We have often discussed how Bicton sits on a mound of glacial debris – clay, stones of all sizes and patches of sand. They form a prominent ridge or 'moraine' across which the old Oswestry road needed improvements when it became part of Telford's 'Holyhead Road' in the early nineteenth century. Since the summer months are a traditional time for getting out and about, why not explore westwards to find out where all that glacial material came from and where the road was leading to.

On a fine day, from the crest of the moraine on Grange Bank, we can easily see the Berwyn Mountain forming the western skyline, so head in that direction. On the way one could call for refreshment at the Royal Hill at Edgerley, one of the few traditional country pubs which have escaped a modern makeover. This would give time to reflect on the river winding over a level plain of clay and silt filling a deep trench scoured in the local sandstone by the passing glacier, which then dumped much of it over Bicton. In this same area is the delightful little timber-frame church at Melverley, whose construction is a sensible response the soft ground beneath.

Further up the Severn, steep hillsides and flat valley floors also betray the action of glaciers draining from the Welsh ice cap some 20,000 years ago. However, for the types of glacial scenery illustrated in textbooks, one must instead head for those mountains up the Tanat valley on the Bala road.

Beyond Llanrhaeadr-ym-Mochnant the narrow road climbs up a tributary valley to reach Pistyll Rhaeadr, claimed to be the highest waterfall in Wales. It plunges over a cliff of hard basalt which shows a rough version of 'Giant's Causeway' vertical jointing and whose height, over one hundred feet, is a measure of the amount by which the ice has cut the valley deeper. This yielded the type of material which contributed to the Bicton moraine, including those boulders built into garden walls in the old village.

For the energetic, the rest of the valley leading towards Cadair Berwyn is certainly worth exploring, if only for the peace and quiet away from tourists. This is more than can be said of Snowdonia, where glaciers moving in the other direction carved passes through the upland, thus providing convenient routes for road builders and access for visitors.

During the late eighteenth century, several local 'Turnpike Trusts' were improving the roads through here, partially as an alternative route between Shrewsbury and Holyhead avoiding Chester. But after 1800, when the parliaments of Dublin and Westminster were united, the Irish MPs, nevertheless, still complained that their journey was slow and difficult. They lobbied the government to intervene, but response was slow thanks to the distractions of the Napoleonic Wars.

The government did, however, eventually become involved when it realised how important these roads were to the national postal services and appointed Thomas Telford to survey the route beyond Shrewsbury and organise improvements. Thus, from 1810 onwards, these were carried out, especially in reducing gradients and providing better bridges which included a suspension bridge over the Menai Strait. Toll houses and milestones of a standard design were spaced along the route, while in the mountain areas strong boundary walls both supported and confined the carriageway on difficult slopes.

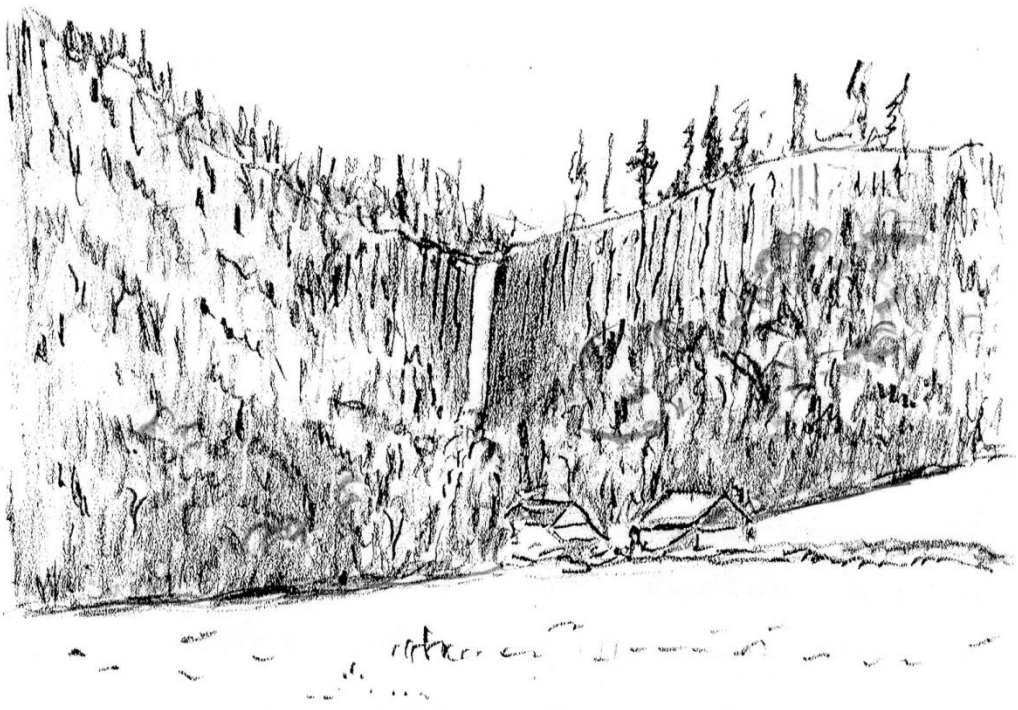
In a drive to North Wales, notice the smooth gradients fit for stagecoaches and the engineering involved, especially on that slow descent into Bettws-y-Coed. On the way, look under the bridge at Chirk, were the modern wide deck actually sits on Telford's original arch! Finally, at Holyhead

harbour, which has seen many modern developments, his custom house and a sort of triumphal arch still greet you at the quayside.

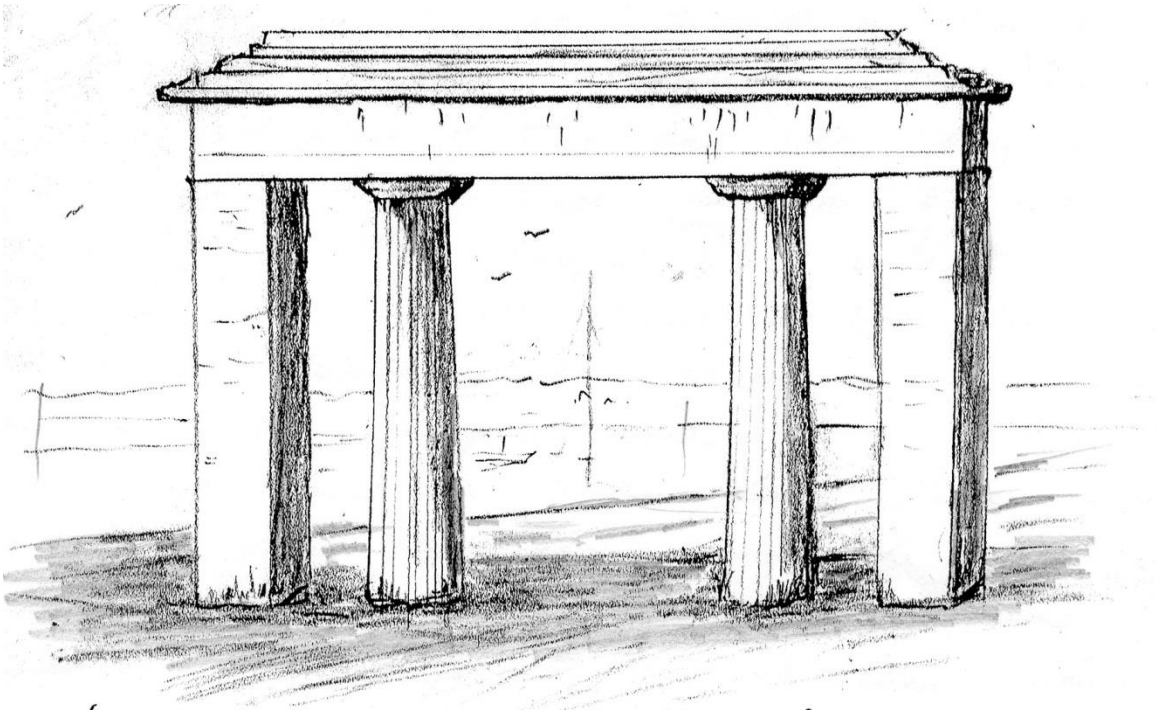
Should you continue your journey to Dublin, or at least look at a tourist brochure, you will see 'Halfpenny Bridge' across the Liffey – guess whose design was used!

With so much urgent work in the mountains it is no surprise that the minor problem at Bicton was not sorted out until 1835, actually after Telford's death, when assistant John Provis took over. Thus the whole project was now complete.

The road successfully reduced travel time between London and Holyhead to about 27 hours, but its glory was to be short-lived as the new railway system took over in 1848. However, Telford's work was 'built to last' so that much of it has been able to accommodate a return to more use in the motor car age (with the aid of 'tarmacadam'). It is also now appreciated as an historic monument. Do explore it along with the mountain scenery and thereby appreciate how our local features and history fit into the wider scheme of things.



Pistyll Rhaeadr, Berwyn Mountains



'The end of the road' - monumental arch at Holyhead Harbour