

David Pannett's History of Bicton part 17 The Ordnance Survey comes to Bicton

Last month we discussed how John Rocque, a French immigrant, (one of the many protestant 'Huguenot' refugees to come here over the years) brought fresh ideas to British map making. This was not to be the only French contribution to our story! In the 1780's the astronomers of Greenwich and Paris Observatories, the leading institutions of the time, asked for help in measuring the distance between them. With this they could then calculate the size of the earth or even the distance to the moon! The respective governments therefore agreed to co-operate in the interests of science.

The French Team under Cassini were very good surveyors and therefore with our national pride at stake, the British Government provided all the necessary funds to equip a matching team led by William Roy of the Royal Engineers. Roy already had established a good reputation mapping the Highlands of Scotland after the '45' rebellion and many military installations afterwards, while steadily rising in rank.

The method chosen was 'triangulation', that is measuring angles between lines of sight across both land and channel, after first measuring the 'base line' for one side of the initial 'triangle'. This was laid out across four miles of Hounslow Heath, where a small monument to it still stands amid the hustle and bustle at the entrance to Heathrow airport.

When this project was finished, our survey team put their new 'theodolite' to good use by extending the network of triangles across the rest of the country as a framework for future detailed mapping.

As so often happened in history, we did not stay friends with the French for very long as their revolution and the rise of Napoleon brought threats of invasion. The government now appreciated good maps for the organisation of troop movements, so the Duke of Richmond, Lord Master of the Ordnance, in 1790, took Roy's original 'corp of engineers' and set them up as the 'Ordnance Survey'. Significantly their first maps were of Kent and Essex, nearest the French coast.

From then on, surveyors worked systematically across England and eventually covered Shropshire about 1816, producing 'field drawings' at the 2 inches to one mile. The next stage should have been a published map at one inch to one mile, but politics got in the way and delayed this until 1833. As already discussed regarding the Holyhead Road (August Instalment), the Union with Ireland took place and surveyors were sent over there to improve the maps, leaving only a skeleton staff behind. Soon after, railways started to cover much of the country and to keep pace they were added to the old printing plates and maps re-issued.

While in Ireland, surveyors developed mapping at the scale of 6 inches to one mile in order to help authorities plot ownership and assess taxes. When the survey teams returned in the 1850's, it was decided to use this scale for the remaining unmapped areas of northern Britain, before returning to the South. In this way the surveyors once again passed through Bicton in the 1880's, by which time they were also mapping at an even larger scale of 25 inches to one mile.

Published maps then appeared at both 25" and 6" scales. The result is a wealth of amazing detail, in which even small features of buildings appear and clear differences between crooked and straight hedges are obvious.

Indeed, all this is of great value to the historian, both in showing up ancient shapes and in enabling comparison with later editions, which reveal subsequent changes (March and April instalments). More of this in future months.

Such is the interest in old maps, several companies have been reproducing them in recent years. The latest available are by a publishing company called 'Cassini'.

Meanwhile, since these early days, the ordnance survey have gradually adopted the metric system invented by scholars under Napoleon!

Come to think of it, I wonder where the unusual name of Pannett originated.



