

David Pannett's History of Bicton part 72

'Downstairs' Problems

In recent years there have been several versions on TV of the 'Upstairs - Downstairs' theme played out in 'big houses' before the first World War. Storylines have revolved around relationships both within employing families and within the ranks of staff and also the relationships between each class. Critics have, however, pointed out that such dramas have tended to paint a rosy picture of a servants life in those times, avoiding some of the associated problems, which were so often 'hushed up'.

One particular problem arising from young staff of both sexes crowded into a 'big house' was brought to local public attention by a case in 1913.... A footman and a housemaid committed suicide in Coleman when she had become pregnant and could not bear the shame of it in their situation. Other cases, not prompting such publicity, could have been caused by the master of the house, or other male family member, taking advantage of their position in a way summed up by the old music hall song:

"It's the rich that have the gravy

And the poor that gets the blame...."

In such traditional societies then (and now) the girls bore the brunt of condemnation for such 'crimes', even though it obviously 'takes two to tango'. As Dickens illustrated with his famous story *Oliver Twist*, many could finish up in the workhouse. Locally, the St Chad's registers record some of the single mothers giving birth there in the 'House of Industry' at Kingsland during this period. In Ireland, the church ran the Magdalene homes, which apparently turned out to be little better, while later in England, special mother and baby units were set up.

In the worst case, the pregnant girl would be dismissed as being unfit for work, while in other cases the employers, admitting some responsibility, would arrange some 'cover up' to protect their image. One local story suggests a marriage was quietly arranged with the groom so that there would be no embarrassing entry in the Parish Register.

Such registers, for instance, recorded the baptism of a child to a single mother in Bicton in 1834, who may have been the same maid recorded by the census in 1841 as working at Bicton Hall. Bicton's parish registers after 1853 recorded at least 10 single mothers during the rest of the century, but few can be found in the regular census records, which do, however give clues to several more cases which must have been recorded in registers elsewhere.

In those days, extended families, wherever possible had to provide their own 'social services' for unfortunate members and this included picking up the pieces for daughters in trouble arising from domestic service.

In each decade of the latter half of the 19th century, the census recorded a few cases of older couples in Bicton bringing up the odd grandchild after their own children had left home, probably 'into service' away from the area. Some may have been orphans, when early deaths of parents were not unknown, but others must of been the result of those situations which 'nobody talked about'. For instance, one couple in Montford Bridge in the years 1860 - 80 brought up the son of one of their daughters, who never did marry, but then spent the rest of her later years as a dressmaker rather than in service.

In the next generation, history repeated itself when daughter - in - law took in the son of her unmarried sister born in 1888. About the same time, another relation suffered from a similar situation caused by a young reverend gentleman, but the child died early.

In the census records, such children were listed as 'lodgees' or 'boarders' and were obviously much younger than any other children still at home. Details were never talked about, but one family story handed down to the next generation concerns the prejudices suffered by one such lad. The vicar barred him from following his 'adopted' siblings into the church choir because of his background. Bad P.R. For the church, but nevertheless, not unusual at that time. The said vicar, formerly a solicitor, was unmarried and shared the vicarage with his unmarried sister. This kind lady did however take in an orphaned boy, which apparently irritated her brother!

While most of these families were suffering from these 'one off' accidents, the census for 1881 records one rather different: A cottage in Shepherds Lane was occupied by older parents with two grown-up, unmarried daughters and

four grandchildren. The parish register records that one of these was in fact a daughter of a third unmarried daughter, who five years later also produced another. Perhaps we should draw a veil over further details!

Religious attitudes, or lack of them, have always played a part in these stories, while the shame felt by many working families have tended to suppress the memories of them. Today some of us, while researching our ancestry, come up against blank spaces in the records and a wall of silence in family oral tradition. However, knowing the person concerned was in domestic service helps to explain the circumstances.

Meanwhile many grandparents are still kept busy helping modern working parents with children, as they have always done from earliest times.

Samuel Slater	Head	Mar.	54	
Mary Slater	Wife	Mar.	52	
Edward Lloyd	Son	Mar.	53	
Edwina Lloyd	Head	Mar.	78	
Elizabeth Do	Wife	Mar.	80	
William Lewis	Son	Mar.	26	
Charles Lewis	Grandson		8	1
John Randall	Head	Mar.	50	
Mary 20	Wife	Mar.	48	
Richard Jones	Stepson	Mar.	20	
Thomas Jones	Boarder		20	

Extract from Census 1861