

David Pannett's History of Bicton Part 58

TAXING TIMES

At this time of year our minds focus on two issues: checking tax returns and worrying about keeping warm, as we look for the first signs of Spring. This is nothing new:.....

Over the centuries governments have devised various forms of taxation, either based on people, like the poll tax, which triggered some medieval revolts, or one based on wealth, usually measured by landholding. In the late 17th century, following the restoration of King Charles II, after the commonwealth; a novel tax was devised based on the number of hearths in each house. They were obviously viewed as an index of relative wealth publicly displayed by the number of chimneys. Naturally such snooping into private homes was as unpopular then as it is today, so that after the 1670's it was replaced by a tax on windows.

Surviving tax records in general are useful to local historians, tracking past wealth and population distribution, while the 1672 Hearth Tax also provides some clues to the nature of the buildings in each settlement. Just at this time timber was giving away to brick, especially in the provision of good chimneys, which contributed to fire safety.

The late 17th century is a particularly interesting time locally as many changes were going on, but documentary evidence is rather thin. Surviving deeds allow the local estates to be traced back to near this period, but beyond it we are left with more guesswork. Moreover, deeds are related to land ownership, which can be very complicated with mortgages, family inheritance and marriage settlements, beside simple sales. They more often showed the owners to be 'absentee', including Shrewsbury businessmen, so one is left in the dark about who actually lived here working the land.

The Hearth Tax fills in this gap in our knowledge by listing actual occupiers, whether owners or tenants, but their names, although grouped in Townships cannot easily be linked to any particular estate or precise location. Also the poorest were 'exempt', providing they obtained a certificate of exemption from the parish officials. They were duly listed for the whole of Shrewsbury Parishes but not specifically linked to any particular township. In spite of

such limitations, the tax records can still make a useful contribution to our understanding of this parish, posing questions as well as answers.

In the township of 'Bicton and Calcott' seventeen taxed households reflect the well-known settlement pattern. Three with three hearths each, John Griffiths, George Griffiths and Widow Harries, and also five with two hearths each, correspond to the number of farm sites in the village itself and south towards Calcott. The nine with single hearths would have been the numerous cottages already colonising the heathland area. Amongst names recorded, Roger Tipton maybe the founder of a long lasting local family. Otherwise, few can be recognized in earlier or later records.

Next door in the township of 'Preston Montford and Dinthill' there is likewise a simple pattern. Thomas Cheely's seven hearths belonged to an earlier Dinthill Hall rebuilt in 1754. Mathias Calcott of Preston Montford lived in a more modest farmhouse before it was joined by Samuel Adderton's new Hall around 1700. Six single hearth households certainly represented the roadside settlement at Montford Bridge including Thomas Griffiths with a name later linked to the Swan Inn (Wingfield Arms) and John Barber, known to be a tenant of the Borough of Shrewsbury at the time. (Drury Lane)

In nearby Onslow, George Berisford had an eight hearth mansion, which like Dinthill was later replaced by its new owners, who also tidied up the landscape rebuilding two multi hearth farm houses and five single hearth cottages.

In 'Woodcote and Horton' at least two multihearth timber framed houses survive from this period, showing their prominent stone and brick chimneys. Four others have since experienced the usual rebuilding, along with seven single hearth cottages.

The record for the 'Isle' certainly includes Richard Sandford's eight hearth mansion, which must be the nucleus of the present house, much altered in the eighteenth century. Five multihearth households no doubt reflect the principle farms of the estate, including Udlington, confirmed by a reference in St Chad's register to Hugh Poole, one of the taxpayers living there. Only one single hearth cottage is recorded, reflecting lack of typical roadside and heathland settlement, in contrast to Rossall which had five of them, having claimed lordship of Rossall Heath. A mansion with eight hearths occupied by

Sir Thomas Kniverton, dominated the rest of Rossall. Such is the mismatch between owner, and tenancy records, this gentleman does not appear in the sale of the property going on around the same time. Edward Gosnell, a London Merchant was buying it from Sir Robert Clayton, also of London, and is credited with building a new mansion for himself, which survived into the 1960's.

As at Dinthill and Onslow, a new rich owner took an existing house appropriate to his status, before changing it to suit his new tastes. What these original houses actually looked like is a mystery, with only those at Woodcote providing some clue.

After experiencing the Great Fire of London in 1666, Edward Gosnell must have been particularly eager to rebuild in brick. About this time too, many locals attending St Chad's church were being asked to contribute to relief funds for other 'burnt out' villages and towns around the country and no doubt thought the same way. Fire can still happen in modern houses, so do take care!!

