

David Pannett's History of Bicton part 33

Let there be light (some seasonal observations)

Flying over Europe on a clear night is quite an experience as the 'map' below is picked out by lights. Venice is clearly visible against its dark lagoon, while in northern France the glow of Paris can be seen from far off. Nearer home, the 'greenhouse' roofs of the Milton Keynes shopping centre pour vast amounts of light into the night sky. Back home in Bicton, the lights of Shrewsbury can be detected in the eastern sky and there are even streetlamps in the village.

Today we take such electric light for granted, but the oldest inhabitants can remember a different world. Once there was real darkness at night (as it had to be in the wartime blackout) before electricity reached the village in the 1930s. The 'national grid' and larger power stations had only been developed in the 1920s and naturally served the main towns initially, often replacing local systems and gas lighting (old Buildwas power station was built in 1932). Rural areas remained longer with candles and oil lamps, not unlike those illustrated by the T.V. 'Victorian Farm.'

For centuries candles have been made from tallow, animal fat, with finer quality versions incorporating beeswax and vegetable oils. Being thus almost a food related product, candles were handled by grocers. Locally, when James Morris of Ruyton was apprenticed to a Shrewsbury grocer, he realised that they could be an important aspect of the trade. When he then set up his own business in 1869 it included a candle factory in Frankwell and in this way the well known Morris Company was born.

Vegetable oils had also been used in lamps but in the latter years of the 19th century American paraffin (from mineral oil) became available. This in turn stimulated the manufacturer of suitable lamps of all kinds. In this way the Morris company became involved in the oil trade which later led to the blending of lubricants for the new motor trade. The rest is another local story!

From now on the provision of oil and lamps became more appropriate

for the hardware rather than the grocery trade and was therefore taken up by the Birch family of Roushill in 1909. Their delivery service also covered Bicton, where some local smallholders and traders also held stocks for those who missed the van.

Once the village was finally connected to the system, there could be electric light and, since then, an increasing number of household gadgets. At the same time essential services such as mains water and later sewerage systems could reach the area since they were so dependent on electric pumps.

The downside of all this has been the spread of 'light pollution', whereby streetlights etc., obscure our appreciation of the natural night sky. Today amateur astronomers seek the Brecon Beacons and the forests of Galloway in order to escape it. The moon, planets and star patterns were once important to early religions and the Christmas story includes those three wise men seeking guidance from them. Ironically the Christian Church discouraged astrology from then on and replaced the winter solstice celebrations with Christmas. Nevertheless strange events were still noted in the sky over the years. Then many were a mystery, but some we now understand better.

These include those recorded in the 16th century chronicles of Shrewsbury:

in
October 1564 "was seenⁱⁿ the element many fiery impressions... all the northern parts seem covered with flames of fire... staying for most part of an hour"

It was obviously the 'aurora borealis' or Northern Lights, normally only visible in polar regions. They were also noted in 1573 - 5 and again 1581 - 1584, each time near the autumn or spring equinoxes, October and March. Then, no more sightings that century. What did this all mean?

The aurora is caused by charged particles from the sun interacting with the upper atmosphere. Normally the earth's magnetic field deflects them towards the poles, but a strong 'solar flare' can burst through to effect

