

David Pannett's History of Bicton part 45
Gone but not forgotten in Victorian Montford Bridge

Bicton churchyard contains the following memorials:

William Thomas March 15, 1924 aged 63

Elizabeth Thomas Feb 24, 1929 aged 64

James Whitehorne born October 26, 1821 died Aug 26, 1885

John Barber son of late James Whitehorne died April 27, 1905 aged 44

Elisabeth widow of late James Whitehorne Jul 23, 1905

John Randles died December 24, 1905 aged 94

Here they lie close together, after a lifetime as close neighbours in Montford Bridge running family businesses in which private and commercial were intertwined. In their day, they must have been known to all around the area, but are now sadly forgotten. So why should we remember them just now?

Today, Christmas cards still often show those romantic Victorian images of snowy roads and cheerful country Inns, while the 2010 weather itself has been another reminder. For over 60 years in that Victorian era the Whitehorne family run first of the Nags Head and then the Wingfield Arms.

Christmas cards themselves were a Victorian invention and played their part in the expansion of postal services. The Thomas family lived and worked in Montford bridge for over a century, half of that time running the first local post office.

Between these two enterprises, John Randles had his blacksmith's shop, where he made his own valuable contribution to the Victorian rural community.

With the sad loss of the modern shop and post office in Montford bridge (on the Montford side) it is perhaps the Thomas story which is most topical and worthy of special attention now.

When John Wingfield of Onslow acquired the Preston Montford Estate in 1829, one of his cottage tenants was William Thomas. Later, the Nags Head Inn on the Bicton side of the road, then occupied by George Whitehorne, was added to the estate. The 1841 census then recorded William as a carpenter, aged 50, with wife Elizabeth, 60 and sons John, 25 and William 20 and daughter Mary also 20. Cousin Mary Thomas, age 6 was also with them in a way which was not unusual at a time when extended families provided their own 'social services,' caring for less fortunate members. The family also had a young servant girl, again not unusual then.

The Tithe map of 1849 showed John, occupying the smallholding, later known as Yew Tree Villa, on the recently improved 'Holyhead' road. (Thomas Telford).

The 1851 census listed him as a carpenter, now married to Mary Anne, recorded in 1841 as the daughter of William and Hannah Morris of Dinthill, a 'castrator'. The couple were now helped by cousin Mary as a 'servant' and together they were developing a new retail business.

About this time it may have been brother William, also a carpenter, who briefly ran the Nags Head before James Whitehorne took over. Also John Randles and his wife Mary moved into a cottage in Drury Lane, next to Edward Lewis the gardener.

Tragedy struck, however, when John Thomas died, barely 44, leaving Mary to continue running the grocery business, while bringing up her only son William, born 1859. The census showed she was also helped by her brother William, 'a dispenser of medicines' and Jane Brenthen, a cousin, still unmarried at 45.

By the 1870s, John Whitehorne, wife Elisabeth and children John Barber and Mary, had moved across to the Wingfield Arms, replacing William Feltham and closing the Nags Head. Now in the 'railway age' the road was losing passing trade.

In 1881 the Thomas household also changed: Mary died, leaving

William, 22 to carry on the business, still helped by Jane. Now post office services were added, with letters arriving from Shrewsbury early, each morning and dispatched there each evening. Being 'open all hours' must have restricted social life, but fortunately the young man was able to court a young 'girl next door'. Elizabeth Lewis had recently come with her parents to the farm cottages by the Wingfield Arms, after their previous employment in Montford, and may therefore have already known William for some time. They married when she was barely 18.

About this time James Whitehorne died, leaving wife Elizabeth and son John to carry on until John's own untimely death in 1905. John Randles had also lost his wife, but continued to work well into his old age, perhaps reflecting some more healthy aspect to the work. Falling demand meant the business died with him.

At Yew Tree Villa, post office work expanded and so did the family. Of the six children, John the eldest left home early and later became a postmaster in Oswestry. Daughter Helen married into another grocery business near Chester, following contacts made via new motor traffic down the Holyhead road. Other siblings likewise dispersed leaving the parents to continue running the business until their deaths in the 1920s when yet again a widow had to carry on for a while.

During that time, bit by bit, this local sub post office had gradually taken on services initially restricted to the main town office, such as money orders, savings bank, and even telegraph links by the 1880s. By the 1890s mail came by cart and many letterboxes had appeared in many parts of the parish, some of which are still in use, boldly displaying their VR logo. By the turn of the century, the office also dealt with insurance and the issue of pensions, later including the state scheme. Finally, in the 1920s the telephone system began, requiring the office to be the local exchange. This was to be the first hint of a new technology which would eventually undermine traditional postal work. We see the results today.