



Our Victorian village postmistresses

... there were few openings for women in those days, especially for those born in small country villages, and she had to be content to rule over her own small establishment. she had arranged her Post Office with its shining counter, brass scales, and stamps, postal orders, and multiplicity of official forms, in what had been a broad passage which ran through the house from the front door to the garden....

Flora Thompson: Lark Rise to Candleford

With these words Flora Thompson introduces us to the village post office at Candleford Green, where Laura found her first job - an establishment ruled over by the sharp-witted Dorcas Lane, and lovingly recreated for the TV series. Steeple Aston had no fewer than three postmistresses in Victorian times, Holiff Churchill, Matilda Durran (later Barrett) and Caroline Mary Grace. We don't know how closely their operations resembled that of Miss Lane, but one thing they certainly had in common - the village Post Office was wherever they happened to live.

Back in the days of the mail coaches, the post came and went via Hopcrofts's Holt Inn, out on the Turnpike Road. With the introduction of the Penny Post in 1840 things began to change, although quite slowly. In 1841 the post was still at the Holt, run by a young landlord, John Churchill and his wife Holiff (Olive?). By 1851 John had died, and an uncle, William Harris from Bicester, had taken over. But Holiff Churchill stayed on as postmistress, a job she may well have been doing while her husband was alive. She had the assistance of her teenage son John, as "letter carrier", and two older "post boys" - Charles Wilkins at the Holt and William Pittaway in Cow Lane.

By 1861 the Post Office was in Southside (Heyford Road end), at the red-brick cottage now known as Kempsford Cottage. This seems to have been built by James Durran - the carpenter and wheelwright at The Old Forge - as a home for his eldest son, Francis, who had married Rose Cross in 1844. Rose died in 1851 leaving three young children. Francis married Matilda Hancox in 1852, and they produced several more children before Francis died of a fever in 1859. If she hadn't already done so, Matilda now turned their home into a Post Office, over which she presided for several years, first as a widow, and then as the wife of John Barrett, from Duns Tew, who married her in 1863. John seems to have shared the running of the PO with her, as well as giving her four more children.



*Right: Old Post Office Cottage
Far right: Kempsford Cottage
- an even older Post Office*

The Barretts gave up their Post Office sometime after 1871 - possibly in 1875, when the GPO banned married women from its workforce - and the village Post Office moved for the first time to the former Village Shop (now the "Old Manor"). These premises had recently been taken over by Miss Caroline Mary Grace, a former governess, and her considerably younger brother John, both originally from Witney. The 1881 census names Caroline as postmistress and head of household, with John Grace working alongside her as a draper and grocer. The Grace siblings remained in the shop building until 1902, when it was sold to William Harris and his wife Lizzie and became Harris's Stores. Either the Harrises did not want to run a Post Office, or Miss Grace refused to give it up, so the Graces moved across the road to the building we still know as the Old Post Office Cottage. The formidable Miss Grace presided there for the rest of her life. She died in late April 1911, aged 74, only a few days after completing the 1911 Census, in which she described herself as Sub-Postmistress and Employer. Soon afterwards, the village Post Office moved yet again - this time along Southside to Appleton House.

Geoffrey Lane