

Farming in Steeple and Middle Aston – a review of the SAVA Exhibition



As the title suggests, this SAVA exhibition had an ageless feel. Many of the photos were of the people in our farming community today and some sections dared to forecast agricultural life in future times. There's justification in this. The climate, the limestone brash, ironstone, sand and clay on which the villages stand, have been the same throughout time. Those who worked the land and how they worked it, form the history.

The pivotal point in this history was in the display of the Steeple Aston Enclosure Map of 1767, the jewel in the SAVA archive. The Enclosure Act signified the end of one method of using the land and the beginning of "farming" as we understand it today. Where strip farming and common pasture land had been used by many ordinary people to grow crops and keep a few animals under the auspices of the Manor and the Church, the land was now "enclosed" and redistributed into larger fields with boundary hedges and fences and cultivated by those who made a profession of farming. The result was ten farms in Steeple Aston, and three created in Middle Aston by a separate Enclosure scheme in 1756.

Over centuries, fields changed owners and individual farms expanded or disappeared. Much of the exhibition was concerned with the development in these individual farms. Of particular delight were panels showing the names of various fields derived from the characteristics of the area. *Daffydowndilly Clump* (an area of trees populated by daffodils) was among the more poetic. *Mortar Pits Furlong* and *Puddle Pits* (for clay) indicated places to obtain building materials. *Raspberry Brake* and *Conegar* (rabbits) provided opportunity for foraging.

Possibly more than in previous exhibitions, Middle Aston stood out for several reasons. First, the huge acreage of farmland in which it sits, and then the fact that it was a "closed" village at the time of the Enclosure. Finally there was the purchase of the entire Middle Aston Estate by Spillers in 1954 for agricultural research. This resulted in the conversion of Middle Aston House to a conference centre with laboratories, and elsewhere, pig and poultry units and innovative changes in arable crops and cow and sheep husbandry. Spillers packaging and products were displayed alongside ancient farm implements provided by Royston Kinch and others.

Both sessions of the exhibition were very well attended, possibly the highest attendance of any exhibition so far. It was gratifying for SAVA members to see their research resulting in lively discussion and reminiscence amongst visitors gathered around the panels. There were also considerable numbers of visitors from outside the village.

SAVA has produced a book of the exhibition, fully illustrated and with extra material which it was not possible to include in the exhibition itself. It is available now through SAVA members, the Village History Centre (open 10-12 am each Saturday) or the website. An ideal Christmas gift at £9.95!

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