



STEEPLE ASTON VILLAGE ARCHIVE TRUST

Old Byways of Steeple Aston

We are all used to the ways in and out of our village, en route to Oxford, Bicester or Banbury, but these routes have not always been the main “desire lines”. Before the advent of the motorised vehicle, the day-to-day horizons of our ancestors were a great deal closer, with movement between adjacent villages and farms more frequent than to the market towns for many people. Still further beyond them was unheard of for most villagers. Our local historian Brookes has an interesting opinion about roads: *“The ancient Roman roads were made for direct passage from places far apart, and for preference kept to high ground to avoid flooding. Later on such roads often fell into disuse. The Saxons on the other hand, were stay-at-home people and preferred to keep near streams for their little tracts, thus avoiding hills.”*

Little is known about the routes used by earliest settlers of our village, except where archaeology has thrown up fascinating insights. When Lawrence Fields was under construction in the 1970s, the remains of a Roman trackway were uncovered, running in a similar direction and roughly parallel to our existing Heyford Road. Wheelruts and burials close to the track show that this was an area of some activity, but we do not know of what kind. The Cherwell Valley was a fertile area and we know of several finds of Roman material locally, including remains of a villa unearthed in 1658 and now apparently lost. This track probably connected to the Akeman Way, which came up from Cirencester heading for St. Albans, and through Alchester, a walled Roman garrison town of some importance close to Wendlebury (which is still being excavated). A stretch of the Akeman Way remains in use today running from near Kirtlington to Chesterton.

Brookes tells us that “above the Heyfords, just below the aerodrome, at the top of the bank there runs a bridle-road following the track of a Roman road, which in turn seems to have followed an earlier British one. It was called Portway, being part of one which ran from Southampton to York,” just as today trains run beneath it to and from the same places.” Portway still exists as the Kirtlington Road running south from the road to Bicester. These roads were examples of the long distance routes, used less by local people than by those passing through.

Many hundreds of years later, before the Inclosure of Steeple Aston in 1767, the routes between the local villages were different to those we have today. For example, there used to be a lane running from Middle Aston to North Aston to the west of the one we now use, which no longer exists. In 1794 a map produced by Richard Davis shows that the Byway running north from Fenway opposite Westfield Farm riding stables used to be the main route from Steeple to Middle Aston. The route we now use from Fir Lane did not always permit passage through the estate of Francis Page at Middle Aston House, and was closed off with iron gates. The site of these gates is easily visible today as the road skirts around the estate boundary, but this did not happen until the original house had been demolished in the early 1800s.

The Davis map also shows the new Turnpike road from Oxford through Deddington, created in 1755 from the previous track. In supporting the Act of Parliament that created the Oxford to Banbury Turnpike a Banbury publican said: *“The road is, from the number of heavy carriages passing along the same, and the nature of the soil, so ruinous as to be a danger to travellers and almost impassable for carriages for many months of the year.”* The turnpike had a toll-house in the dip just south of Deddington, very similar to the one surviving at Water Eaton just north of Oxford. In less than a hundred years, the Oxford Canal and newly-open railways succeeded in taking substantial revenues away from the turnpike here, with most of the carriage trade and waggon haulage switching to the newer forms of transport. Our toll-house was demolished as a result in 1844. Things have since reverted of course, and we now think of the Oxford Road as the most important route in our area, but in fact there is no evidence that it existed at all before about 1650. The two roads that now connect the village to it- Sixty-Foot and Fenway, were probably once little more than tracks for occasional use. So it is probable that only four hundred years ago, Steeple Aston was much more “off the beaten track” than it now is. The village was not located on a cross-roads or as a stop on a through route, as many are, but had its origin in the farms and dwellings of a much more localised world.

Even so, the Enstone to Bicester road, once known as Shamblesway, runs across Heyford bridge at Rousham, and was (and still is) important as one of very few crossings of the Cherwell in the area, and may have lent our village some additional importance. The road was made a Turnpike in 1793. Its commercial potential, however, was undermined by both canal and railway constructed to run alongside it, and Turnpike status was removed in 1876.

More typical of the most local level of route in the village is the narrow foot-way which we know as the Tchure and which passes between two orchards, the unusual name defined as “a narrow alley.” Brookes quotes an old man speaking of “of the children being catechised in the “tuer” in the Church, meaning the aisle. The “square” of roads that make up the heart of our village is bisected by the Tchure. Of these (once known as North Street, Watery Lane, South Street and Pain’s Street) the earliest was probably what is now North Side, when the village was only a few dwellings in the vicinity of the Church. On a quiet day standing by the Church looking out over the Cherwell valley down Cow Lane, it is perhaps easy to imagine that the Oxford Road does not exist.

Martin Lipson

This article is drawn from SAVA’s current work for the Autumn Exhibition - the Environment of Steeple Aston- to be held in the Village Hall on the weekend of November 10th and 11th. Themes covered will include- Watercourses and Springs, Flora and Fauna, Trees and Hedges, Tracks and Roads, and local Geology.

Your knowledge and views on these and other subjects of local interest will, as ever, be welcomed at the Exhibition. From 2008, SAVA plans to advertise and hold occasional “open meetings” to give more opportunities for this local knowledge to be shared.