

After discussing our changing farmyards, it seems logical to also look at their associated farm houses, at least one of which has recently appeared in the property pages of the Shrewsbury Chronicle.

In the parish most appear to date from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which was a general period of agricultural improvement and investment by landowners, especially in the boom years of the Napoleonic wars. In the old village, deeds suggest that original smaller farms were amalgamated during the inclosure of the 'open fields' so that improved accommodation was needed. The resulting 'Georgian' and 'Victorian' buildings reflect both their age and the individual stories of the varied owners involved.

In the wider parish the Hearth Tax records of 1672 suggest that almost all the main farms were already in existence, but only the fine timber houses at Woodcote have survived with little change from this period. As homes of local landowners and Shrewsbury businessmen, Hosiers and Warings, they had been built to a high standard and did not require rebuilding when occupied by later tenants. Perhaps elsewhere 'Georgian' brick may actually conceal original timber structures, as it does in many houses in Shrewsbury.

There is certainly a hint of this at Bicton Grove, which otherwise appears to be the work of Thomas Wright, a successful nurseryman in the early eighteenth century. Later owners, Jenkins and Wingfield, did not need to change it for their tenants.

One typical feature of investment by owner occupiers was their aspiration to create a smaller version of a 'Big House', in contrast to tenanted houses on big estates, which were more integrated with the farmyard in a functional manner. 'Big Houses' of the gentry would keep such functional buildings at arm's length, present a fine architectural front and enjoy views over parkland, across which ran a private carriage driveway. Bicton Hall, seat of the Jenkins family, and Bicton House illustrate this well.

Accounts reveal new building taking place at Bicton House in 1778 for the owner, Rev. Henry Hanmer. Elsewhere such precise dates may be difficult to pin down, but the arrival of a new owner may provide a clue. Thus in Bicton old village 'Red House' was rebuilt by Richard Gittins after about 1800 to face the fields instead of the street. Likewise, at the Woodlands, John Lloyd, about 1830, altered the house to face north over the fields and also enlarged the garden. The needs of modern farming now mean that buildings now obscure that view.

By contrast, the Grange, Upper Calcott and Churncote illustrate the simple, functional tenanted layouts, although not lacking in architectural style. The Preston Montford farmhouse, however, is rather different, perhaps not to compete with the adjacent Hall, built c. 1705. It looks as if it has been put together from different parts without the same regards for architecture and records give some support for this idea. In 1793, then landlord, John Hill, reimbursed tenant, John Yale, for the cost of "*taking down a piece of building at Preston Montford and erecting it to adjoin the farmhouse in his occupation converting the same into a cheese room, parlour lodging as well as other repairs....£111,-00*"

For some years after the Wingfields had acquired this property in 1829, it was called the 'Cottage' and was occupied by Miss Katherine Wingfield and her maid servants, while other members of the family lived in the Hall. Where the tenant farmer fitted into this accommodation is not clear. When

tenant, Butler Lloyd, took over in the 1850s he filled it with family and both domestic and farm staff. Still standing in its own grounds away from the buildings makes it now ideal for non-agricultural occupation!

One of the main reasons for building large farm houses, when so many rural cottages were rather small, was the housing of staff as well as the farmer's family. Sons were often kept at home to help; dairy maids processed the milk for butter and cheese, while young, unmarried workers and even older widowers were given a home. Census records show varied examples including that for Churncote in 1891.

John Cooke	Head	married	45		Farmer
Sarah Cooke	Wife	"		45	
Joseph "	Son	single	18		Farmer's assistant
John "	Son	"	16		" "
Margaret "	Daughter	"		14	Scholar
William Griffiths	Nephew	"	29		Waggoner
Robert Cooke	"		21		"
Edward Williams	Servant		30		Cowman
William Jones	"		22		?
Thomas Cooke	Nephew		15		Milkman
Sarah Jones	Servant			14	General servant

In modern times, smaller families, reduced domestic and farm staff, better housing for remaining workers and farm amalgamations have made such large farm houses less necessary. It has proved more profitable to 'downsize' to small modern dwellings or even 'barn conversions' so that the old house can be sold to a non-agricultural owner able to invest in improvements. Old, traditional buildings may look 'desirable' but an input of outside capital may be needed to modernise them in a way in which an agricultural enterprise alone may not be able to afford. The church authorities have, meanwhile, faced the same problems with oversized rural vicarages. This situation is illustrated in Bicton with a new, modern vicarage in Brookside replacing the Old Vicarage at the top of Bicton Lane.



*Bicton  
Farm*



*Preston Montford Farm*

