

## David Pannett's History of Bicton part 44

### Thirteenth Century Bicton

Recent discussions in the world of education have raised concerns about history teaching which concentrates so much on recent two centuries that the contributions made by earlier times get overlooked. As Michael Wood has shown in his TV series, they also helped lay the foundations of our modern world and we should therefore take another look at Bicton in the Middle Ages, especially the 13th century.

At the national level, these years 1200 - 1300 included the reigns of John, Henry III and Edward I. At the local level, the peasant farmers worked together in cooperative 'open field' villages and hamlets where their land lay intermixed in narrow strips around three large fields used for crops and fallow in rotation. Damper land along river floodplains and in odd hollows was used as hay meadows, while the worst land was left as rough grazing and heathland. Some communities also had access to woodland for various 'coppice' products and pig pasture. Bicton fitted well this 'model' depicted in many history books. Preston Montford was similar on a smaller scale, but the details of the management of yet smaller estates like Calcott, are not so clear.

The peasants also contributed rents and labour services to their feudal overlords, which in some cases were religious institutions. A local knight held 'Up Rossall' by military service to his feudal lord at Oswestry and therefore lived in a fortified manor house, the earthworks of which still survive at the site. The 'feudal' overlord of Bicton was actually St Chad's Church Shrewsbury, so that the status of any local manor house is not clear. Preston Montford similarly belonged to Lilleshall Abbey.

At the national political level, the reign of King John was turbulent with civil war amongst the barons never far away, during which both sides sought support from the Pope. The barons resented the King's taxes to pay for his French Wars and other abuses of power and only settled matters with the drafting of 'Magna Carta' in 1215.

As part of this national unrest, Llewellyn (the Great) of Wales increased his power, even attacking Shrewsbury, thereby stimulating the building of new town walls.

In the reign of John's son, Henry, the barons remained powerful so that the young king never really got the upper hand. Instead, there were some

constitutional advances when Simon de Montfort Earl of Leicester, called the first parliaments. Llewellyn also continued to take advantage of the situation to extend his power, during which time Montford Bridge became the recognised meeting place of English and Welsh envoys. A treaty was signed in 1221 but still Llewellyn attacked the area again 'laying waste land between Shrewsbury and Oswestry'. Bickton, on the main road could have suffered at this time.

In spite of all this, local trade prospered, especially associated with wool and cloth. In 1247 William de Bickton granted part of his lands to Buildwas Abbey for the establishment of a 'grange', together with extensive rights over the path. Such grants to religious houses were often considered acts of piety securing some benefit in the afterlife, but they may also have been commercial deals in disguise. Abbeys ran their affairs like business corporations and the wool trade was part of it.

Later his son Thomas was also recorded as a bailiff of Shrewsbury and therefore may not have actually lived in the village. Clearly, he had become part of the expanding commercial community, enjoying increasing local government powers granted by the King desperate for political support (and cash).

Upon the death of Henry in 1272, his son Edward returned to England to take the crown. He had been busy on the Crusades, securing the 'Holy Land' for the christians, thus contributing to a story which still poisons our relations with the muslim world today.

As a soldier, he now set about expanding his power over the whole of Britain, starting with Wales, by now in the hands of David, Llewellyn's grandson. His methods included a network of castles modeled on many he had seen in his travels. Unfortunately for Wales, David was still defiant and experienced the wrath of Edward, who had him executed in Shrewsbury, where a parliament had been convened for this purpose. The nasty details are recorded on the wall of Barclays Bank.

All this activity no doubt highlighted the importance of the 'Kings Highway' to Wales, and in particular Montford Bridge. In 1285 the first of several royal orders allowed the levying of tolls to finance repairs. (In normal times, traffic by both river and road would have been free). Only goods for sale were charged, both basic commodities and luxuries. River traffic included 'floats of timber'. Trade was obviously expanding.

As the century ended, peace had returned to this area, although Edward used his tax revenues to pursue wars elsewhere, still leaving lasting

bitterness in Scotland, for instance.

In general strong central government had triumphed over 'regional warlords' and foreign meddling, some lasting constitutional advances had been made, while the power of the commercial middle classes steadily increased. Peace also allowed essential infra structure to be maintained.

Recently a new minister visiting Afghanistan dismissed it as a 'dysfunctional 13th century state'. I wonder what he meant?

