

As Christmas approaches, our thoughts turn to homes and family gatherings. It is therefore appropriate to reflect on the story of those who once lived in the largest house and home in the Village, Bicton Hall.

The story can be traced back to those years of change around 1700 when the old 'open fields' were enclosed, property boundaries tidied up by sales and exchanges and brick began replacing timber amongst newer farmhouses. A new chapel was likewise built of brick.

Arthur Tonge, a Shrewsbury businessman and Mayor in 1693, had purchased one tenanted farm in 1694, but it soon passed by marriage to another Shrewsbury Gent, John Muckleston, who chose to live there, however, in such unhealthy times, he died in 1722 leaving his daughter, Letitia, born 1713, as sole heir.

Meanwhile, back in Shrewsbury, Thomas Jenkins of Charlton had become High Sheriff of Shropshire and had therefore built a fine new house in Abbey Foregate where his family included two sons, Richard and Thomas. Then, in 1730, Richard married Letitia, by now barely 18, and thereby acquired the Bicton property, which to become the 'family seat' for the next three generations: John (who married Cousin Emma, daughter of Thomas), Richard I and Richard II.

At some stage, during all this, they enlarged the original Muckleston house to create 'the Hall'. Architecture suggests the hand of Richard I who took over in 1771 and married Harriet Constance Ravenscroft in 1781. Deals with neighbours also suggest he was also improving the surrounding parkland and acquiring property in Rossall. He even promoted the textile mill at the neck of the Isle.

However, his son Richard, later 'Sir Richard' became much more famous for what he did elsewhere, especially in India, during the spread of British influence there, while his widowed mother remained at the Hall. He returned in triumph in 1827 and spent some time adding further improvements to the grounds (walled garden and 'Muriels' Little Wood'). However, his stay was short since after the death of his mother in 1832 and then upon becoming an M.P., he moved permanently to London. Details of his life and work are worthy of longer treatment some other time.

The 'Hall' did not remain empty for long however, since there was a ready market for rented property amongst other members of the gentry overflowing from ancestral homes, particularly dowagers and unmarried daughters.

The first of a succession of such female tenants was Lady Boughey and her daughter, supported by a staff of nine, also mainly female. As before, the farmland attached to the estate was let to the tenant of the adjacent Bicton Farm.

Meanwhile, at Woodcote, by Sheriffhales on the Staffordshire border, the Cotes household was becoming crowded. John Cotes, at one time also an M.P. for Shropshire, had died in 1821 leaving two sons and six daughters: Charlotte (1784), the eldest by first wife, Lucy, and others including Sophia (1802) and Emily (1805) by second wife, Marie. When son John (1799) took over and started his own family, he must have found it a problem to have three sisters still at home passing their marriageable 'sell by date'. In view of the family's political connections it is therefore no surprise to find them moving to Richard Jenkins' Hall at Bicton, where they were to be tenants for the next thirty years or more.

During this time, the sisters ran a typical Victorian Country House with an average of ten staff, mainly female. Thanks to a constant turnover of youngsters, in the end they must have employed a total of over forty individuals. Only Mary Jones from Fitz stayed for the whole time in the Laundry!

In the middle of all this, their Landlord changed twice. Sir Richard Jenkins died in 1856 and was brought back to Bicton with great ceremony for burial in the old church next door. Then, partially thanks to family connections, the property was purchased by John Wingfield of Onslow. In 1874, a further deal between members of that family meant that the estate passed to Charles Wingfield.

Charlotte died in 1854 and was buried in the old churchyard, followed by Sophia in 1885. This left Emily on her own and therefore the household finally closed down, leaving the house empty for a few years. Staff moved on, as they always did, including maid Sarah Morris who married Thomas Edwards, gardener from Shepherds Lane. Meanwhile, back at Woodcote, nephew Charles had also become an M.P. and took his household to London.

Under the Wingfields, the next tenant was Miss Edith Dorothy Milbank from Yorkshire, who also spent over thirty years here, entering into the living memory of the Village. Reasons for coming here are not clear, but may be through family connections by marriage to the Herberts, Earls of Powys.

She is remembered as a stern but kindly lady, who became a sort of 'fairy godmother' to much of the community: treats for Sunday School, sponsorship of scholars and loans to businesses. She was a loyal member of the Church and was particularly supportive of the young vicar, Anthony Lawson (1927-31), since he also came from Yorkshire.

She regularly came to church by pony and trap, but in later years had to be pulled and pushed there in a traditional 'bath chair'. She actually died in June 1935, while taking communion there but was buried back in her native Yorkshire near Bedale.

During this same period, George Percy Mead, actually a surgeon by profession, had bought the Woodlands Farm, where he specialised in breeding Jersey Cattle. Now in semi-retirement, he moved to the Hall, while keeping up his herd until his death in 1958 at the age of 92. The Hall now had a succession of new owners including Jack Overy, the outfitter.

By now, the days of those armies of servants had long gone and therefore the opportunity was taken to remove the whole top floor before a further sale in 1964.

Today, Shrewsbury businessmen are still involved..... back to where we started!



Bicton Hall 1879

BASED ON DRAWING  
BY STANLEY LEIGHTON

