

David Pannett's History of Bickton part 29

Up the old village street

Bickton Village has two distinct parts: the original farming settlement and the newer cottage and 'suburban estate' community. Many inhabitants of the latter rarely venture into the former and in the late 19th century even two census enumerators failed to reach it! Now, the population of this end has been expanding, thanks to bungalows infilling between the old farms and 'barn conversions' within them.

The story of this area reflects both the influence of particular individuals owning it and the changing times through which they lived and worked, especially during the 'Agricultural Revolution'. This was a period of steady improvement in land management and production, during the 18th and early 19th centuries.

Here in Bickton the old 'open fields' were enclosed by a series of exchanges between landowners, leading to the amalgamation of farm units until there were only three, plus the 'Hall', one for each estate. No single big estate dominated the village (as at Montford) and instead a succession of smaller landowners became involved through inheritance, marriage, purchase and even by foreclosing mortgages. They also bought, sold and exchanged plots of land between themselves to simplify boundaries, enlarge holdings or raise ready cash. Most were absentee landlords just letting their farms, but some were resident and probably had the greatest impact on the landscape.

In general, improvements included brickwork to replace old timber frame and mud, so that the local boulder clay proved very useful. The weathered surface layers provided the preferred material, so that brickmaking left no deepholes, but field names, such as the one near Bickley Coppice, provide a clue. These local bricks often included glacial pebbles by accident, – take a closer look.

The end of the 18th century and the first part of the next were particularly prosperous because of the Napoleonic Wars, so that landowners were able to invest more in their property, both for production and more genteel comfort for themselves. Developments of this kind took place in Bickton and are shown up by the contemporary maps and surveys. They survive to this day, thanks to the subsequent fall in prosperity, first after the wars (Waterloo!) and then later when British agriculture faced overseas competition. Farming techniques, nevertheless continued to improve, so that investment would have concentrated on

functional buildings and machines.

'Bicton Farm' was always a tenanted holding throughout this period and has therefore retained its original early 18th-century appearance, while the neighbours were altered, by new 'owner occupiers'.

'Red House' once stood facing the street, next to its yard, in the same way as 'Bicton Farm', but was totally rebuilt on a new site facing the garden. Deeds suggest it was the work of John Gittins of Ensdon House, who chose to live here after buying the farm soon after 1800. He moved out after 1830 and let the farm to Nathaniel Hughes. By 1845 the property, now let to Richard Russ, was in the hands of Richard Gittings of Shrawardine. There is an interesting family story here: the Gittins family were already established tenants of the Montford estate (Clive) and perhaps one sought to invest in freehold property during those boom years.

'The Woodlands' presents a similar story, but on a slightly grander scale, in which the original farmhouse was developed into a small 'gentleman's residence', facing parkland and including a new pleasure garden. A separate carriage drive by-passed the village street, where the concentration of farming activities no doubt kept it rather mucky. The creation of the garden, with its curving wall provided both privacy and shelter from west winds, involved the diversion of the road.

John Morris, who bought the property in 1806 for £6147.00 may have started the changes, since he also owned Bicton Farm, across the road. However, it is more likely that all this was the work of John Lloyd, a 'gentleman' farmer who bought Woodlands soon after 1830, following the death of Thomas Morris (perhaps John's son.)

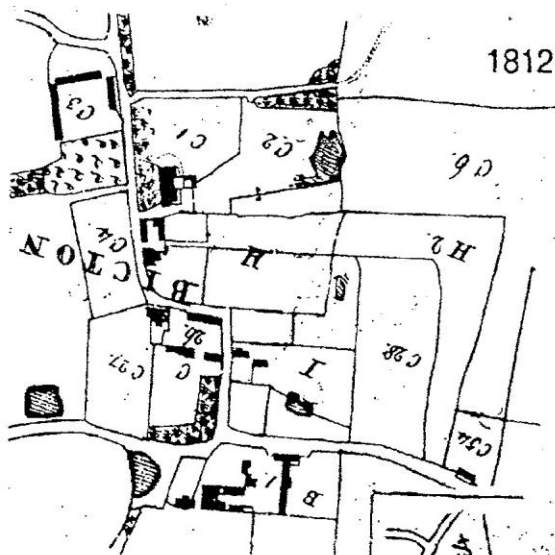
The house has three storeys, giving space for both family and domestic staff. For instance, in 1851, when John Lloyd was by then a widower aged 75, the household included four domestic servants and one widowed labourer.

The Bicton farm ownership had meanwhile passed to Dr. William Crawford of Bicton House, a similar three-storey building in its parkland.

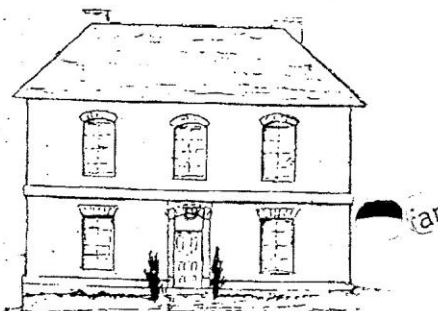
In between these farms stood 'Bicton Cottage', where at this time, Mrs Christianna Jellico ran a small boarding-school with her daughter Lucy. The cottage has gone, but its coachhouse cum stable block remains as a residence. Those pupils must have been packed in very tightly!

Meanwhile Richard Jenkins improved his home at the Hall.

Each of the farms continued with its individual story, but still in a framework laid down during this important period in our history. They remain good reminders of those times



'OLD' BICTON
in the 19th century



EXTRACTS FROM TITHE MAPS
AND ORDNANCE SURVEY

