

History Passing By

Some communities have been known to celebrate their local history with a pageant, allowing a lot of dressing up, parading and performing to illustrate past people and activities. Should Bicton ever think of this, the ordinary nature of this rural area may offer little to celebrate in this way. However, the main road, or King's Highway running through the parish has witnessed a wealth of both local and national traffic which arose from changing historical stories, some of which we have discussed already.

In the Middle Ages, this local link between Shrewsbury and Oswestry via Montford Bridge must have seen regular military comings and goings between important Norman Castles. For instance, the tenants of the Isle (Rossall) did military service at Oswestry Castle for their feudal overlord, De Lacy. In the thirteenth century, during Welsh wars, Llewellyn attacked the area and prompted Shrewsbury to improve its defences.

With the imposition of peace under Edward I, trade was able to prosper unhindered, as shown by the list of goods expected to pay toll at Montford Bridge to finance its repair. Apart from building materials for Shrewsbury, there was evidence of the growing cloth trade, in which Welsh weavers marketed their products through Shrewsbury merchants. At this stage strings of packhorses were used more than carts, thanks to the poor quality of the road surfaces.

As trade expanded the merchants could afford to build timber houses in the town, while locally, at least one weaver had also 'set up shop' on roadside waste in Montford Bridge by the 16th century.

In the 17th century military traffic returned to the area during the Civil War, when the County was divided between loyalty to the King or Parliament. The Parliamentarians took Shrewsbury and maintained a small garrison at the newly rebuilt Montford Bridge to keep an eye on 'Royalist' movements. Most troops would have been on horseback along the road, along with many private individuals who could maintain a horse.

Gradually road surfaces were improved so that more wheeled traffic was possible. However, real improvement only came with the establishment of 'Turnpike Trusts', which collected tolls and organised maintenance. Regular passenger stage coaches now linked the main towns, even right through to London.

After the union of the Dublin and Westminster parliaments in 1801, the Irish MPs still found the journey difficult and lobbied the government for yet more improvements. The result, after some delay, was the Holyhead Road project designed by Thomas Telford, which we have often discussed.

Now the hundred Irish MPs would certainly come this way rather than via Chester. Many belonged to landowning families not really seeking change and were outnumbered by unsympathetic British MPs anyway. However, after 1824, Daniel O'Conner managed to get elected and once in

Westminster displayed a more dynamic approach to Anglo-Irish affairs, advancing Catholic emancipation for a start.

To cut a long story short, he became one of the heroes of the Irish struggle for a fair deal and ultimate independence. His statue now stands in the centre of Dublin on the main street named after him.

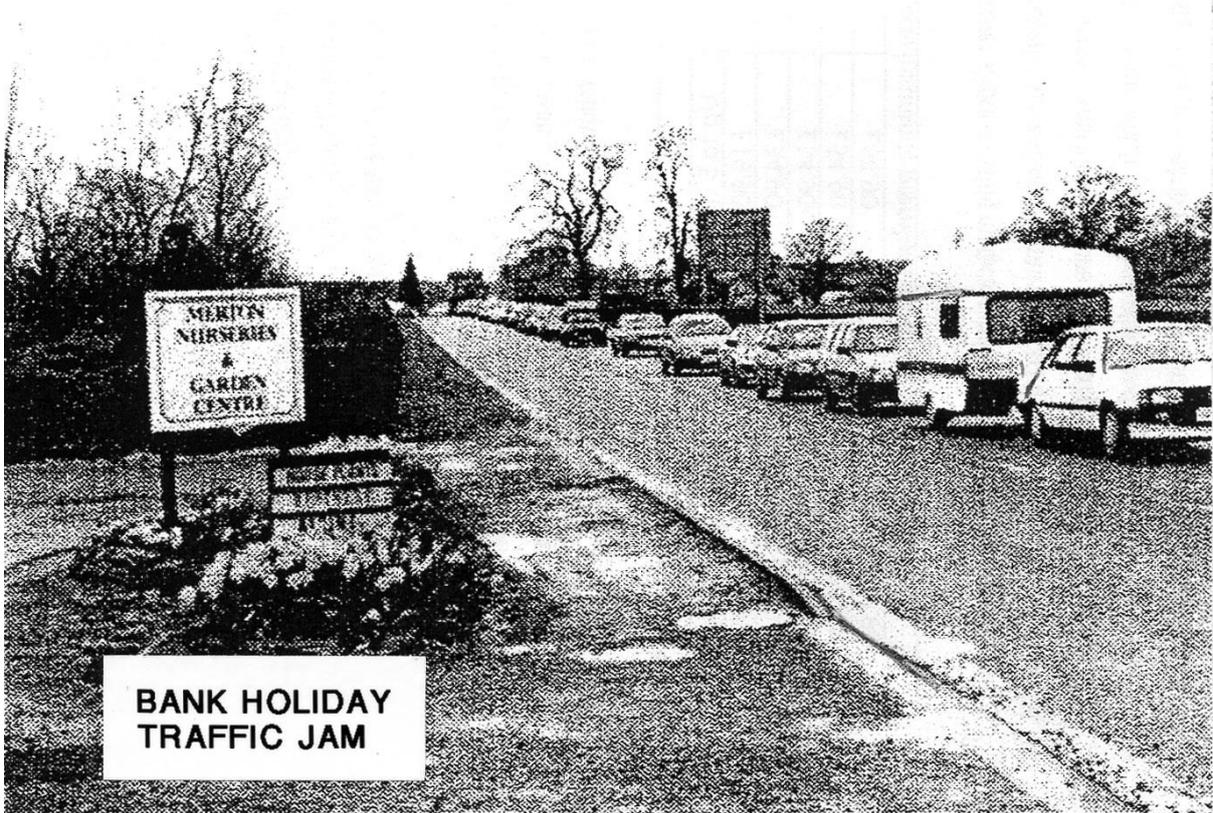
No doubt many other Dubliners passed through Bicton at this time, but the triumph of the Holyhead Road was cut short when the railway route was established via Chester in the 1840s offering faster journey times.

Although long distance traffic suffered as a result, local people could still enjoy the improved road on their regular trips to and from Shrewsbury Market in particular: Sheep, cattle and geese would have been driven there while regular carriers' carts carried people and their goods. Otherwise, many just walked carrying their buckets of produce. Those who could afford it had their own two-wheeled 'gigs' or a 'pony and trap', more suitable for ladies than horse riding.

Towards the end of the century, the new County Councils took over responsibility for highways, abolishing turnpike tolls. Also the development of the 'safety bicycle' improved mobility for everyone, both for work and pleasure.

After the First World War the motor car allowed even more people to travel longer distances and together with those bicycles encouraged many more town people to enjoy the countryside, perhaps pausing at tea rooms in Bicton. Regular bus services also started. Thus the modern world had arrived and after the next War such traffic went on increasing. Telford's 'Holyhead Road' allowed tourists to enjoy the delights of Snowdonia, although the frequent Bank Holiday traffic jams through Bicton were less of a delight!

The rest of this long story we have witnessed ourselves. Now as you wait for that No. 70 bus, just think of all those characters that passed this same spot during the last thousand years.

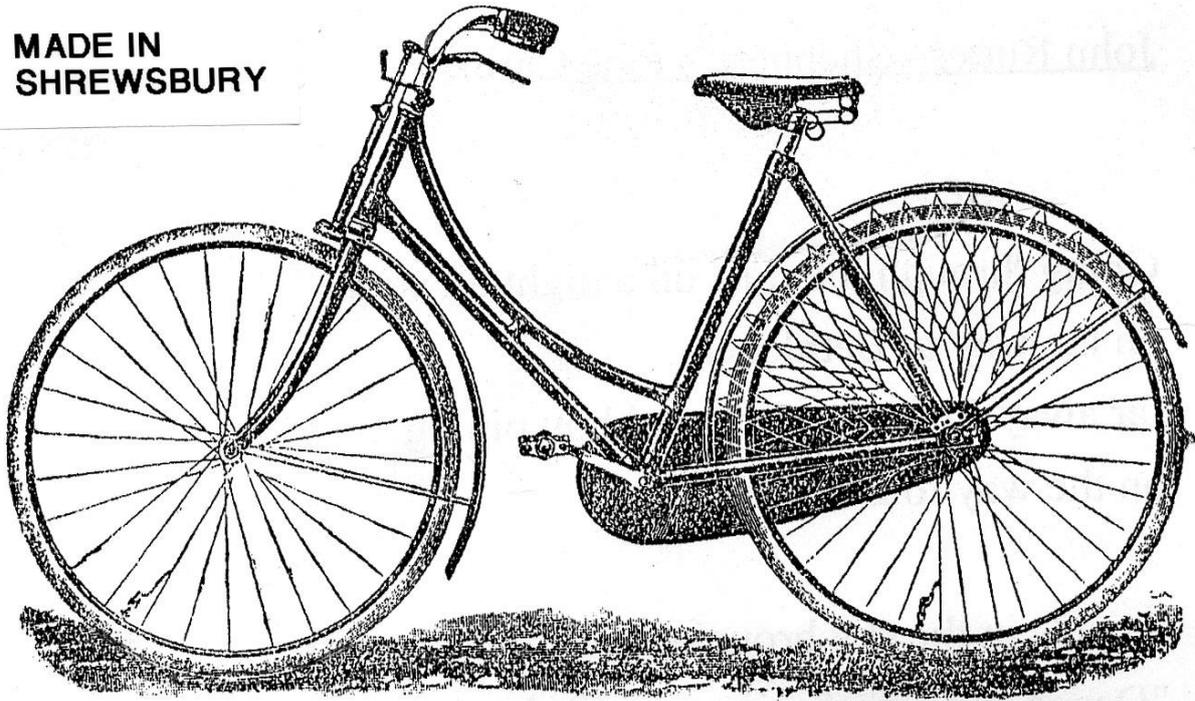


**BANK HOLIDAY
TRAFFIC JAM**



**DANIEL
O'CONNELL**

**MADE IN
SHREWSBURY**

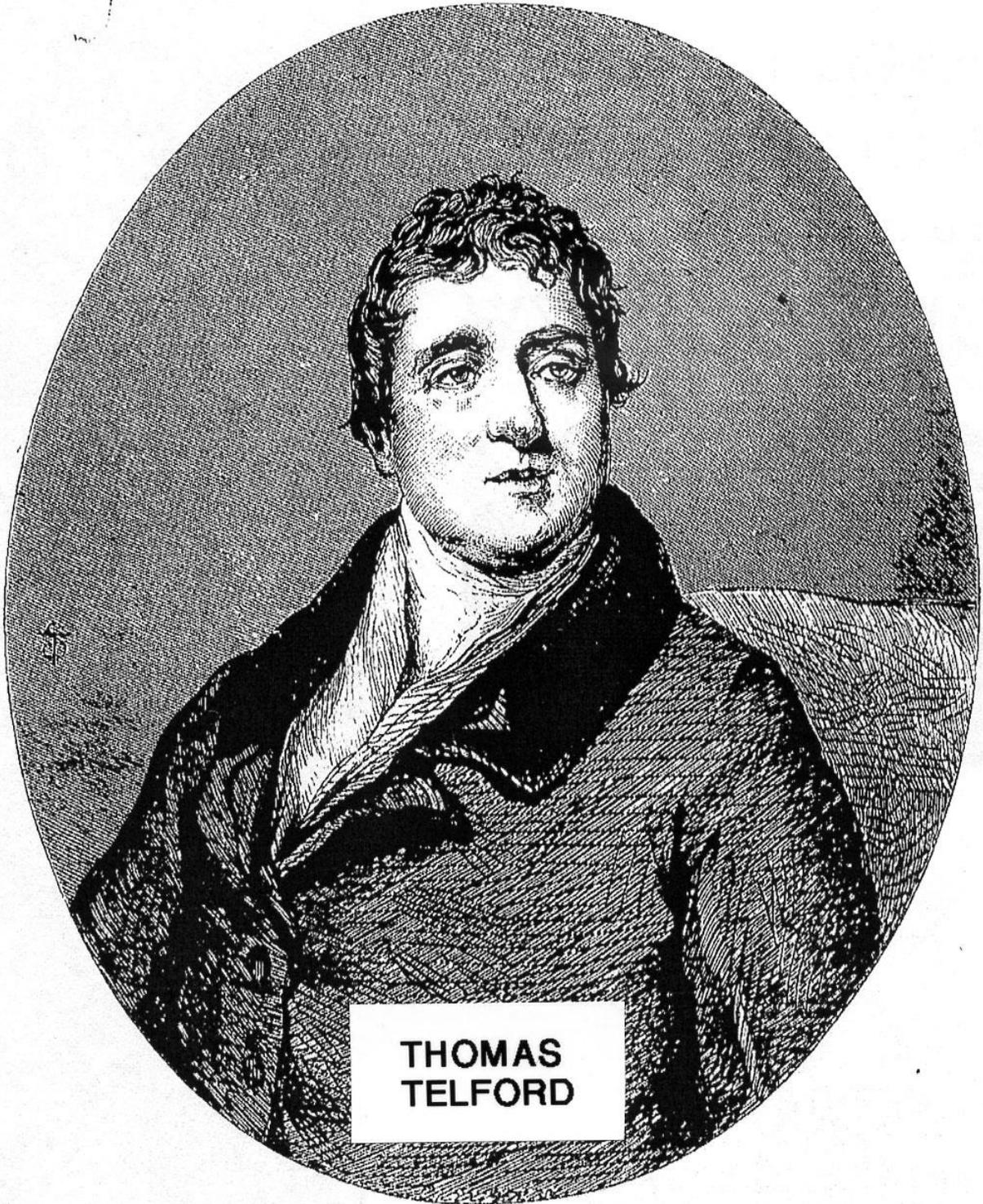


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