

**David Pannetts' history of Bicton - Part 8**

**Hedgerow shrubs and landscape history**

Earlier instalments have explained the development of our local field pattern in terms of the enclosure of the open fields and heath, cottage encroachments and the improvement of the main roads. The actual plants forming the hedges, however, have not been discussed and this omission must now be corrected, before they shed their leaves this Autumn.

Many years ago a professor of 'Local history' collaborated with an ecologist to explore the relationship between various hedges of known date and the trees and shrubs which they contained. They found that old hedges usually contained many more species than newer ones. In spite of the many variations in detail, they drew a straight line through their 'graph' of data which suggested that, on average, a hedge would gain a new species about every hundred years. One would just count the number in a sample 30 yard stretch and 'hey presto' you have a date! Such a simple 'rule' was welcomed by the general public, reproduced in books, quoted by 'Jennifer Archer', Alan Titchmarsh and even by other presenters this very year. It is for this reason we must mention it, if only to chop it down a bit.

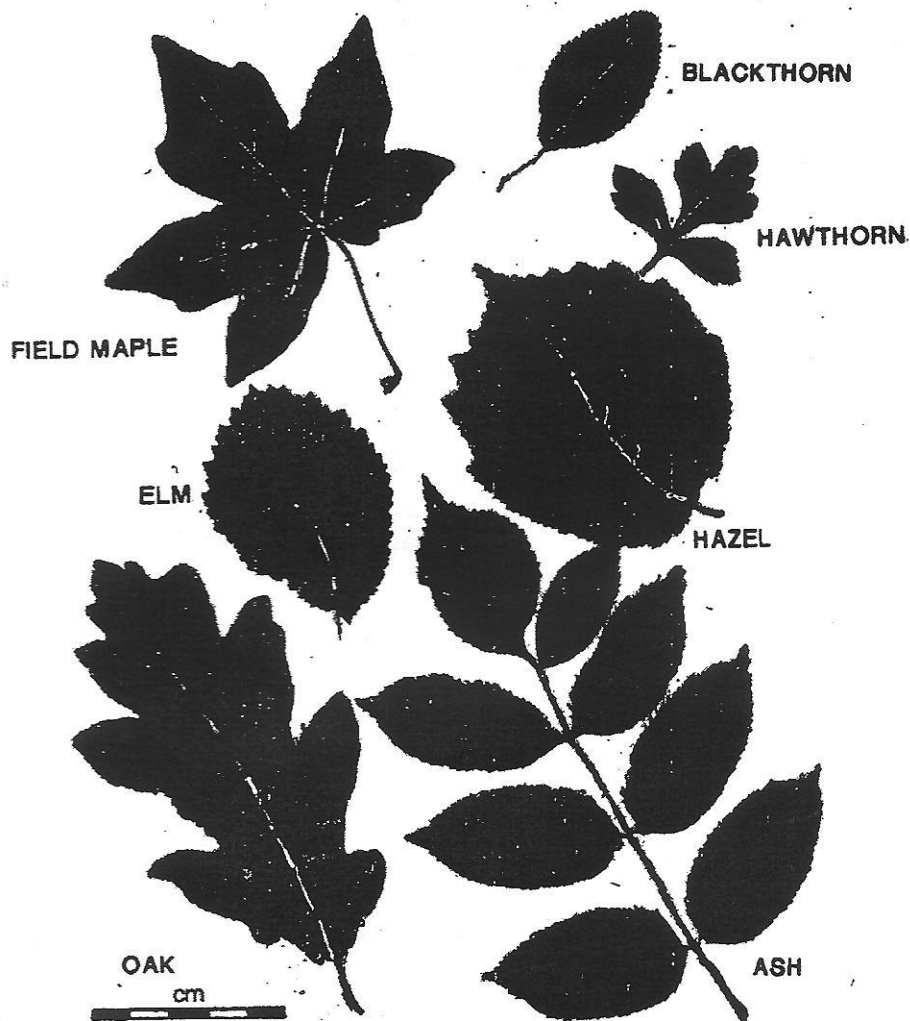
Detailed local studies, including some around Bicton, certainly confirm that old hedges are richer in species, but also reveal that the actual ones present are more significant than crude total numbers. Each has its own biological character which has influenced its place as a relic of the past, selected barrier or invading weed.

The most common hedgerow trees and shrubs around Bicton illustrate this principle well, as follows:

Field Maple - our only native acer, and Hazel, do not spread very easily, but were important elements in the original wild woodland. They can be good clues to 'assarts', fields created directly from cleared woodland, and are found in hedges close to Bickley Coppice.

They also occur in the very ancient boundary winding westwards from the old church towards Bicton Grange, which separated the grange and 'demense land' from the open fields. (where Telford's new road cuts this line there is a lone Hazel bush incorporated into the new road hedge). Similar old Hazel hedges mark the boundary of Calcott, the old lane to Preston Montford and the further Parish boundary with Ford.

Some hedgerow shrubs in Bicton



Blackthorn - propagated by suckers, was the preferred stockproof hedging plant used for the new enclosures from the 16th to the 18th centuries. Its relatives amongst the *Prunus* family include Sloe, Wild Plum and the cultivated Damson, an important source of fruit for cottage gardens.

Elm also grows from suckers and once planted, can aggressively dominate whole lengths of hedge as can be seen in the heath area. Sadly, many show signs of Dutch Elm disease, but as old tops die the rootstocks continue to throw up new shoots, whose smoother bark is first uninviting to the dreaded beetle.

Planting such a mixture of suckers dug from local woodland and wasteland was typical of this 'enclosure' period and was actually described by an agricultural writer c1800. This certainly undermines that one species per century 'rule'.

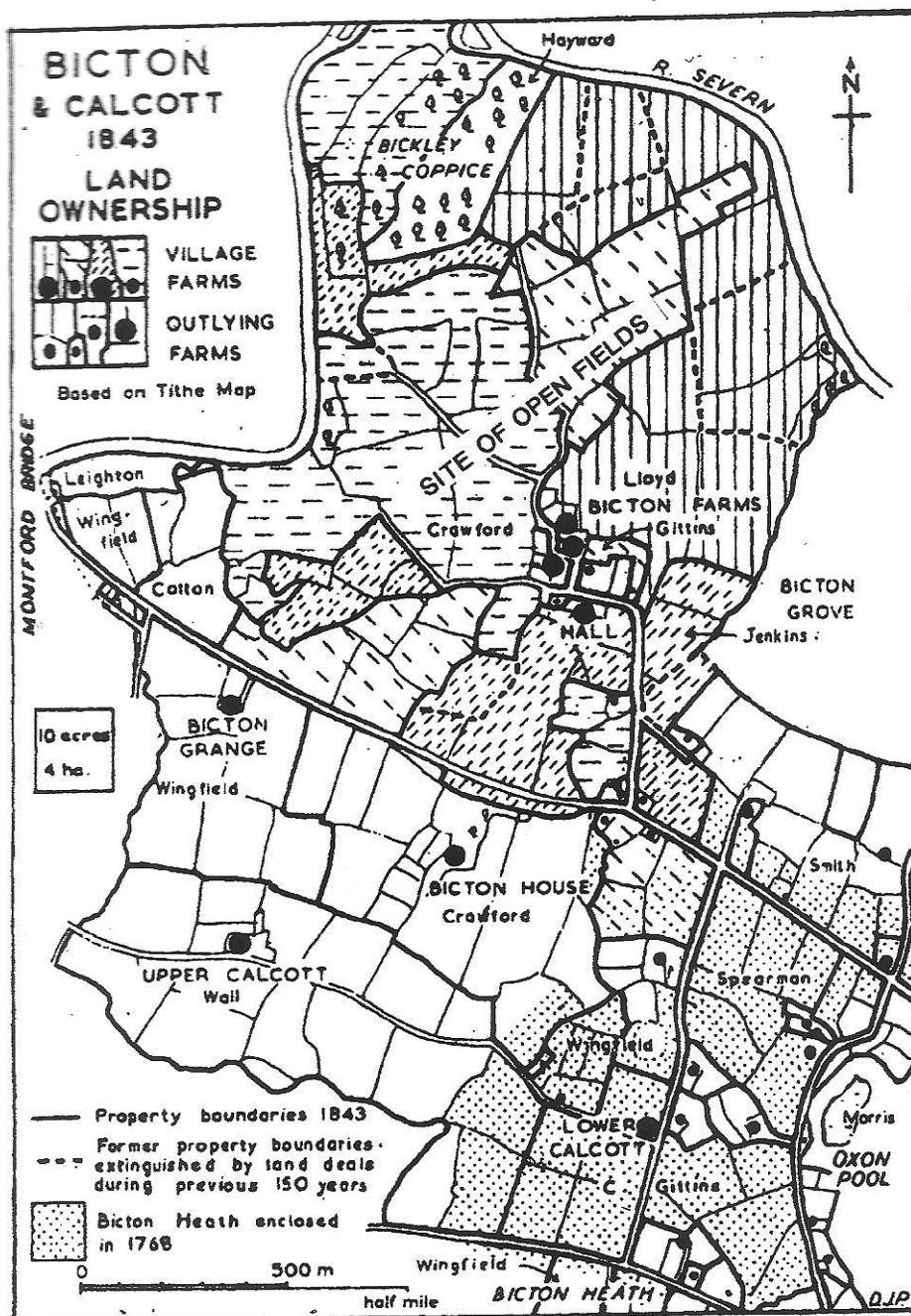
Hawthorn, or 'quick', by contrast, is raised from seed and became the preferred material once commercial nurseries became established in the nineteenth-century, (including one on the Welshpool Road, known to have supplied plants to many gardens around Shrewsbury). Now mass planting of this simple species could take place, as along the new road towards Montford Bridge. It was also used to repair gaps in older hedges, while birds did their bit to spread seeds around.

Holly, also spread by seeds, appears widely for the same reason. Along parts of Calcott Lane it may also have been deliberately planted as an alternative to thorn.

Oak usually appears as standard trees, planted in hedges of many dates because of its timber. They often stand at regular intervals. Fine old specimens line Shepherds Lane, but where is the next generation?

Ash and Sycamore spread with winged seeds and can invade any hedge, the latter being a particular 'weed' shading out other species. Birds also spread Elder making hedges of all dates more diverse.

The latest hedge planting, apart from that around new 'suburban' gardens, has been along the new A5. Now with thoughts on nature conservation, mixed planting has been returned, even including Field Maple. So we are back to the 'middle ages'



map first used for part 4