

David Pannett's History of Bicton part 30 What's in a name?

The reorganisation of our local government this year has brought Bicton more directly under the control of the Shropshire (County) Council. Before it had also come under Shrewsbury and Atcham Borough Council, whose name reflected an earlier amalgamation of Shrewsbury Borough with the surrounding Atcham Rural District, which had included Bicton (see 'A.R.D.C.' rural cottages in the crescent Montford Bridge). Historically, Bicton was for centuries closely linked to the Borough as part of the Liberties of Shrewsbury, by virtue of being an outlying township of the Parish of St. Chad. Later it became a separate parish with a church dedicated to the Holy Trinity. Throughout, it has been part of the diocese of Lichfield, yet, close by to the south, neighbouring parishes belong to the diocese of Hereford. Today, matters of law and order involve the West Mercia constabulary, rather than county or borough police forces as in the past.

Such a medley of past and present forms of authority! How are they all related?

The term 'Mercia' takes us back to the eighth century when Anglo Saxon 'warlords' were organising a series of small kingdoms during the unsettled times after the breakdown of Roman rule. 'Mercia' was the name of one occupying most of the Midlands, which was then a border zone between the partially celtic and christian areas to northwest and the southern Saxon Kingdoms being converted by Augustine from Rome. In this area, Mercian Kings such as Penda held on to their old religion much longer. His son did, however, convert, making the whole country nominally christian. (Nevertheless old festivals linked to the agricultural year and the winter solstice carried on with the Christian message, while we are still reminded of the old gods each Woden's day and Thor's day.)

However, such national unity revealed differences between Celtic and Roman faith and ritual, which had to be resolved at the Synod of Whitby in 664. The Roman view prevailed and the other side sacrificed their independence in exchange for membership of a wider 'European Community'.

Nevertheless, the Celtic contribution continued as Chad came down from the north in 669 to organise the church in Mercia and create a diocese within its borders. Meanwhile, Merewalh, another son of Penda, had become King of the 'Magonsaete', the people of Hereford, whose territory also became a diocese. Both kingdoms have gone, but the boundary between each diocese still runs right across our local area, showing how this dynasty must have carved up this eastern half of Powys between themselves.

The 'Celtic' tradition of favouring 'home grown' saints rather than 'Roman imports' continued so that Chad was declared one after his death and

his name used in the dedication of churches.

In the following century, Mercia became famous for King Offa, the builder of dykes, but then in the century after, the Danish invasions destroyed the kingdom. To add insult to injury, when Alfred the Great of Wessex reclaimed the territory in the tenth century, he imposed a totally new system of 'Shires' and central 'Shire towns', thus wiping the old Kingdom off the map and almost out of the history books. This was local government reorganisation on a grand scale, which formed the basis of what we still have today, including Shrewsbury and Shropshire.

By this time, St Chad's church was already an important local religious centre, but its extensive parish had to be broken up in order to give parts to the newer town churches. In later centuries, this whole group of parishes became known as the 'Liberties of Shrewsbury', within which the developing borough authorities had some secular jurisdiction. When Bicton and adjacent townships of St Chad's became a separate parish in 1853, its upgraded chapel needed a new dedication.

The concept of a tripartite deity, "Father, Son and Holy Spirit," had been well debated by the early bishops around the time of the Nicaean Council in 325. They noted that the Bible was not very clear on the subject, so that different interpretations were possible, but then, in 381, a new emperor Theodosius, who had little patience for learned debate, chose one version and declared others heresy. This was one more stage in the 'Romanisation' of christianity by which 'authority' was to have a high priority for the next thousand years.

The Reformation was a revolt against such authority as Protestants chose to interpret Scriptures for themselves. For instance, 'Unitarians' were so called because they rejected the concept of the Holy Trinity and more besides (Darwin's mother was a member of the Shrewsbury congregation and Charles was first educated by its minister). By the nineteenth century, 'non conformist' churches, rejecting the Church of England, were very popular and as a result remaining 'Anglicans' felt the need to reassert its ancient traditions. As new churches were built to cater for changing patterns of population, they were given both mediaeval architectural styles and dedication emphasising those old traditions.

Also in the nineteenth century, many political developments were taking place to produce the local government system we know today – complex story for some other time. More recently, the government has been accused of imposing regional government to please the E.U. Could the ghost of Mercia be coming back to haunt us – first the police and now the Mercian Regiment at Copthorne Barracks?



*Map showing the main kingdoms and provinces
of England and Wales in c.600*

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