

At the end of August, once again many visitors will be coming to the parish of Bicton to enjoy the Onslow Steam Fayre, where displays and demonstrations will remind us of the story of mechanisation in the countryside. In particular, the field demonstrations of horse, steam and early tractor cultivation and the running of old threshing machines allow us to appreciate the hard work involved.

By coincidence, in 1823, the St Chad (Shrewsbury) parish register recorded the death of Thomas Healey of Onslow, age 13, killed by a threshing machine. Normally such registers only record the cause of death in exceptional circumstances and clearly this was considered such a case, since these machines were still rare at this time.

Although such machines obviously made life easier for the workers, they also threatened their employment and were not always welcome. This was a common situation in many industries at the time and for many years since.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, farm work was very 'labour intensive' in a manner not far advanced from the Middle Ages. A cartoon by George Cruikshank, c. 1852, in which a landowner is studying these traditional ways with a view to making improvements, shows some similarities to medieval manuscripts (Cruikshank also illustrated stories by Charles Dickens). Cultivation still involved walking behind a single furrow plough drawn by animals, although better iron shares and stronger horses had speeded up the work. Although drills had been introduced for root crops, most cereals were still 'broadcast' by hand. For harvesting wheat, the reaping hook was now replacing the sickle, two related tools which are often confused. The hook has a smooth knife edge, kept sharp by a stone, which slashed a bundle of straw held in place by a crooked stick. The sickle, well known as the Soviet symbol, was lighter and toothed like a file, so that it cut by a sawing action across a bundle of hand-held heads of grain. Being lighter to operate, it was also used by women as shown in some medieval illustrations. We can also understand the biblical story of Samson cutting a field of wheat with the jaw-bone of the ass.

Barley and oats, like hay grass, could be cut with a scythe, hence the pub name 'Barley Mow'. Today, the scythe is usually associated with the 'grim reaper', but the earliest illustrations show him with a sickle!

The cut grain was tied into sheaves with rope of twisted straw, and stacked in stooks to dry before being carted to the stackyard to await threshing. Harvest was always a busy time for the whole community with extra help expected from wives and children, hence the tradition of a long summer school holiday. 'Gleaning', recovering fallen grain from the stable, was one of the perks, helping to feed chickens or family at home.

Threshing by hand could be delayed until the winter. It involved spreading the sheaves on a floor and beating them with flails, an operation requiring some skill in order to avoid injury! Tossing the results into the air then allowed a breeze or fan to separate the wheat from the chaff. Finally the grain could be bagged up and sent to the miller.

All operations required a large workforce and it is no wonder that census records of the nineteenth century show the parish filled with agricultural labourers and their families, mainly in groups of cottages in Calcott, Montford Bridge, Isle Lane and Shepherds Lane. Those still single were still at

home or living in one of the farm houses built with space for such staff. Other cottages housed a variety of tradesmen; bricklayers, carpenters and blacksmiths, all necessary to maintain the local infrastructure. Just compare this with the present situation!

During the rest of the century, mechanical improvements gradually crept in, although perhaps slowly since this area had only mixed farming rather than specialist arable. Some labour-saving devices were being developed in the expanding American farmland where there was a shortage of labour, but since British farming then suffered competition from the resulting cheaper imports, farmers had little money to spend on them.

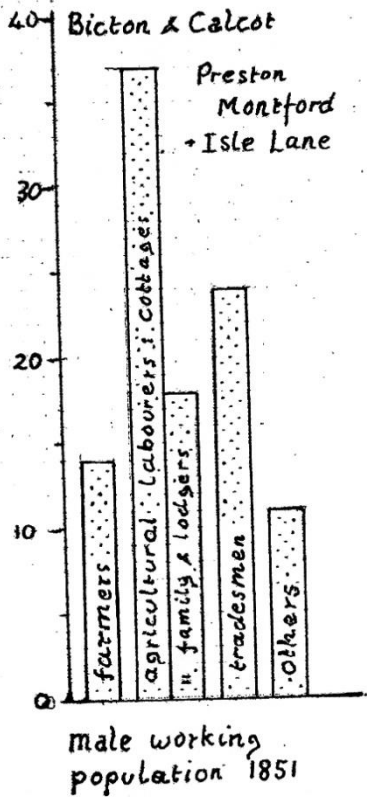
Locally, Thomas Corbet developed the Perseverance Iron Works in Castle Foregate, Shrewsbury, in the 1870s, producing improved equipment for which he became nationally known. Mechanised mowers and reapers were now becoming available and the workforce could be reduced to save costs. Anyway, with depressed wages alternative employment was even more attractive to a new generation with at least some improved elementary schooling. As demonstrated at Onslow, steam traction engines could now take the specialist threshing gangs from farm to farm. They are remembered in Bicton in the 1920s.

Two world wars and a deep depression provided further stimulus to change in the twentieth century, especially more mechanisation which we must explore some other time.

Many reminders of those earlier times are still around the village, but have been adapted to modern life and a variety of inhabitants with no particular connection with agriculture. A feature typical of many modern villages.



cartoon by George Cruikshank 1852





cartoon of a farmer  
and his varied workers

