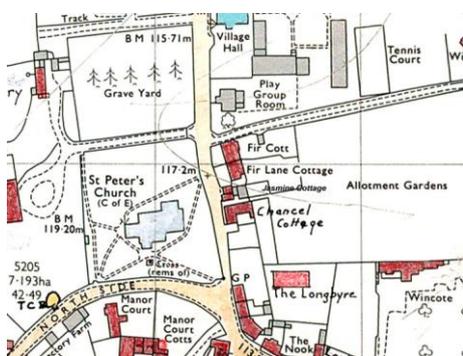


Notes on Chancel Cottage

Chancel Cottage faces west onto Fir Lane directly opposite the east end of Steeple Aston church (hence its name, which appears to be fairly recent). It stands in a row of four dwellings of varying ages and styles – starting from the north we have Fir Lane Cottage and Fir Cottage – a terraced pair of houses set back from the road with similar, but not identical, Georgian facades – Jasmine Cottage, a small thatched cottage also set back from the road but with a modern extension at the front, and then Chancel Cottage, with another Georgian-style façade, which stands close to the roadway. Then there is an open space before the row of cottages now amalgamated into two dwellings, Merlins and Church Cottage, which for convenience will be referred to here as the Church Cottages. The map below, taken from the hand-coloured OS map in Heyford Road, shows the present arrangement (though Jasmine Cottage – labelled here but not on that map – may not be accurately coloured):



ML DG & GL were shown around Chancel Cottage on 20 July 2008 by Andrew Johnston and his wife. Andrew is the son of the current owner Mrs Barbara Johnston, now in her nineties. He told us that the house had been occupied by his family for many years, starting with his maternal grandparents, Mr and Mrs Edward Keen. Mr Keen was an insurance official, “the man from the Pru”, as Andrew put it (so perhaps the first occupant not to be employed within the village).



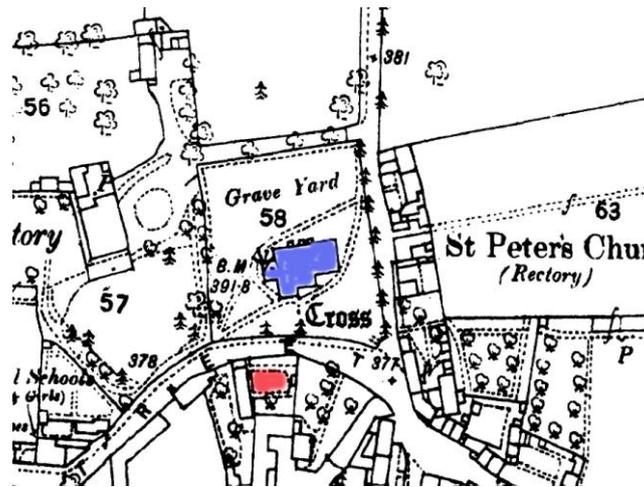
Independent dating evidence:

The evidence from the Enclosure Map of 1767 (see above) is that there were only two buildings in Fir Lane at that time:

- A) a longish building opposite the northern boundary of the churchyard, equivalent to both Fir Cottage and Fir Lane Cottage; and
- B) a second longish building on the site of Church Cottages.

There do not appear to have been any other houses in between. However the 1767 Map appears to show two small closes alongside the road between these two buildings, the northerly of which equates approximately to the site of Chancel Cottage. This suggests that Chancel Cottage did not exist in 1767, but may have been built quite soon afterwards.

The Victorian OS map available at the Oxfordshire Studies Centre shows an arrangement similar to that seen today:



ML said that in the schedule of listed buildings, Fir Cottage was shown as C19; Fir Lane Cottage and Chancel Cottage both as C18. (Is Jasmine Cottage similarly scheduled?) These appear to be no more than guesstimates based on existing fixtures and fittings, and it is not clear how reliable they are, given that the report on Chancel Cottage makes no reference to its cellar.

The Land:

ML said that one old OS map appeared to indicate that Chancel Cottage at one time controlled all the land to the south lying between it and Church Cottage opposite the end of Northside. However at present there is only a relatively small plot of land on this side, bounded at the rear by a low garden wall directly in line with the back wall of the cottage.

Andrew Johnston told us that his grandmother, Mrs Keen, rented the first of the allotments which lie laterally (i.e. north-south) beyond this wall – where the (disused) cottage cess pit is located. His mother, Mrs Johnston, later purchased this strip of land, and arranged to rent the next strip of land beyond this in perpetuity. Mr Johnston said this was at the time a new house (The Longbyre) was built on land adjoining the allotments to the south, and Mrs Johnston apparently feared that the allotment land might otherwise be built on.

The Building, external features:



Chancel Cottage, from the SW.

The cottage is an L-shaped building, with a symmetrical west façade facing the road, and a rearward extension to the east from its northern end. The front and the extension are roofed in old Stonesfield slates, but the back slope of the main block is in modern cement tiles. There is no visible evidence that the building was ever thatched. On the façade the upstairs windows have narrow stone lintels constructed in three sections, the middle sections being supported by diagonal cuts, in the manner of keystones.



Those on the downstairs windows are thicker and in a shorter single piece, with etched lines to suggest jointing – the soft stone is beginning to flake. The pictures above show the right-hand windows, but those on the left are similar. The central front door and its canopy, and the windows themselves, all appear to be relatively modern. A modest string course of cut stones just below the upstairs windows is the only decorative element.

The rearward extension is butt-jointed to the main block, and its roof-line cuts across a timber inserted into the latter's rear wall (see below) – both suggesting that it was added later. However, since the style of the stonework is similar, it seems likely that this was done at an early date, but it is possible it replaced an earlier short extension designed simply to enclose the stairs to the cellar and upper floor, which lie beyond the rear wall of the main block.



The extension proper evidently terminated with a rear wall in line with the existing chimney, and there is a distinct line of ironstone ashlar blocks in the south wall at this point, similar to those at the SE corner of the main block. However the building continued beyond this point in the form of a small stable block with a hayloft above.



The ground floor of this further extension has now been converted into a bathroom, with a window replacing the earlier doorway. (The left-hand end of its rough wooden lintel set oddly between two of the ashlar blocks). The loft window-opening has been blocked in, but its outline is still visible just left of the roof to the outside privy.

Again it is difficult to be certain this *was* a later addition – the roof shows no sign of alteration at this point, and the rear wall of the house, seen through a ceiling access panel, does not appear to have been fully pointed to make it weatherproof (although this is not very clearly shown in my photo).



The two chimneys of the main building are in modern textured brick, but the extension chimney is in attractive old red brick, now rather weathered:



Interior features – main block:

The principle downstairs room has a stone-flagged floor, and a broad open fireplace with twin inglenooks. This has been reopened in recent times after numerous vicissitudes.



Andrew Johnston remembers it in his grandparents' day having a black-leaded range or enclosed fire in the middle, flanked by cupboards on either side (inside the stone supports which were not then visible). He believes the stonework and the rather clean-

looking beam to be original, although it is less blackened than one might have expected. If it ever functioned as a cooking fireplace before the rear extension was added, there is no surviving evidence.

The heavily-worn stone threshold under the door leading in to this room from the rear extension is a notable feature. The front door also opens directly into this room, which therefore occupies more than half the downstairs area.



A door left of the front door leads into a smaller room lit only by a single window at the front. Like the window in the main room, this preserves its old shutters, which are scheduled – they cannot be closed, however, owing to the double-glazing units inserted to alleviate aircraft-noise from the former airbase at nearby Upper Heyford.



Unlike the main room it has a wooden floor. This room has no visible fireplace, but a deep cupboard in the wall at the SE corner provides some evidence for a blocked chimney-breast in the east wall. This is deeper than the equivalent open recess in the SW corner.

To the right of the fireplace in the main room, a door in the back wall leads into a narrow stairwell with a turn near the bottom, and an old wall-cupboard above.



The stairs were once lit by a small window borrowing light from the upper floor of the rear extension. This ancient piece of glazing (possibly the oldest in the house) is now blocked on the extension side:



The two bedrooms in the main block have few noteworthy features. Any sign of a fireplace in the north bedroom is concealed by fitted furniture. The south bedroom has a Victorian iron fireplace in suitably classical style let into a plain fireplace which may be older, and originally an open fireplace. The north bedroom has a beam partly chamfered and partly showing the original surface where the bark has been stripped off:



A further flight of stairs leads to an attic space running the length of the main block. This has been in use for many years, judging by the window at the southern end, tucked in beside the chimney.



An unusual feature is the way the purlins are butt-joined within the rafters.

A barrel-vaulted cellar runs the full length of the main block fronting the road. It has a rough stone floor with a capped well half-way along the back wall from which a pipe leads to a (now disused) pump in the kitchen. Beyond it, a window provided some light from the back yard. A small brick and slate rack at the far end provided some cool storage, perhaps for dairy products.





The cellar is reached by a stone stairway directly below the upper stairs, and accessed by a door from the rear extension, to which we now turn. Its function was clearly to provide the cottage with a more ample kitchen, and in earlier years its end (east) wall beneath the back chimney was formerly occupied by a kitchen range in a recess. Originally the recess would presumably have been an open cooking-fire with spits etc. When this space was converted in recent times into a deep cupboard, a substantial brick and iron baking oven was uncovered on the left side of the recess:



At the same time a large opening was created to the right of the cupboard/range area giving access to the former stable, which was converted into a bathroom. Another notable old feature is a shallow recess in the left-hand side wall of the kitchen, opposite the window, which no doubt originally housed a wall-cupboard:





Despite its rather limited headroom, the loft area over the kitchen has long since been converted into a bedroom, accessed from the top of the main staircase. Apart from the exposed rafters, the most striking feature is the stepped chimney-stack at its far end, the brickwork plastered over. This would have radiated considerable heat when the range was alight. It seems unlikely it ever included a fireplace, and this was confirmed (as far as possible) by tapping.

Ownership and occupation of the Property:

Andrew Johnston said the cottage had been occupied by his family since the time of his maternal grandfather, Edward Keen, who lived into his nineties. However he said there were no old deeds, because his mother had rented the house from the local council until the 1960s, when (perhaps prompted by her solicitor?) she inquired whether the council had any proof of *its* ownership. It admitted that it did not, and agreed that she had effectively purchased it over the years.

This is a puzzling story. The Steeple Aston Rate book for 1892 clearly shows that all five dwellings located in Fir Lane, and four more in Cow Lane were at that time the property of Mrs John Rogers. The Rogers were an old village family of blacksmiths who were already well established in Fir Lane (East Street) in 1841, when Robert Rogers was trading here. Later Census returns, in 1851 and 1861, noted that Robert was blind. In 1871 his widow, Jane Rogers (“retired blacksmith’s widow”) was in residence along with her son John. John Rogers, blacksmith aged 44, was recorded as head of household in 1881, but he had died by 1891, when his widow, Ann Rogers, was recorded living at the same place. (This is presumably the “Annie Rogers” mentioned in Brookes’ *History of Steeple and Middle Aston*, but as far as I can see only in the index, not in the text!)

Perhaps Mrs Rogers died intestate, and the local authority, having failed to trace any relatives, simply took over administration of her properties as council houses. If so, the other houses she owned must have similar histories, and in buying hers, Mrs Johnston may have taken her cue from one of the other owners. (It should be possible to confirm this from the council records.)

The early maps do not show the location of the Rogers' home and smithy, but there are several indications that it was the northernmost house in Fir Lane – i.e. Fir Cottage:

1) Brookes tells us that human remains were discovered in 1913 “at the back of the Rogers' cottage”, and that this was “only a few yards” from a Roman burial, with bronze bracelets, found in 1875 when the Infants' Schoolroom was being erected (pp 7 & 166).

2) Fir Cottage has a plaque on the façade, inscribed TR 1813: the initials TR may well prove to be those of an earlier member of the Rogers family. (The date 1913 has also been squeezed in along the lower edge of the plaque, no doubt to indicate a rebuild – maybe the human remains were discovered during this operation).



3) Almost invariably (five times out of six), the census enumerator tackled the Rogers' house immediately after calling at the Rectory – or before, if he was going round the village anti-clockwise. In all cases, the remaining Fir Lane properties were dealt with in the same order. (In 1871, for some reason, Rectory Farm and its attendant cottages were fitted in between after the Rectory and before the Rogers' Smithy, but the remaining properties still follow in sequence). At the other end of this short sequence there is some confusion between censuses about which properties are in Fir Lane, and which are in Cow Lane or Paynes Hill – this is easily explained, given the geography at this point.