

Bicton Village News

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David Pannett's History of Bicton Part 50

The Isle through the ages

William Shakespeare once summed up the stages of human life with the verse:

“...And all the World's a stage

And the men and women merely players

They have their exits and their entrances

And each in their turn plays many parts...”

This could also apply to the story of our landscape, if we add the observation that “the stage hands keep leaving bits of scenery behind after each act”.

The Isle illustrates this very well in the form of medieval earthworks, a 15th-16th century timber frame farmhouse and an 18th century brick mansion, all now joined by a modern commercial farm. They all cluster together within a special ‘stage’, where the River Severn has carved wide loops through soft glacial sediment leaving only a narrow neck as access to a wide peninsula. Although correctly named ‘Up Rossall’, this site is therefore more generally known as ‘the Isle’. However, no man or place can ever be a true island, as national and even international events have impacted on its local story.

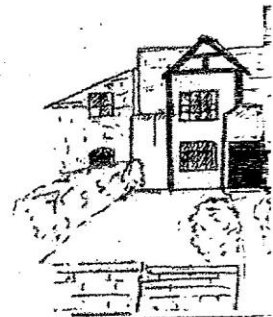
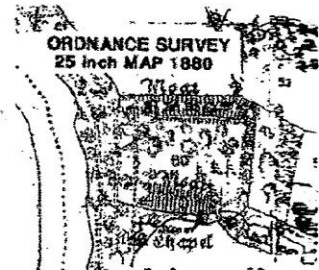
The most dramatic outside influence was the Norman Conquest, which reorganised the feudal control of land in this country. Rossall was granted to one Albert who held it under Reginald the Sheriff and later Fitz Alan, Earl of Arundel, and Lord of Oswestry and Shrawardine. Albert and his successors were ‘knights’ owing military service to the Fitz Alans in time of war and therefore it was appropriate for them to build a small fortified manor house, as much for show as for defence. Succeeding generations here took the name ‘Rossall’ and continued this knightly lifestyle through the 13th century, when no doubt they may have seen action in the Welsh Wars.

They also added a chapel to the complex serving the household and a local peasant community, who actually worked the land. The estate also built a fish weir on the Severn. A mill on the Perry in Yeaton had also long been

linked to the estate. After about 1400, however, this medieval world began to fall apart. The Black Death and 'climate change' of the previous century led to the breakdown of old ways of peasant farming and stimulated a great period of rebuilding, often on new sites, of which the timber framed farmhouses is one example. On the river, the increasing demands of trade meant that special commissioners ordered the clearance of obstructions in the river, which probably included the local fish weir. A field name on The Isle and silted up barge gutter on the Fitz bank are the only clues to its site. (The Fitz weir survived however.)

At the personal level, Thomas Rossall died without issue in 1418, leaving the estate to Phillip Englefield of Berkshire, his brother-in-law. The Englefields were already greatly involved in public affairs and may have been 'too grand' to want to use the old manor house of the Rossalls. The estate was therefore only left with its tenants and both manor house and chapel disappeared from the records before the end of the century.

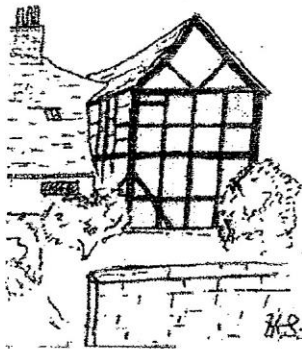
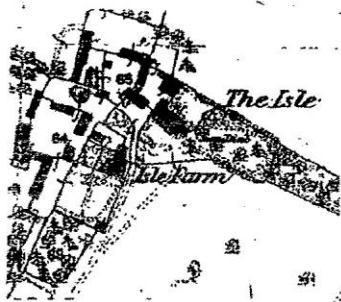
Phillip Englefield's son Robert and grandson, Thomas, contrived to rise in the ranks of Royal officials, but the affairs of state were soon to become very complicated as dynastic and religious issues came to dominate the 16th century. To cut a long story short, the next Englefield, Sir Francis, served the Princess Mary, daughter of Henry VIII, and became even more important when she became Queen, promoting the catholic cause against the force of protestant reform. When in turn, Elizabeth took over and continued the reformation, Sir



The Isle



The Isle



Isle Farm



Francis fell from power and went into exile, during which time his tenant at The Isle, Richard Sandford helped look after his English affairs. This led to some messy disputes during which the estate was forfeited to the Crown, and re-allotted to some of the Queen's favourites, although the four tenants actually occupying the land may not have been disturbed, including Richard's son Humphrey.

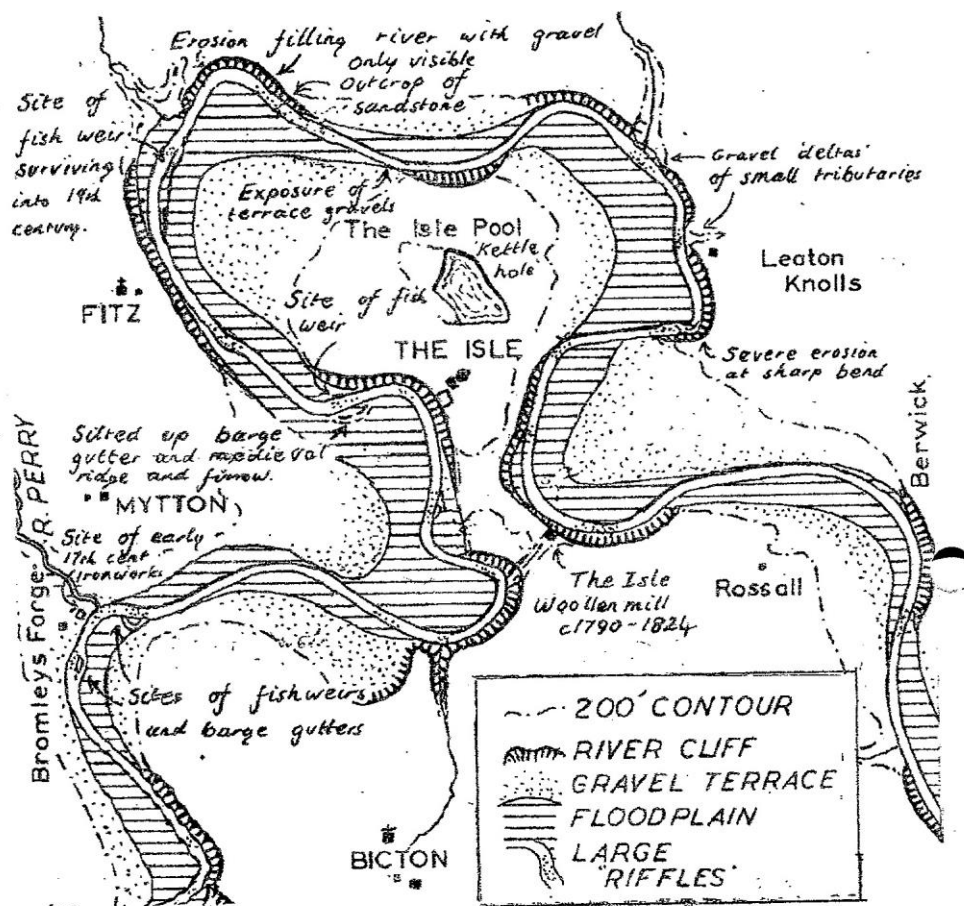
Religious allegiances still influenced affairs into the next century, especially around the time of the Civil War. Some cupboards in the old farmhouse are reputed to have been hiding holes for priests. Significantly, Humphrey Sandford (II) married Jane Gifford from White Ladies, Staffordshire, a 'safe house' used by the fleeing Charles II.

As dynastic and religious strife calmed down, The Isle entered a new 'modern age', dominated by educated country squires, now firmly C of E. From now on a long line of Humphrey Sandfords pursued professional careers in the Law and the Church, following public school and university education. They also participated in public affairs while actual farming was continued by their tenants.

Bit by bit, through the 18th century, Humphrey Sandford (VI) bought out the remaining owners of parts of The Isle peninsula, making it once again a single estate. This included buying the main house in 1749 which had probably been started in the 1690s. Sandford alterations now included turning it back to front, so that the normally 'rear' chimney stacks now flank the front door, producing an unusual architectural facade. Nevertheless, it retained its modest

proportions appropriate to a family more concerned with professional careers than display. Significantly, just at a time when similar houses in the neighbourhood were creating mini-parks in the spirit of the 'landscape garden' movement, Folliot Sandford actually drained the pool in 1793 and later preferred to spend the remaining years of his life away near Bath. However, Humphrey Sandford (VIII) restored the situation when he took over in 1841.

Nineteenth century investment is better seen elsewhere on the estate in the form of improved cottages for workers. So the play moves on – I wonder where new 'bits of scenery' will be left behind for the future?



website www.bictonvillage.co.uk

(Managed by Richard Brett)