon realised that many paupers were also suffering from mental problems, for whom the typical workhouse regime was inappropriate. He therefore advocated a special asylum, both for their own good and to relieve pressure on the conventional 'union' workhouses in the County as a whole.

To this end, he visited examples of such institutions already built in other parts of the country, in order to pick up the best ideas. He also involved Montgomeryshire so that costs could be shared, since he also contributed to county affairs there. Significantly, the site chosen was a detached portion of St Julian's parish within the St Chad's township of Shelton lying just outside the town, on the road towards both Loton and Montgomeryshire.

The Leighton family had come to Loton in the early 17th century and were often involved in various aspects of public service. Perhaps for this reason one Edward Leighton had been made the first Baronet in 1693. Sir Baldwyn was therefore able to inherit both an estate and title along with a strong family tradition of service. In this aspect he was to surpass all the other Leightons with his efforts and achievements.

He was born in 1805 and in 1824 inherited the estates in Alberbury and Cardeston from his father General Sir Baldwyn Leighton. In 1836 he became chairman of the Atcham Poor Law Union, of which Bicton was a part, and continued in this role until his death, while doing many other things. For instance, as serving JP, he was a member of 'Quarter Sessions', the committee of justices which ran the county before county councils were established in the 1880s. He also served two terms as MP for South Shropshire, during which his first hand experience with running the Loton estate enabled him to make useful contributions to debates and legislation on rural affairs.

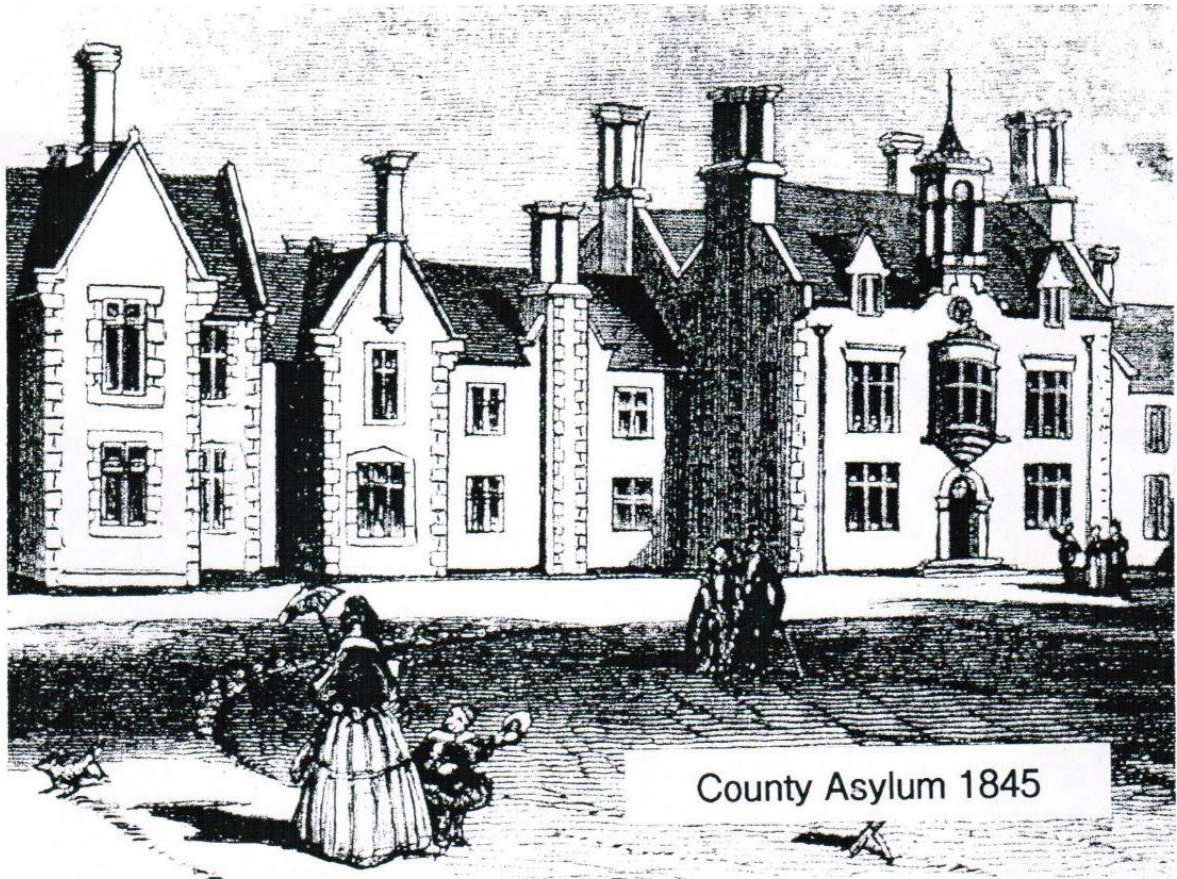
He showed a passion for many aspects of agricultural improvement, including the welfare of tenants. On the estate he pioneered the provision of new cottages at a time when such accommodation in the county was still generally poor, and so provided a model for other landowners to follow.

By visits and meetings, he was eager to exchange ideas on such subjects. In one address he reminded everyone of all the improvements locally, which had already taken place since the eighteenth century, especially by enclosure of wasteland, installation of better drainage and upgrading of roads. These had contributed to increase in food production, access to markets and an improved diet, all of which confirmed his conviction that one must seek ways of avoiding rural poverty rather than just condemning those who became poor. In this way, the burden of the Poor Law system could be reduced and he did, in fact, manage to reduce costs in the Atcham Union (welfare debates are nothing new!).

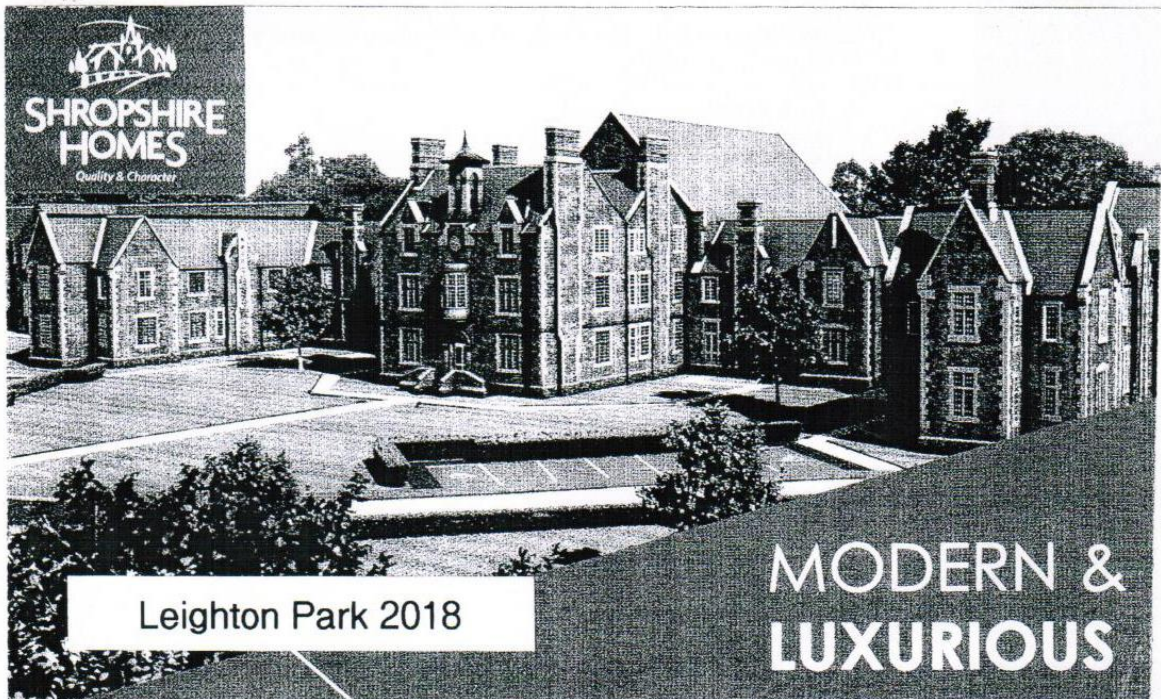
In between all this, he was also a family man, who, with wife Mary from Sweeny Hall, raised four daughters and two sons. The girls were educated at home by a series of governesses, while the boys were sent away to school, which their father personally selected – Eton and Harrow.

By 1871, after the death of Mary in 1864 and having lost his parliamentary seat in 1865, Baldwyn began thinking of retiring from public service. However, he sadly died that same year age 66. He had lived at a time when the landowning gentry ruled the political scene in the 'Shires' and therefore to some extent he just did what was expected of him. However, he did so with extra energy and compassion for those less fortunate in society, thus earning the lasting respect from his peers. In many ways he just wanted to be 'useful' an inspiration we all could try to share.

It is fitting that his name should be preserved by the new development, along with the bricks and mortar of the old building.



County Asylum 1845



Leighton Park 2018

MODERN &
LUXURIOUS