David Pannett's History of Bicton Part 47

If you go down to the woods today you won't be at all surprised to see not teddy bears, but the first real signs of spring growth after a cold winter with the woodland plants striving to get started before the canopy cover shuts out much of the available light. Of course, there will also be some history to notice!

In the distant past our landscape once contained much more forest and woodland, but constant expansion of population gradually reduced it. Some local place names still provide clues to its former extent, especially the element 'ley' as in Pulley, Plealey or 'wood' as in Hanwood and Woodcote. Medieval monasteries exploited them for building materials while local peasants used woodland pasture for their stock, especially pigs which would eat acorns.

While so much was disappearing, some landowners took care to preserve some areas for more sustainable exploitation as 'coppice', i.e. cut in a 20 year rotation to yield useful poles for fencing, tools and light building. The name Bickley itself suggests this coppice has been here for a long time. Right to remove wood was indeed part of the grant to Buildwas Abbey in 1247. A later deed in the seventeenth century suggests it was also treated as a common pasture. As records became clearer, it can be seen that three landowners each had a part of it.

About this time too, such woodlands were often exploited for charcoal in iron making. Bromley's forge, just across the river from Bickley appears to have been set up by Basil Brooke in the early seventeenth century using fuel from Boreatton, power from the Perry and transport on the Severn. There is no evidence that Bickley also contributed charcoal, but it could have done. The enterprise did not survive the Civil War as Brooke backed the losing side!

Such industrial exploitation nationally caused many landowners to worry about maintaining supplies, just when naval shipbuilding was becoming more importan The need for new planting was therefore obvious. Such concern coincided with the appreciation of 'landscape' around their new country houses. Once medieval nobility had used forests and remote wild places for their hunting, but now in more 'cultured' times they were more interested in improving the visual appearance of parkland nearer home. Through the eighteenth century, experts in design such as William Kent and Lancelot 'Capability' Brown 'improved' many landscapes. Locally, Humphrey Repton contributed his ideas to lay out Attingham parkland.

Lesser landowners and gentleman farmers, observing these grand designs, copied them as best they could within the confines of their own small estates. The Wingfields of Onslow had space for a conventional park, but others, including

Hanmer of Bicton House, Jenkins of Bicton Hall, Spearman of Oxon and Wentworth-Fielding of Ross Hall managed smaller versions. Their efforts were shown as a special symbol on the new Ordnance Survey and Greenwood maps by the 1820s.

The common design features included belts of trees hiding the neighbours, while framing a longer vista across a wide 'lawn' of well grazed pasture. Pools could be included if the land allowed, while functional outbuildings, including stables, would be kept out of sight to one side. They might have their own 'tradesmen's' entrance off the village street, while the 'carriage folk' approached the house via a separate 'drive'.

All these typical features are illustrated by the Bicton Hall estate which was i[redacted]roved by Richard Jenkins after his return from India in 1827 and before he spent more time in London as an M.P. One legacy of this is a small plantation opposite his gateway, now known as Muriel's Little Wood, in recognition of the efforts which the late Muriel Morris made to secure this for public use. Records place its origin to the 1830s, between the 1830 St Chads Parish survey and the 1843 Bicton Tithe map, which described it as a 'plantation'. It had been originally part of 'Near Cowpasture' while in 1768 this end of it at least was named 'Paradise Meadow'. The ground may have been damper before the stream here was scoured deeper to improve the drainage upstream.

Later in the nineteenth century many such parks became the home for exotics, as seen in the Vicarage garden and the churchyard, but for now only native species, especially oak, were planted.

Meanwhile in the surrounding area, not visible from the houses, odd patches of woodland could still be useful where relief or odd shaped property boundaries made alternative uses difficult. Stitford Rough on a cliff overlooking the Severn and High Oaks in a corner of one of the estates are such examples. Left to regenerate na[redacted]ally, they could still supply the odd material for fencing etc., but perhaps just as significant they provided cover for game. The nineteenth century saw the development of organised fox hunting and the sporting gun. Even those who do not approve of hunting must appreciate that 'hunting, shooting and fishing' interests have helped create and maintain landscape features which we can all enjoy, along with other wildlife.

History, of course, is always being made and renewal is ongoing. What will be the effects of current usage in these woodlands, motor cycling in Stitford Rough, scouting in Bickley Coppice and public access in Muriel's Little Wood? Only time will tell.

BICKLEY

Sketch showing coppice growth