

David Pannett's History of Bicton Part 63

What was a Grange?

From time to time, new building developments around Shrewsbury have been labelled a 'Grange' or 'Manor', in order to convey some up-market image. Since the Norman conquest the English language has adopted many such French words for the same reason, as in the case of 'mansion' (maison) to describe a large 'house'. The meat eating, French speaking aristocracy likewise consumed Anglo Saxon cows as 'beef' (boeuf), sheep as 'mutton' (mouton) and swine as 'pork'.

In this context, the term 'Grange' was reserved for the agricultural enterprises of the French inspired monasteries established in the 12th and 13th centuries, several examples of which were around Shrewsbury. Grange Farm at Bicton has already been pointed out in this series, but now needs to be more fully explained. It was one of the properties of 'Buildwas Abbey' which had been founded by Roger de Clinton, Bishop of Lichfield, in the 1135. Soon after, the Abbey joined the Cistercian order, named after the original 'mother house' at Citeaux in Burgundy. The ethos of the order was a simple self-sufficient life with emphasis on hard manual work rather than scholarship. Their buildings were plain and on sites chosen partly for their commercial possibilities. In the case of Buildwas, the sites lay on the navigable severn just where the stream descended from Wenlock Edge to drive mills and fill fishponds. Early growths of land included pastures on the Stiperstones, suitable for sheep ranching.

Locally, the Bishop of Lichfield (for a brief period relocated at Chester) held the manor of Meole Brace and therefore it would be no surprise that in 1192, Roger's successor granted the Abbey more land here on which to build a grange. This estate therefore acquired the name Monkmoole, now known as Crowmeole in Copthorne, where it also gave access to a belt of heathland stretching as far as Bicton and Preston Montford, ripe for exploitation.

In 1236, Roger of Onslow granted the Abbey 'common of pasture' on his part of the heath for sheep from the grange, which Roger promised not to impound if they strayed. In return, the Abbey promised to appoint their own Shepherd and allow Roger to keep 120 sheep.

In 1247, William de Bykton, granted the Abbey a 'grange' and lands in Bicton, including common of pasture for 18 Oxen, 24 cattle and followers, 4 horses and 300 sheep. Significantly, no deals were struck with Preston Montford, which was owned by another monastery, Lillishall Abbey.

With all these deals, it is no wonder that a later valuation of the properties in Meole showed some decline on the arable production, but increase in the value of stock!

All this fitted the national picture in which the Cistercian houses behaved like a Multinational Development Corporation exploiting the commercial potential of hitherto undeveloped areas. As the wool trade was very important in the British economy, monasteries clearly wanted part of the action. British wool was in great demand from continental weavers and this stimulated a thriving export trade. Lawrence of Ludlow, for instance, was able to build Stokesay Castle from his profits in this business.

At first, the granges would have been run by the direct labour of 'lay brothers' belonging to the Abbey, but, later in the Middle Ages, after disturbances in Welsh wars and the The Black Death, they were usually let or 'farmed out' to laymen. The monastery therefore took only rents rather than actual produce, like many orders had done from the start. Preston Montford, for instance, had been an endowment of St Alkmund's church Shrewsbury (Preston = priest's tun), which was taken over by Lillishall Abbey, while rents from Calcott supported St John's Hospital at the Welsh Bridge in Frankwell. Bicton itself was held by the 'College of Canons' at St Chad's Church.

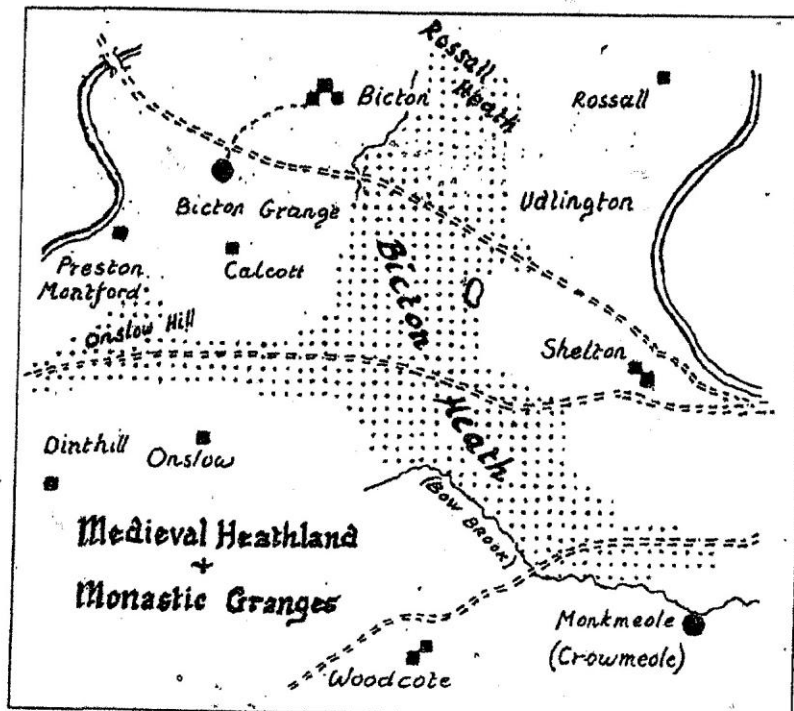
Nationally, religious institutions had become very important landowners, but in the 16th century all this was changed with the activities of Henry VIII. His quarrel with Rome over his divorce from Katherine of Aragon led to the dissolution of monasteries and confiscation of their properties. These were redistributed amongst the multitude of existent landowners loyal to the King. Here, the Bicton and Meole granges went to Edward Grey, Lord Powys, whose son passed them on to the Foxe and Leyton families. Further land deals then involved the Mytton family, who, in fact had already been involved as tenants over many years.

By now the wool trade had also changed, with the increase in domestic manufacturing, rather than the export of raw materials. Trading in cloth

produced in Wales helped to make Shrewsbury prosperous, as can be judged from some fine timber houses which survive from those times.

As already discussed in this series, the heath has long since disappeared as each township enclosed its portion or allowed it to fill up with cottages. During this process, John Mytton of Halston challenged the Borough of Shrewsbury by claiming Lordship of the Manor of Bickton on the grounds that he owned the old monastic property at Meole and Bickton which included rights over the heathland. Therefore, at the 'inclosure', in 1768, he was allotted all the recent cottage encroachments. (Later sold in 1824)

John Mytton eventually sold Grange farm to Sir John Hill, in 1791, thus adding it to the Preston Montford estate, which, in turn, passed to the Wingfields in 1829. The name alone reminds us of all that monkish history, while, at the other end of the heath, we still have Mytton Oak road. In between, one can now appreciate the significance of 'Shepherds Lane'.....Baa.



P.S. Our local Shrewsbury Chronicler reported in 1576 "This year the whole month of June was so unreasonable weather of wind and great rain that the people were in great fright of dear breadcorn"

- sounds familiar.....