



## STEEPLE ASTON VILLAGE ARCHIVE

As many of the older residents of the village know, Steeple Aston has had a variety of shops over the years. This article about them draws on SAVA's publication "Steeple Aston- Business and Trade" (which is still in print and available, for more detailed information).

**1. The Co-op:** perhaps the most memorable shop for many was the "Co-op", in the Manor House on South Side just round the corner from our present shop. It was established in 1872 in three large interconnecting rooms in what had been Charles Harris' rather grand house, sold after he went bankrupt. Our Co-op was one of the early manifestations of the co-operative movement in Oxfordshire, and had its own bakery at the back, and a wide range of goods on sale. One room was given over to drapery. Several well-known village families were involved, like the Franks, Miss Miller, the Miss Jordans, the Wadhams and the Hicks. Small tokens could be traded as currency (SAVA has one in the archive), and of course, there was the dividend. Several people in the village can still quote the family 'divvi' number. By the early C20th the shop was in competition with other village stores and villagers had more mobility. In 1969, after nearly 100 years, the Co-op closed.

**2. Harris's Stores:** our current village shop - started life next door in the corner house as The Wheatsheaf pub in the 1860s. By the turn of the century it was selling groceries and drapery. Until 1938, later members of the Harris family ran the store and when Mr. and Mrs. Burton bought the shop in September that year customers were still being served across a "magnificent mahogany counter with shelves everywhere, with little drawers to store spices, jars of sweets, and deep bins; there were also counters with a cheesecutter, a weighing machine and bacon slicer". Fred Stone started work in Harris's store at the age of thirteen and spent his entire working life there. With the coming of war, Mrs Burton lost all her staff, except for Fred, who was given exemption from call-up because she simply couldn't run the shop on her own. Much of the village was registered for rationing with either the store or the Co-op. Packing orders, serving, running up and down stairs for goods, counting and binding up food coupons, together with all the paperwork, they spent the war years run off their feet. It was 1954 before Doris Burton could take a holiday. In 1957 she sold the shop to the Armstrongs, who renamed it 'Armstrongs Stores' and ran it with the assistance of Mrs. Gardner and, yes, Fred Stone.

By 1965, it was Harris's Stores again, the shop now incorporating the Post Office in the back room. It then changed hands several times before Sharon and Andrew Peace took it over in 2002. Operating as the "Peaceful Trading Company" the shop and post office provided a comprehensive range of goods and other services to the village, employing seventeen full and part-time staff. Small local shops, however, are increasingly affected by the dominance of supermarket and now internet shopping and deliveries. In 2007, the Peace family separated the shop from the adjoining house, removed the bay window and curved corner entrance that had served the shop for many years, and installed a new shopfront where previously the garage had been. The business was sold in 2008 to Raj and his family, who occupy a self-contained flat above the relocated shop. The latest owners continue to provide an indispensable element of the village's vitality, in premises that have evolved to cope with the realities of the 21st century.



**3. The "Old Forge Stores",** at the other end of Paynes Hill, came into being in the premises previously occupied by the Dun Cow pub, which closed in 1958. Charlie Gardner, the last landlord of the pub, had let out the rooms next door for meetings, but the previous landlord, Mr Gascoigne, had made use of all the buildings, being both publican and blacksmith. In 1961, there was great excitement in the village because Mrs. Tilbury and her son Alan opened 'Tilburys' as the first mainly self-service store in Steeple Aston. They stayed five years and then the shop, by now renamed 'The Old Forge Stores', changed hands three times: first to the Pryses, then the Hunts and in 1981, to Mrs Jackson and her daughter Ann. The Jacksons sold groceries, greengroceries, cooked meats, coal, charcoal, peat and fishing tackle, and there was an off-licence.

Three years later the shop closed when the Jacksons left the district. After much speculation about the future of the building, it was converted into offices, and more recently into two flats.

**4. Stones:** In 1934 Mrs. Elsie Stone opened a small general store at what is now The Nest, at the junction of Cow Lane and Paynes Hill, using the door onto Paynes Hill as the entrance and the room it opened into as the shop. She sold groceries, confectionery, cigarettes, and as there were no fridges, she kept butter, cheese and a large tin of ice-cream down in the cellar below the shop. She also sold all the small necessities that you might run short of – paraffin oil, candles, matches, hairnets and hairgrips, boot polish, Aspros and suchlike. Many older residents remember as children buying sweets at Stones'. On the death of Elsie the shop closed and most of the remaining stock was bought by the Harris Stores. But in 1964, Mrs Jill Birk opened a baby and children's wear shop in the empty premises directly opposite Tilbury's store, which she called 'Kinderland'. It closed after four years and the shop reverted to part of the private house again, still lived in by Peter Stone, Elsie's son. The photo (below left) shows him on the steps in 1937.

**5. Waltons:** Three generations of the Wall family butchers in the village came to an end in 1879, and some time later John Walton took over their butchery business at Bladebone Hall in South Side, eventually buying the property in 1902. Their single storey shop was on the site next door, now occupied by Walton House, and was shaded by a huge tree to keep it cool in summer. His fourth son, Frank, commonly called Charlie, took over the business. In 1965 he was still in charge, with the butchery work being done by three of his sons: John, Richard and Stuart. The Waltons only dealt in good quality, locally-sourced meat. Live beasts would be held in the adjacent 'holding field', and chickens and turkeys were also reared. The three brothers ran the shop and had two vans, each of which travelled 200 to 250 miles a week, delivering to surrounding villages. Richard and Stuart moved on to open butcher's shops elsewhere, but John, helped by his wife Betty, continued to make a great success of the village shop, winning the county prize for their sausages annually. In 1984, in the face of competition from supermarkets, the interior of the shop was rearranged to make space for frozen foods and greengroceries, and for the first time, a name board was put up outside. When John retired in 1996, the shop closed, marking the end of what was believed to be over 200 years of butchery on the site. Glyn, his main assistant, who had learnt his trade from John, opened a butcher's in Kidlington, retiring in 2005.



**6. More Waltons:** In Heyford Road, by what was then the slaughterhouse on the corner of the Dickredge, a Walton cousin, Frederick, ran another butcher's shop. He died when his son, Fred, was only sixteen, but Fred and Frank Walton continued to run it, helped by Ted Calver. Fred and his wife Betty, who was famed for her pies and general good cooking, continued to run the shop until 1962, when Ralph Fonge and his wife, Joan, took over. The shop finally closed in 1973.

**7. The little shop:** for over sixty years the small shop on South Side seems to have been used for boot and shoe repairing. In 1901, Amos Evan George worked here. His son also trained as a boot and shoe repairer. By 1925 John 'Jack' Wadham was working here. As many still remember, for more than thirty years he worked with boots and shoes, but also sold Raleigh bikes and did cycle repairs. Mr. Pointer followed, continuing with boot and shoe work, but adding cycle accessories and selling some shoes too. When Mrs. Rhodes bought the shop it changed character completely. She set it up as an antique shop with Mrs Oliver in charge of sales. When they both retired in 1983, Aston Windows moved in and transformed its external appearance to that which we see today. Since then it has been empty at times, but has been a saddlery, a gallery, and a health and beauty treatment centre. It is currently available to let.

Various houses in the village have also hosted shops at times, for example a baker's at Springvale in Heyford Road, and a bookshop/library at Chancel Cottage in Fir Lane. The Post office had several locations before it arrived in the present shop, but that's a story for another article.