

One of the many technical advances stimulated by the 'Great War' was aerial photography. With its help, trench systems on the other side could be mapped prior to some attempted advance, or particular targets identified for the guns. While training at Shoreham in 1917, Len Cooke of the Grange even took his own photographs of nearby Brighton in passing.

Between the Wars, commercial firms such as Aerofilms continued to record our own landscape and special events, producing what is now a valuable historical record. Archaeologists also discovered the value of aerial views in their own research.

With the second world war, technology improved even further, especially with roll film and mechanical controls which provided overlapping shots necessary for stereoscopic, '3-D' images. Specially adapted spitfires flew reconnaissance sorties all over Germany with this equipment, yielding valuable intelligence. Naturally, the Germans were doing the same over here, so that in the run up to D-day a 'phantom army' of fake features was created in SE England in order to confuse them.

With the arrival of peace, the Government realised that such technology and manpower could also be useful in updating our understanding of Britain, especially its map information which by now was decades old in places. 'Provisional' editions of the old maps could now be issued with the new material sketched in outline to distinguish it from the original accurately surveyed data. In the Bicton area that would have been in 1902 and 1926 nearer Shrewsbury.

The photographs now form an important national archive cared for by specialist trying to preserve the old acetate negatives which have a tendency to self-destruct.

One sortie came over Bicton in early April 1946 and, apart from showing a few new buildings for the map makers, the images revealed a rich variety of old and current features and activities. For instance, the pattern of crooked ridges produced in the medieval 'open fields' stood out as both shapes in grassland and as soil marks in modern ploughed ground. The relationship between these old ridges and the hedge pattern could also be seen.

The modern ploughing was also shown well on that spring day, producing striped patterns of its own. Today, powerful tractors have mounted multi-furrow ploughs which can be 'reversed' as they run up and down across the field. In 1946, however, smaller tractors towing fixed ploughs had to work in a pattern of 'lands', up one side and down the other, not unlike the old horse teams.

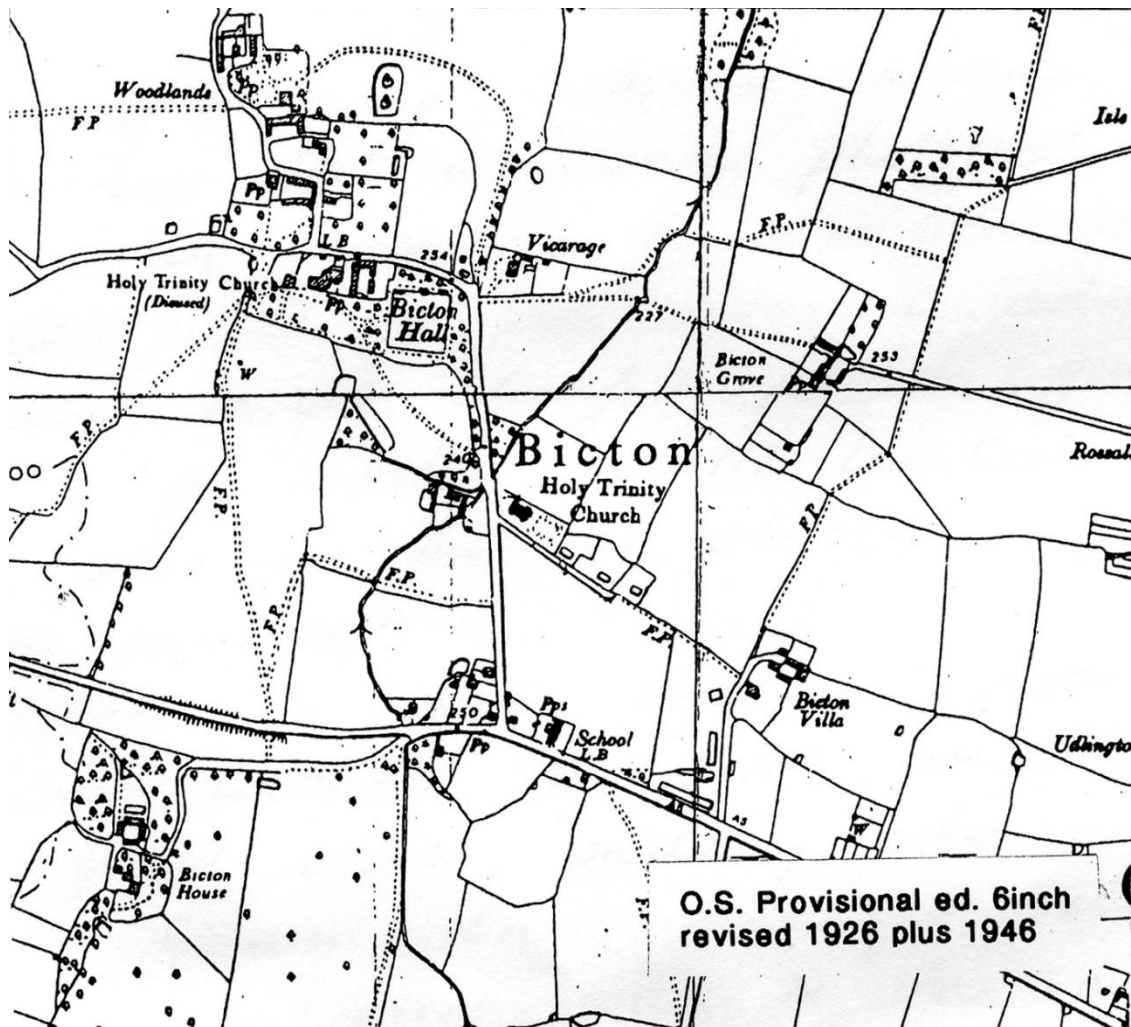
Within the village, the 'dig for victory' spirit was still in evidence, as shown by Bicton Hall's well used walled garden and other plots near Bicton Farm, now occupied by bungalows. The post-war phase of suburban building was also just starting with Somerfield in Church Lane and activity to be seen in Bicton Lane.

In the decades following these RAF photographs various private companies provided both similar 'vertical' cover for government-sponsored projects and 'oblique' shots of special features. SkyViews of Manchester, for instance, targeted larger properties in the Midlands where now the resulting framed prints hang upon their walls, including those around Bicton. Newspapers also appreciated aerial views to illustrate such events as flooding or traffic jams on the old A5, which we ought to use in this history series some time.

With talk of improving the A5 in the 1970s, Bicton was again photographed in 1976, while the County Council also commissioned more general cover for planning purposes and have since deposited the prints in Shropshire Archives. Meanwhile, the Ordnance Survey were revising their maps with photographs of such quality that surveyors needed to spend very little time 'on the ground'. Stereoscopic techniques even improved the drawing of contours now used in their recent metric editions.

Today, Google can bring coloured aerial views to every home computer. Indeed, one must wonder who is watching us! One is thus reminded of a story from the 'Cold War' period, in which a community in the western USA asked their local air force base if they could spare any photographs of their area. The authorities refused, as it was such a sensitive military area, but the Russian embassy was happy to oblige!

p.s. When viewing 'vertical' aerial photographs, point 'South' to the top of the page, because shadows will then show up raised features better. The brain prefers to work that way.





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