

This article is based on one from Upper Heyford Recollections Volume 2; with thanks to Ian Lough-Scott of Upper Heyford Historical Society for permission to use it in SAL.

RIFAM PLANK!

A walk to Steeple Aston across the meadows takes one over a narrow timber footbridge across the Cherwell stream, which today we call Rifle Plank bridge, but in living memory has been called 'Rifam Plank' (sometimes spelt 'Rifeham Plank'). It is a very old and unusual name and one is left to ponder its derivation. Brookes 'History of Steeple Aston' mentions Ryfarm Meadow, which is adjacent to the bridge, and suggests that the original name of the bridge was 'ad ripam' (to the bank). It is likely that it is a Latin name that has been corrupted over the years, perhaps from the Latin riparian – of, inhabiting, or situated on the bank of a river.

The recreational walker is pleased to find the plank* in place to make life easy, but in Victorian times it was of much greater importance, as cross country footpaths were main routes between villages. Edmund Creek, a farmer with land in Steeple Aston & Upper Heyford, wrote to the Oxford Chronicle in September 1876 to complain about the delay in replacing the plank following winter storms:

Dear Sir,

*The above, known as the Rifeham Plank, is or was a long wooden slab which, up to November 1875, when it was washed away by the floods, spanned that part of the Cherwell stream which divides the parishes of Upper Heyford and Middle Aston in this county, and also formed part of the public foot-road which immediately connects the parish of Upper Heyford with those of Steeple and Middle Aston and other contiguous parishes. The plank could not be restored during the winter on account of the floods, but, so soon as the cuckoo came to pick up the dirt, we fondly but vainly hoped to see a new one put in its place, and when our disappointment found vent in a question respectfully addressed to some of our road officials as to when the new plank was to be laid down, the usual reply was, that it was awaiting the solution of a question of *ratione tenurae* (or who was liable for maintenance by reason of tenure).*

*I think, Sir, that this consideration of *ratione tenurae*, officially applied, ought to have its weight in inducing those gentlemen, whose special business it is, to endeavour to solve, if not yet solved, the very difficult problem whether or not an ancient and public footpath ought to be maintained, and whose duty it is to maintain. Everybody grumbles, not excepting the district medical officer of Upper Heyford, who resides at Steeple Aston, and grumbles at being deprived of a short cut to visit his patients, while his patients themselves helplessly groan away the time lost in fetching the doctor and obtaining the required relief. If we should have another series of autumn and winter floods set in before the work is done, we may have to wait till next midsummer, and I therefore hope that as this *ratione tenurae* question has had a good six months run, it has by this time, received a satisfactory solution, and that the work will at once be proceeded with.*

Yours, truly, Edmund Creek. Steeple Aston, September 9th, 1876.

We don't know how this story turned out. These days, it has been established that the responsible party is the County Council, and indeed a major replacement of the bridge was carried out by them in 2014: * it is no longer a plank. SAL reported that in the course of this work a heavy machine had managed to mire itself in the mud for some days.