

History of Bicton

David Pannett's History of Bicton - Part 14

The Chapel in the Lane

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Like most chapels that have been converted into homes, there is still a distinct 'Wesleyan' look to the chapel in Drury Lane at Montford Bridge.

The chapel has been a home since the late 1980's but the building was centre for the local Methodists from the early nineteenth century. The engraved stone on its western end records that it was built in 1826 and replaced in 1881. Another wall plaque listing benefactors has been lost.

Given that the existing bridge over the River Severn was built in 1792, you may wonder what they were doing building a chapel at the end of a cul-de-sac. However, in 1826 Drury Lane was still the Holyhead Road and linked directly to the bridge. Its route can still be traced along the field opposite The Crescent and then in front of the former Post Office and blacksmiths (The Yews) and The Swan public house: as it was. *Only in 1835* the chapel found itself at a dead end (see July and August instalments).

It is not at all surprising that a chapel was built at Montford Bridge. The Methodist movement has a history of "springing up" where industry and trades prospered, especially away from the established parish centres, as seen around Oakengates, Dawley, Ironbridge and the Stiperstones. Montford Bridge at the time was a busy service centre for both the agricultural community on either side of the river (Montford & Bicton) and many travellers on the main road. There were tailors, shoemakers, carpenters, blacksmiths, retailers and innkeepers. All could lend a hand with their individual talents to build the chapel right on their doorstep.

These tradesmen, usually literate and able to read the bible themselves, owed little or no allegiance to the large landowners whose workers felt obliged to be C of E in deference to their lord and master. They welcomed a movement that did not "talk down" to them, but which allowed them to become more involved. Such "non conformists" therefore provided their own "House of God", the chapel.

Although John Wesley and his brother Charles had started the movement in the mid eighteenth century, it had become weakened by the division by the early nineteenth century (such are the result of so much freedom and democracy). However, this in turn, provoked some local "revivals" which may have led to our local chapel at this particular time.

Methodists are well known for preaching temperance, which was then in response to alcohol abuse amongst thirsty industrial workers. Ironically it turned out that this chapel had a link with the local Inn. The Swan was then run by William Blandford as tenant of the Preston Montford estate, but this William also owned a piece of land called "Grange Field" or "Cobblers Piece" opposite the end of Preston Montford Lane. Before the

new Holyhead Road was built in 1835, this bordered on Drury Lane with a very sharp corner. By then he had sold it to William Cotton, tenant of the Grange Farm, who probably built Brook House here for his own use, or for his relative Thomas.

It is not clear which came first, land sale, Brook House or chapel. Was it Cotton or Blandford who provided the site? In a way it does not matter, as both were small proprietors, who at least would be sympathetic, while all around the land was held by large estates more likely to support C of E, Preston Montford (Hill-Wingfield) and Montford (Earl of Powys) across the river. All this determined the only available site.

One is reminded of the well-known situation at Snailbeach. The Marquis of Bath would not allow the miners to have their chapel on his land, but the Earl of Tankerville was more helpful, providing land at Lord's Hill just across the boundary.

It is significant that most other local chapels were also margins of a parish at Bicton Head, Ford's Heath, Forton Heath and Bomere Heath. Indeed there was an abundance of centres of worship for what was a minority denomination. The total number of chapels was also a reflection of divisions in the movement and it was necessary to specify 'Wesleyan' in the case of our local chapel. Others could be 'Primitive' or 'New Connection'.

A religious census carried out in 1851 records that 52 met at Drury Lane Sunday on March 30th. Otherwise, records are lacking, including those, which show the date of the last service. Maureen Everall remembers attending soon after she moved to Broomfields Farm in 1968. There was still a regular congregation then and long-term residents of Drury Lane recall cars parked along the lane and the sounds of hymn singing drifting across their gardens.

The chapel was eventually sold for development to Harry Kirk of Pontesbury, who not only turned it into a house, but cleared away the Sunday Schoolroom to provide a garden and parking bounded by a brick wall against Brook House.

Now we only have memories such as the one provided by Alma Hotchkiss of Forton Bank who was a 'land girl' at the hostel in Preston Montford Lane.

"I and some girls went to chapel because John Brassy Jones from Shrawardine was preaching. He was one of the leading preachers. We all got the giggles because he said he had come all the way on his horst, but because of his broad accent pronounced it as 'arse'.

ERRATUM

In last months instalment the sentence about Charles Darwin should be read as follows:

"However, while there, he came under the influence of Reverend Charles Henslow (professor of Botany) and Reverend Adam Sedgewick (professor of Geology) and the rest is history".

It is important to remember that many nineteenth century churchmen had no problems with accepting the conclusions of scientific observations.

