



STEEPLE ASTON VILLAGE ARCHIVE TRUST

THE VILLAGE AND ITS TREES

One of our oldest trees is the great Sycamore in the churchyard. Although its exact age is unknown, it appears to have begun life as three saplings planted in one hole, a style of planting which went out of use well before 1850. Back in January it dropped a large branch, the second in seven years, damaging several gravestones; a fungal infection was diagnosed, and it now sadly awaits a severe pruning. The aim is to reduce its bulk by between 30 and 50 percent, but to retain its overall shape as far as possible. By the time you read this, the chain saws may already have arrived...

Some of the finest trees in the village were planted in the grounds of the big houses – The Grange, Hill House and Middle Aston House – when they still belonged to individual families. A tall and elegant Tulip Tree and a gnarled old Oriental Plane stand in Grange Park, along the road behind the old house. There is also a stately Cedar of Lebanon in the field behind the modern houses, which has also had to be lopped in recent years, but retains its characteristic shape.

Talking of Cedars, the grounds of Middle Aston House boast a variety of fine trees, including an unusually tall Cedar of Lebanon – when Spillers owned the house in the 1960s they wrote to The Times, claiming it was the tallest in the country. Two other types of Cedar – a Deodar and an Atlantic Cedar – may be glimpsed in the garden of the former Rectory, now Canterbury House.

The owners of The Grange surrounded their grounds with an impressive belt of trees, including Beech and Ash. On the west side, facing towards Fenway, Horse Chestnuts dominate, but there used to be Elms along here until they died of Dutch elm disease.

Hill House also prided itself on its trees, including large forest trees planted as a belt around the grounds, although they are a little more hidden away now. These include several impressive conifers in the valley near the Steeple Aston brook – a very un-matching pair of Wellingtonias, and near them two Douglas Firs and a Corsican Pine. Specimen trees in the park included a Ginkgo – now in one of the gardens off Water Lane. Ginkgos are often called living dinosaurs, though in fact they go back to an era well before dinosaurs roamed the earth. They come from China, but European plant hunters first noticed them growing in the grounds of Japanese temples.

Around the corner in Sixty-Foot Road, an avenue of Silver Limes was planted to mark the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977. Now thirty years old, these trees still have some way to go. A fine mature Silver Lime can be seen along Southside, down the track beside Grange Cottage.

There are plenty of English Oaks growing around the village, some of them originally planted in old hedgerows. One of the most striking is in Heyford Road, at the corner of Nizewell Head, where it doubles as a notice-board.

The dense wood through which the Heyford road leaves the village is traditionally known as The Beeches, although the original trees, planted in the early 18th Century, are long gone. More recently, and at the other end of the village, a double-row of Beeches was planted in 1905, running from the Middle Aston House towards Steeple Aston. A few years later, rows of

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Chestnuts were added on either side – these were grown from conkers picked up in Verdun during the great siege of 1916 and sold in aid of a war charity. This extraordinary avenue suffered damage from poultry farming in the past, and now looks somewhat neglected. It can be seen from the car park behind the industrial estate, and also from the Beeches path which runs behind the school and Grange Park.

An earlier squire of Middle Aston, Francis Page MP, planted Scotch Firs on his land in the 1740s, and the Rector, John Eaton, copied him by planting more along the road from there to the church, which thus came to be called Fir Lane. Both men were staunch Tories, and their choice of trees led to accusations that they were Jacobites and secret supporters of Bonny Prince Charlie. The original trees must have died long ago, but the tradition of planting Scotch Firs (which are really Scots Pines) has been maintained. Several were planted outside the school only a few years ago.

Another fine group of trees stands at another entrance to the village, in Fenway, on the edge of Westfield. These are London Planes, with their characteristic flaky bark – more familiar perhaps shading the streets of big cities than standing beside a modest village roadway. An impressive Oriental Plane stands in the garden nearby.



Finally, we should not forget that Steeple Aston was known in the past for its apples, particularly an ancient variety called Nonpareil. Most of the orchards have gone, but there are still some fine old fruit trees to be seen just off Paines Hill, along with a sad reminder of past glory.

Geoffrey Lane

A version of this article formed part of SAVA's Autumn Exhibition – the Environment of Steeple Aston – held in the Village Hall on the weekend of November 10th and 11th. An article on Old Byways of Steeple Aston appeared in the September edition of SAL. Other themes covered in the exhibition included local geology, watercourses and springs, flora and fauna, and hedges.