

DOWN MEMORY LANE

Continuing our series looking at Stewkley past and present

The Thatched Cottage and the Cat Woman

Twisting north past the new development at Cricketers Close, High Street North narrows such that the footpath disappears, and the traffic literally clips the hedge on the inside of the left-hand bend. The High Street opens into a short vista with plenty of trees and greenery before making another left turn. The centre of this narrow vista is graced by The Thatched Cottage at No 88.

It is a Grade II Listed 17th-century home. Its pavement frontage is enclosed by a traditional brick boundary wall, important in maintaining local street character. The upper storey is built in red and buff coloured chequer-patterned brickwork and the right-hand bay, rebuilt from the former adjoining Dutch barn, has an interesting internal truss beam in its timber frame.

With a wealth of delightful, thatched homes in Stewkley, what gives No 88 a more interesting back story?

Back in the mid-20th-century, it lay in the grounds of neighbouring Stewkley House, then a comfortable, country-retreat hotel often to be found written-up in the glossy interior magazines of the day. Guests would be hosted with every possible comfort by owner, Sir Basil Tangey and his partner Miss Monica Michell. Having been a tiny, semi-derelict, farm labourer's cottage, No 88, together with its barn, was skilfully restored under the supervision of Miss Michell, to become her home.

As well as being an efficient hotelier, Miss Michell was a cat fancier and avid collector of all things feline. More than 20 cats were known to share her cottage which also housed over 350 cat images of all shapes and sizes, pictorial, china, wood and stone. Little wonder that children and villagers from far and wide came to know her as the 'Cat Woman.'

At the height of the anti-Third London Airport campaign, an enormous sign hung outside her home with Miss Michell's brightly painted words:

"To Mr Justice Roskill we're the lowest of the low,

We're twenty-one little cats and we do not want to go.

We love our home, we love this place, we're happy as can be,

So put your airport where it belongs,

Place it by the sea!"

When Miss Michell passed away in 1984, her gravestone in the village churchyard was adorned with two sculpted stone cats to keep her company.

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