



STEEPLE ASTON VILLAGE ARCHIVE TRUST

John Paine, the Flower de Luce and the Doctor's House

The Fleur de Lys, commonly known as the Flower (or Flour) de Luce, was Steeple Aston's leading public house from the 1750s until the 1780s. Its landlord was a colourful character called John Paine, and it's very likely that he gave his name to Paines Hill. As the *Victoria County History* puts it, the street was "possibly named after John Paine, butcher, auctioneer, owner of the Fleur de Luce inn, and a leading figure in the 18th-century life of the village". Auctioneer may be a slight exaggeration, but the pub was regularly advertised as the place to pick up details of houses for sale in the neighbourhood.

John Paine ran his pub here at least from 1753 – the earliest date for which Oxfordshire has licensing records – and maybe a bit before that, since he was married in Steeple Aston in May 1751, to Elizabeth Haycock. But he seems to have started out in Deddington, where he had a butcher's shop and other property until he sold them in 1766. Charles Paine, who was probably his brother, stayed on in Deddington, running a pub there called the Butcher's Arms.

John Paine had a knack of getting himself talked about – there are more than twenty references to him between 1761 and 1783 in *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, the local newspaper of the day. Twice he acted as witness for people forced to apologise for slandering others, and another time an associate had to apologise for bad-mouthing him – "aspersing the character of John Paine, butcher". In 1766 he bought a fat cow for £24 from a Mr Barker of Banbury and wagers were laid on its weight – "she had been near three Years in feeding, and was looked upon by Judges of Cattle, to be both the largest and finest Creature of her Kind that was ever seen in this Part of the Kingdom". The paper failed to follow up the story, however, so the outcome is not known.

The opening of the Oxford-Banbury turnpike road in 1755 gave Paine a fresh business opportunity – from 1770 onwards he began offering to hire out "neat post-chaises" with able horses and careful drivers. Unlike the ponderous and crowded mail coaches, these were luxury vehicles for two or three passengers, and were pitched at the "nobility and gentry". Paine's chaises could be picked up either in Steeple Aston itself (no doubt outside the pub) or from Hopcroft's Holt. The Holt service was discontinued in 1776, but Paine soon announced that he had bought a new chaise for Steeple Aston.

The Flower de Luce was regularly named as the place where creditors should gather to share the dividends paid out by some unfortunate bankrupt. Ironically enough, John Paine himself became insolvent in the late 1770s, and spent some time as a debtor in the King's Bench Prison in Southwark. He probably did not help his position by falling out with his London attorney, a Mr Priddle – they met up at a pub in Brentford, on the London road, and afterwards Paine lent the lawyer his greatcoat, only to accuse him later of stealing some silver spoons from one of its pockets. The Bow Street magistrates were not impressed and had Paine arrested.

Back in Steeple Aston, Paine turned even these experiences to his advantage, advertising his pub as a place where people could obtain advice on the laws relating to relief from insolvency, and so escape being imprisoned for debt. Sadly though, the Flower was no longer his own pub. As a result of his financial difficulties John had been forced to sell all his real estate, though he carried on as a tenant licensee until 1781, and his widow Elizabeth continued as landlady until 1785, when the Flower ceased trading and disappeared from view. Even its location was forgotten, as our village historians William Wing and the Rev C. C. Brookes took no interest in pubs.

If the Paines' hostelry was on Paines Hill, what became of it, and can its site now be identified? No definite record has yet come to light, but there are some clues. It is not known who bought the property from the Paines, but it may well have been another butcher, William Wall, who settled in Steeple Aston in the 1760s. Wall was in a good position to pick up the pieces when Paine got into difficulties, and there is documentary evidence that he bought another of Paine's properties in 1777 – the building we now know as the Red Lion. (At the time it was almost certainly trading as the Chequers Inn – but that's another story).

William Wall built up a property portfolio in the village which he passed on to his sons, William and James, and James' son, another William, who were also butchers. The Walls' estate was finally sold in 1902 by trustees, some years after the death of the youngest William and his only daughter. As well as a string of cottages and some land, it included three substantial properties, among them Paynes Hill House – known for many years as the Doctor's House, because it was occupied by a succession of medical men.

(Optional picture)

*Paynes Hill House and its neighbours – perhaps
the site of the Flower de Luce Inn?*

According to Brookes, Paynes Hill House was “built in 1806” by the first of these doctors, John James Perry, using stones from the façade of the newly-demolished Middle Aston Hall. The stonework very likely did come from Middle Aston, but Brookes was misinformed about the builder – Dr Perry was only a boy at the time, and didn't come to Steeple Aston until 1818. Besides, Perry never owned the house – a surviving Rate Book for December 1837 shows that he occupied a substantial property, rateable value £12 16s, and names the owner as “late Wall” (the second William died that year, having outlived his brother James). Earlier Rate Books show that Perry first occupied it in 1822, following the death of a previous tenant, a widow, Mrs Esther Jordan; but frustratingly these older documents do not name the owner.

The Steeple Aston Enclosure Map (1767) shows very few houses on Paines Hill, but it does indicate that there was already a building on the site of Paynes Hill House well before 1806. The map shows a substantial house with a cottage on either side – very much the arrangement we see today. It also shows two buildings across the road (roughly where Pump Cottage and Audley Cottage now stand), and the sale announcement for the Flower included “other Messuages or Tenements and Stable ... opposite the said Inn”. All this makes Paynes Hill House a very good candidate for the site of the “lost” Flower de Luce pub. Looking at its dominant position on the brow of the hill, it is not difficult to imagine the pub in its heyday, with its ebullient host, and the occasional post-chaise rattling out of its yard on the way to Oxford or Banbury.

GEOFFREY LANE

NB: SAVA is looking at house histories this year, and would be grateful for the chance to examine old property deeds which could help us fill out the history of the village and its buildings. Old deeds are valuable historic documents, and should not be thrown away, or turned into lampshades, even if your solicitor says they are no longer needed.