

David Pannett's History of Bickton part 38

Tales from the Twenties

Towards the end of last year, the memorial clock installed in the church tower in 1922, was restored, while in February this year Dorothy Lewis, our oldest inhabitant celebrated her 90th birthday. They are therefore of similar age and also linked by association with Ernest Lewis, who was Dorothy's father and the one who started the clock and wound it for many years.

That time was one of looking back in sadness at all those lost in the First World War, 1914-18, with the erection of a variety of such memorials. However, it was also a time for looking forward to making changes which would make all that suffering seem worthwhile. Therefore, as Dorothy grew up and changed, the world was also changing all around her.

Dorothy was born at Milnsbridge, off Shepherds Lane, in February 1920 and christened by the Rev. George Fletcher at his church at Oxon on May 16th. This location was necessary since there was a vacancy for a vicar at Bickton. One reason for this is perhaps suggested by reports in the Shrewsbury Chronicle for that same week of her birth: The Rev W. Roberts, who claimed to be the vicar designate of Bickton was in dispute with the furniture removers, Alick Low and sons, over their bill. Low was rightfully claiming payment of £7 - 5 shillings and 11d (£7.30) through the County Court, while Roberts was counter claiming £5-10 shillings (£5.50) on account of damage, dirty boots on stairs, boxes stacked too high on the floor and possible pilferage of cigars. Judge Ivo Brown scornfully dismissed all this commenting that 'the Bishop was a bit shy of him' and that Roberts 'did not belong to this particular parish' nor did the vicarage belong to him' and, any way, some slight damage was only to be expected during removals.

After all this it is no wonder he was not around to christen Dorothy! Bickton parish had a lucky escape from such a character. The Rev John Purser later took up the post.

At this time, Bickton Hall was occupied by Miss Edith Dorothy Milbank, who involved herself like a sort of 'fairy godmother' in the

affairs of the local community. Besides helping to sort out problems with Dorothy's christening, that same year she was lending money to the Peoples Refreshment House Association for the purchase of the Four Crosses nearby. Later she helped finance secondary education for Dorothy's brothers, Walter and Herbert and also others in the village, before it became free and universal. Sunday school children also had regular treats.

The arrival of Dorothy made the Milnsbridge household even more crowded: three brothers and one sister aged 4 to 12, parents Ernest and Blanche and also her mother Constance and even a wartime 'landgirl' still working at the Woodlands. In such a rural cottage facilities were still basic with most cooking done on a traditional range as seen on the TV 'Victorian Farm'. Blanche managed well, as she had been Cook at the vicarage when she met Ernest and was well-equipped with her copy of Mrs Beeton's *BOOK OF HOUSEHOLD MANAGEMENT*. Improved facilities of piped water and electricity did not reach them until the 30s. Till then, Dorothy remembers visiting a friend in Shrewsbury where she would enjoy the novelty of 'pulling a chain'.

Nearby, there were signs of improving standards as the 1919 Local Authority Housing Act allowed Atcham Rural District Council to build their 'rural cottages' at Oxon and Montford Bridge in 1921.

Other clues to improved technology, partially stimulated by the war, were also reported in February 1920: Corbets were arranging tractor ploughing demonstrations at Uffington, while at Hallscott the government was selling surplus cars, vans and lorries, Morris and Co. had already expanded their oil business by buying up similar government surplus oil stocks and confidently faced the future with their new offices at Welsh Bridge. As a stunt, an ex-serviceman even drove a car up to the Wrekin! The motor age have arrived! The Shrewsbury By-pass opened from the Oak and by 1926 Midland Red were running a bus service through Bicton. Percy Mead, of the Woodlands is remembered as buying the first car in the village (see prominent grave near church tower).

Caring for the family involved a lot of self-medication since doctors visits were expensive. In later life, as a nurse, Dorothy became a passionate advocate of the National Health Service. In the week of her

birth, the Royal Salop Infirmary was making a public appeal for 50,000 shillings (£10000) to top-up of its funds (for comparison 'Home and Colonial' store was offering margarine at one shilling (5p) per pound)

On the brighter side, the lads were noticing how girls were showing more leg with the shorter skirts. More seriously, women since 1918 now had the vote and could have been involved in the election that year returning G. Butler Lloyd as Unionist MP for Shrewsbury. By 1920 government was a Liberal - Conservative coalition (Lloyd George - Bona Law) whose most pressing problems included the political settlement in Ireland leading to 'Home Rule' and 'Partition'. By coincidence, in the midst of such troubles, Francis Smyth was born in Belfast that same year, and eventually became a popular vicar of Bicton, where he now lies buried.

Finally, as Dorothy was arriving, Shrewsbury town beat Kidderminster Harriers 3-1.

