

## David Pannett's History of Bicton part 69

### Our Daily Pinta

Hardly a week goes by without further discussion about the supply and price of milk. This prompts some reflection upon the situation in the past, before the upheavals of war and the changing economies of scale.

Since the shift from local self-sufficiency of the Middle Ages to the spread of regional specialisation, the Shropshire/Cheshire plain has been noted for its dairy farming. In the days of poor transport most of this had to supply the market in the form of butter and cheese. Howard Street Warehouse at the terminus of the canal in Shrewsbury catered for those products, for instance, hence the name 'Butter Market.'

In the 19th century, increasing competition from imported grain, made it all the more important for farmers to make the most of their pastures for stock of all kinds. Fortunately, as this situation led to a generally depressed state in agriculture in the early 20th century, the demand for liquid milk increased. Particularly after the first World War, fresh milk was promoted as part of a healthy diet and now motor lorries and trains link farm and urban customer with the necessary speed for freshness.

Here, the Bicton area was well situated to supply the growing market in nearby Shrewsbury where suburbs were expanding rapidly. Most local farms were 'mixed', with both arable and pasture and therefore each could make some contribution, however small.

The significance of the 'mixed' system was that grain crops provided straw for bedding, while root crops which allowed a 'rotation', could be used for winter feed. The animals then supplied valuable manure in return. The varied workload could also be spread more evenly through the year, during which milk provided regular income.

The actual milking herds were often no more than 20, which would be as much as could be milked by hand before the advent of machines. Breeds tended to be mixed, usually dairy short-horns, with perhaps the odd Jersey to increase the cream content, before the universal spread of black-and-white Friesians.



A Jersey Cow

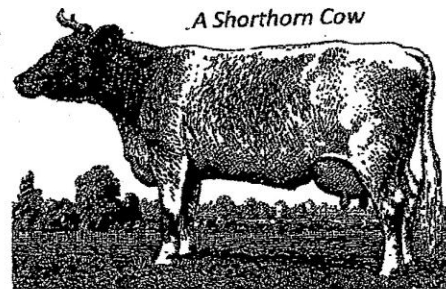
Marketing was very much in the hands of each farmer. Len Cooke at the Grange (November 11), for instance, secured contracts with some local hotels, while Isle Park farm supplied local schools with 1/3 pint bottles. Dorothy Lewis still remembers drinking hers through a real 'straw'. The Milk Marketing Board was then set up to regulate prices.

One unusual specialist producer was George Percy Mead, who bred Jersey Cattle at the Woodlands for over 40 years, before moving to the Hall. He was finally 'retired' by the war agricultural committee and eventually died aged 92 in 1958. (Grave by church tower). His personal story is also unusual, since he obviously had some independent resource with which to buy the Woodlands and indulge in a specialist interest. He came from a medical family and had actually started medical training at Guys Hospital, London, before meeting his future wife there and switching to farming. Ann Charlotte, six years his senior, was the daughter of Evan Bowen of In Eidsdon House, whose birth had caused the death of her 42-year-old mother in 1856. Elder sister Elisabeth married cousin John Bowen Jones and together with two maiden aunts, brought her up at Ensdon. After boarding school, she became a nurse at Guys, but then came back to Shropshire with George in 1889, soon after which they took over the Woodlands. The fate of her mother no doubt put them off having children of their own, but they concentrated on breeding cattle instead.

Rich Jersey milk was a specialist product which was much appreciated by Mr. Soli, who was developing his Italian style ice cream business in the 1920s.

George delivered to his various customers with his own van and is reputed to have bought the first motor car in Bicton. Ann Charlotte died in 1943 and joined the family tomb in Montford churchyard (scope for some Montford historian to further research the Bowen - Bowen Jones and Minton families!).

By accident, the landscape history this side of Shrewsbury included that belt of former heathland which has often been discussed in this series. The story of irregular encroachments and formal 'inclosure' produced a pattern of



A Shorthorn Cow

cottages and smallholdings to which the county council was adding even more with its own 'small holding' policy in the interwar years.

Making a living out of such small units was always difficult, so that many were in fact the homes of various tradesmen. Now the liquid milk trade was offering further opportunities. The



1870 directory was the first to list David Meredith as a 'purveyor of milk' in Bickton Heath and in the following decades the list of such traders steadily grew. Edward Rogers, for instance, took over the old nursery at the end of Calcott Lane, while the Stringer family started their business in nearby Bickton Heath. By the 20s and 30s, there were over 10 'cow keepers' or 'dairymen' in this old heathland area and also Horton Lane. Between 1922 and 1941 John Cooke from Churncote took over from Edward Rogers at the old nursery, while George William Dudley, originally at Laburnum Cottage, set up his business at Bickton Villa nearby.

Bit by bit these specialist traders improved their facilities with hygienic dairies, whose remains still survive in the buildings today, where they treated milk from neighbours as well as any of their own production. Initially, before bottling plants, milk was taken around to the customers in churns from which it was ladled into their own jugs. George William Dudley, in particular, was to continue to be a familiar figure around the neighbourhood for several decades.

One incidental feature of landscape history noted by some scholars at the time was the way in which this pastoral farming was helping to preserve the traces of mediaeval arable fields, which once surrounded the local villagers. Under the ancient system, arable land tended to be near the Homesteads for ease of carting, but now, however, pastures were needed there so the cattle could be nearer the dairy. Traces of this story can be seen in Bickton, but first wartime and later ploughing has removed most of the features, leaving only clues on aerial photographs.