

The festive season, with its family activities, is a reminder of how much Victorian writers, such as Charles Dickens, promoted this form of Christmas. They also pointed out contrasting conditions which could be found in their workhouses at that time.

These have long gone, but they have left some reminders in the form of some very impressive buildings, and also some curious local government boundaries.

At the recent reorganisation, Bicton found itself in an odd-shaped county constituency stretching around the north of Shrewsbury to the Tern Valley at Withington. The historical background for this is an echo of the former Atcham Rural District, which likewise wrapped itself around the borough of Shrewsbury, before eventually becoming united with it in the 1860s. Bicton was part of it.

This R. D. Was one of those set up in the County during earlier local government reorganisation in the 1880s-90s. Its delegated powers included local planning control and provision of rural housing, as illustrated by the Rural Cottages built about 1921 in Montford Bridge, Ford and Bicton Heath. The District covered a large portion of the central area of the county, with its headquarters in Oakley Manor, Belle Vue, Shrewsbury.

In view of this, one wonders why it should have borne the name 'Atcham', as opposed to Shrewsbury or any other local village. The answer lies in its evolution from the Atcham Poor Law Union, which had been established under the National 'Poor Law' reforms of 1834-6.

Originally poor relief was administered by individual parishes, some of which ran small 'workhouses' provided accommodation for paupers who were encouraged to engage in some sort of work to offset the costs. These were mainly covered by the 'Poor Rates' levied on the local landowners and businesses.

At that time, Bicton was still part of the parish of St Chads, Shrewsbury, and therefore shared its town-based 'poor house' managed by the overseers. Meanwhile some local benefactors were founding almshouses in some parishes. In 1676 Richard Taylor left money to build one in Bicton, but there is no record of what happened to it.

During the late 18th century, some parishes decided to pool their resources in order to build larger workhouses, which they could share. In this way, the Shrewsbury parishes and Meole Brace clubbed together in 1784 to purchase the old 'foundling hospital', now no longer needed by the London charity which had built it in 1760. They named the new institution the 'House of Industry', stressing its role in improving the state of the poor through useful work. All this set a good example which was followed by other groups of parishes, including ten east of Shrewsbury, centred on Atcham. After 1792 a new workhouse was duly built for them at Cross Houses, actually in Berrington parish, just outside the Attingham Estate. Nevertheless, the name 'Atcham' was given to this parish group.

Following the example set by the Kingsland House of Industry it was a substantial building designed and built by local architect John Hiram Haycock. Some small parish workhouses could then be sold off to help with the cost, but otherwise capital was raised through loans.

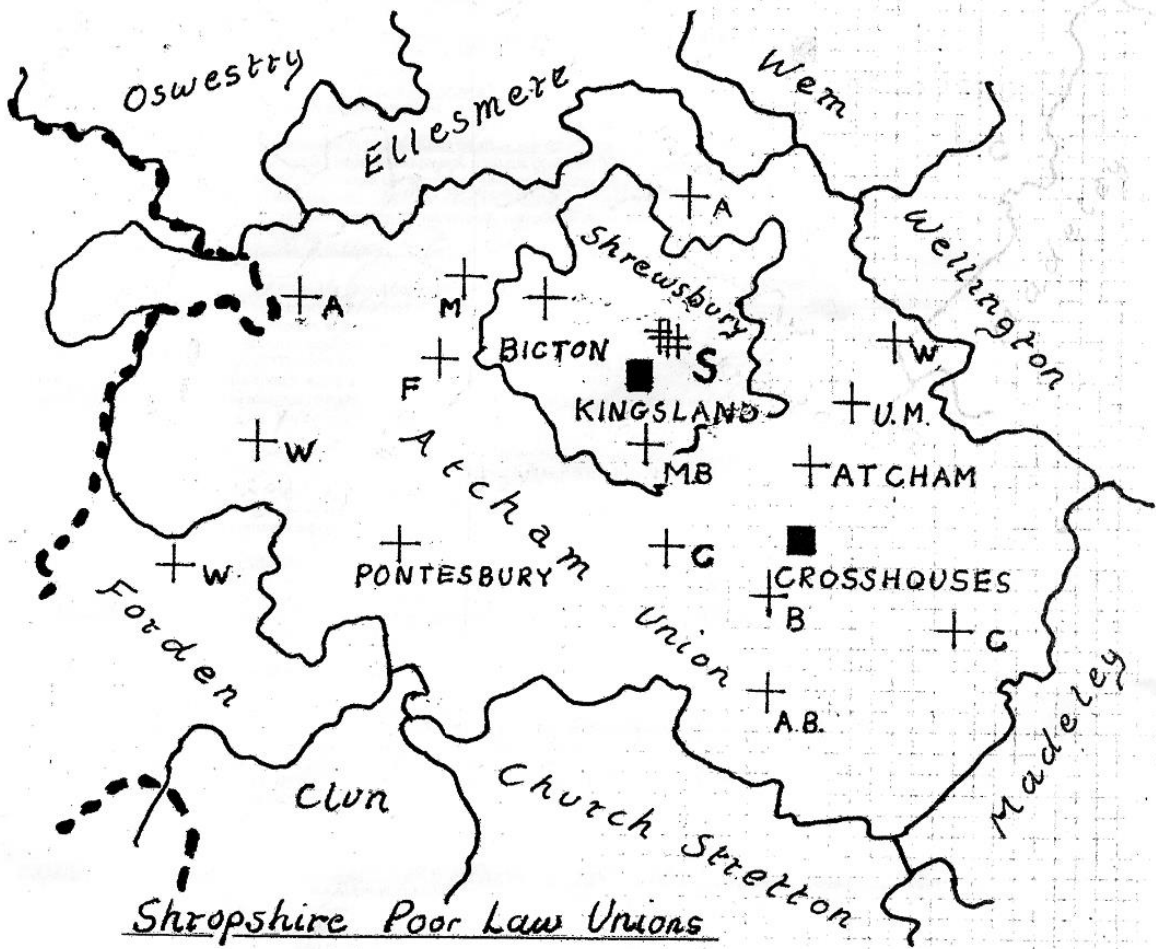
Following an Act of Parliament in 1834, a national system of 'Poor Law' management was introduced involving 'Poor Law Unions' on this same model. Shrewsbury could therefore carry on much as before, but Atcham was enlarged to include 43 parishes stretching across to the Montgomeryshire border, thereby encircling Shrewsbury and becoming one of the largest unions in the County. Its first chairman of the management committee or 'guardians' was Sir Baldwin Leighton of Loton Park, Alberbury, a man of very positive ideas, who strove to make this Union a model to how things should be done. He also campaigned for the establishment of a County Lunatic Asylum, in order to lessen the responsibility for specialist mental care in workhouses. This led to the creation of the nearby Shelton Asylum in 1845.

The typical inmates of the workhouses included young children 'taken into care' or actually born there to single mothers with no other family support (similar children apparently taken in by aunts or grandparents in Bicton, show up in some census records and were therefore more fortunate by comparison). Other typical inmates were older men, probably made homeless by losing accommodation tied to work, usually on farms. In spite of the grand architecture the regimes were more like those of a prison, as if punishing the destitute for being there, as illustrated by Charles Dickens. They were clearly places 'of last resort'. However, as the century progressed they came to be more like infirmaries and alms-houses.

In the 1870s, when Shrewsbury and Atcham Unions were properly amalgamated, the Cross Houses site was enlarged to accommodate 600, allowing the Shrewsbury House of Industry to be closed down. This building therefore provided a new home for Shrewsbury School away from its confined town centre site.

In the early 20th century new forms of 'out relief' and social security replaced the old system leading to final closure of Unions by 1930. Their buildings generally continued as part of the normal hospital system, but in modern times the expansion of the Copthorne and Princess Royal sites has made them redundant. Cross Houses has been successfully converted to residential use in the centre of a housing complex.

During the 19th century, these Unions were convenient units for organisation of other aspects of Government, such as the ten year national census. When, in the 1880s, several Acts of Parliament created the modern County Councils and the system of Urban and Rural Districts, the large Atcham Union could easily form the basis of Atcham R.D.C. However it did not include the borough of Shrewsbury, as defined in the 1832 Reform Act, which therefore remained separate but surrounded by it, while leaving the new Civil Parish of Bicton under the R.D.C.



Shropshire Poor Law Unions
set up in 1836

