

A Candle Factory, a Piggery and two Maiden Ladies – just a bit of Victorian Southside

This article focuses on just a short stretch of Southside which includes two of the oldest houses in this part of the village – Grange Cottage and Radley Cottage – as well as later dwellings such as Tamarisk Cottage and Palmer House, which appear to stand on older foundations. (The house-names themselves are all comparatively recent – older houses would have been known by the names of their occupants).

Grange Cottage is clearly ancient. It stands well below the modern street level, and marks on its eastern gable show it was once only two-storeys, with a steeply-pitched roof that would have been thatched. The old deeds to this lovely building have disappeared, but we have a number of clues to its history. The Census returns for 1841 show that it was occupied by Richard Prentice, a tallow-chandler by trade – in other words the village candlemaker. Richard must have inherited his business from “old Isaac Prentice”, a freeholder who voted in the closely-fought county election of 1815. While Admiral Lechmere’s lady from Hill House was knocking on Isaac’s front door, Brookes’ village history tells us, the Rector “went straight to the candle factory where he guessed that Isaac would be working” and secured his vote for the other side! The Enclosure Map of 1767 takes us back another generation, showing that a “Mr Prentice” owned the land behind Grange Cottage. This was another Richard Prentice, one of the village farmers (and landlord of the Chequers Inn, location unknown, from 1753 to 1761).

Prentice’s grounds, like those of Grange Cottage today, included the access track and the line of barns behind the next house to the east (now Staithe Cottage). This is probably where Isaac and the younger Richard had their workshop, turning animal fat into inexpensive candles. By 1851, Richard Prentice had retired, and had turned his outhouses into a row of three modest cottages. For the time being, these were known as Prentice’s Yard. The yard’s name changed with its owners, and some tenants came and went, and but a farm worker called Charles Needle made one of these cottages his family home right through to the 1890s.

On the west side of Grange Cottage the 1767 Enclosure Map shows a long building fronting onto Southside, exactly where Tamarisk Cottage and Palmer House now stand. It seems to have been the family home of the Fenemore family, so we could call it “Fenemores”. In 1841 it was occupied by William Fenemore and his family, including his 70-year-old mother Martha. William was already in business as a pig dealer.

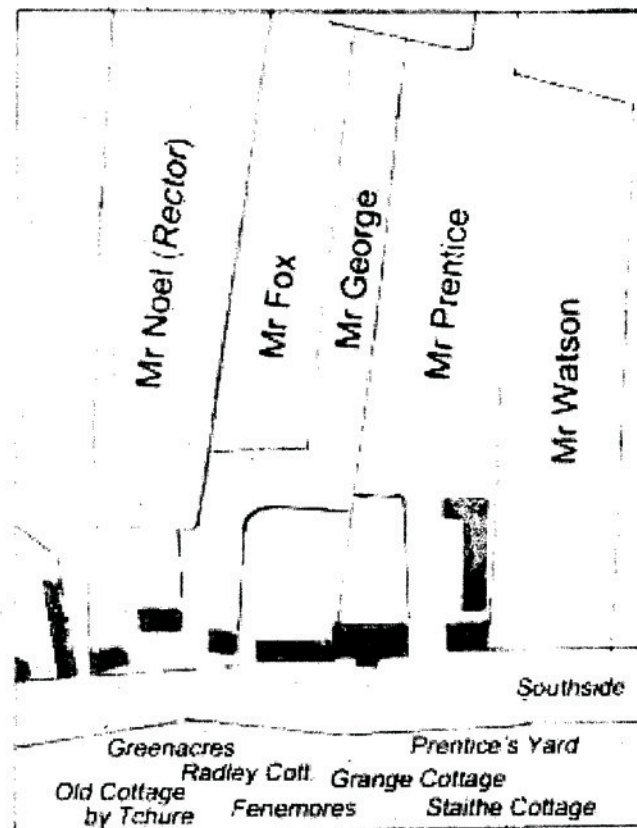
The 1841 census shows William’s younger brother Joseph Fenemore living on Paines Hill, but later that year he bought the cottage next door, now Radley Cottage. Behind its early-19th century façade (which Joseph himself may have added) lurks a smaller, older building with a cellar, and with rafters that retain some of their original bark. Thanks to a fascinating set of old deeds, its history can be traced further back. Joseph bought it from the trustees of Henry Hedgskins, a shoemaker who had inherited it from John George, a blacksmith, along with some farmland across the street which had belonged to John’s uncle, Richard George. The old cottage itself seems to have belonged to John’s father, another John George, who was granted just over an acre in the 1767 Enclosure as the “owner of one cottage and cow common”.

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Like William, Joseph Fenemore was a pig dealer, and his move to Radley Cottage probably helped the brothers consolidate their joint business. This had expanded still further by 1861, because Richard Prentice had died, and William's son, Henry Fenemore, another pig dealer, had moved into Grange Cottage. (The adjacent cottages were still being called Prentice's Yard – by 1871 they had become Fenemore's Yard). William also died in the 1860s, leaving "Fenemores" to his brother. Joseph knocked the old house down and built the pair of dwellings we know as Tamarisk Cottage and Palmer House, which have the date 1865 on their façade. These were let to various people over the years, but the piggery continued at the back.

The next bit of the story takes us across the valley to The Grange, whose proprietor for some years was a retired colonial officer, Lt-Col Henry Atkins Bowyer (born in Nova Scotia). He died in 1871, leaving the house and estate to his son Captain Henry Bowyer, formerly of the 10th Hussars, who sold up only six years later. This was not to the liking of his maiden aunts, Mary and Frances Atkins Bowyer, who had clearly formed an attachment to Steeple Aston. By 1881 Mary had bought the Prentices' old house and renamed it Grange Cottage. Initially it seems to have been let to a friend or relative, but by 1891 the two sisters were living there in some style, with four resident female servants. Charles Needle still occupied one of the back cottages, but his address was now Bowyer's Yard.



Part of Southside: diagram copied from 1767 Enclosure Map, with landowners' names as given. The buildings are as shown on the map, but some houses have been completely rebuilt, and all their names are much more recent.

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The piggery had run its course by this time. Joseph Fenemore had retired by 1881, and Henry had moved his operation to Heyford Road. Joseph's son, William Fenemore junior, was now tenant of the Rectory, or Lower Field, Farm (324 acres employing 9 men & 4 boys), and was living with his family in the old manor buildings opposite the church. But the sisters may still have been worried that the pigs might come back under new management, and began buying up the neighbouring properties along with the land they controlled. By the time Mary Bowyer died in 1895, she was the owner of Tamarisk Cottage and Palmer House. In 1896, Frances Bowyer bought the remaining property for £600 from Elizabeth Fenemore, William junior's wife. Frances named it Radley Cottage out of family pride – her forebears were the Atkins Bowyers of Radley Hall (where Radley School now stands) and the nearby village pub is still called the Bowyer Arms.

When Frances died in 1907, friends and family donated a large window in Steeple Aston church to the memory of the three Bowyer siblings, Henry, Mary and Frances. The little estate the sisters had built up remained in the Bowyer family for another half-century. Grange, Tamarisk and Palmer were eventually sold in 1953 (though Grange and Tamarisk Cottages remained in joint ownership until 1979); Radley Cottage was sold separately in 1957.

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