

David Pannett's History of Bicton No 20

The Lewis Gardeners have long roots

One feature of nineteenth century Bicton, which was typical of such rural villages, was the continuous turnover of population. Farm tenancies, tied cottages and 'living in' domestic service all contributed to this (Nov 07). Families remaining here through several generations, both witnessing and participating in the local social history, are indeed rare. One such has been the Lewis family, more recently associated with Merton nurseries. Their local story started with Edward Lewis, born about 1790, becoming gardener at Preston Montford Hall. With his young wife and their four children he may have lived in a cottage annexe to Preston Montford Farm as part of his employment with Sir Francis Hall. Then in 1829 the Hill family of Hawkstone, the actual owners, passed the property to John Wingfield of Onslow, although Sir Francis remained as tenant (May 07). By 1841, the growing Lewis family were living in an estate cottage in 'Drury Lane', Montford Bridge, which now had a larger garden following the diversion of the Holyhead Road in 1835. (Aug 07) Of the six daughters, Anne the eldest, had already left home by 1841 and her three sisters by 1851, probably going into service. It was a typical feature of the period, enabling large 'Victorian' families to grow up in small Victorian cottages. In this little community most neighbours were agricultural labourers, many of whom could not read or write.

Specialist retainers in country estates often had more permanent jobs than average farm labourers and it is significant that Edward and Elizabeth continued to live here until their respective deaths in 1866, aged 80, and 1872 age 75, when both were buried in the old Bicton churchyard. By this time, the daughters had dispersed, two being married, but Anne, later returned unmarried and probably helped her parents in the later years. Families then had to provide their own social security and care. Anne herself died in 1914, age 91.

Long before this, William, the only son, born 1835, had married Mary Birch from Broomfields. Their respective families would have known one another in the rural community sharing the varied services at Montford Bridge.

Her Mother; Mary was also the local midwife (Her brother John may have been the father of another John, who later became the head gardener at Styche Hall, Market Drayton, the ancestral home of the Clives who owned the Montford Estate).

Just as William and Mary started their own large family, the new Bicton school was opened, leaving the adjacent 'old' school house available for them to rent. Here, between 1865 and 1882 they raised four boys and four girls, although one of these died in infancy. Child deaths from common diseases were more frequent at this time.

While girls might escape crowded cottages to work 'in service', it was harder for the boys. Walter, the eldest emigrated to Chicago in 1882, while by contrast, Frederick ~~went to New York~~ ^{remained at home until his death in 1937.} *but returned ill and then*

William himself was a bricklayer, who thereby left many 'monuments' to his skills around the neighbourhood: enlargement to old school house, the churchyard wall, a boundary wall at Onslow and no doubt many others.

Ordinary farm work was clearly not in the family tradition and typically such independent tradesman did not need to move home very often.

Shrewsbury 'just down the road' was now offering more opportunities to the children, both in providing some limited secondary education and then apprenticeships with other trades. Son, Ernest was thus apprenticed to a jeweller and watchmaker in High Street in 1894, while still living at home. Then, in 1907, the same year in which his father died, he married Blanche Gertrude Rosier, from West Bromwich, the cook at the vicarage.

It was a typical case of far travelled domestic meeting a local lad (Nov 07).

The Rosier family had included teachers, until the early death of Thomas Rosier, which forced his children to turn to domestic work. At this time, the long-distance professional and social contacts amongst gentry and clergy could often aid the various career moves of their staff and it was in this way two Rosier sisters came to Bicton.

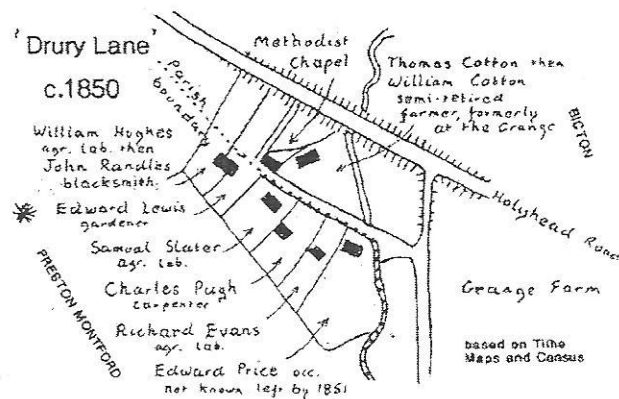
At first, Ernest and Blanche lived in Frankwell, nearer to his work, but by 1912 they returned to Bicton, renting 'Milnsbridge' off Shepherds Lane.

About the same time, he opened his own shop in Frankwell. This reflects a new aspect of Bicton, providing pleasant rural life to urban workers. Then they relied on walking and cycling, but by the 1920's motor buses were available too.

Now he had space in which to be a keen gardener and allow children to grow up with closer contact with nature. Otherwise, Ernest was very public spirited, winding clocks in Bicton and all over the town, acting as special constable, and joining in community life in the village here, and even more so in Frankwell.

As with Ernest himself, the children also made use of the opportunities for extra education and apprenticeships in Shrewsbury. Walter and Herbert attended the Allats School, a charity in Shrewsbury, and Herbert went on to be an apprentice grocer with Morris and Co, where he met Phyllis Ball, a regular customer. Walter later worked for JK Morris himself, who incidentally could also include a daughter of Edward Lewis amongst his ancestors. Alan was apprenticed to a carpenter and furniture maker and entered the building trade in the spirit of William. Daughter Mary obtained a scholarship^{to} the Priory School and became a teacher in the Rosier tradition, while Dorothy trained as a nurse at the R.S.I (Sept 08) and later became a successful Midwife like Mary Birch sen.

Herbert was the most passionate gardener and, to cut a long story short, eventually returned to the Milnsbridge site with wife Phyllis and a 'modern family' of two in order to develop Merton Nurseries with brother Alan. We can discuss the details of this some other time. Suffice to say, his daughter Jessica, a teacher, then met the new Geography tutor at Preston Montford Field Centre and 40 years ago this Christmas, started married life in a cottage there.....back to where we started!



Many thanks to Dorothy Lewis for family memories, putting 'flesh' on the bare bones of official records.