

## 95 Richard Jenkins MP

This year we have an election while we also celebrate the role of Magna Carta in the evolution of our constitution. Meanwhile, international news includes the failure of new governments elsewhere, which exposes the problems of transplanting our democratic systems almost 'overnight' into societies with a different history. Political leaders must take note! Part of such political history can be seen in the life and times of Sir Richard Jenkins, who now lies under the floor of Bicton's old church, standing next to his family seat of Bicton Hall. His burial, 6<sup>th</sup> January 1854, was one of the first entries in the new parish register after the old chapel had been upgraded to a parish church. He had actually died on the 30<sup>th</sup> December 1853 at his home in Blackheath near London, but his family obviously still felt he belonged to Bicton.

Fortunately, the new railway system was making this relatively easy, even with snow problems that very same week. Other families appear to have been doing likewise as in the same month the body of Charlotte Edgerly was brought to Shrewsbury from Dover, while that of Mrs Bather was carried from Brighton for burial at Meole Brace.

Although Bicton Hall had been the main family home, Richard was actually born at Cruckton, the home of a relative, in 1785. At the age of 15 he joined the East India Company, with which he enjoyed a successful career already discussed in these pages (March 2011). He played his part in helping the Company spread its influence and power throughout the sub-continent.

He returned home in 1828 and, amongst other things, may have been responsible for improving the Bicton property. However, life did not become a quiet retirement to the country, but rather an opportunity for continued involvement with the management of the Company. He was awarded the 'Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath' in 1838, thus becoming 'Sir', by which time he had been twice elected as an MP for Shrewsbury 1830-31 and 1837-41.

It was said that, as an MP, *"he spoke little in the House, but when he did it was about Indian affairs, for which his views were much respected."* (The wider professional experience of MPs is still an issue today!) Thus, *"although not gifted with eloquence or with the grace of education, he was always received with marked favour."* Locally he was appreciated for helping several other young men gain cadetships with the Company.

Company and parliamentary business obviously made it more convenient to live nearer London, leaving Bicton Hall for tenants. It could have been no coincidence that these were to include the unmarried Cotes sisters from Woodcote near Shifnal, whose family was supplying a succession of MPs for north Shropshire.

Some historians have commented that the British were "Romans in their colonies, but Greeks at home". We were creating an empire in which good government, peace, justice and trade were more important than allowing any democratic voice of the peoples. By contrast, Greek culture was associated with such democratic voices and the classical bias in public school education would have made our rulers aware of all this. Thus, while the empire expanded, helped by the likes of Richard Jenkins, back home there was agitation for reforms, which provoked much parliamentary debate. The Great Reform Act of 1832 was but one example, which improved national representation.

Locally, however, not a great deal changed and Shrewsbury continued to send two MPs, while north and south Shropshire also had two each.

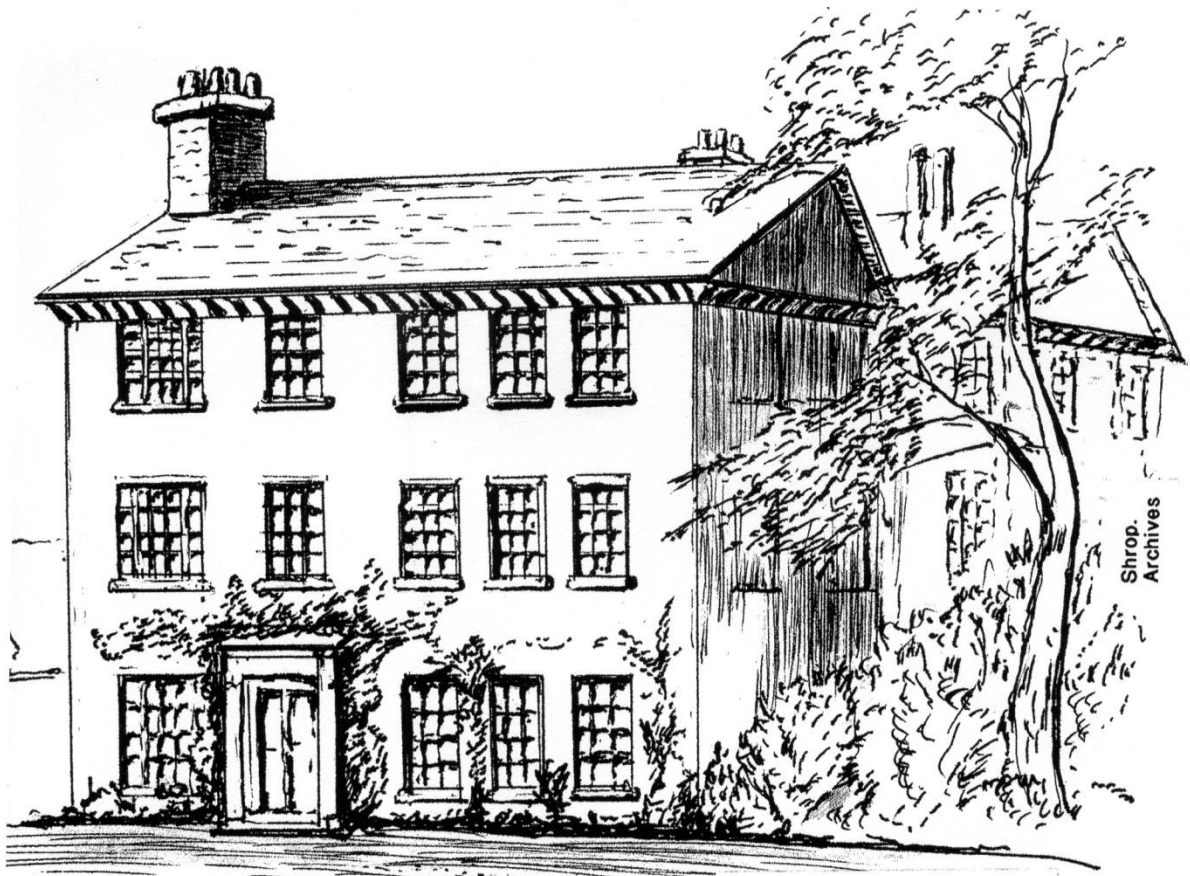
Because the vote was restricted to men of minimum wealth and property, only about 10% of the population could actually do so. The ordinary rural worker in a tied cottage would have to wait longer for the right, while women did not obtain it till the following century. Nineteenth century reformers were mainly male, who still thought women politically inferior.

We did, however, begin to enjoy a fairly free press, so that the obituary writer in the Shrewsbury Chronicle could point out that the paper did not always agree with Richard, but nevertheless had to admire his achievements. Earlier, at the 1837 election, the paper actually gave more space to the speeches of Mr R A Slaney, the other MP for Shrewsbury, who was a reformer.

Richard, as a Tory, was a great supporter of church and monarchy who would oppose reform, such as further change in representation, but nevertheless he would aim to address any grievances which the electorate had. At the election the reformers won more seats.

A supporter then remarked that *“Richard Jenkins’ speeches are so calm and moderate that we expect good voting for him in Parliament, more particularly as it is evident that all the moderate men in the House will forsake the violent contests suggested by the old Tories and will not thwart the Queen’s Government, to which all the waiters on Providence must now look for succour.”*

As a mark of respect for the man, the Mayor and corporation lined his route through Shrewsbury that January day in 1854. Now, perhaps as a mark of respect we could improve the state of his grave!..... and use our vote.



Shrop.  
Archives

Bicton Hall 1879

BASED ON DRAWING  
BY STANLEY LEIGHTON

