



STEEPLE ASTON VILLAGE ARCHIVE TRUST

The Story of Great Aunt Ada

Miss Ada Smith was born in Hinksey in 1880. She came with her family to Middle Aston when she was one year old and attended Dr Radcliffe's school until she was 12. Then she had to leave and find a job. As the seventh child in a family of eight boys and four girls (born between 1870 and 1892), she needed to make her contribution to the family finances.



Ada (back left) and her family

The only job she could find locally was as a laundry maid with Mrs Brookes. The Rev C C Brookes, son of John Henry Brookes who had been Rector of Steeple Aston until 1896, lived in Middle Aston House. His mother – a member of the Christie family – had bought the estate with a rebuilt mansion house when her husband died, and her son Charles had succeeded to it. For a while he was Rector of Duns Tew, though living at Middle Aston. In his retirement, he wrote the history of this parish, which was privately printed at the King's Stone Press. Copies are now very rare.

Mr Brookes was a generous man. After the harvest, when women and children were allowed by the farmers to walk around and gather the corn missed by the cutters (known as leysing or gleaning), Mr Brookes would take their corn to Lower Heyford Mill and get it properly ground in to flour for them.

Ada thought herself lucky to have obtained employment locally so she could still live at home. At this time, she also worked for the Barrett family and Lady Paton. But in 1901, she moved with her family to the Dickredge in Steeple Aston. This gave her a wider choice of employment as trains ran from Lower Heyford with many local connections. (Of course, there were no bus services at that time.) Ada found herself employed once again as a laundry maid, but now with Mrs Miller of Shotover House in Wheatley.

In those days, the laundry was still all done by hand. Water was boiled in a copper or boiler, which needed to be kept frequently stoked. Cotton bed linen, table linen, blouses and shirts were boiled, washed, rinsed and starched before being put through a hand-operated mangle. Then they were hung either in the kitchen on hoisted washing lines or outside in good weather. When they were dry, the ironing was done with flat irons heated on the top

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of the cooking range. The whole process took two days and was very hot and uncomfortable, particularly in the summer months.

When she wasn't working, Ada liked to spend her time sewing – she was an expert at embroidery and also made ragmats. She enjoyed reading as well, and talking to the other employees who lived in the house. But her quiet and settled life was disrupted in 1914 when the First World War broke out. Everyone was expected to help out with the war effort, so off went Ada, aged 34, to do her bit. She worked first in an aircraft factory in Staffordshire, and then at another, Brasleys next to Kentish Town station in London. Sadly, like many of her contemporaries, she lost her boyfriend in the war and she remained a spinster all her life.

When the war was over, Ada went back into service, working for Lady Paton and various other employers in Gloucestershire and Staffordshire. But eventually she came home to look after her elderly parents still living in the Dickredge. She also worked by helping other elderly people in the village, including the parents of Rev. Michael Hayter, the Rector of Steeple Aston. They lived at East Springs in Northside and she worked for them until Mr Hayter senior became too heavy for her to lift. She was by then 70 years old herself.

Later, when she was asked how she thought the village had changed over the years, Ada said how she missed seeing the extensive apple orchards (shown on the old OS maps) in bloom, and their fruit ripening over the summer. Apparently apple buyers would come and lodge in the village waiting for the crops to be harvested.

Ada also remembered the Smiths of Deddington bringing their street fair to the Steeple Aston Feast, which was held at the end of June. The fair was staged on the wide verge in Heyford Road, and in the first field, before any of the houses were built.

Ada told how Mr and Mrs Smith (no relation) also took the fair to Middleton Park. There, Mrs Smith was asked by the owner, Lord Jersey, how many children she had now. "Twenty-one sir," she replied, "and another in the basket."

She also recounted an incident in the village shop, then owned by Mr and Mrs Harris. A local gentleman, who reputedly had had a few too many, noticed as Mrs Harris climbed the steps to the top shelf that she was wearing her husband's socks. When she handed him his change he said, "You keep that Mrs Harris and buy yourself a pair of stockings".



Heyford Rd, where the fair would be set up on the verge

Great Aunt Ada continued to live in the same house in the Dickredge, now called The Cottage, until she died in 1976 at the age of 96. It had been her family home for 75 years. She was a much-loved lady by all who had the privilege of knowing her.

Gwen Stone (née Smith)