

History of Bicton

David Pannett's History of Bicton - Part 15 A Sermon in Stone: the new church at Bicton

In spite of enlargement, the old church (March Instalment) was felt to be too small and dilapidated for the new enlarged parish created in 1855 and a new one was clearly needed. The new building, we now see, stands on a fresh site given by Colonel Wingfield of Onslow not long after acquiring it from the Bicton Hall estate (Jenkins family). It cost £3,400 and was consecrated in September 1887. Sadly the vicar Revd Lloyd died only a few months later and was therefore one of the first to occupy the new burial ground. Frederick Stephen Edwards, a former solicitor then took over.

The building of a new church at this time and in the particular style is not altogether a surprise. Through the nineteenth century the Church of England was experiencing some competition from various 'non-conformist' denominations (April instalment) and therefore many church leaders felt some revival was needed. One way was to promote new church building to keep pace with the growth and changing distribution of population. Another aspect was represented by the 'Oxford Movement', which sought a return to medieval liturgy, perhaps wishing to 'put on a better show' than the non-conformists. (It may be no coincidence that Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford was a vocal critic of Darwin and also urged clergy to boycott the government's census of church attendance in 1851, perhaps because it might reveal poor numbers).

Related to all this, a fresh appreciation of medieval architecture and décor led to a 'Gothic Revival', in which many old churches were restored and new one built in a medieval style (eg Meole Brace 1868). Secular buildings were also treated this way, such as the rebuilt Houses of Parliament associated with the work of Augustus Pugin, one of the greatest enthusiasts for this style. Locally we once had the Raven Hotel and Old Post Office in Shrewsbury, but we still have a 'late gothic' railway station.

Some architects favoured the simple lines of the early Gothic as seen at Oxon church 1854, but others, especially later in the century, preferred the more ornate 'Decorated' style of the fourteenth century as at Bicton. Architects generally took a scholarly interest in the shapes and patterns of original features, such as window tracery, in order to reproduce them faithfully in 'restored' or totally new work, so that the differences between 'old' and 'new' are not always obvious.

Medieval church architecture normally meant stonework. Bicton's old chapel had been built of brick, with only stone dressings, in the seventeenth century, when all around would have been timber, plaster and thatch. It therefore stood out as something special (c.f Minsterley 1689). However, as brick became almost universal in this village, even for humble barns, stone would once again assume that 'special' status.

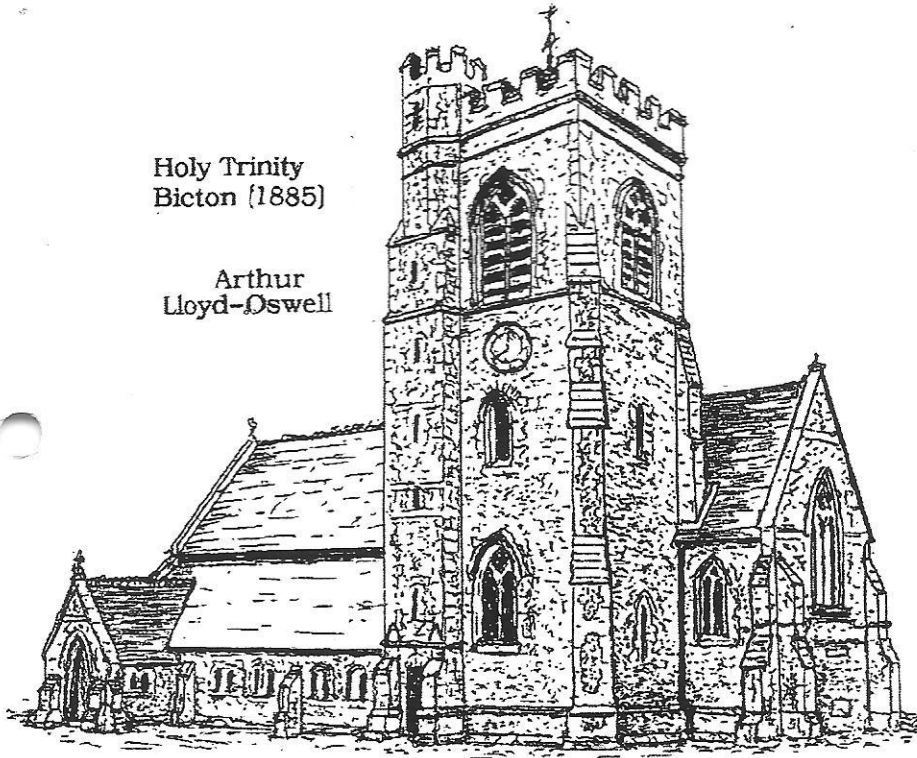
In the Shrewsbury area from the fifteenth century onwards the pale sandstone from Grinshill was the most popular stone for high class work, either blending with new brickwork, as at Bicton Chapel, or facing whole buildings such as the Grammar School

(now library). In earlier centuries local churches and Shrewsbury Castle had used the more widely available red sandstones, which were normally rendered and colour washed to protect them from the weather (eg 'Whitehall'). By the nineteenth century, however, much of this render had fallen off, so that people began associating 'antiquity' with redness. Architects seeking to mimic the old styles now looked for redstone, even though the pale Grinshill stone was of superior quality (the new church at Grinshill itself was actually built in the 'Norman' style using red stone in 1840!)

The exposed stone of old walls generally showed a rough weathered surface or irregular sizes of blocks, but all this could be mimicked by deliberate rough tooling or 'rustication' if necessary. Poorer quality stone, which could not be dressed to a smooth finish anyway, then became useful, such as the 'Keele' sandstone from Red Hill near Hook-a-Gate (Holy Trinity, Meole Brace 1867 and Shrewsbury School Chapel). An even better stone for this purpose, as used at Oxon and Bicton, came from Cardeston and Alberbury. It is a 'breccia' consisting of broken fragments of hard limestone set in a red sandy matrix, forming a sort of natural 'concrete'. It was originally laid down by flash floods running off the hills, where limestone lay exposed to erosion. At that time, 270 million years ago, the Shropshire plain was rather like one of those desert basins in the American South West.

Holy Trinity
Bicton (1885)

Arthur
Lloyd-Oswell



Such rough stone still needed to be complimented with finer 'freestone' which could be cut in any direction to form window and door casing and corners. This is where Grinshill Stone was still the obvious choice. Its qualities come from the uniform size of grains originating in sand dunes in that same desert basin. Once it may have been little different from Nescliffe stone, but about 50 million years ago hot groundwater removed its typical red desert iron oxide and allowed the sand grains to really lock together to form this durable stone resistant to weathering. Altogether this was a wise choice of materials. *Nevertheless pale red stone from Shelvock near Ruyton-VI-Towns was also used.*

A parallel movement in the nineteenth century was the rediscovery of medieval techniques of staining and mounting window glass. The company of Kempe was one of the most prolific producers of such windows and examples of their work compliment the medieval style here.

The architect Arthur Lloyd Oswell of Shrewsbury also designed parts of Holy Trinity, Belle Vue, but Bicton's new church is considered to be one of his finest works. It is, however, not only a monument to this man and the traditional craftsment who built it, but also to wider aspects of the Victorian era. Even the churchyard trees reflect this age - no 'medieval' yews but giant sequoias from California, which also decorate so many English country parks.



Giant Sequoia
(California)
popular with
Victorians