



Three for the Price of One

by Lis Garnish

One of the rewards of historical research is when, after hours of routine transcribing, recording and card-indexing, one finds that small nugget of original information which no-one has noticed before and which expands our knowledge of Wantage. Three such small snippets came my way some time ago, and all for the price of reading one document.

Mr Alan Trinder, of Cleggs the Chemists, was kind enough to lend me the deeds which relate to his shop, and to Austin's next door, so that they could be read, recorded and indexed for the Museum records. They were a bundle of documents concerning the various sales of the plot of land from 1717 to 1948. The first two which I read were useful but not out of the ordinary, but the third was fascinating. It was two sheets of parchment, three feet by two feet six, stitched together at the bottom, very stiff, springy and awkward to handle. It recorded the sale in April 1768 by William Tripp, Thomas Whitehorn, Francis Gallaway, William Hazel, John Whitehorn and Thomas Huckwell of a "Close or piece of ground" to Benjamin Hobbis, baker, of Wantage. Then came a description of the bounds of the property and the first surprise. It said, "...having a brick wall belonging to Mary Cooke Widow ... on the North Side, a Lane called Lissets Lane on the South Side, a lane called Hardings Lane at the East End and the said Street called Newbury Street at the West End thereof".

In *Reflected in Wantage*, part 2, p.136, Kathleen Philip poses a query about the location of Lissett's Lane. Its whereabouts had been known in 1901, when Mr Jotcham wrote of it in *Wantage Past and Present*, but by 1970 its location had been forgotten. Now, once again, we can place it - it is the lane we know as Post Office Lane! But how did it get its former name? Reading on, I found that the same deed mentions that in July 1717 the whole plot had been bought by Nehemiah Lissett of Wantage, gentleman. Presumably the lane had had some other name before then, but once Nehemiah bought the land it became the 'lane by Lissett's land' and, very soon, 'Lissett's Lane'.

Secondly, we now know as well that the lane at the back, running past the Westminster Bank car park and down to Wallingford Street, was Harding's Lane. Searching for an explanation for that name as well, I found that in 1663 Richard Hardinge senior and Richard Hardinge junior each had a house in Wallingford Street. It seems likely that one or the other of them lived on the corner of Wallingford Street and the lane and, hence, the lane took its name from the adjacent property.

When Nehemiah Lissett bought the land in Newbury Street in 1717 there was a house standing on the plot, a house known as 'Amsterdam House'. In *Victorian Wantage*, Kathleen Philip speculated that this may have acquired its name from Robert Styles of Amsterdam, who endowed the Styles Almshouses. So who had owned Amsterdam House before Nehemiah?

The same deed gives the name - 'Benjamin Stiles of Amersbury, Wilts., Esquire'.

That established a link back to the Stiles family but I needed to know Benjamin's position in the family and his relationship to Robert Stiles. Over the last few years I have built up a number of family trees for Wantage residents, from the wills and inventories of the 16th and 17th centuries and from the Parish Registers. The Stiles family is one for which we have quite a lot of detail. Robert Stiles, the founder of the almshouses, was born in Wantage in the autumn of 1625. It's not possible to be exact as we have only his date of baptism. His parents, Henry and Ellinor, had three children living and another daughter was born after Robert, but two of their children had died in infancy.

Robert grew up with three sisters and one brother in a family who were improving their position in the world. His father came from a family of blacksmiths but, by the time he died, Henry was able to style himself 'Yeoman' and had a house, cottages and quite a lot of land to bequeath. Henry died in 1637 when Robert was nearly 12 and the older son, Henry, was nearly 17. Their eldest sister, Jone, was already married, but Alice, aged 19, Henry, Robert and Ellinor, aged 8, were left as orphans, their mother having died two years before. In later life Robert seems to have had a particular affection for his sister Alice and it may be that she had to play the role of mother to Robert for the next few years. The family suffered a further loss two years later when Robert's older brother Henry died. Robert himself was apprenticed to Richard Cooke, a draper in London. In 1646, when Robert was 20, and probably at the end of his apprenticeship, he decided to go abroad and spent the next 34 years of his life in Amsterdam.¹ He does not seem to have married and, at his death in 1680, handed his extensive business interests to Joseph Haskins, son of his favourite sister Alice. Joseph had helped him for many years with the business in Amsterdam and, on his uncle's instructions, he came to England and arranged the founding of Styles Almshouses. Joseph was left a very rich man and, as a mark of respect to his uncle, took the additional surname of Stiles. He and his wife, Sarah, had three daughters and two sons, and it was their eldest son, Benjamin, who in 1714 inherited his father's and great-uncle's wealth and two years later sold the Amsterdam House to Nehemiah Lissett.

So there we have the answer to two small mysteries, and one extra bit of information :

- Lissett's Lane was the present Post Office lane;
- Amsterdam House was named for the Stiles family;
- and the original name of the lane past Eagle's Almshouses was Harding's Lane.

It would be exciting to be able to finish by saying that we have identified the site of the house where Robert Stiles was born and grew up, but there a small problem arises! When Henry Stiles the elder died he named his house as 'Bedfords'. He left it to his elder son, Henry, and when Henry the younger died two years later the major part of his property went to Robert. Unfortunately the description of the bounds of Bedfords does not necessarily fit Amsterdam House. Bedfords is described as "... bounded with the messuage or tenement of Bartholomew Robbins on the north side, and the highway or lane on the south". It could be Amsterdam House, but it seems odd that Newbury Street is not mentioned. The description would fit better a property lying in an east/west street, or one on the end of a block. So if anyone knows of a house called 'Bedfords', we may solve another mystery.

There is a lot of equally important information in the deeds of other properties in the town, but it needs to be recorded properly. If you have any old deeds for your house or land which you would be willing to lend briefly to have them read and indexed, then please let the museum know.

¹ More recent information would suggest that he went into business with William Kiffin, a radical who had been apprenticed to Lilburne and a noted Baptist.

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Vale and Downland Museum Trust, 19 Church Street, Wantage, Oxfordshire, OX12 8BL
Telephone: 01235 771447 e-mail: museum@wantage.com