

Part 2 of David Pannett's HISTORY OF THE BICTON LANDSCAPE

THE MEDIEVAL VILLAGE AND ITS FIELDS

The name Bicton or 'Bicca's tun' (Bicca's farm), reflects the founding of the settlement by Anglo Saxon times, although earlier settlements could also have existed here. It is mentioned in the Domesday Book 1086, when it was held by a man called Wigor. For tax purposes it was assessed as '2 hides' and of its 3 plough teams one was used on the lord's demesne land' while two were held by four villeins and one free man. There was thought to be room for 2 more ploughs. By this time and for the rest of the Middle Ages it probably consisted of a group of small peasant farms lining a street around which lay their land as intermixed narrow strips in the 'open fields'. For convenience of ploughing and draining the land, these strips were ploughed into broad ridges some seven to ten yards broad and about a furlong or 'furrow long' in length. Many were also curved with a reversed S-shape for the convenience of turning an ox team into the headland with a driver walking on unploughed land on the left hand of the team. Such shapes predate the age of stronger, better-trained horses who turned right at the headland and are therefore a distinctly medieval feature. The ridges were grouped in blocks called furlongs and lay in the best direction for drainage down the slope. Thanks to the heaviness of the soil some have survived into the present and can still be recognised on the ground or in aerial photographs. A light covering of snow can pick them out particularly well.

As was typical of much of Midland England, these fields of open strips were divided into three units for rotation of (1) bare fallow, (2) winter wheat and (3) spring barley, oats or beans. Each farmer was obliged to keep his cropping in step with his neighbours since stock grazed the fields after each harvest and throughout a fallow year. Such fallows served several purposes at once; heavy land could be cleansed of squitch by a summer ploughing, the plough teams were kept busy in an otherwise slack time and the land was prepared for autumn sowing. At the same time the stock could graze the land and contribute manure and even when ploughing broke up the old stubbles, could still use the grassy headlands and furrows or 'reans' between each ridge. The alluvial soils by the Severn, enriched by floods and moist even in dry springs, were exploited as hay meadows and only grazed after Lammas (August 11th) Stock were also turned out on the heath.

The rigid control of grazing on these arable fields was probably the main mechanism by which this old system could resist any changes in routine. In parts of the Midlands some open fields lasted until the eighteenth century and nineteenth century when they were finally 'enclosed' with the help of Acts of Parliament to produce the modern pattern of separate farms within hedged fields.

In the West Midlands and Borderland, however, this process had generally already taken place by 1700. Here there was a more gradual and informal process in which landowners exchanged their scattered strips in order to group them together and allow them to be enclosed by a hedge. This could take place because the regular rotations of the field, especially the strict control of fallow grazing, were beginning to break down for various reasons. Firstly stock had access to the heath, grass fields enclosed from it, or cleared from Bickley Coppice ('assarts') so that animals were less dependent upon grazing within arable fields. Secondly, stock farming was probably becoming more profitable in this area anyway; as part of the national trend towards regional specialisation made possible by improving communications and trade. Drier eastern counties could therefore grow corn more profitably while stock farming expanded in the west. In Bicton at least the four estates who held land in the village could also amalgamate their tenant farms so that by 1700 their properties each consisted of one farm. Until then much of the history can only be inferred from a few surviving deeds and leases. Later documentary evidence is much clearer, showing that exchanges of land continued in order to further consolidate and simplify farm boundaries. The farmsteads nevertheless stayed in the village street in a way very typical of many Shropshire villages. The writer of the Board of Agriculture report in 1813 in fact complained of the inconvenience of such villages. In the nineteenth century and even today the boundaries of the farms, trackways and fields therefore reflect patterns inherited from the open fields.

The field and farm pattern in the remaining south west corner of the township is completely different from the rest of the area as a reflection of its own particular history. During the Middle Ages much of Bicton had been granted to Buildwas Abbey and the term 'grange' signifies a monastic farm, typical of the Cistercian Order. Although at first the monks may have run this directly as a 'demesne' they were later content to collect rents and tythes only. Significantly, evidence for open fields is ambiguous in this area and it is separated from the more obvious field land by a very old hedge. 17th and 18th century deeds do however suggest that 'Grange Field' was divided amongst different farms like an extra 'open field'. Details of this story, including the founding of Bicton House Farm must remain guesswork at the moment.

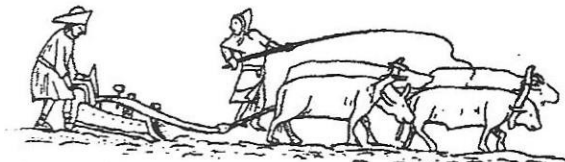
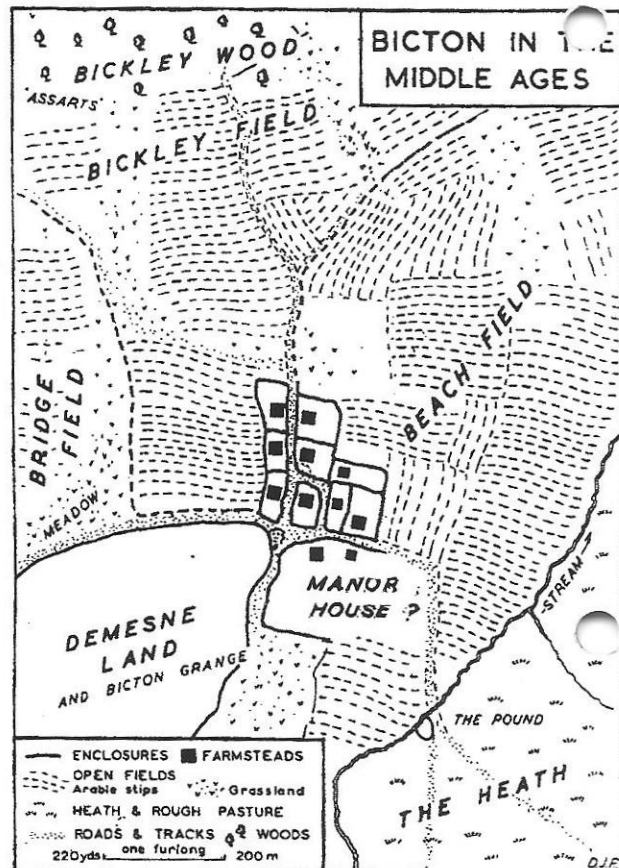
Calcott represents a distinct unit of land which was also once given as an endowment to a religious house, namely St. John's Hospital, Frankwell founded in the 13th century. It was most probably not a 'grange' but a normal hamlet or miniature 'village'.

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HISTORY OF BICTON contd.....

Analogy with other 'cot' settlements suggest it would have consisted of two or three small peasant farms which later became amalgamated to form only one modern farm. Or, could it have been the home of that 'free man' recorded at Domesday? After the dissolution it passed to a succession of lay owners before becoming part of the Wingfield estate in the late nineteenth century. The family named Calcott held land in the adjacent township of Preston Montford in the seventeenth century

To be continued.....



A Medieval illustration of ploughing