

## David Pannett's history of Bicton- no 25

### Upstairs Downstairs in Victorian Bicton

Some years ago, the TV programme "Upstairs Downstairs" portrayed life in a large household employing a large domestic staff. It used story lines reflecting the rigid class system of Victorian and Edwardian England and the hierarchy within the servant group. More recently, several National Trust properties, have been paying more attention to the life "below stairs".

In and around Bicton, "Big houses" employing a similar large army of staff in the nineteenth century, included the "halls" at Bicton, The Isle, Onslow, Rossall and Preston Montford. Census records 1851 - 1901 reveal some interesting similarities and differences between these households.

Bicton Hall, for example, was then the home of the three Cotes sisters, Charlotte, Sophie and Emily and also their niece Lucy, after the death of Charlotte. At any one time they employed up to 11 staff as follows: Butler, Housekeeper, Cook, Footman, Ladies Maids, Housemaids, a Kitchen Maid, Laundry Maid and a Coachman, covering all the varied tasks running the household. The old Onslow Hall had even more.

While this general structure continued over the years, each census showed a constant turnover of actual people. Mary Jones, Laundry Maid, at Bicton was a rare exception, serving through three decades and still doing the same work in 1881 aged 69.

Another exception was Linda Thatcher, who, by 1871 had joined the Isle Hall as nurse to the Sandford children, but was still there in 1901, by which time the aging parents may have needed her skills themselves. Perhaps like many successful children's nurses, or "nannies" she had developed a close bond with her charges, which continued into their adult life and practically bridged the upstairs downstairs divide. Significantly, two children, Annette (46) and Richard (37) were also still at home in 1901.

Because other staff were always moving on to advance their careers or leaving get married, (often to local lads: Dec 08), their average age remained in a constant 25-30 range at each of the "Halls". Illegitimate births could also occur in such environments, which brought such shame to hard working families that they hushed things up, leaving mysteries in some of our family trees. Apart from Mary, those of above average age, generally held the more senior posts, such as Housekeepers, including Mary Hughes 55, at Onslow and Anne Cooper 48, at Bicton, where the Butler Samuel Grey was 41. Emily Lamb 38, was Governess to the Sandford children at The Isle in 1871. Incidentally, she had been born in Yorkshire and had therefore travelled further than most staff, who mainly came from this county and the borderland. Perhaps her special profession enabled her to seek work over a wider area. or simply came here with the new Mrs Sandford from Milnsbridge House Huddersfield

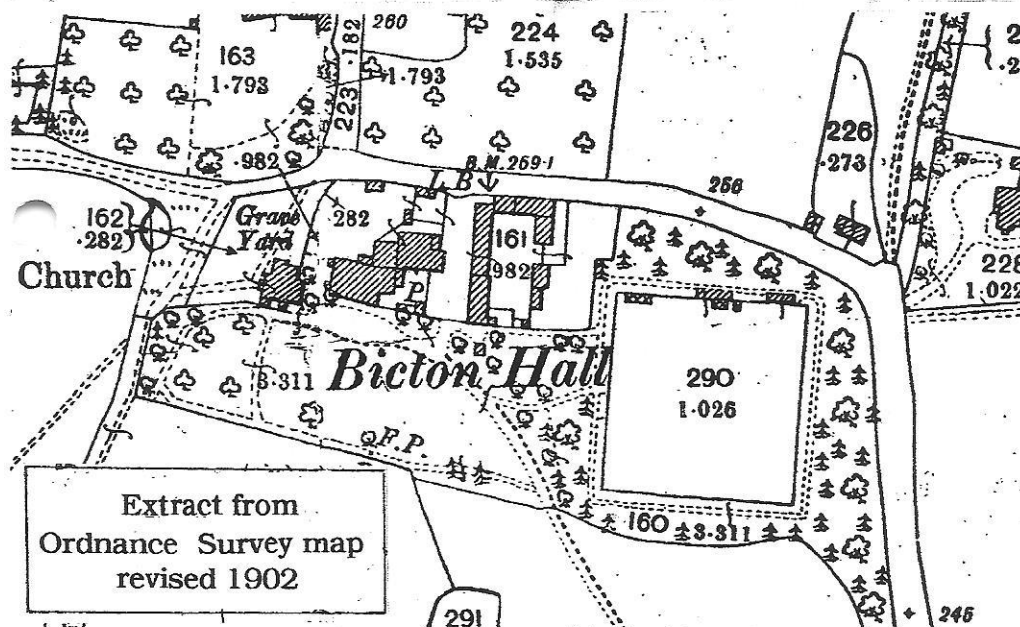


For such mature single people a job with accommodation had great advantages, as they may not have known any other "home".

Grooms and Coachmen were often housed above their charges in the stable block, rather than in some crowded attic, and this, no doubt allowed John Paddock (36) to live with his wife at The Isle. The total of 5 staff listed here represented a relatively modest upstairs/downstairs ratio of 1:1 or 1:1.5, while Bicton had a ratio of 1:3.6. The

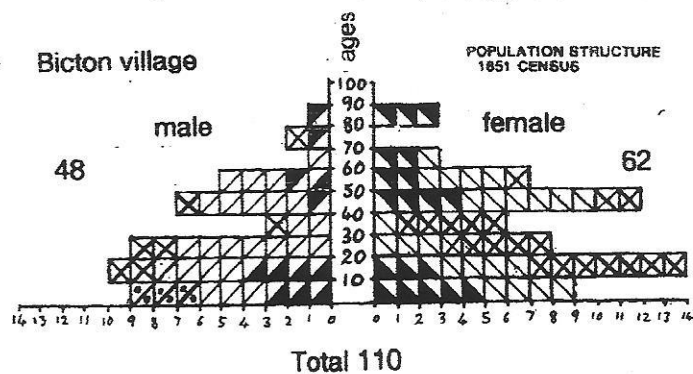
work at The Isle may have been supplemented by "dailies" from the estate cottages in a way not available to the Cotes at Bicton.

Such high staff levels reflect the contemporary high birth rate, low wages and the labour intensive nature of domestic chores. A variety of social and economic factors have changed all this, including wider opportunities for girls. Such are the improvements in technology, now, even small houses can boast an army of "servants" by the names Hotpoint, Kenwood, Electrolux and Dyson, to list just a few. "Modern" husbands are also more helpful. However, power cuts can force us to think about those old time skills again.



# Bicton village

## POPULATION STRUCTURE 1851 CENSUS



- ■ born in Bicton
- ▤ ▥ self employed and 'gentlefolk'
- ⊠ ⊡ 'living in' domestic and farm staff
- ▨ ▩ school boarders
- ▧ ▦ other family and visitors