

Bickton and the 'Little Boro'

Here on the west side of Shrewsbury, the first point of contact with the town would always have been Frankwell. This ancient suburb became known as the 'Little Boro' through being almost a little town, or 'borough' in its own right, offering a range of services to match any high street.

Its plan and location by the river and bridge suggest deliberate planning by the Normans, while its name might even be a corruption of 'French Ville' or 'Free Ville', because it lay outside central Shrewsbury and its market tolls.

Today, we associate it more with traffic problems and a limited range of small businesses. The present traffic island was only possible through the demolition of old buildings, one of which was rebuilt at the Avoncroft Museum of Buildings near Bromsgrove.

Over a hundred and twenty years ago, directories recorded a wealth of services, including four grocers, three butchers, two greengrocers, two fishmongers and one baker, all covering most food needs. Other traders included three tailors, four boot and shoe makers, two watchmakers and one ironmonger. Eight other 'shopkeepers' were also mentioned. Clearly this side of Shrewsbury and nearby villages were well catered for.

The grocery business at no. 7 was, in fact, Morris & Co, founded by James Kent Morris and by now run by sons Harry and Frederick. It evolved into today's well known company, as we recently discussed. Nearby, at no. 10, the only ironmonger was 'Lewis and Froggatt', another family business, whose special advertisement claimed they could supply most of the needs of country estates and farms.

The founder of this business in 1853 had been Edward Lewis, 2nd son of William Lewis, blacksmith on the Montford side of Montford Bridge. He had learned the trade with William Jones at Mardol Head before moving here to Frankwell, where there appeared to be no competition.

At this time, Edward was still unmarried in his forties, but was helped domestically by his sister Martha. Then, younger brother John joined him, while marrying childhood friend Emma Lewis, daughter of the gardener to Preston Montford Hall. Setting up home in New Street, the couple went on to raise 9 children, including John Edward, who would later join the business, and Amy, who married neighbour Harry Morris, the grocer.

Edward eventually married another Martha, originally from London, but starting so late they had no children. However, they were able to recruit a nephew, John Froggatt from Bittersley, son of one of the farming families in that area.

Edward died in 1883 aged 62, followed by John in 1888, aged only 53. Clearly, long shop hours were taking their toll! Wives outlived them, dying in 1903 and 1910 joining husbands in adjacent plots of

the general cemetery. John Froggatt's father also died in 1887, perhaps releasing some capital to improve the business including a fine new frontage, still visible at that bend in Frankwell.

Now the new generation worked in partnership, seeking new opportunities for the business. The development of the 'safety bicycle', the design which we are still familiar with today, was particularly important and they opened other shops in Frankwell to market them.

Cousin Ernest Lewis, from Bicton, who set up his watch-making shop at no. 115 in 1907, must have been a good customer. He needed one to get around in order to wind many public clocks and also illustrated them in some of his Bicton photographs which we have reproduced here.

About this same time, the partners added 'motor engineering' to their business, thus continuing to move with the times.

John Froggatt at first lived with Edward's wife Martha and then John's sister, another Martha, before marrying his first wife when already 46 in 1912. Unfortunately she soon died, but John married again later.

With no children from either marriage, John perhaps had more free time to devote to various public affairs, particularly as a borough councillor, leading to his elevation to Alderman.

Between 1899 and 1920 he represented the Welsh Ward, promoting liberal policies and serving on several committees. In doing so, he must have been an associate of the more famous J K Morris whose story is being celebrated this year. Being a Freemason and JP followed on from such activity.

Locally in Frankwell he was a manager of St Georges School and Trustee of Millington Hospital. For recreation it is no surprise that he was a keen cyclist and member of a local club.

The downside of all this public activity, however, was that the Lewis side of the partnership may have been left with more than their fair share of the shop work. John Edward's sons, Ronald and Roy in particular, were losing interest, especially after their wartime experiences, so that in 1924 the partnership ended (the sons subsequently living to a great age).

John Froggatt finally died in 1927 after a period of ill health, soon after his only brother, a teacher, had died in Folkestone. He lies in Shrewsbury Cemetery not far from Edward, Martha, John and Emma. So now, as you drive slowly through Frankwell and are reminded of that Morris story at no. 7, spare a thought also for those enterprising ironmongers in what is now the Severn Social Club at no. 10.

