

David Pannett's History of Bicton Part 62

'The Cottage Buildings'

The provision of 'affordable housing' for essential local workers is a constant subject of debate in rural communities. This is nothing new.....

During the 19th century the debate focused on the improvement of accommodation for agricultural workers whose low wages condemned them to the cheapest rented cottages available. The issue was therefore one of providing a form of 'social housing' in order to improve their lot. At that time, of course, that had to be provided by the landed estates.

At the beginning of the century, Archdeacon Joseph Plymley discussed the subject as part of his report on the state of agriculture in the county. He was concerned about overcrowding in cottages in general and also provision of small plots to help the families to produce some of their own food as a compensation for low wages. He commented on good examples and recommended other estates to follow.

Nationally other writers were recommending improvements in design which should include enough bedrooms for separating the sexes, while outside, providing necessary space for privies, wash houses and the pig. Government sponsored enquiries, however, including those for Shropshire, continued to report the slow pace of improvements. One is, therefore, reminded of the words of Mrs Alexander in 1848, which we no longer consider part of 'all things bright and beautiful', as they suggest this acceptance of the 'status quo':

*The rich man in his castle
The Poor man at his gate
God made them high or lowly
And ordered their estate "*

In Bicton, many cottages started life as encroachments around the heath or by the roadside at Montford Bridge and each have their own stories of alterations and improvements since the 18th century. In the Isle Lane, however, stand a group of cottages which illustrate very well the direct role of landowners over the same period. Their location here is no accident, since they lie at the junction of at least three estates at the Bicton - Rossall

township boundary and reflect each estate's desire to house its workers well away from the 'big house'. Although appearing to be one group, these cottages are the product of different stories.....

At the southern, 'Four Crosses' end stand the pair of modernised Victorian houses which began life as part of a terrace of cottages built for factory workers. In the 1790s John Jenkins, father of the more famous Richard, had a tunnel dug across the narrow neck of the Isle loop to provide water power to a textile mill on part of his land. The adjacent Isle and Rossall estates were not involved, and, anyway, since much of the land was still Rossall Heath, the workers cottages were sited further down the lane just inside Bicton township, on the land of William Smith.

The factory closed down in 1824, but the site continued as a corn mill until the 1850s, when the Isle estate took over. By this time Folliot Sandford had already bought the cottages in 1840 upon the death of John Smith, William's son. The 'factory cottages' therefore became the 'Isle cottages' although locals knew them as 'Bug row', perhaps as a comment upon what had become a rural slum.

Into due course, improvements were made by the new owners along with other farmhouses and cottages on their land. Projecting wings were added at each end using the latest fashion of decorative brickwork, but the terrace continued to be divided into eight small dwellings, by now mainly for agricultural workers.

Fast forward to modern times, with sales and adaption to the present scene, the two 'new' houses have each been created out of three old units, while corners have been demolished to separate them.

Meanwhile on the opposite side of the lane, in the corner of Uldington (Villa) land, a pair of cottages were built in the late 19th century, but being rather 'basic' have been removed rather than improved.

Further down the Lane, just across the township boundary stands a short terrace of improved and modernised Victorian cottages associated with the Rossall state. Here their story starts with the closure of Rossall Heath in 1829 - 30, which, unlike Bicton Heath, had been kept clear of cottage encroachments. One exception was right here, where messrs Tipton and Morris had their cottages and small irregular closes around them. The 'enclosure' process, which produced a new landscape of straight roads and

field boundaries also replaced these with a terrace of three dwellings with long gardens behind. Later, another pair of cottages was added further down the Lane.

The 'enclosure' also allowed the redesign of the entrance drive at 'Ross Hall'. After John Harley bought the estate in 1852, he built a new lodge and planted a screen of trees beside the Lane. To enhance a grand entrance the lodge has a picturesque style complete with carved barge boards and tudor chimneys' and housed one of the estate gardeners. Now, with demolition of the Hall, the drive and gate no longer function, but the lodge remains to remind us of it.

By the 1950s, that belt of woodland became the site of the newest estate cottages, whose design is similar to many local authority houses at that time. This is no accident, since the original council houses, such as the A.R.D.C. 'rural cottages' in the parish, reflected the best of estate designs, while, even in the 1950s, parts of Monkmoor, Shrewsbury, projected a 'village green' image. Even some modern developments have used a 'cottage' style.

In the 1850s, these "cottage buildings" together had 11 households with a total population of 46. By the 1900s, even with the addition of four more dwellings, the population was still much the same.

In 1850, families were, all but one, linked to farm work, but this figure had halved by 1900, reflecting a national trend of a falling agricultural workforce, thanks to mechanisation. Other occupations now included bricklayers, labourers, gardeners and even the retired and an army pensioner.

As was typical with farm workers they only lived here a few years at a time. The recorded place of birth of the numerous children reveal their migration from job to job, mainly in the borderland. By 1900, the improved railway network meant that many have moved from even further afield. Compare all this with today!

website www.bictonvillage.co.uk
(Managed by Richard Brett)