

This year, as part of our remembrance, the status of the church clock as a war memorial has received more public recognition. Indeed, Bicton is perhaps unusual in having a 'useful' memorial outside, backed up by the actual names on a board safely inside! Meanwhile, in the press, there have been discussions about the value of 'old time' trade apprenticeships as an alternative to some 'modern' further education. Also, many organisations are on the lookout for volunteers to help fulfil their public role. Now, as Christmas arrives, many families will get together and no doubt record their celebrations on their latest digital technology, while also reflecting upon similar images in old family albums produced by simple box cameras.

These themes, which seem so different, all come together in the life story of former Bicton inhabitant, Ernest Lewis 1878-1956. He was born the seventh child of William and Mary Lewis of Old School House and grew up in a period which witnessed steady advances in technology, of which photography and design of the modern bicycle were but two examples.

The principle of photography had been worked out earlier in the century and at first tended to be used only by a few enthusiasts. Improvements in more portable equipment enabled Francis Frith, for instance, to get out and about recording the world around him and to promote the world of picture postcards. Other professionals set up studios to which people could come for more formal poses, better for those long exposures. Directories recorded three photographers in Shrewsbury by 1877, one of whom boasted the 'largest studios in the Kingdom' and by the end of the century the number had risen to nine, some of whom supplied chemicals and materials for amateurs. Ernest became one such amateur, but first there was the need for a reliable day job!

Father, William, was a bricklayer and stone mason who has thereby left his mark on the village, such as the churchyard wall. Eldest sons Walter, Frederick and Edward followed in his footsteps, daughters: Ann, Mary and Ethel went into service while another, Salena, died in childhood; altogether making it a very typical 'Victorian' family. Young Ernest, however, was set up for a different career by being apprenticed to Henry Wells, Watchmaker and Jeweller, in Shrewsbury (15 High Street), one of eighteen such businesses in town. Across the road, in the 'new' school house, George Blakemore did likewise, which may not be a coincidence since the families were close friends.

Such apprenticeships offered an escape from the employment problems caused by large families producing more 'hands' than the local economy could use! (The well-known Morris Company originated from one such apprentice, for instance). The alternative would involve moving away in search of work. Walter emigrated to America and was last heard of in Chicago, Frederick went to New York, but had to return injured while Edward moved to Warrington.

The apprenticeship with Henry Wells lasted five years 1894-1899, after which he stayed on for a while, but in the next century both his business and personal life changed. Father William died in 1907 and in the same year Ernest married Blanche Gertrude Rosier, who had been cook at the Vicarage (her sister Adelaide married another local lad, Bert Glover. Their first home was in Hunter Street, Mountfields and then, as the first children arrived, he set up his own business nearby in Frankwell (number 15, now 'stove' shop). Then, with more children, they moved to Bicton, taking over Milnsbridge, off Shepherds Lane, after fellow Shrewsbury businessman, Charles Birch.

Life was now split between Bicton and Frankwell, where he became a prominent member of the local community combining business and pleasure in a generally public spirited way, including developing his interest in photography.

In and around the town he wound and maintained numerous public clocks, including that at Bicton, which he actually set going in January 1921. In Frankwell he found time to publish a humorous weekly newssheet 'The Little Borough Observer' and organise the annual carnival which brought out his sense of fun. More seriously, he also served as a special constable in the old borough force as his contribution to the war. He eventually retired in 1949 after 39 years in business and could turn his attention to gardening in Bicton. He successfully exhibited at various shows and incidentally inspired son Herbert to follow similar interests, which would, much later, lead to the establishment of Merton Nurseries on Milnsbridge land (he had to serve a grocery apprenticeship first, however!).

Finally, in 1956 Ernest died suddenly in his beloved garden at the age of 77. It was a kind way to go, for such an active man would not have enjoyed slow, lingering decline. Mementoes of his life include some high quality family photographs and glass negatives, with historical images which we hope to salvage through modern technology so that they can be shared by all.



Wedding day portrait of Ernest Lewis by the 'Williams & Williams' studio in Wyle Cop



Adelaide Glover (nee Rosier) c.1906 showing off her new bicycle at Old School House
(Family photograph by Ernest)

