

A History of Steeple Aston in 100 Objects

At some point in the 600 years of the Anglo-Saxon era, an early Steeple Astonite mislaid a spear head. Many centuries later, in the 1940s, boys cultivating the gardens in the grounds of Dr. Radcliffe's School came upon the hunting implement and handed it to the teacher. Subsequently, in the absence of anything like SAVA in those days, it found its way into the County Archive Collection. On the occasion of SAVA's latest exhibition, it was on view in the Village Hall, just a few yards distant from where it was first dropped and then discovered.

The spear head was just one of the hundred objects on display at this year's show. The theme was a well-trying one but, when applied to the village archive, gave the opportunity to open up the contents to a wider audience. Some of the objects were immovable like the war memorial but were represented photographically; others needed careful handling as fragile historical documents and artefacts, though you could touch the Steeple Aston bricks as much as you liked!

The collection was organised chronologically, starting with minerals and fossils, and ending with plans for recent housing developments. Along the way was Margarita Chamberlayne's Hunting Diary illustrated with ink drawings and a wry commentary on the horses and their riders. Harriet Kilby was the daughter of the family at Rectory Farm in 1835 and produced a beautiful sampler. The first minutes of the newly formed Parish Council in 1895 showed concern about the poor state of the footpaths and the need to "light the villages with lamps". Plus ça change. The largest of the mobile objects was the bier, made to carry coffins through the village to the church in the days before funeral directors.

A simple bowl of conkers revealed a touching story amongst the WW1 objects. They were the direct descendants of what was known as the Verdun conkers planted by Charlotte Brookes to form an avenue of trees which still exists, though a little depleted now, near the "chicken sheds" on the road from Steeple to Middle Aston. The conkers were originally harvested from the battlefields of the Verdun after the great siege of 1916.

A great many of the objects had been donated to SAVA by villagers in recent years, many having been hidden away for years, a little like the Anglo-Saxon spear head. Such items are the life-blood of SAVA who are always willing to accept or copy documents and artefacts relating to the village.

An appreciative set of over 100 visitors attended this wide-ranging exhibition over two days, many staying for hours. Some demanded that SAVA produce a book of the show. We shall see. In the meantime, for those that missed this weekend, there are two new books on sale which draw on previous exhibitions - please have a look on www.steepleastonarchive.org.uk/shop