

David Pannett's History of Bicton part 34

'Which way the Weather?

"If you do not know history, you cannot understand the present, nor plan for the future"— Helmut Kohl

Wise words from a German politician caught up in the county's recent history. Today non-stop discussion of climate change seems to involve a lot of future planning based on computer models, without reference to history. We should do our bit to correct the balance!

On the long-term geological timescale, the earth is currently in a 'cool' period caused by the movement of the continents, which has left Antarctica isolated with an ice cap at the south pole, while northern continents restrict warm water access to the Arctic Ocean. In between, chemical weathering of recently elevated mountains has been removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere faster than volcanoes are replacing it. This has allowed the regular variations in the earth's orbit to trigger a series of 'Ice Ages'. In the past two million years our local climate has been 80% cold and only 20% mild, including our current 'inter glacial period'. There is no geological or astronomical reason to say this pattern will not continue for the next few million years!

Within our current mild period there have been several minor variations over ten thousand years. The 'Bronze Age', for instance, was especially warm and dry in Europe, allowing farming to spread into upland areas, such as Dartmoor and the Scottish highlands and nearby Stapeley Hill. Locally, some wet hollows dried out curtailing the growth of peat.

After about 1200BC, however the 'Iron Age' climate became cooler and wetter, so that larger peat areas grew again, expanding into the adjacent forests such as at Whixall and the Scottish Highlands. The larger population was now more stressed, leading to more warfare, while under cloudy skies, religious observance shifted from viewing the heavens to revering the woodland and water features (we still celebrate with holly and mistletoe and throw coins in a fountain)

Weather was rather mixed in the Roman period, but gradually returned to the warmer drier conditions afterwards. As the weather systems continued to shift, Vikings colonised Iceland and Greenland,

while in mainland Europe agriculture and settlement flourished as never before. Conditions to the south, however, became more stressful and perhaps led to a religious revival rooted in traditional desert culture, which is still with us today.

In northern Europe more land was brought into cultivation' (with eroded soil finishing up on river floodplains) and towns like Shrewsbury expanded, especially after the Norman conquest.

In the fourteenth century, however the 'Little Ice Age set in', bringing poor harvests, famine and diseases, including the bubonic plague. Loss of population undermined the old feudal systems helping to change the 'Middle Ages' into the 'Modern World'. The Bicton area provides examples illustrating this and will be discussed further some other time. A Shrewsbury Chronicler recorded extremes of weather, both good and bad in the sixteenth century (Jan 09). At the end of the 1650 Humphrey Sandford of the Isle, during a dispute with his neighbour over Rossall Heath, (Oct 08) also felt moved to record the very disappointing weather on the back of the legal documents.

January: very hard frost

February: moist weather with rain.

March: winds and storms with rain

April: fair sunshine weather

May: a little frost and sunshine weather with wind

June: Fair bright sunshine days, a little frost.

July: a hard frost dark and cloudy all day

August: a hard hoar frost

September: snow and frost

October: hard frost and snow

November: hard frost and snow lying on the ground

December: frost and some snow

How such poor weather influenced the politics of the Civil War and Commonwealth is not clear. In the following century poor harvests in France certainly caused civil unrest, which led to the revolution when Marie Antoinette suggested the peasants should eat 'cake', meaning 'oat cake', not the Mr Kipling type, since oats are more tolerant of damp weather than bread wheat; i.e. a tactless but logical remark. There were many more examples of extreme weather during this period, but they

have become fewer as the Little Ice Age fades away!

Records and tree rings both then and now show how weather has varied so much from year to year, that general trends cannot be detected until several years have passed. One measure of variability can be the dates when flowers open each year. June

Hughes has noted these in Bicton for the last 21 years and, when plotted as a graph, they suggest a rhythmic pattern of changing Spring temperatures, but no overall change since 1988. You can add your observations for this year! The regular rhythm, which may well relate to the behaviour of ocean currents and cycles of solar activity, already suggest that 2010 should start cool. Not even the Met office predicted how cool!.

This leads to a final political comment: King Canute is often dismissed as fool for trying to stop the rising tide, but in reality he was a wise ruler demonstrating to his followers the limits to his power over natural forces. This message is still relevant today.

