

David Pannett's History of Bicton part 73

Past and Future down Shepherd's Lane

The recently published proposals for development at Bicton Heath on the edge of Bicton Parish, show a complex pattern filling the space between the existing settlement and a section of the NW Relief Road, reduced to act as a Bicton Heath bypass. This 'Shrewsbury West Sustainable Urban Extension' will continue the on-going urbanisation here, extending into a rural area whose history has produced the outline pattern into which each new development had to fit. This prompts us to summarize these aspects again even though most have already been discussed in previous parts of this history series.

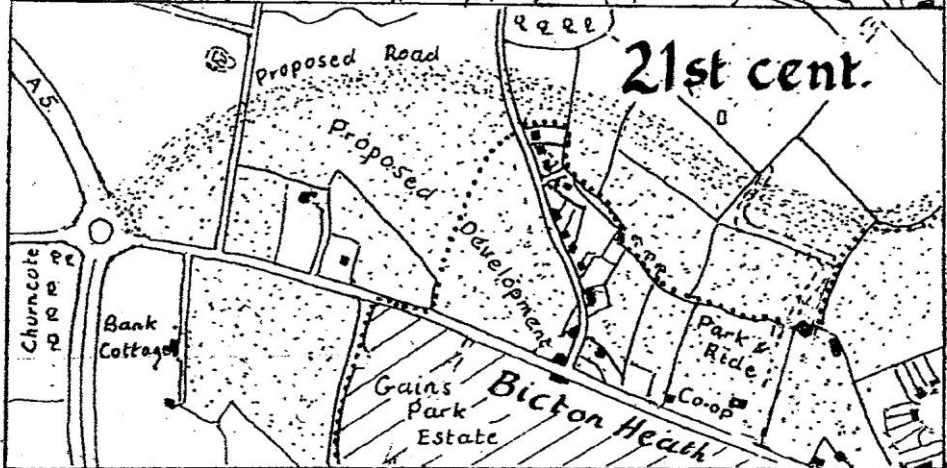
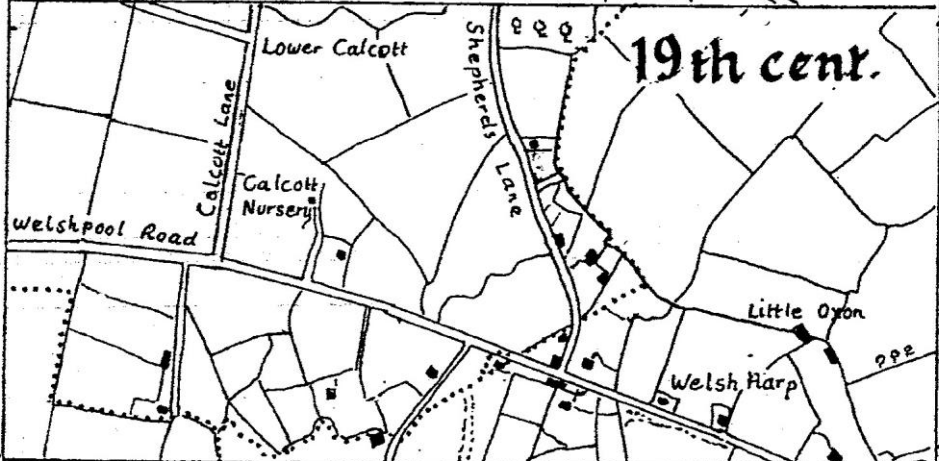
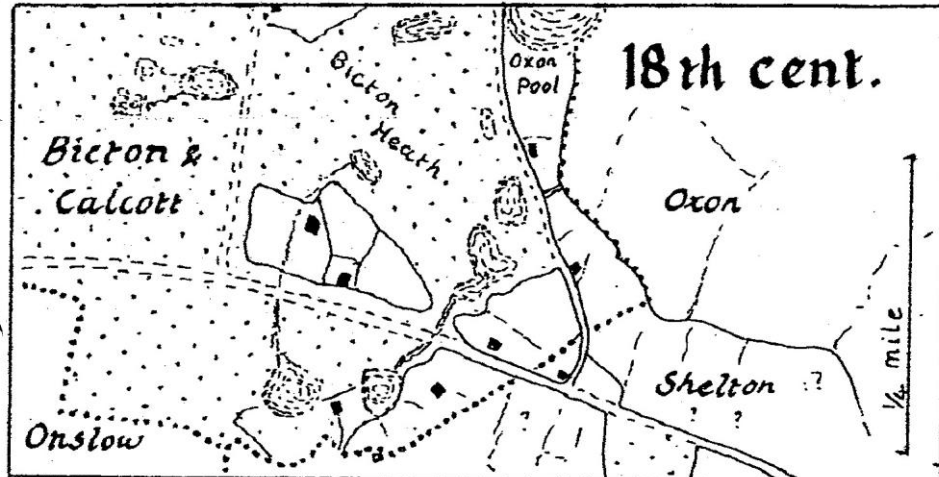
The area involved straddles the boundary between the Civil Parish of Bicton and the Shelton district of Shrewsbury, whose position and status has changed over recent centuries. Indeed, it might be quite logical to move the boundary yet again in order to include a new 'urban' area wholly within Shelton, leaving Bicton with the rural area.

Within the ancient township of Bicton & Calcott the dominant landscape feature was the once 'heath' which also extended into Shelton. Gradually from the seventeenth century onwards its fringes were colonised by cottages and smallholdings, which almost filled up the Shelton portion. Finally the remaining open lands were 'inclosed'-Bicton 1768, Shelton 1804- whereby the local landowners were each allotted a portion which they could lay out with new hedges fields and access roads. They could also tackle the problems of drainage with a network of ditches, field drains and even deeper culverts.

Much of this heath had been left as such over the centuries, not because of more 'hungry' sandy soils, but because of poor drainage on an uneven boulder clay surface produced by the last 'Ice Age'. In places the glacial deposits are up to one hundred feet (30 metres) thick and allowed the formation of deep hollows containing pools. Many original shallow hollows must have accumulated peat, known to have been exploited in the Middle Ages as fuel.

Significantly, those cottage settlements picked out the most favourable sites between the problem areas. The Lower Calcott group, for instance, occupies a small patch of gravel overlying the clay, while most of the old cottage building on the Shelton side occupy the watershed between the Bicton and Bow brooks, where the water could drain away in either direction.

The recent very wet years have so saturated the soil and overwhelmed the



drains that some old pools have reappeared, including those in the middle of the proposed development. Significantly an old pool in the modern Gains Park estate has been well filled in but not actually built upon, perhaps because of the soft peat lurking underneath.

The 'lordship' of the heathland was disputed between John Mytton of Halston, who claimed links with former monastic property and the corporation of Shrewsbury which claimed all the wasteland within the 'Liberties'. In Bickton, at least, John Mytton won and at the 'enclosure' was awarded the ownership of the encroachments. Under the new 'landlord' arrangements there was no more expansion, but several minor alterations. When the

Mytton estate was forced to sell in 1824 (Mad Jack's debts), John Wingfield of Onslow took over, adding them to the existing estate nearby.

On the Shelton side, some new cottages were built along the main road, while other smallholdings were developed as 'up - market' 'villas' complete with parkland rather than just farming activity. This contributed to the modern name 'Gains Park, where several such 'Villas' still stand enveloped by the modern housing development.

At the time of the Bickton Heath 'inclosure' it was agreed not to plant trees in the new hedges along the main roads. They remain treeless today, but in Shepherd's Lane oak trees were planted at regular intervals, giving us today some of the finest specimens in the parish. Some will be lost in the new development, but, where they can be 'preserved' development could severely damage the roots which spread so wide. Kingswood Oak estate and 'Severn Trent' car park contain such trees which should act as a warning!

Meanwhile, the Oxon Estate followed its own history within clearly defined boundaries and always contained normal farmland in spite of containing the same type of land surface. Pasture, more than arable may have been more important in its history. During the nineteenth century under the Spearman, Morris and Morris - Eyton families, it certainly developed Oxon Hall as a gentleman's residence, surrounded by parkland, until sold in 1930.

The proposed new road must pick its way between the old settlements and recent developments at Oxon, dealing with various obstacles encountered as best it can. The nature of this surface has implications for the treatment of the existing Calcott and Shepherd's Lanes!!!

Whatever happens, we are assured it will be 'sustainable' (whatever that means). Anyway some elements of the historic landscape have already made a good job of 'sustaining' their identity over several centuries!