

## Victorian Man of Iron

A closer look at houses in and around Bicton will reveal many examples of modern extensions and alterations, the latest of which is the 'Old Smithy', highly visible on the Holyhead Road between the village and Four Crosses. The site and name remind us of the blacksmiths which were once so important to rural life when horses dominated travel and farm work and so many tools and machines could be made and repaired locally.

From the 1840s and 50s onwards improved records allow us to see how many there were in our area during Victoria's reign...

Besides the Bicton smithy, worked by Phillip Rowlands, another was adjacent to the Swan Inn (Wingfield Arms) in Montford Bridge, worked by Thomas Cotton and then John Randles. Over the bridge on the Montford side, another had been worked for many years by William Lewis. Also, just across the boundary at the end of Shepherds Lane, in Shelton, another was worked by Stephen Davies.

All were on the main road, where they were easily accessible to locals and travellers alike at a time when these roads were being improved and passing traffic increasing.

They functioned as true family businesses, in which the commercial activity was bound up with family structure spanning successive generations. This was particularly special at a time when so many farm workers frequently moved on and even tenant farmers worked to short leases. The clergy also came and went. Thus, in some respects blacksmith families shared some features with the local gentry, including their tendency to live to greater than average ages.

On the Welshpool Road, Stephen Davies, born about 1810, first set up home with sister, Elizabeth, in the 1840s, before marrying wife Ann. A typically Victorian family of seven followed, who in due course left home, one by one, leaving son Andrew to help with the business and eventually take it over in the 1890s. Wife and another large family followed, while father, Stephen, remained around in his 80s, helped domestically by unmarried daughter Sarah.

Eventually Andrew's son, 'Alick' continued the business right up to the Second World War, thus clocking up a century of family involvement.

Meanwhile, the story unfolding on the Holyhead Road was similar, where Phillip Rowlands was already here in 1812. While also still working into his 80s, he was able to train grandson Richard Buckley to follow on. Nephew Francis Medland was also brought into the family to work.

In the 1860s, Richard eventually married Sarah, but being such a late start, they could not match the Davies family size. Nevertheless, it did include sons Stephen and William, who continued the business into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, also clocking up a hundred years of business.

William was to be the last Rowlands to work here, so John Jones stepped in until the last War.

Down the road in Montford Bridge, John Randles from Fitz came with wife Mary to live in half of a new estate cottage in Drury Lane, recently cut off by the Grange Bank improvement of 1835. Unusually, in an age of large families, the couple produced none of their own. Instead they took in nephew Richard Jones and another helper, Samuel Davies. John Price of Montford Bridge may also have worked here in this blacksmith's shop behind some new cottages by the Wingfield Arms.

With no obvious successor, the business did not survive John's retirement and widowhood, but he remained in his cottage, until dying in 1905 at the age of 95. He lies in Churchyard.

Meanwhile, over the bridge on the Powys Estate at the junction of the Forton turn, William Lewis had been operating his smithy since before 1820, following on from Robert Cooke. With wife Mary Brayne, another large Victorian family of 6 or 7 was raised here.

William, the eldest, who was destined to inherit the business, set up his own married home nearby with wife Mary Ann. The next son, Edward, was therefore free to follow a career in Shrewsbury, learning the ironmongers' trade with Jones of Mardol Head before starting his own shop at No. 10 Frankwell in 1853. Much younger brother, John, joined him there, while also marrying Emma Lewis, daughter of John Randles' neighbour, Edward Lewis, whom he must have known from childhood. They started their own large family of 8 in New Street.

The ironmongery trade in Frankwell is another story in its own right, which we must return to some other time.

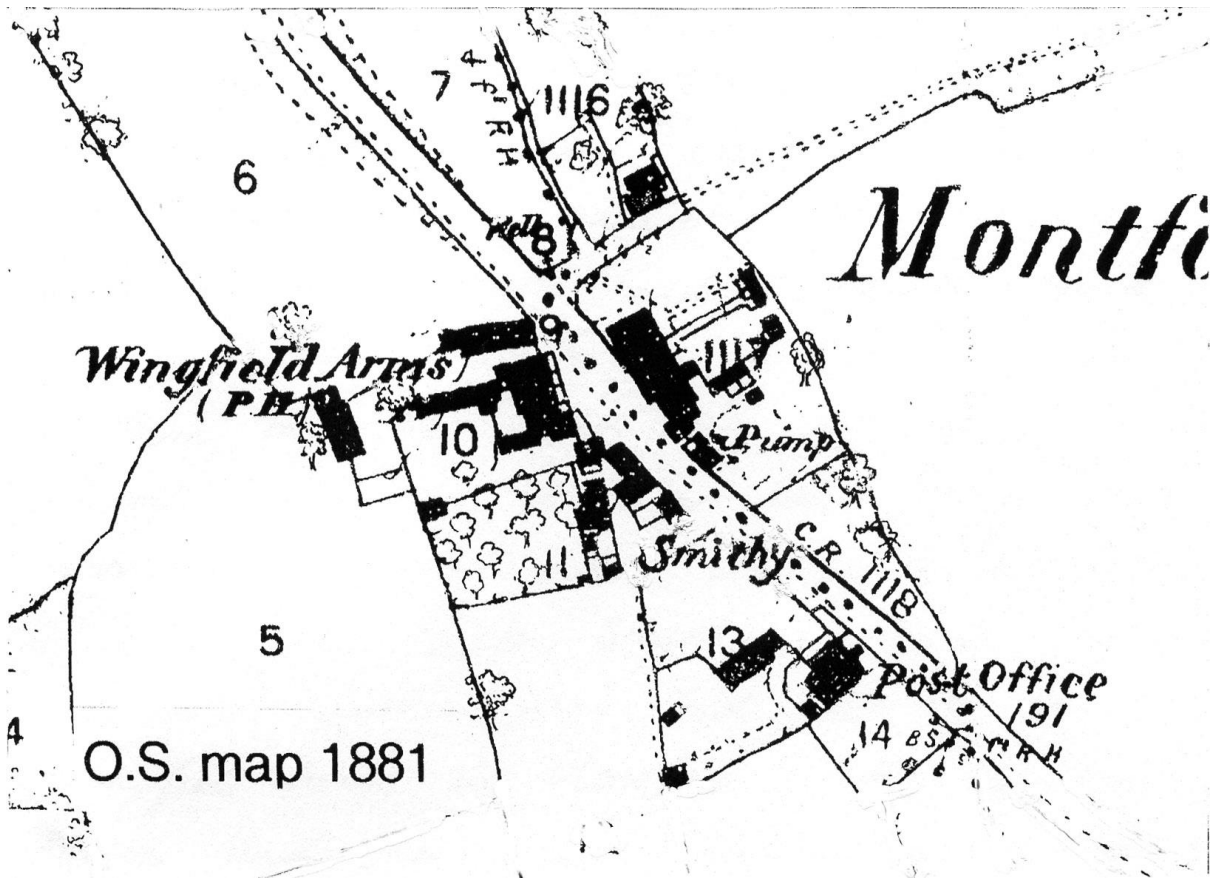
Meanwhile, back in Montford Bridge his brother, William, finally took over after the death of his father in 1876 at the age of 82. Their business is of particular interest as its account book survives, which sheds light on the geographical area of their customers. As you can imagine, this covered most of Montford Parish, which was dominated by the Powys Estate.

Another special feature, common to many independent tradesmen, such as William, was involvement with Methodism. He was actually a preacher himself and was the driving force behind the rebuilding of the Montford Bridge Chapel in 1881... Here is another story which we may return to some other time.

William died in 1888 and was succeeded by son James, who unfortunately had no heirs, so the business was carried on into the 20<sup>th</sup> century by James Abraham and then Robert Kynaston, who diversified into undertaking services.

This was the last blacksmiths' shop to operate in this area, under Dick Roberts who retired in his 80s ending an important chapter in our local history.

*Special thanks to family history volunteers at Shropshire Archives and to June Hughes for loan of the Lewis account book.*



*Montfi*

*Wingfield Arms*  
(P.B.)

*Pump*

*Smithy*

*Post Office*

O.S. map 1881

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C.R. 1118

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