

## David Pannett's history of Bickton part 32

### Bus ride to Bickton Heath

Over the years many local inhabitants may have found outsiders, visitors and delivery firms getting confused between 'Bickton' and 'Bickton Heath'. Now, the number 70 bus obliges many to pass through Bickton Heath and become familiar with its landscape, including the Grapes, Oxon Church, Coop Store, Shelton Hospital etc. In view of this, a brief explanation of the area is appropriate.

In the Middle Ages open heathland stretched along the borders of the ancient hamlets occupying this area. Most were townships within the parish of St Chad, although parts of Shelton also belonged to St Julian's, and each also had a share of that open land, although the general term 'Bickton Heath' was applied to most of it. Local communities would have grazed their animals here and in the 13th century the monks of Buildwas Abbey also acquired rights as an extension of their 'Granges' at Bickton and Crow Meole (Monk Meole).

In later centuries, after the reformation, each township enclosed its portion of the heath in an individual way, until, by the early 19th century no open land remained. Nevertheless some distinctive landscape features had been created.

In Onslow, a single estate was able to reorganise plantations and new hedges in its own way. By contrast, in the neighbouring townships of Bickton and Calcott and also Shelton encroachments by cottages and smallholdings had been taking place since the 17th century. The remaining open land was finally enclosed by agreement between the landowners in 1768 and 1804 respectively. Some local access roads, including Calcott Lane and Racecourse Lane were also laid out.

The Shelton part of the heath, together with its extension into Crow Meole (probably enclosed by the Mytton family) had also been under the nominal control of the Borough of Shrewsbury. For this reason, the corporation had been able to lay out a racecourse here in the early 18th-century. After enclosure it crossed Mytton land, but when this had to be sold in 1824 to pay off 'Mad Jack's' debts, the new owners were less cooperative. Fortunately, in 1831, the Earl of Tankerville offered an alternative site along Monkmoor Road.

Today, Mytton Oak Road and Racecourse Lane still remind us of this story.

Meanwhile, the pattern of smallholdings and encroachments beside the Welshpool Road encouraged the development of various services, not unlike those at Montford Bridge. By the mid 19th century there were two inns, two blacksmiths, one of which was also a small foundry, a selection of tradesmen and up to two shopkeepers. A Methodist chapel was also a typical feature of such a community.

The middle of the century also saw the greatest changes with the founding of the county asylum in 1845 on an adjacent plot in St Julian's parish. Then in 1853 the Shrewsbury parishes were reorganised, creating not only Bicton Parish, but also a new one covering Oxon and Shelton, sweeping away some irregular boundaries. A new church and school were built, which like Bicton, used red sandstone, thought appropriate to its mock mediaeval architecture. The vicarage was built well away near Shelton and is now in the 'Oxon Priory'.

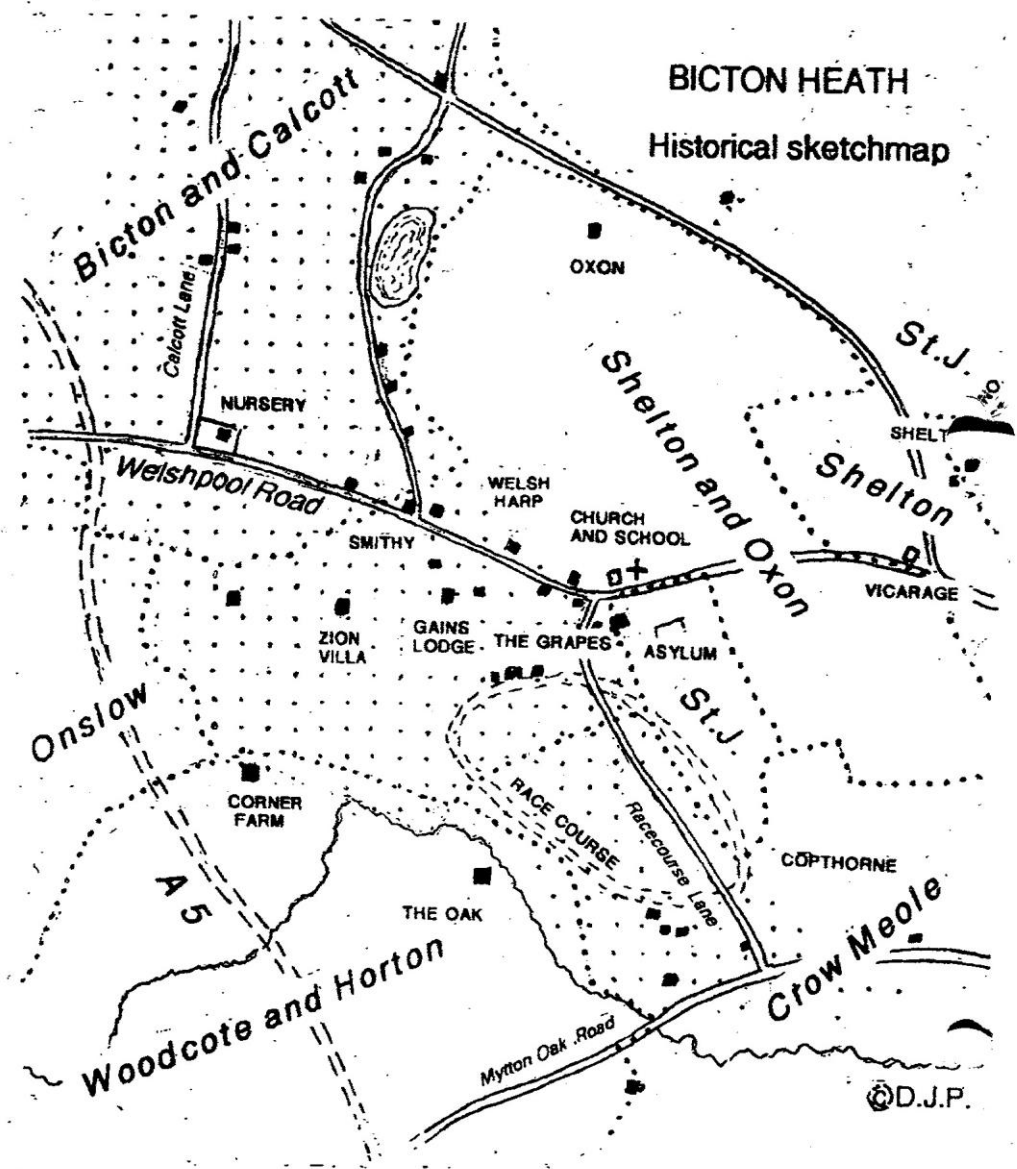
This provided a new centre for the community. Otherwise, the Grapes alone had been providing this since the 18th century. In 1896 it was recorded as being the property of the Litchfield Brewery Company and consisted of a parlour, bar, sitting room, clubroom and six bedrooms. By contrast, the Welsh Harp, owned by the local Oxon estate had only minimum facilities.

Around, the smallholdings lent themselves to milk production and retail sales. Otherwise, their land allowed infilling by more cottages, especially along the main road. This trend continued through the 20th century producing a great mixture of building styles and ages.

Increased traffic along the road, in the age of the motor car brought more trade to the area. As a result the Welsh Harp was remodelled in the 1920s while the Grapes was totally rebuilt in 1936. Eventually, in the 1980s, the Welsh Harp was also totally rebuilt, just in time to lose trade when the new A5 bypass was built. Its structure then contributed to the present supermarket.

By this time continued suburban growth included whole estates rather than odd infilling, so that the area has become fused with the rest of suburban Shrewsbury. Nevertheless, many aspects of its heathland legacy can still be seen in the landscape. Just look around as you pass through on the bus!

BICTON HEATH  
Historical sketchmap



..... Probable extent of heathland in the Middle Ages

..... Parish and township boundaries pre 1850 (St. Chad & St. Julian)

■ pre 1850 settlement