

The Morris Saga

Each new year brings another set of anniversaries, which this time includes the 150th 'birthday' of Morris & Co, the well known company based in Shrewsbury. Today, several divisions of the company are represented within Bicton Parish: 'property' with ownership of parts of Rossall and Udlington, including a property services depot and mini industrial estate; 'care', with one of the company's four nursing homes at Isle Court; 'leisure', with the Oxon touring park. In addition, the now separate oil division makes an important contribution to the annual Onslow steam rally by exhibiting its own vehicles, while lubricating many others.

All such activities display high standards, keeping 'up to date', while respecting the past, thus continuing the ethos of James Kent Morris, who founded the company at no. 7 Frankwell in 1869.

Since then the company has continued as a family business, which has shrewdly adapted itself to the changing opportunities for profitable activities, while at the same time showing social responsibility towards staff, customers and local community.

Today the present and past chairmen actually live in Bicton parish in a way continuing a long tradition of Shrewsbury businessmen enjoying country life here not too far from the 'office'. Draper Samuel Adderton who built Preston Montford Hall in the early 18th century was but one example.

James Kent Morris, who came from Ruyton XI Towns, served an apprenticeship with a grocer in Shrewsbury at a time when candles made of animal fat were also part of that trade. He realised that there was scope for improvement in such trade and therefore, when striking out on his own, he acquired both an existing candle factory and grocer's shop in Frankwell. Here he put his ideas into practice with productions, which were not cheapest, but offered quality and value for money. Looking beyond the local area he promoted wholesale trade and therefore travelled around the region getting orders and making deliveries. Unfortunately, he suffered a traffic accident which led to his death at the age of only 44.

Sons James, Frederick and Henry, together with Herbert from a second marriage, were still too young to take over responsibility for the business, but J.K. had appointed trustees to guide them until they were old enough. When they did take over things expanded and changed.

James, 'J.K.' followed his father's interest in the candle business, which by now involved new materials including mineral oil. He even worked as salesman for the oil company which supplied this and, like his father, travelled a lot. Later he became involved in local liberal politics and has left monuments to his activities around the town, including the Morris Hall. At the end of WW1, supplies of Government surplus oil proved a great boost to business.

Meanwhile, the other brothers were left to concentrate on the grocery side, while also marrying local Frankwell girls: Frederick to Ruth Skitt from Mountfields and Henry to Amy, youngest daughter of neighbour John Lewis, ironmonger at no. 10, and wife Emma, youngest daughter of Edward Lewis,

gardener at Preston Montford Hall. Homes along New Street, Frankwell provided space for expanding families.

The policy of expanding the grocery trade mainly involved taking over existing businesses and then improving them to 'Morris' standards. New offices were first built in Frankwell, then by Welsh Bridge. A company bakery was set up to supply the shops, as well as regular rounds to local villages including Bicton. At first, these used horse and cart, then motor vans.

The work in grocery stores at this time involved very long hours with skilled manual work weighing, slicing and wrapping orders for customers across the counter - lots of brown paper and string!

Local employees included the Lewis Brothers from Bicton, who were also descended from Edward the gardener: Walter at the oil works, who also drove for J.K., and Herbert, a grocery apprentice, who also met his future wife across the counter at Wyle Cop.

Wartime brought problems for all, but also opportunities for the supply of food to all the extra military stationed in the area.

Post war, the company, now led by a new generation, expanded by opening shops in suburbs and nearby market towns as a way of meeting the challenge of 'multiples' in the High Street! A further challenge from self-service discount supermarkets then prompted the development of the 'Saveright' brand.

While doing deals in the changing times, the company recognised the value of property ownership, so that when really big 'out of town' supermarkets moved in, they got out of grocery altogether but retained the freeholds. As replacement trade efforts were directed towards the activities we see today. Meanwhile the oil business continued a successful life of its own.

All this is but a brief summary of an interesting local story - a new book is promised, so look out for it.

Answers to New Year Quiz

- 1 Shepherd's Lane by Oxon Farm on map produced for 'inclosure' of heath
- 2 Woollen cloth made by 'mill' powered by water through tunnel
- 3 Calcott Lane - bungalow called Haughton
- 4 Four Crosses Inn, since much enlarged
- 5 Bicton's old church, now a ruin. Sir Richard Jenkins and members of Wingfield and Sandford families buried here
- 6 Bicton Hall: top floor now removed, former occupiers included Jenkins family, Cotes sisters, Miss Milbank and George Percy Mead
- 7 Preston Montford Farm, Field Centre next door
- 8 Preston Montford 'huts' used by Women's Land Army
- 9 Lover Farm, Woodcote. Six hearths taxed in 1672
- 10 The Isle House, home of Sandford family
- 11 Milestone on Grange Bank, designed by Thomas Telford and made of limestone and cast iron
- 12 Clock added in 1922 as war memorial. Church (1886) designed by Arthur Lloyd-Oswell
- 13 Built of Cardeston Stone (Alberbury Breccia) on land donated by Col. Wingfield of Onslow
- 14 John Spearman lived at Oxon and now lies in the old churchyard
- 15 Boundary stone on Isle Lane, by Isle Court identifying sections of road maintained by adjacent landowners