

Where did all the blacksmiths go?

In search of Steeple Aston's Old Forges

article by Geoffrey Lane (SAVA member since 2006)

It's a while since the clang of hammer on anvil was last heard in Steeple Aston, and memories have faded. Although we have two "Old Forges" in different parts of Steeple Aston, neither is typical, and there are other sites with an equal claim to the title. Blacksmiths must have been here since way back, making and mending ploughs and hand-tools, as well as farriers shoeing horses. But we have no clear information about them until the late 16th century, by which time the George family were already operating the longest-lasting of our village smithies.

1) The early Georges. The George family of blacksmiths were probably descendants of earlier Georges who farmed strips in the common fields. They were almost invariably called John or Robert, making them difficult to distinguish from other Georges who called themselves husbandmen, carpenters or cordwainers (i.e. cobblers). Sometimes they are helpfully named as "John senior" or "Robert the younger"; the Protestant Returns for 1641/2 even include a "John George the midle"!

1a) John George, blacksmith, who died in December 1668, was "aged about 87 years" so he must have been born about 1581 and would have completed his apprenticeship while Elizabeth I was still on the throne. He left lands and property to his son John and heirs, but made special provision for his grandson Robert (son of another Robert). He was to have a half share with **his** father in the smith's shop and its contents - two coffers and a case of drawing boxes, which were not to be altered or diminished during the grandson's lifetime. An inventory of John's goods and chattels amounts to £19; more than half its value is accounted for by his farming activity: 15 bushels of grain in his barn, three cows one hog and ten sheep, and "five ridges of wintercorne sowed".

1b) Robert George, blacksmith (1607-1675) barely outlived his father. Apart from some "tokens", he left everything to his son Robert. His goods amounted to £33 6s 8d and likewise included farming items: carts, a plough and harrows; three cows & one swine; pease & hay, corn in the barn & on the ground.

1c) Robert George c1643-1680

1d) John George, blacksmith ?1673-1734 - most likely son of the above, though someone else, perhaps an uncle must have trained him. He left his lands to his elder son Robert George (1714-) and his shop and tools to his younger son John (1716-1809). His property included five lands in Steeple and Middle Aston which he had "purchased from the widow Rogers". He also had "lands and tenements" at Ludgershall, Bucks., but gives no indication how he came by them.

Up to this point their wills and other documents give no hint as to where the Georges were living and working, but later evidence points to two possible locations - Fir Cottage in Fir Lane, and Radley Cottage on Southside.

2) The later Georges.

2a) John George 1716-1805. In 1739 He married Ann Berry of Westcott Barton (d 1790) and they raised a large family, including three sons who became blacksmiths in their turn:

3a) John George 1748-1809.

3b) Robert George 1750-?

3c) Thomas George 1753-1825

John the elder was 88 when he died in 1805. He left property to several children, but his Will makes no mention of any workshop. He had presumably been retired for many years.

He is known to have lived, at least in later life, at Radley Cottage, on South Side, which he passed on to his eldest son, another John who died, apparently childless only four years later, in 1809. Radley Cottage then passed to the younger John's brother-in-law Henry Hedgkins.



3 Fir Lane - George and Rogers families:



Meanwhile a younger brother, Thomas George - the last of the line in Steeple Aston - carried on the family trade at another address, and the evidence available so far points to Fir Lane Cottage, just across the road from the church.

When Thomas George died in 1825, he left his "house outbuildings and yard" to his nephew Thomas Rogers, who had apparently been sharing it with his uncle for some time. The George/Rogers forge would have been somewhere close by, perhaps round the back.

In fact there is good reason to believe that the George blacksmiths had been plying their trade in Fir Lane for many years, because over time they had acquired other properties in this area. In 1749 John George (the elder) had bought three cottages from the trustees of the deceased Rector, the Rev. George Freeman. We can be fairly certain these were the Church Cottages, which remained in the Rogers family until 1913, since an original Deed recording this purchase was found among papers relating to Thomas George's estate, along with a certified copy made in 1826. [To be precise, the three cottages passed to Henry Hedgkins (as above) and two were then owned for a time by his cousin Robert George, a blacksmith in St Clement's Oxford, who sold them to Robert Rogers in 1843; Robert already owned the third, which seems to have passed directly to his father Thomas].

Thomas Rogers had also been busy buying on his own account. As early as 1809 he bought another property close by which had been in the hands of a yeoman family called Davis (not the family at The Grange!) since 1724. It is described as a "messuage cottage or tenement with buildings yard and gardens *near the churchyard of Steeple Aston*". It cannot have been Fir Cottage or the adjacent cottages (see below), and Chancel Cottage was only built in 1809 by George Woodford on land leased from the Church.....which seems to leave only Jasmine Cottage or some other building which has disappeared.

In 1818 Thomas Rogers declared in writing that he had demolished two cottages next to his home and resettled their occupants, John Bennett and Richard Knight, in a pair of cottages he had erected in Cow Lane - the new building became known as Rogers Row, and is now The Nook. In place of the old cottages Rogers built Fir Cottage, which bears his initials and a date: "TR 1813" - though the difference in date is a bit puzzling. Another date was added when Fir Cottage changed hands following the death of Annie Rogers, the last family member, in 1913. Up to then Fir Lane Cottage and Fir Cottage had been treated as a single property, though it often had very few inhabitants.



The Rogers family carried on where the Georges had left off. Thomas Rogers died in 1827, only a year or so after Thomas George, and was succeeded by his son Robert. At some stage Robert became blind - a fact first mentioned in the Census return for 1851, when his elder son George was only 16. George died just five years later, in 1856, by which time the second son, John, was only about 17. But somehow the family struggled on, and a grandson of our village historian, William Wing, later recorded this recollection of their situation:

"John Rogers was the blacksmith at the forge opposite the Church near the Infant School. He succeeded his father, the wonderful blind blacksmith. My grandfather used to say that if a broken implement was brought to blind Rogers, he could pass his hands over it and say "yes I see" and would know at once how to make a job of it..."

The anvil fell silent in 1887, when John Rogers died at the age of 51. His widow Annie Rogers lived on until 1913, drawing a steady income from the various properties she owned in Fir Lane and Cow Lane.



2 Southside/Heyford Road - the Plumb family. Thomas Plumb, blacksmith, and his wife Maria (Mobbs) both from North Aston, were married in Steeple Aston in 1765. Thomas seems to have teamed up with the Watson family, who had the largest farm after the Rector. The Plumbs settled in a cottage-cum-smithy just behind the Watson's farmhouse, which stood on the site of the later Village Shop (now "Old Manor House"). If any fragments of this smithy survive, they are probably incorporated into the kitchen wing of the "Old Manor", which joins the main building at an odd angle. The Plumbs were still there in the 1830s, when Charles Harris started building his New Manor House next door, but Frederick Plumb later set up a new forge on the corner of The Dickredge, on land obtained from Harris. Plumb's smithy was later turned into a stable, owned in 1892 by James Gilkes - his paperwork reveal its true origins as a "blacksmith's shop with the engine house adjoining". Since then it has had many other uses, as a warehouse for Morrell's Brewery, a slaughterhouse and butchers' shop ... and most recently as a cottage called Belda.

3. The Old Forge - Durran and Field families. More or less opposite the above, but not a typical smithy, because the occupants of the site were carpenters and wheelwrights - James Durran from 1840, Nathan Field and sons from 1883. But wheelwrights need a forge for the tyres and other metal parts they use. The Fields employed a blacksmith, according to information their representatives gave to the Oxfordshire History Centre - along with a collection of their tools - and the Durrans probably did the same. In fact there were blacksmiths living next door at the "Old Post Office" - Thomas Thornett in the 1860s and Henry Hurst in the 1870s. In the 1880s Richard Hurst took over the White Lion along the street, and moved the smithy there. No doubt it was thirsty work, and blacksmiths quite often ran pubs....

4. Old Forge Studios - Gascoigne. ...like Thomas Arthur Gascoigne, who combined his work shoeing horses on Church Corner from 1924 to 1941 with being landlord of the Dun Cow Inn in the adjoining building, now Chestnut House. He must have had a forge, though not necessarily a very old one. But oddly enough there was a farrier, John Burgess, living at Chestnut House in the 1840s. He later rebranded himself as a Cow Leech - an early kind of vet. *[This is an expanded version of an article which appeared in Steeple Aston Life in December 2015. Some of the details are speculative, because the documentation available is far from complete. If you can add or correct anything please feel free to get in touch.]*



A note on sources: Wills and Inventories of the early Georges are in the Oxfordshire History Centre (recently digitised); later ones and those of the Rogers family are from the National Archives (PCC) or Probate Service (after 1858). Copies (or at least notes) are held by SAVA. For Rogers family properties the OHC has a series of documents indexed under Sp I/i/1-22 and Sp I/ii/1-4 (the latter relating to the Davis property). Other information comes mainly from Census returns and Rate Books for Steeple Aston, copies of which are also held in the SAVA archive. SAVA is particularly keen to acquire Deeds and similar documents relating to properties in Steeple and Middle Aston - either the original documents or photographic copies we can take from them.