

## David Pannett's History of Bickton Part 65

### THE FOUR CROSSES 'CLUSTER'

Since the creation of the Shropshire Unitary Authority i.e. Shropshire Council and the issuing of new ideas by the government, there has been a review of local planning matters. One aspect has been the designation of small rural communities outside the main 'villages' as 'clusters' in which limited expansion of housing would be allowed after years of restriction. In Bickton Parish the area around the Four Crosses is one example. How did this area develop here?

The story of the Inn itself has already been explained in some detail in this series (June '09), but we must now look at the surrounding settlement using the evidence from a succession of maps: inclosure, tithe, sale catalogues and Ordnance Survey to explore its origin.

Like many parts on the south side of Bickton, this story starts with open heathland, where small cottage encroachments had been established by the eighteenth century (Dec '07). Then in 1768, the principle landowners agreed to 'inclose' it, employing surveyors to plan a new landscape and allotting each a share. Since John Mytton also claimed to be 'Lord of the Manor', he was allotted those cottage encroachments, then mainly occupied by farmworkers and assorted local tradesmen.

A map of Bickton made by John Saxton in 1812 for Shrewsbury School shows the new landscape and lists the owners and tenants, of which only the Edwards family appeared to continue here as tenants from the inclosure period. Most land here was part of the Mytton estate, but thanks to the wild lifestyle of the famous Jack Mytton, it had to be sold off in 1824 to pay his debts. The inn and fields across the main road were offered as 'one lot', which John Smith added to his Bickton estate. Other land went to the Spearman of the adjacent Oxon Estate (see tomb in old churchyard).

Edward Morris then acquired this estate in 1832, although the tithe map of 1846 shows Andrew Spearman still holding land west of Shepherd's Lane, where he had erected some farm buildings. Around the same time Morris and Spearman lowered the level of Oxon Pool by digging a culvert under Shepherd's Lane (Feb 11).

Later in the century, perhaps when Charles Morris had taken over Oxon, old cottages were removed from near the pool and trees planted to create a better landscaped park around the Hall. A new pool may have been started too. Spearman's original farm buildings, were also taken over and equipped with a house to form 'Oxon Farm'.

Meanwhile, the Four Crosses had been rebuilt and continued to be run as a small farm in which a new cottage had been built at the south end. When the little estate was then sold off in 1887 this cottage was offered as a separate lot, and was bought by Miss Armine Sandford, daughter of Humphrey Sandford of The Isle;

who named it 'Milnsbridge' after her mother's Yorkshire home. Significantly, the adjacent old 'Edwards cottage' was soon removed. Across the lane the cottage and barn were cleared away only, leaving faint clues in the soil of the modern gardens. In view of their age and status this was quite appropriate. The last to go south of Milnsbridge, was replaced by a pair of 'New Cottages' built to a higher standard by local man Edward Paddock.

Further changes came after the first world war in 1920, when the 'People's Refreshment House Association (already tenants since 1910) actually bought the Four Crosses and enlarged it (look at the brickwork when you next visit) and then, in 1927, built 'The Haven' at the corner of their land as staff accommodation.

Then in 1930, the Oxon estate, was put up for sale and, as a result, several existing tenants were able to buy their own, while the main house and most land was acquired by the County Council. This enabled them to create smallholdings as part of that post war idealism aimed at helping entrants to the farming. Several estates had become available at this time and the characteristic smallholder cottages of hipped gables and white walls appeared in many parts of the county. Here, however, Oxon Farm was simply split and combined with 'New Cottages', which prompted a name change to 'The Oaks'. The sale also opened the way to the first housing development on the Oxon side of the lane from 1935 onwards.

After the second war even greater changes came about. In 1952 the PRHA disposed of their land attached to the Four Crosses, since small farming was no longer part of the business. It was bought by William Harold Williams of Shelton Farm, who straight away started selling plots to individuals for building, thus continuing the pattern started by 'The Haven' before the war. Behind this frontage members of the Lewis Family of Milnsbridge bought the remaining fields upon which developed a Nursery. The settlement as we now it was virtually complete by the time of the OS Map revision of 1967.

When such development started, Bicton was under the Atcham Rural District Council, whose planners, in keeping with the inter-war mood, had a relaxed attitude to rural housing. However, by the time the District had joined with the Borough, restrictions were becoming tighter. Even the county council could not promote development on 'smallholder' land when they sold it, after recognising such schemes no longer fitted modern farming.

The result has been a minimal growth of housing since the sixties, although many have been busy with alterations and enlargements where some original properties were small.

Likewise, 'The Oaks' has become a business park, the garage has moved from the forecourt of the Four Crosses to adjacent land, the inn has been enlarged and the nursery land developed for the Brethren Meeting Hall.

The future, under the new rules, remains uncertain, but whatever happens will take place within a framework laid down in the eighteenth century upon a surface left by the last 'Ice Age'!

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