

Once again in August vintage steam engines and crowds of visitors will be descending upon Onslow in Bicton, enjoying the extensive parkland created in the nineteenth century by the Wingfield family.

Their involvement in this area started in 1780 when Rowland Wingfield bought the small Onslow estate from Richard Morhall, who had only recently bought it from Thomas Fownes in 1768. The original Wingfield home had been Preston Brockhurst since 1650, although Rowland is also recorded as living at Whitehall in Shrewsbury and was, in fact, buried at the Abbey in 1818.

In a situation, not unusual at the time, eldest son John, born 1769, joined the army, while second son Charles, born 1770, joined the church. While duties took John away, Charles stayed in the area and married Letitia, daughter of Richard Jenkins of Bicton Hall, whose family were virtually 'next-door neighbours' in Bicton, Cruckton and Abbey Foregate.

Probably after his military service, during which he had risen to the rank of Lt. Colonel in the 4th Dragoons, John succeeded his father at Onslow, married the much younger Mary Rocke and set about improvements. In 1815-20 he employed the local architect Edward Haycock to re-design the existing house as an impressive 'neo-classical' mansion, which may be described as a smaller version of Haycock's later well known work at the old Royal Salop Infirmary in Shrewsbury (now 'The Parade') complete with 'Doric' portico. Construction in both was in Haycock's usual style of 'brick within' but Grinshill stone on the surface.

The north front gave clear views over the new park, while behind, gardens and stables were laid out replacing any existing buildings left over from a long history of a farming community here stretching back to Domesday. Natural glacial hollows flanking this high ridge of 'moraine' were exploited for ornamental pools.

This development coincided with the first maps of the Ordnance Survey which recorded the modest extent of the park with carriage drives connecting the house to the Welshpool road, while the public lane still passed through the site leading to the Montgomery road at Horton. (When published they also showed the ancient parish boundary passing through the site... but that is another story.)

By coincidence, soon after 1820, some of the neighbouring estates came up for sale and were duly acquired, starting with the Mytton property in Bicton, consisting of many cottage holdings around the former heath, followed by both the Jones and the Waring estates in Woodcote. Preston Montford and Grange Farm were acquired by exchange with the Hill family, enabling both parties to consolidate their holdings 'nearer home'. All this added both farmland and useful extra accommodation at Preston Montford Hall both for other gentry or members of the family, including brother Charles in his final years. Another distant cousin at this time held the adjacent Dinthill and in 1846 John was able to add this to his collection! In a similar way family connections no doubt helped the acquisition of the Bicton Hall estate upon the death of Sir Richard Jenkins in 1855. Finally, the addition of Upper Calcott farm 'rounded off' the estate boundaries.

John died in 1862 and was buried in the new family vault which he had added to Bicton's old church in 1832. Being without a direct heir, the estate passed to his eldest nephew Charles John Wingfield, although he also specifically willed the Bicton Hall estate to the younger nephews. However, Charles bought it back from them in 1873, thus keeping the whole estate intact. Charles also married Jane,

another cousin, perhaps through obvious social links, but also helping to keep capital within the wider family circle. He also followed his father in a military career with the rank of Colonel.

By the next surveys in c.1880, the park, as we know it, had been fully developed both as a visual amenity and as part of a 'shooting estate' with new plantations and 'coverts'. Even the pool had a 'duck decoy'. Whatever 'village' community may once have occupied the site was now replaced by ornamental lodges on the main road, workers' cottages scattered around and a new farm at Churncote. Horton Lane ceased to be a through route, although most can still be followed as a 'bridleway', all within the enlarged estate. (The life and working on this Victorian estate could make another study some other time.)

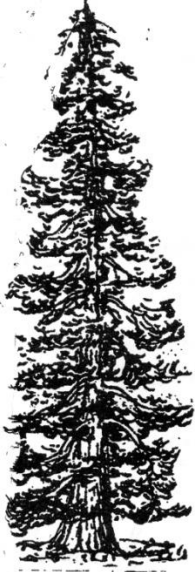
There were, however, still some developments to occupy John's successors, which probably encouraged them to take a wider interest in nature beyond shooting. While such traditionally English 'landscape' parks had been started with native tree species, with perhaps just the odd 'cedar of Lebanon', during the course of the nineteenth century overseas exploration was making many more exotic species available, which park owners were eager to try out as both ornaments and timber producers.

Now, for instance, after a century or more, American visitors are often amazed at the wealth of giant sequoias thriving in our parklands, since 'back home' their forebears were only interested in cutting them down! Onslow illustrates this very well, thanks to the work of Charles and then, after 1891, his son Charles Ralph Borlase (named after an 18th century ancestor) and later his son Charles in the twentieth century.

Almost by accident, parkland tends to preserve some features from the past, such as traces of former hedge banks or marks of ancient ploughing, as in the pastures south west of the house. Here the garden boundary probably follows an older hedge following those medieval ridges so that it still has a 'reverse-S' shape about one furlong in length.

After two World Wars many country estates have had to face up to changing economic circumstances and perhaps it is no surprise that Haycock's monumental mansion, which in its heyday was run by at least eleven resident staff, had to be demolished in 1957. Its great 'Doric' columns were even rolled into the pond! Two replacements have been on a more modest scale.

In Bicton, the two later Victorian Wingfields lie under an ornate tomb by the new church which they helped to finance, where they are also overlooked by giant sequoias which they probably planted. Sadly the choice of red sandstone for the inscriptions means that some details are being lost. Nevertheless, as we gather to celebrate the achievements of Fowler, Foden, Sentinel etc., we should spare some thought to the creators of the Park all around.



Giant Sequoia
popular with
Victorians

