

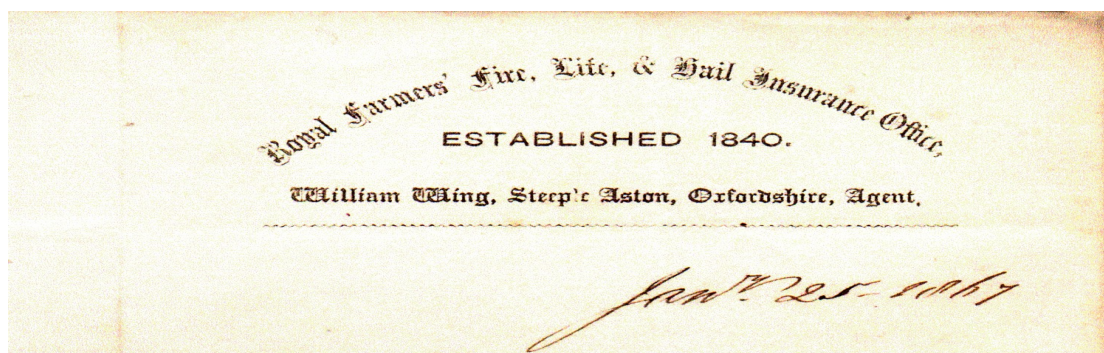
When looking up at some of the older houses in the village you may have seen metal embossed plaques with mysterious emblems and wondered what they were for, and why they were there.



Such “fire marks” identified the building as being insured, usually against fire. In Steeple Aston, there are 11, most of which depict the wheat sheaf motif of the 'Farmers & General Fire & Life Insurance Company'. However there are 3 others: 'Country Insurance' has Britannia with the escutcheon of the arms of Hanover, 'Norwich Union' Lady Justice blindfolded, holding sword and scales, and 'Westminster Insurance Company' (a London-based company) which depicts The Prince of Wales' feathers above a portcullis.

For most of the C18th, each insurance company maintained its own fire brigade, using local retained firemen to stand in readiness to 'engage any fire which occurred on any property insured by the Company and to prevent a fire from spreading to such property'. On arriving at the scene of a fire, if the brigade found the building did not display their plaque, and no surrounding property insured by them seemed to be in danger, they were permitted to go home, leaving the fire to be fought either by another brigade, or by the public if no insurance existed. It is doubtful, however, that anybody would have let property burn when they had the power to prevent it. Co-operation between different company brigades was agreed in 1826, and payments were made from one company to another for assistance rendered by its firemen.

No claim was settled until the mark from the burnt-out building was produced as evidence that it had been insured. The marks were originally made of lead; later copper or tin were also used. They were placed as high up as practical on the first floor to prevent fraudulent folk from appropriating them and affixing them to their own buildings. In 1705 the Friendly Society offered a reward for the ‘apprehension of the persons who had stolen several of their marks’.



In the C19th., the country insurance business was usually handled by local agents; in Steeple Aston William Wing appeared to fulfill this role. He is listed as one of the members of the Fire Engine Society for the Astons, the Bartons and Heyfords. At their annual meeting on 9th December 1876 the engine-keeper attested that the engine was 'fit for use in an emergency' and that there had been only one call-out that year, but the fire had been 'subdued' before the fire engine arrived. The plaques had by then become redundant although local people still had to pay to keep up membership of the local Society and receive a free service.