
David Pannett's History of Bicton Part 21
Our Changing Climate

Almost every day somebody in the media will mention 'climate change'. Even unrelated events seem to get that extra 'climate change' spin, so that critics fear the issue is almost becoming a new state religion. So here we are discussing the topic too.

The landscape of Bicton has already been explained as a product of the last Ice Age and the subsequent warming in the current 'Interglacial' period (Sept 07). As the earth's orbit continues its pattern of slow changes, cold conditions are sure to return. By that time, we would have faced another crisis as fossil fuels run out. The first hints of this have already appeared as demand is exceeding supply and prices creep up.

Some critics of climate change fears point out that current trends reflect natural recovery from the 'Little Ice Age'. This was the period between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries when average temperature was lower and severe weather more common, although there were also some better years in between. At this time glaciers advanced in the Alps and Iceland, pushing up ridges of moraine from which they can now be seen to be shrinking.

In the earlier centuries, calmer, warmer conditions allowed the medieval population and settlement to expand and prosper. The climate change of the fourteenth century, not only gave bad harvests but may have triggered the migration of Middle Eastern rats bringing the 'Black Death' to Europe via the trade routes. The disease greatly reduced the population and undermined the old 'feudal system' which once so controlled the villages and towns. It may even have been a blessing in disguise in those areas experiencing over population and shortage of productive land.

Population numbers probably did not recover until the early eighteenth century, by which time the social and economic 'climate' had changed. This story of growth, contraction and slow recovery is reflected in the development of the Bicton landscape and the shape of Shrewsbury.
(April and December 07)

Each Christmas we may receive cards which use old paintings of snow and ice. The 17th century Dutch painters depicted many crowded scenes on frozen canals, as if fascinated by their severe winters, while more recent scenes show a romantic image of a 'white Christmas' in Victorian England. Dramatic examples of such bad weather appear in the history of our area. For instance, the great flood of 1795 caused by melting snow put Telford's new Montford Bridge to the test, while damaging many others in the county. He was then kept busy rebuilding them.

One interesting record of past weather can be found in a 'chronicle' of Shrewsbury written by a schoolmaster in the sixteenth century. In between recording political events, murders, accidents etc, he noted some effects of extreme weather. The following extracts illustrate them (with modern spelling, otherwise the computer spellchecker might have blown a fuse!)

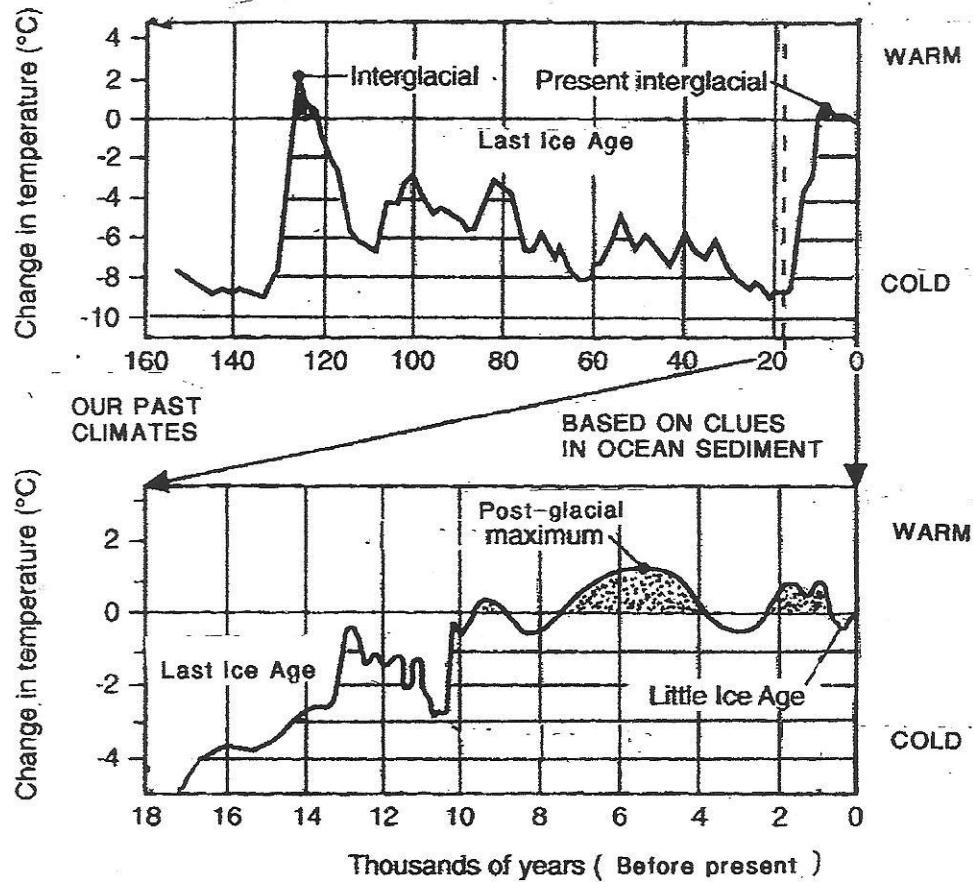
1525 "it rained from the seventh day of April to the third of June day and night continually, this year was such a scarcity of all things in England by reason of unseasonal weather..... that many died for default of bread".

1572 "this year the Winter and Springtime was very long, cold, hard and dry so that it was far in the month of May before any leaf or blossom appeared upon any tree".

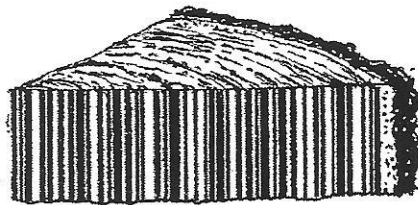
1573 "this year from beginning of November until within nine days of candlemas (Feb.2) the season was so pleasant and fair without frost or any snow that there appeared leaves upon hawthorn and plum trees before Christmas and the cuckoo was heard sing and also seen ten days before Christmas".

1590 "this year was by the means of the hardness of Winter and dryness which caused hay and fodder to be very dear and caused many cattle to perish for want....."

These are but some of the extreme events mentioned, which show how varied they were. As trees grow, the width of their annual growth rings reflect such variations, so that a group of years can acquire a unique pattern rather like a barcode. Researchers can trace these patterns back from recent trees to successively older structures and thereby accurately calculate their ages. For instance, we now know that the Kings Head in Mardol was built in 1404.



In our own lifetimes we have also experienced a similar range of weather, but not so many cold spells recently. Now we are part of a global economy it is the long drought in Australia which has indirectly affected the price of bread in our local shop. Climate indeed rules our lives in so many ways. Life may be becoming harder, but not as tough as in the sixteenth century, so cheer up!



TREE RINGS ARE LIKE BAR CODES RECORDING THE CLIMATE VARIATIONS DURING RECENT HISTORY