

David Pannett's History of Bicton Part 59

Sir Richard Jenkins and India

During the eighteenth century, the British East India Company was extending its trade contacts around south east Asia, often competing with similar Dutch and French companies as part of their respective imperial ambitions. The Napoleonic wars, however, weakened this competition leaving Britain a free hand to expand its influence even further, into India. The whole sub-continent had once been controlled by the Mogul emperors based at Delhi, but as their power declined the different princely states jostled for local power, allowing the company to get involved in politics as well as trade. In all this the company acted as an agent for the British Government, even to the extent of maintaining its own army, however, following the 'Indian Mutiny' in 1857, the government actually took over. Queen Victoria was made Empress of India (the jewel in her crown) and the sub continent was officially added to the British Empire, although still largely managed through the existing states and a local civil service .

Robert Clive, originally from Market Drayton played a prominent part in all this during the eighteenth century and is commemorated by a statue in Shrewsbury's Market Square . By contrast, few appreciate that Bicton produced a similar hero, Sir Richard Jenkins, but here his memorial is only a humble plaque from the 'old church' reminding us that he is buried under the floor there. Now with the roof gone the grave lies open to the elements, except where partially hidden by fallen brickwork. Surely our local hero deserves better than this!

Although the family held Bicton Hall he was actually born in Cruckton in 1785. Then in 1805 as a young man he went to India and straight away became acting British resident or Ambassador at Nagpur, the court of the Maharajah of Gwalior, Dowlut Rao Scindia. After 1810 he became the permanent resident here until he returned to England in 1827.

This was not to be a quiet posting, however, for in 1817 he had to repel an attack on the residency from Appa Sahib, the new Maharajah

whom he then imprisoned. A year later, after further warfare, Gwalior became a principality under British protection, with Nagpur becoming the capital of the 'Indian Central Provinces'. The skilled manner in which he handled this situation made him a trusted advisor to the Governor of Bombay, Mountstuart Elphinstone.

At this time he also married Elizabeth Spottiswood the daughter of a company civil servant and started a family with two daughters while in India.

On his return to England, he was elected a director of the East India Company in 1832 and the company chairman in 1839, at a time when it accounted for one-fifth of all economic activity under British control. In recognition of such achievements he was made a fellow of the Royal Society and given an honorary doctorate in civil law by Oxford University.

As a reflection of his popularity locally, he was elected MP for Shrewsbury on two occasions 1830-1 and 1837-41. Such interests nearer the capital however, meant he did not stay in Bickton very long and moved instead to Blackheath in SE London. Perhaps thanks to his parliamentary contacts, he was already acquainted with the Cotes family of Woodcote, whose three unmarried daughters were to become long-term tenants of Bickton Hall.

Bickton was nevertheless not forgotten for at his death in 1853 he was brought back here for burial in the old church, amid much ceremony. (The new railway system no doubt helped to make this possible). In any case, his younger sister Frances had remained in Bickton, living in Lower Calcott and was later buried in the old churchyard just outside the door. Another sister Emma had married Rev. Charles Wingfield a member of the local family who became the new owners of the Hall estate.

Otherwise, India was now in the family blood with no children keen to return to the village and countrylife. Eldest son Richard, although born in Bickton in 1828, became a colonel in the 1st Bengal cavalry and died

still in India in 1880, while younger son Edward also became a colonel and likewise remained in India after retirement. Their wives and in-laws also had similar Indian and military connections reflecting how spouses met within a tight social circle.

Meanwhile, other young men from local gentry families were also venturing to the same part of the world, often suffering from wars and diseases and are also commemorated in the church. More stories to tell another time! Now the flow is in the opposite direction as young men (and women) come here from India to advance their careers in commerce or medicine.

Our legacy in India includes the unifying force of the English language and many civil institutions, which have helped it to become a successful modern state. Today, we have many daily reminders of our historical links with the sub-continent and therefore we should not forget how all this began.

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website www.bictonvillage.co.uk

