

Over the Christmas season there is often debate about the meaning of the festival. While some regret that the religious significance is being lost, others point out that the European midwinter festival was, in fact, an ancient celebration of the winter solstice long before the Christian church adopted it for its own story. The design of Stonehenge and the great megalithic tombs of Ireland, for instance, enabled a symbolic 'copulation' between the sun god and mother earth at this time, in order to encourage the birth of a new year. Rubbish dumps (middens) testify to the feasting which followed.

In the duller, damper Iron Age, however, the focus of attention was less upon the heavens and more upon the apparent 'magic' of evergreens, such as holly, ivy and mistletoe. The modern Christmas still uses these symbols, partly thanks to Prince Albert and Charles Dickens for reviving interest in them after a period of 'puritan' austerity.

More recently, senior churchmen have expressed concern at falling support for the Church of England within an increasingly secular society and our local experience is no exception. This prompts us to reflect upon the former situation in Bicton as remembered by the oldest inhabitants and also by the late John Lawson, who has left us his own observations on church and village life when his father Anthony was vicar, 1926-1931.

Anthony Lawson originally came from Yorkshire, where he had started his clerical career with the Congregational church, which led to his war service as a chaplain on the 'Western Front'. The stress of this, together with life-threatening 'Spanish flu' did, however, undermine his confidence but he was helped by wartime colleagues, who brought him into the 'Anglican fold' through a curate's post at St. Chads in Shrewsbury. Subsequently, when Revd. John Purser retired from Bicton, Anthony, with his young family, took his place thanks to St. Chads' historic links here.

In those days, the church was well attended each Sunday, especially the morning service. Most of the community were expected to be there, led by the principle landowners, their tenants and staff. There were, of course, also non-conformists in the village, including Mr & Mrs Edward Lewis, who supported Montford Bridge chapel, but somehow they were not considered 'part of the community'.

Within the church each 'rank' had their regular pews, with the leading citizens at the front, while others sat behind. The south aisle seemed to be reserved for servants, including the chauffeur who brought the Wingfields from Onslow. Seating was usually more flexible at Evensong.

Mrs Wingfield (patron of the living), now a widow, was sometimes accompanied by her two sons, Charles in his Eton suit and Owen in Dartmouth cadet uniform. Indeed, everyone wore their 'Sunday Best'. Humphrey Sandford from the Isle, who was also church warden, came with his wife and also his sister, Armine. Brother, Richard, a solicitor, came from Udlington with his wife Louis. Miss Milbank from the Hall, travelled the short distance by pony and trap and, later, in a traditional bath chair pushed by her garden staff. She was a generous supporter of the church and community, especially Revd. Lawson, since she also came from Yorkshire.

Other families sitting behind included May Edward from Montford Bridge, who helped with the Sunday school and Mr Thomas Slater, an Isle Estate tenant who was the other church warden.

The choir of men and boys only (although supported by girls in the pews), were drawn from many family backgrounds in the village, including John Lawson. As vicar's son, educated in town, it was

one of his rare opportunities to mix with other village lads. The choirmaster was Mr Ward, who cycled out from Frankwell.

Sunday school for the children took place in the village school, where between stories, they were happy to use up any sandwiches left over from the previous night's whist drive. It was times to allow them to continue to join the main service in the church.

As it was a Church of England school, the children started each day with reciting the catechism and, from time to time, were tested on their knowledge of the scriptures by the vicar, thus earning a certificate.

Secondary education was limited to the Lancasterian School, Allatt's School or the Priory in Shrewsbury. The latter was entered through scholarships and it is interesting to record how many children from humble rural families were successful here. This contribution to 'social mobility' is still a subject of discussion today.

The years at Bicton were happy ones for the Lawson family and in later life John still had fond memories of the rural life which he witnessed in his childhood: the steady pace of farm horses at work, fresh milk in open pails and jugs, the annual visit of the steam threshing team and even the castrator dealing with the piglets. In 1931, however, they moved to St Michaels, Shrewsbury and a totally different environment. Their leaving present was a group photograph of the choir, which John later returned to the church, where it still hangs (we must try to reproduce it sometime).

Meanwhile, back in the village, there were the first signs of new trends towards the community life we know today.

Richard Sandford's wife was very active in forming the Women's Institute, whose constitution avoided links with the church (in spite of singing Jerusalem). They first met in Bicton Heath but later used the tea rooms built behind the Four Crosses by the People's Refreshment House Association, which was thereby becoming almost a 'Village Hall'!

At the corner of Bicton Lane and the main road, Mr & Mrs Proctor let rooms, including some to Mr & Mrs Frank Hayward, who actually worked in Birmingham. They reached the station by car, which they also used for leisure at weekends, rather than join others in church. They would therefore wear golfing clothes rather than 'Sunday Best'!



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