

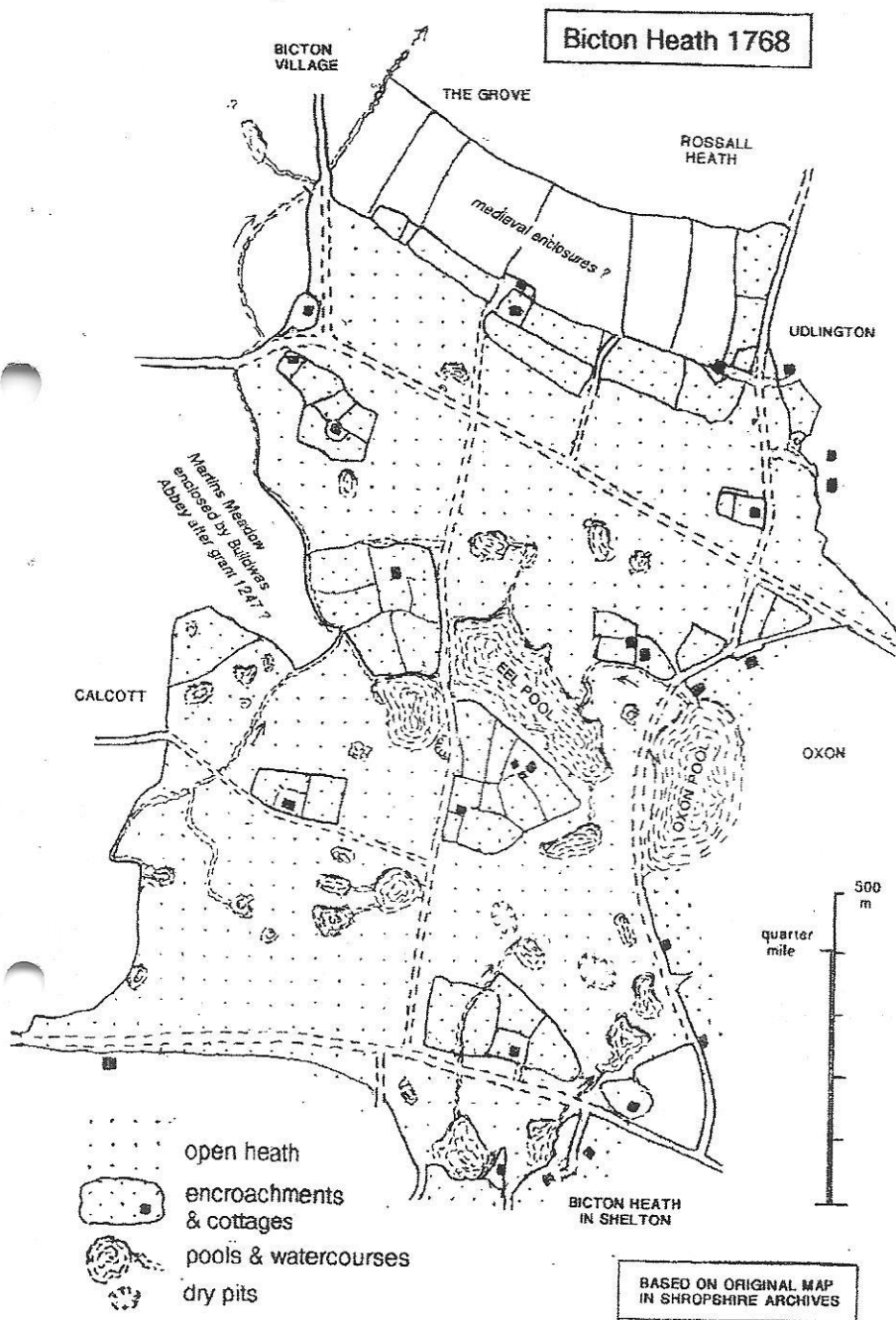
**David Pannett's History of Bicton Part 7 A closer look at Bicton Heath**

The general location and history of this area have been discussed in previous instalments, but there are still details which deserve a closer look.

The 'Meres and Mosses' of the Ellesmere area are a well known feature of the Shropshire landscape, but few realise we have a small scale version in Bicton. Here, deposits of glacial boulder clay, sand and gravel are particularly thick, thanks to the convergence of two ice streams from the Irish Sea and Wales. In addition, a hidden network of channels cut into the bedrock by meltwater under that ice allowed detached blocks to fall in and become buried. As these melted later, after surface ice had disappeared, the ground collapsed in a series of hollows called 'kettle holes' (named after the traditional cooking pot rather than our familiar kettle). Their location provides clues to the buried channels, otherwise only known from boreholes. Locally, the piles supporting the South end of the new Montford Bridge have been sunk deeper than those on the North end as engineers had stumbled upon the sharp lip of the channel leading from Shrawardine towards Shrewsbury. Along this route is the severely deformed ground of Bicton Heath and the Western suburbs of Shrewsbury.

The typical 'post glacial' development of such 'kettle holes' suggested by sections revealed by building development is as follows; As they began sinking in the newly exposed bare 'tundra' landscape, wind and water blew and washed in fine dust. This provided a sticky mud lining which allowed pools to form (and also trap passing mammoths at Condover). With warmer climates forest clothed the land, while lush pool vegetation grew and died to leave peat, which even filled in some of the shallow depressions, perhaps only leaving Oxon Pool as a true 'mere'. With the arrival of the Neolithic and Bronze Age farmers the forests were steadily thinned out, allowing renewed erosion, washing soil into hollows and floodplains. This often buried the peat, so it remained hidden, sometimes until some unsuspecting builder came across it, with inevitable results. When the route of the new A5 bypass crossed a pool at Preston Montford, engineers had to remove many tons of soft mud and peat before building their embankment. They had to backfill the hole with many more tons of rough stone to keep the subsoil free draining (and then excavate a replacement pond nearby since the old one had been a teaching resource for the field centre).

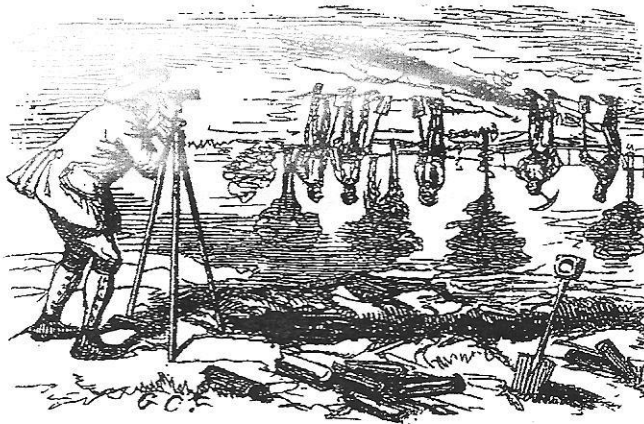
The old name of this pool 'Moss Pit' and others near the Welshpool Road in Bicton Heath, reminds us that peat was dug from these hollows in the Middle Ages, no doubt for fuel. The grant of Bicton Grange to Buildwas abbey in 1247 included the right to dig 'turves' commonly called 'peth' from parts of the heath. In this way pools of open water would again appear in the landscape and are therefore a marked feature on the map made for the 'inclosure' of the heath in 1768. Most overflowed through a network of ditches converging on the stream at the Northwest corner of the heath. This area may have been the 'Martins Meadow' which Buildwas Abbey was allowed to enclose in 1247; it is the only patch of level wetland suitable for traditional hay meadow in the area of the grange.



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John Mytton, Lord of the Manor, may have created the Eel Pool using Calcott Lane causeway as a dam, to augment the natural shape of the hollow. Reference to the eels reminds us that they could inhabit such isolated pools since, unlike normal fish, they could slither through small ditches to reach them. During the Middle Ages great numbers were caught in 'weirs' along the River Severn during migrations, but now the population has been in sharp decline, partly because of the loss of such habitat.

Following enclosure, work could start on improving the drainage to allow better farming as recommended by the agricultural writers of the day. Bit by bit, the main ditches were cut deeper and even buried stone culverts dug to lower the level of Oxon Pool and drain the Eel Pool. The peat of Calcott Moss was now exposed, so that it developed a 'raised bog' profile. The centre continued to grow as a dome of sphagnum moss fed only by acid rain water, surrounded by a moat of willow 'fens' in contact with ground water.



Laying field drains  
in the 19th. century :

Farmer confused by  
the inverted image  
through a new  
surveyor's level

cartoon by  
George Cruikshank, 1852.

In the surrounding fields under draining could take place with newly available 'horseshoe' drain tiles. Some small ponds were however retained in some field corners for watering stock, but in modern times these have been filled in as pip water and drinking troughs became available.

One of the effects of the wet Summer of 2007 has been the revival of the debate about drainage basin management. Clearly improved systems, which quickly remove water from farmland 'upstream' then pass it on quickly to lowlands 'downstream'.

Traditional pools, millponds, natural wetlands can absorb some of the shock of excess rainfall and are even more important where land has also been developed with hard surfaces. A related debate is the value of the little pockets of land for nature conservation under new ideas of countryside management and farm support. Indeed food for thought as you explore the fascinating landscape through its lanes and footpaths. Also note the role of 'climate change' in forming it in the first place.