

## Some Grave Concerns

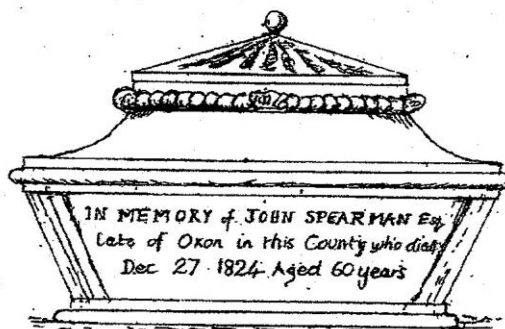
This year, thanks to a team of volunteers, the gravestones in Bickton's old churchyard have reappeared from their cloak of vegetation and can once again take their place as part of our historic landscape. We can also see the scale of further conservation work which is needed. Nationally, such old churchyards, great and small, are causing great concern amongst historians and conservationists and for this reason the diocese of Hereford, for instance, has been promoting their 'God's Acre' project to give them greater care through local groups. However Bickton is in Lichfield diocese.

Graves can provide information which supplements the written records, but many inscriptions are wearing away and need transcribing before they are lost altogether. Monuments also reflect the social status of the families concerned and the changes in fashion over time.

Traditionally, yew trees grow in churchyards, safely away from browsing livestock, while many types of wildlife also find a refuge here, so that management must strike a balance between being 'too tidy' or 'too wild'.

The Bickton graveyard was probably taken out of the adjacent village green when the chapel was built in the late 17th century. Its boundaries, now more visible, certainly give this impression. Before this, burials must have taken place in (old) St. Chad's Shrewsbury, the 'mother church.' Surviving monuments however, only date from the late 18th century and continue through to the 1880s, when the new churchyard took over.

During this period the different strata of society were certainly well matched by their monuments, nearly all of which made use of Grinshill sandstone. The principal local landowners, Sandfords of the Isle and Wingfields of Onslow, actually built their family vaults under the chapel in 1754 and 1834 respectively, only recording individuals on marble tablets on the inside walls of the chapel. Since most of these were later transferred to the new church, their words 'under this floor' can be misleading now.



Sir Richard Jenkins, sometime owner of Bicton Hall and M.P. for Shrewsbury, who died in 1857, is also under the chapel floor, while John Spearman of Oxon Hall lies out in the churchyard with his brother Richard. Nevertheless they have impressive monuments appropriate to their status. The inscription for Richard records

that he was both rector of Preston in Shropshire and Rector of Haddenham in Cambridgeshire, thus exposing one of the abuses of church organisation at that time. Some landowning families could acquire church 'livings', but chose to stay in their mansions, while employing a vicar or curate to do the actual work.

Those lower down the social scale generally lie in the plain 'table top' tombs which in some cases allowed space for other family members. The Jellicoe family from nearby Bicton Cottage (White House) is a good example with the inscriptions recording family tragedies in the early 19th century. They ran a small boarding-school, worthy of some comment some other time. Their next door neighbour, John Davies, tenant of Bicton Farm in the 1850s, is still their next-door neighbour in the churchyard!

All around, lesser ranks of agricultural workers and tradesmen are marked by single headstones, (now sadly vandalised) including those of Edward Lewis, gardener to Preston Montford Hall, who died in 1866 and the unrelated William Lewis and his wife 1858 and 1867.

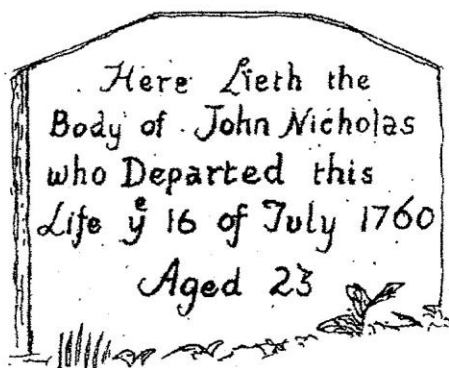
The ages of death recorded here range from childhood to beyond the traditional 'three score years and ten', as diseases in the 19th century could strike at any time. Childbirth was a particularly

SACRED  
to the Memory of  
EDWARD LEWIS  
who died May 29<sup>th</sup> 1866  
aged 80 years.  
Prepared to meet thy God  
Also ELIZABETH wife of the  
above who died June 1 1871

dangerous time for all classes, and once children had survived all this, it was all the more distressing for parents to lose them just a few years later. (Charles Darwin recorded how this experience changed his attitude to life). Significantly, child graves, such as those of Selina Lewis (Edward's granddaughter) 1877, aged four and Frederick, 1871, aged eight, son of William Sandford, (first vicar of Bicton), are as elaborate as any for an adult. Another shows how Samuel Preece, (agricultural labourer) and his wife Mary lost two young sons in the same year, 1857.

Monuments also reflect the contemporary fashions in design. The Spearman's tomb illustrate the 'Classical Revival', while later smaller tombs use 'Gothic Revival' decoration, as on that of Miss Frances Jenkins, 1867. Even smaller headstones then displayed 'pointed arch' shapes. Such 'Gothic Revival' designs continued in the new churchyard starting with the church itself.

At the same time, inscriptions changed much in line with title pages of books or tradesmen's letterheads. In the 18th century blunt statements in a bold



hand were sufficient, as in the case of John Nicholas 1760, but by the Victorian period a whole range of 'type faces' were used: Roman, *Italic*, **GOthic** etc., all skilfully carved. A modern word processor now offers a similar range! The wording also included more sentiment, as with Edward Lewis, for instance.

The problem for our present generation is now how to preserve all this for the future. What authorities are responsible now, for instance, and what can or cannot be done in practical terms are serious questions. Money, history and 'health and safety' all get involved.

Thanks to the constant turnover of population only 2 local families appear to have ancestors here. However, their varied lives can help us understand some of the history of the whole community.