

## David Pannett's History of Bicton part 74

### How a 'Field Centre' Came to Bicton

This year we celebrate the 70th anniversary of some important events in the last war, which marked a turning point in the whole conflict and made it possible to plan for a better post-war world.

One organisation born at this time would eventually lead to a 'Field Centre' being established here in Bicton.

The story started with Francis Butler, a London school inspector, who was disappointed to find how much of the natural history teaching was confined to the classroom and so little out in the real countryside. A few enthusiastic teachers had already made some efforts to take children out, demonstrating what could be done, but there was scope for a whole lot more. While recovering from a bomb blast, he had time to think more about it and then a transfer to Cambridge brought him into contact with like-minded academics in different disciplines, who fired his enthusiasm even more. To cut a long story short, a group of supporters met in December 1943 to establish the "Council for the promotion of Field Studies".

A key issue was establishing 'Hostels' as bases for such studies, so the council resolved that "suitable properties should be sought for in locations selected for the richness and variety of the ecological features, geological interest and archaeological importance". By good fortune the National Trust became involved, leading to the opening of the first centre in their property at Flatford Mill, Suffolk in 1946 (Well-known to all through John Constable's paintings reproduced on countless greetings cards, prints and biscuit tins). Later, other NT properties near Dorking and at Malham in Yorkshire followed.

By now the organisation had simplified its name to "Field Studies Council" and confirmed its status both as limited company and registered charity, relying on income from visiting students, together with assorted grants and private donations, mainly for special projects. Each Centre had salaried staff, headed by a 'Warden', while overall direction came via voluntary committees.

These first centres were in areas of obvious special interest and as demand increased, especially from A-level students, thoughts turned to establishing one in or near the geologically interesting Shropshire Hills. Just then a 'probation home' occupying Preston Montford Hall in the Wingfield estate, closed down and therefore offered a country house already partially



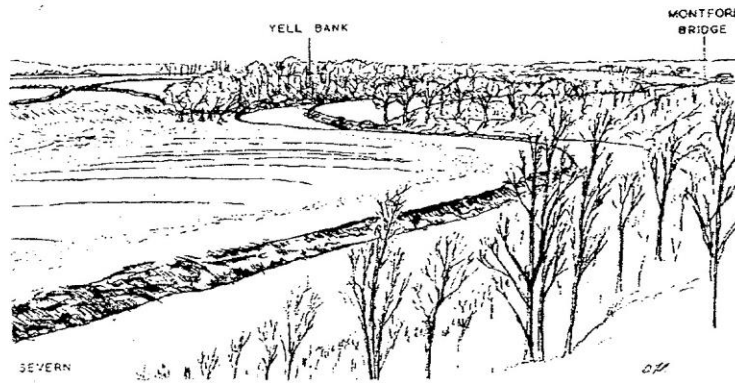
**Preston Montford Hall c.1705,  
also rebuilt kitchen wing 1890  
and classroom 1957**

adapted to institutional use. Additional accommodation was also available in ex land-army huts, (by coincidence also built in 1943). As a result, Charles Sinker came from the Mallam centre to open a new one here in 1956. Many at this time felt it was in rather 'ordinary' landscape, but Charles and his team set about demonstrating that this could be a virtue, since understanding such 'ordinary' landscape and ecology could be more relevant to many students from similar areas. Anyway, the location proved conveniently central to a variety of upland and lowland sites with the help of minibuses and 'Vaggs' coaches (27 seater petrol bull nosed Bedford's, now only seen at rallies!). The location also proved convenient for Wroxeter Archaeology summer schools run by the University of Birmingham, while proximity to Shrewsbury station made access from distant parts of the country much easier.

A classroom/laboratory was added to the original house which had been built by Samuel Adderton in c 1705, while the surrounding small estate was exploited for various outdoor studies.

The riverbank provided a clear view to the West, while it's geological origin could be explained by the sediments exposed by excavation. Indeed, such a permanent clear section of real sediments, as compared to some textbook picture or blackboard drawing, is but one symbol of what 'Field Studies' are all about. Likewise, special plots on the grassland were given contrasting mowing regimes in order to show how this would influence the range of plants. Thanks to the sewerage system the two ponds had different nutrient

levels, influencing the life found in each. Since these early days the practical treatment of effluent has become both a necessity and an educational opportunity!



Basic weather recording instruments were also set up and their range has been added to over the years. Twice in the 60s 'foot and mouth' struck the county and with

restrictions in place for access to other teaching sites, the local estate proved most valuable. Since then it has been constantly improved with much more planting, for instance.

From the start, Charles Sinker and his team were involved with local organisations, particularly in the development of the Shropshire Conservation Trust and its nature reserves. A geography tutor even helped the Stiperstones community with the registration of their commons as a by-product of teaching there.

One amusing aspect of such contacts was that the BBC discovered the centre and wrote one into the 'Archers'. At first the staff were very proud to have fixed up this publicity link, but once script writers actually got to work, pride turned to embarrassment!

Charles Sinker was made director of the whole organisation in 1973 and the start was made on a 'head office' in the hitherto underused stable block. He later had to retire through ill health, but the office continued to expand, thanks to its central location in the country equidistant between an increasing number of centres from Devon to Cumbria.

Since these early days, the whole organisation and the local centre has gone from strength to strength. Thanks to the new A5, the old wartime huts could be replaced with better accommodation near the house - now more 'Premier Inn' than 'Y.H.A.'. It continues to contribute to the local economy, if only through the extra pints pulled at the Wingfield Arms or by employing the local army of loyal domestic staff. The organisation is therefore rightly proud to celebrate its 70 years.