



Love and bread-making at Old Tom's

Old Tom's on Northside is one of Steeple Aston's most picturesque cottages – long, low and thatched. It also has a few tales to tell. Thanks to a fine set of Deeds, its story can be traced back nearly two-hundred years.

Tokens of Love and Marriage

The early history of Old Tom's is intimately bound up with the Davis family, who owned The Grange on the other side of Northside. The cottage, its outhouses and around one acre of meadow or pasture, formed part of a Marriage Settlement drawn up in 1726, when Thomas Davis married Elizabeth, daughter of Samuel Wilkins, a butcher in Middle Aston. Wilkins is said to have brought a butcher's basket full of golden guineas to the wedding as Elizabeth's marriage-portion. The Settlement was Davis's own contribution. At a time when a married woman could not hold property independently of her husband, it would provide Elizabeth with an income of her own while Thomas was alive – and during her widowhood if she outlived him. The property, held by trustees on her behalf, included farmland as well as several houses.

Thomas died in 1747, and twenty years later Elizabeth passed the properties on to her son and heir Thomas Davis II. By 1767 mother and son were both living in Bicester, where young Thomas had established himself as a surgeon. The transfer gave him full control of the Grange estate just as the Steeple Aston open fields were enclosed. In 1775 he married Hannah Tanner, from Bucknell, and Old Tom's formed part of Hannah's Marriage Settlement. It remained hers until her death in 1811, a few months before her husband in 1812, when it passed to their elder son Thomas Davis III, a surgeon like his father with a London practice that would grow to include King William IV and the first Regiment of Life Guards. His future earnings would enable him to turn The Grange into the ornate sculpture-encrusted building we know today. But in 1813 he probably needed money for his London home – he sold Old Tom's in April that year, and a month later married Maria Spicer...



Old Tom's

A Village Bakery

So much for the landlords of Old Tom's, what about the tenants? The evidence is that for many years they were bakers. The bakehouse itself is first mentioned in 1813, but it had obviously been there for some time, as the deed of sale names a baker, Nathaniel French, as a previous tenant. In 1813 Mrs Sarah Lockett, a widow, bought the freehold of Old Tom's from Thomas Davis for her daughter-in-law Ann, whose husband William Lockett, another baker, had followed French as tenant. William had since died, leaving Ann with two daughters, Frances and Sarah, and it seems likely that Ann Lockett carried on supplying the village with bread and cakes.

A passion for trees

Sarah Luckett paid £700 for the cottage and grounds, plus another £32 for the trees, which had been separately valued. They must have been impressive, and they certainly caught Sarah Luckett's imagination. When she died four years later she left Old Tom's to Ann for life and then to the two granddaughters, but only on the strict condition that she did not cut down the trees or harm them in any way – if she did, Old Tom's was to bypass her and go straight to her daughters. (Sarah Luckett had a house of her own somewhere in Steeple Aston, which remains to be identified – she had inherited it from her husband, another William Luckett, and under her Will it was to be sold and the money distributed to her numerous sisters and their children).

A few years later Ann married again, and moved to Wootton Underwood to live with her farmer husband, Daniel Guttridge, taking her girls with her, but keeping hold of Old Tom's. In 1839 the four of them agreed to mortgage the property for £400, taking care to include in the deed the same tight restriction on cutting down or lopping the trees, or allowing them to be damaged by cattle.

Bankruptcy and repossession.

Old Tom's was meanwhile let to yet another baker – David Woodford. In 1844 the Guttridges put it up for sale, and as Woodford was the highest bidder, sold it to him for £460. He took out a new mortgage for £400 with William Spittle, a farmer at Weston-on-the-Green. But Woodford struggled to make the repayments, even though Spittle only charged him 4½% interest. Exactly what went wrong is hard to tell, but competition probably proved the last straw. By 1851 John Louch, from Fewcott, had opened a new bakery on the corner of Paines Hill and Heyford Road – the shop that later became Harris's Stores.

In 1854 Woodford was declared bankrupt, and at the end of April his principal creditors gathered at the Bell Inn, Lower Heyford, to take over his home and his business – in fact everything “except his wearing apparel”, as their agreement stated. The leading creditors were Joseph Gilkes, farmer of Rousham, and Francis French Creek, mealman of Lower Heyford, together with William Wing, farmer, land agent, and historian of Steeple Aston, whom Spittle, now dead, had appointed as his executor.

The violin-maker and his landlady

Old Tom's was put up for auction, but failed to sell. At some point it must have been let to Richard Harris, second son of the violin-maker Charles Harris, and himself a practitioner of the craft. William Wing continued to manage the property on behalf of Spittle's estate, and eventually found a solution to its future – in 1858 he sold it to Spittle's niece Martha for £420. And as luck would have it, the relationship between Richard Harris and Martha Spittle progressed well beyond that of tenant and landlady. On October 30 1860 they were married at Steeple Aston Church. Richard continued to make violins, at least until 1869, but by 1871 he was calling himself a Corn and Hay Merchant. After his death in 1876, Martha continued to live at Old Tom's for many years. She was still there in 1901, by which time their son, John, and his wife Lizzie were trading as a grocer under the same roof.

GEOFFREY LANE (with thanks to Mr and Mrs Lloyd for the loan of their Deeds).

Does your house have a story to tell? If you have old Deeds, SAVA would be grateful for the opportunity to examine them.