

Forty years ago this month, in 1975, the West Midland Agricultural Society celebrated its 100th anniversary at its show in Shrewsbury. As a contribution to this event, the newly formed County Museum Service put on a display in its tent showing how farming had changed over that period. To do so, apart from the usual museum artefacts, it used twin models summarising the 'then and now' changes around a typical farmyard. 'Britains' toy animals and machinery proved the best way of illustrating this, so the whole model followed their 1:32 scale.

Although designed to illustrate the general county-wide picture, the models, nevertheless, had strong connections with Bickton and neighbourhood. Firstly, the buildings, mainly put together from polystyrene ceiling tiles and cardboard, and the whole layout was the work of a small team at Preston Montford Field Centre led by David Pannett. (Warden, Charles Sinker was encouraging his staff to get involved in local organisations and had himself helped to establish the Shropshire Wildlife Trust). Also local farms, visited by students on geography field courses, provided much of the inspiration for the design, as well as useful measurements to help get the scale correct. It even turned out that the Centre's catering coffee and bean tins were just the right size for grain bins and a silage tower. Knowing that the models would be viewed by a critical farming audience (as well as the Queen) was a stimulus to getting things right!

The 1875 farmyard was shown as a courtyard lined with brick-built cowshed, stables, granary and barn with the 'midden' in the centre. The shape of each unit reflected its function housing the small milking herd and the horse teams. The barn had wide doors and a through passage to the stackyard, but otherwise doors were rather narrow. On the far side of the barn an extension (based on one at Montford) housed the 'horse gin' which drove simple barn machinery, such as root chopping. The rest of the stackyard had more space for wagons and stacks of grain or hay raised up on mushroom-like 'staddle stones' as protection from damp and rats.

The small milking herd had to be repainted to reflect more varied traditional breeds. Pigs lived in small sties, while chicken and ducks roamed more freely. There was a 'little bit of everything' here on the farm.

Fast forward to 1975 and this stackyard had now become the centre of activity with more space for moving machines and new buildings of metal, concrete and asbestos sheets. Perhaps the earliest amongst these had been the 'dutch barn', giving shelter to straw and hay, now in rectangular bales, as well as assorted machinery. More recently the large cattle shed had been added, now housing a large uniform 'black and white' milking herd. They now walked on concrete surfaces which had replaced cobbles.

Winter feed was stored in a silage tower, many of which had become common features of our farming landscape. Grain was held in bins rather than in sacks. Various machines now handled the harvesting of fodder and the distribution of manure. Tractors had replaced horses and the ubiquitous 'Land Rover' now replaced the farmer's pony and trap. (The quality of the toys was most appreciated here).

The population of the other stock was now much reduced, with pigs and poultry raised in specialist units elsewhere, while the one time resident bull had by now been replaced by a visiting 'man in a white suit' not actually shown here.

If the opportunity and need arose for an up-dated model, the Bicton area would certainly suggest yet more changes. For instance, obsolete cowsheds and stables are being converted into desirable county residences housing an increasing number of Bicton residents. With amalgamations and specialisation some whole farmsteads have been given over to other uses. Larger farm units now have even bigger tractors, some of which have been specially designed for road as well as field work to link up with detached parts of an enterprise. The model maker would find that Britains toys are also keeping pace with these trends, so that their educational value remains high.

Bicton's skyline changed with the removal of the woodlands silage tower, replaced in part by large round bales in black polythene bags. Old 'staddle stones' are more likely to turn up as garden ornaments.

After the show the models went into the museum store, but because of their fragile nature the structures did not survive. They were not used at the Acton Scott Farm museum since that was, after all, the real thing.

Meanwhile the original model maker has remained in Bicton and is still helping with the interpretation of the landscape in other ways. Look around yourself to discover many of these changes. 1975's three-year-old son Jeremy is now a father himself but his own childhood collection of farm toys are still in the loft!





