

When discussing the school curriculum, some historians note that the seventeenth century does not always get the attention it deserves. By contrast, the reigns of Henry VII and Elizabeth I always attract popular attention, while here in Shropshire the later Industrial Revolution is well appreciated. However, the period 1600-1700 saw more changes than in any other century, laying the foundations of our modern world, with the creation of many institutions which are still with us today in the fields of religion, politics, finance, science and international trade. Naturally, Bicton was caught up in all this, partly thanks to its close association with Shrewsbury.

The century opened with the death of Elizabeth and the arrival of James Stuart from Scotland (James VI), uniting the kingdoms. Religious and political struggles continued in Ireland requiring Shrewsbury to contribute its quota of soldiers, which included Edward Cloob, a butcher from Montford Bridge. The local chronicler also reported on yet more bad weather and poor harvests and also the return of plague to Shrewsbury.

Religious debate following the protestant reformation remained bound up with politics and loyalty to the Crown. We still celebrate Guy Fawkes and the Gunpowder Plot (1603) and more recently the anniversary of the King James Bible (1611) which was to have a lasting impression on our language. On the one hand, leading bishops, especially Archbishop Laud, were promoting traditional forms of worship, while others, inspired by Calvin, preferred simple forms based upon the words of the bible. In doing so, they challenged the authority of the bishops and felt restricted in their freedom to choose. Emigration, such as with the Pilgrim Fathers, became the answer for some.

For centuries, monarchs had promoted their particular state religions, through which, in return, they claimed divine authority to rule their subjects. Like some other European kings, Charles II, who succeeded James, still believed in this, but his parliament did not. To cut a long story short, there followed Civil War, his execution in 1649 and the establishment of the 'Commonwealth'.

Both nationally and locally, the loyalties of leading gentry and businessmen were split. Humphrey Sandford of the Isle held Royalist sympathies, while Thomas Mytton of Halston, who also held land in Bicton, actually gained the rank of Major General in the Parliamentary army. No fighting took place in Bicton, but a small parliamentary garrison controlled the road at Montford Bridge. (Incidentally, the bridge had recently been repaired so well by the borough authorities in 1628, that it was to survive very damaging floods in 1634 and 1672).

In the end, Oliver Cromwell, 'Lord Protector' of the Commonwealth, began behaving like a dictator so that, after his death, Charles II was welcomed back from exile and the mood of the nation changed. After the Commonwealth 'Presbyterian' management, the Church of England reverted to its traditional Episcopal structure, prompting many changes of local ministers.

Throughout this time Bicton remained part of St Chad's parish where the town centre graveyard was always crowded, especially after the recurrent plagues of 1604, 1630 and 1654. It is therefore no surprise that some people from Bicton and Rossall made use of nearby rural churches instead. For example, Richard Hussey, 'gent' and his wife were buried at Montford in 1625 and 1622 respectively, while Humphrey Sandford and his niece of the Isle were buried at Fitz in 1654-5. Others from Preston Montford and Dinthill, part of St Julian's parish, also used Montford and Ford. Relationships between them and particular priests and ministers may have played a part as well as 'geography'.

With the Restoration, the Church of England was eager to assert its position as a state monopoly with the help of the 'Act of Uniformity' and a new book of Common Prayer in 1662 (350th anniversary!). It also tried to steer a middle course between old Catholic rites and those favoured by puritans, but failed to stem the rise of non-conformist congregations meeting in their own homes and chapels.

Perhaps it was in this religious environment that Bicton Chapel was built to avoid long journeys to the town and temptations to join other groups. However, the records of St Chad's are strangely silent on the matter, so we must rely instead on other clues for its actual date.

In 1675, the Borough of Shrewsbury granted an enclosure on the heath for the use of the Chaplain of Bicton and then in 1676 John Taylor of Bicton left a bequest to finance a teacher in the chapel. Nevertheless, he himself was buried in St Chad's with his daughter. Likewise, as late as 1687, Nathaniel Ness of Bicton and a child of Timothy Waring from the Isle were buried at Fitz.

By coincidence, in 1689, a new church was built at Minsterley in a classical style using the same materials as seen at Bicton – brick walls with stone quoins and jambs around rectangular doors and windows (Bicton later acquired a gothic east window). Another similar building is the old 'free school' at Cardington, erected in 1720. All this points to the general period, but the actual date of the chapel still remains a mystery.

At this time Sir Christopher Wren was busy rebuilding churches in a 'classical' style after the Great Fire of London in 1666 and no doubt his ideas were spreading.

In 1687, a new Act allowed greater freedom of worship to non-conformists and in the following centuries their chapels and meeting houses were to appear in many parts of the County, including Bicton parish.

In 1853, the Bicton Chapel was upgraded to a Parish Church, but later replaced by our new church in 1886, leaving the old building to decay. However, even as a ruin, it remains a rare monument to that century which gave us a modern world through so much 'trial and error'.



Bicton chapel 1879. based on drawing by Stanley Leighton

