

David Pannett's History of Bicton Part 47

Population then and now

Both locally and nationally, current political debates include care for the elderly, pensions, provision of schools and future demands on housing. Within the parish we have a primary school which also serves a wide area where other schools have closed, while, in recent years, two care homes have been built. The background to all this is our changing population structure.

'Demographers', those who study human populations, often refer to their 'population transition model', which includes three stages recognisable in different parts of the world.

In stage one, seen in the poorer underdeveloped countries, a high birth rate was particularly balanced by a high death rate and short life expectancy. This still allowed a slow increase in total population, but as recognised by the Rev. Malthus in the early 19th century, such 'natural increase' would be periodically checked by famines, disease and warfare. Indeed the very growth of population could trigger such catastrophes through environmental degradation and competition for resources. Darwin appreciated this as a model for his 'natural selection' in animal populations.

In stage two, now associated with 'developing countries' death rates fall, partly through better medical care and 'famine relief', while a high birth rate continues leading to a 'population explosion.' This generates economic and political problems of its own which are constantly in the news.

In stage three, illustrated by advanced 'Western' countries including Japan, the birth rate has declined, 'natural increase' is slow or static, while the proportion of older people therefore increases, helped also by greater survival rates.

So much for textbook generalisations, what aspects of it can be seen in our own local history?

Mediaeval Britain and Shropshire certainly had all those characteristics of an underdeveloped 'Third World' country: essentially rural, with subsistence agriculture, foreign trade based on exporting 'primary products (wool) and a political elite wasting national wealth on their own pet wars. As population expanded in favourable years, it became vulnerable to disasters caused by disease and climatically induced famines, especially the 'Black Death' and 'Little Ice Age' starting in the 14th century.

Our 16th century Shrewsbury chronicler recorded some instances of these:

1525: ' This year the plague was in the town of Shrewsbury'

1526 'This year was such scarcity of all things in England by reason of unseasonable weather..... that many died for the deficit of bread.'

1531 'This year was there a plague again in this town of Shrewsbury'

Poor hygiene and medical ignorance also played a part affecting even those wealthy enough to be well fed. Locally, Humphrey Sandford, 1580 - 1654, and his wife had at least seven children, but his son Richard lost his wife age 29, while grandson Richard lost all three children before dying himself age 31 in 1676. Queen Ann was faring no better, all of which are affected dynastic history.

During the 18th century things began to improve slowly, especially with the absence of plagues. Nevertheless, childhood remained a vulnerable period. For example, in the first three months of the following century, St Chad's registers, which then included Bicton and Rossall as well as part of the town, recorded 65 deaths of which 40 were children. The 15 adults ranged in age from 14 to 80 obviously dying 'in harness' rather than in retirement.

During the rest of the century the country became more wealthy with industry and improved agriculture and could import food to banish the threat of famine. (In this way the Irish potato famine of the 1840s could have been alleviated, had there been political will - a fact which left lasting resentment amongst survivors).

Improved understanding of health is reflected by the rebuilding of the Royal Salop Infirmary in 1830 and then promotion of better water supply and standards of housing following damning public health reports. In rural areas estates began building better workers' cottages, although still basic by modern standards. In this way the nation was entering stage 2 of the population model, with Albert and Victoria setting an example.

Census records show large families, especially amongst low paid agricultural workers, who could least afford or accommodate them. On the other hand, 'many hands make light work', while the large families could better provide their own 'social security'. The large number of children in proportion to the elderly shows up clearly in a 'population pyramid' diagram for 1851.

Problems of having such families in small cottages were usually eased by sending the eldest children away to work, especially girls who could go into domestic service. At the same time others were coming into the parish to work in the large farms and 'big houses,' producing a marked female bias in the population diagram.

For this reason actual data on family sizes must come from individual family histories. Thus we know that Edward and Elizabeth Lewis of Montford Bridge raised seven children from 1833, including son William, who went on to raise eight of his own in Old School House Bicton. His son Ernest went on to produce six at Miinsbridge.

The Lewis daughters generally found work and husbands in other towns thus leaving the area. Two of William's sons tried their luck in America, Walter staying in Chicago, while Frederic returned to Bicton with ill health after working in compressed air on the foundations of a New York Bridge.

Such spirit of adventure, escaping limited local opportunity, was often a factor encouraging young men to join up in World War One. This war did, however, start those social changes which were to bring about our present state in the third stage of the population model.

Female emancipation was opening more career opportunities for them, replacing or delaying motherhood. There was better education and advice from Marie Stopes for them now, all resulting in smaller families. The later descendants of Edward and William Lewis reflected this too, while the Duke and Duchess of York set a new royal example.

However, the total population was by now much larger causing towns to expand their suburbs, while even Bicton acquired its first suburban houses in the twenties.

The modern population 'pyramid' diagram has now changed its shape to more like a 'column' and politicians must grapple with the implications. However, at the same time many have been promoting fears of man-made global warming, while shrinking from making the obvious connection with the sheer numbers of mankind. Perhaps they fear upsetting traditional cultural and religious attitudes which are generating this real global problem.

