

From time to time during the writing of this history series, the question is asked “How do we know all this?” We must therefore give some space for commenting on some of the sources used.

Many ancient records which mention Bicton are preserved in the archives of the county, diocese and state, but are not always readily accessible to browse or easy to physically handle. Fortunately, however, during the late nineteenth century in particular, many were transcribed, and even translated by local scholars who then published them in the Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Natural History Society. Local historians can therefore easily access the information on the library shelf and give thanks to those Victorians, mainly clergymen, who did the hard work. In addition, the Rev. J Blakeway, who did hold land locally, gathered much information from documents to form the basis of articles about local townships in the ‘liberties of Shrewsbury’ (1888-9) which included the Bicton area.

Amongst the published records are the ‘Orders of the Corporation of Shrewsbury’ (1888) which provide clues to the repairs to Montford Bridge in 1628 and also the first reference to a preacher at Bicton Chapel in 1677. The Rev. Drinkwater of Frankwell then published the ‘Tolls of Montford Bridge 1285-1412’ in 1907 revealing aspects of medieval trade. Several more documents specifically about Shrewsbury town incidentally throw some light on some local landowners who were also town officials, such as the Hosiers of Woodcote.

One unusual document, partially transcribed and published in 1880 as the ‘Early Chronicles of Shrewsbury’ comes from the Taylor collection in Shrewsbury School library. The author of these sixteenth century chronicles still remains a mystery, but he must have been an important citizen in the town, or at least a schoolmaster, with access to both all the latest national news as well as local gossip. The published extracts, dealing with mainly local affairs, start with brief summaries for the first half of the century, perhaps compiled later from records, but they become fuller later, suggesting contemporary observation. They finish suddenly in 1603, probably at the death of the compiler, perhaps struck down by the return of the plague in 1604, recorded elsewhere.

The information in the chronicles is set out chronologically with each ‘Mayoral year’, i.e. from October to September, starting with the election of new ‘bailiffs’ and other officials. Further comments continue this link with local politics intermixed with records of floods and extreme weather, often quoted in this history series, accidents, fires and even the aurora and occasional earthquakes.

Nationally, the protestant reformation marched on under Elizabeth and we learn when local churches were issued with new English translations of the Bible. National politics also intruded when local troops were dispatched to Ireland to fight rebels or to the Low Countries to help the Dutch fight Spanish overlords (hence our Zutphen connection today). Such major issues are also known from other sources but some local ‘gossip’ gives some clue to real life in and around the town, including the Bicton area.

The following are a selection of extracts.....

1573 This year and the xiiij of Septe’ber about mijnight there aperyd in the Elyme fiery impressions in the northe towards the wouthe and so contijnuyd untyll day light and the next nijghtfollowinge

Aurora or 'Northern Lights' at this latitude suggest a very strong solar flare. Scientists are still worried about them today – could wreck satellites.

'1575 This year and the xxvjth daye of Frebruarye between 4 & vj of the clock in the afternoon great yearthquacks happened, the books in men's studies fell down in the town of Shrewsbury for the space of halffe an howre'

The old geological faults of the Welsh Borders still 'shock' us from time to time.

'1576in the moonthe of February at the Isle of Rossall by Shreusberie a man servant of one Richard Sandfords was by mischance slayne in cutting dwne bough of a tree a lytell of from hys masters howse wch boughe bracke before it was full cut and stroocke hym amayne downe upon a sharpe cage at the bottom of the saide treeand so broosyd hym in pec's that hys bowels ran about hys bodye a refull man to beholde'

'Health and Safety' in the workplace has improved now!

'1580two of the newe byldyd shopps upon the Walshe bridge... are alteryd and made for pryveys for necessary easement for strangers'

Very convenient for people coming from Bicton!

'1578 there was a fraye made in Franckwell... between master Thomas Story of Rossall ... and Mr John Cole of the towne of Salop ... and yif speedy rescue had not coom there had be' mutch slaughter not withstanding dyv's of bothe syds were burtt'

John Cole also held land on the Isle and perhaps this was part of the dispute over Rossall Heath. Thomas Story in 1596 was drowned when crossing the river from Berwick. Make sure your boat is secure to the bank before stepping out!

Thys yeare ... God sent a strandge sickness in Shrewsbury mytche lycke the plage but was not the plage it wold tacke them in the head and hartt with a laxe eyther upward or downwards and those which should dye were nosbblyd with a cramp in their legs soon having stytches in their sijde ... the lycke hathe not been seene it towchid pore and ryche...

Any modern explanation would be welcome!

Perhaps in the spirit of these Victorian scholars, publication of documents has since continued but now it will be more 'on the net' than in a book upon the shelf.

