

DOWN MEMORY LANE

Memories of Old Stewkley - the first of three parts

These recollections of Stewkley old boy, the late E R Hedges of Alresford, Hampshire, were first related in a letter to the Archivist of the Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society.

I was born in Stewkley in 1913 and lived there until 1934, so I knew Mr Fred Coles, who was still living in the village, and his two (now late) sons, Fred and Maurice. Both died several years ago. Their grandfather, Thomas Coles (1844-1912), was the last proprietor of the coach-building business and saw it flourish and decline. He died in 1912 aged 68.

My great, great grandfather, Richard Hedges, was landlord of *The Old Swan* in Stewkley in 1811 when the Commissioner of Enclosure and their surveyors started work there on the enclosure of the parish. They then held meetings in *The Cock* at Wing before moving to *The Bull* at Aylesbury as their established meeting place. (I believe a certain distance from the victim parish was a legal requirement. It would most certainly have been a social convenience too, as Stewkley consisted mainly of small freeholders, and the leaseholders who had earlier frustrated several attempts at enclosure with their very hostile opposition, made easier by the almost permanent absence of the lords of the manor.) The Coles family were wheelers in the 1700s and wheelwrights in the 1800s until, according to *Bucks Directories* they became coach builders in the middle of that century. They had a large workforce of woodworkers, ironworkers, painters and varnishers, but the final operations, the real finesse, were done by a body of visiting experts who were skilled in trimming and upholstery, when a coach had reached

an advanced state of construction. They stayed at the nearby *Cricketer's Arms* (which closed about 1920) and were responsible for the seats, padding, internal fittings and the general finesse necessary for the interior. William Grace of Stewkley, a contemporary of mine, has given me this information. His maternal grandfather, Robert Clark, was landlord of the pub in the 1890s when these visiting tradesmen stayed there from time to time. The woodwork and paintwork were done in the workshop adjoining the house or, when the weather was suitable, on the large forecourt. The ironwork was done in a yard and

buildings across the road.

They continued to make carts and traps concurrently with their coach making and, when the advent of the motor car in Edwardian times brought about a decline in the demand for coaches, Thomas Coles himself went



Coles and Son wheelwright and coach builders premises already in decline, High Street N, 1910s

into decline and neither of his sons, Fred and George, were interested in carrying on the business. When the business closed before the First World War, some of the skilled tradesmen set up their own small concerns, for there must have been several employees who could make or repair a cartwheel.



Coles and Son, wheelwrights and coachbuilders, employing a considerable workforce in 1890s



Richard Stonhill who bought the Coles' business and house, and was Captain of Stewkley VCC

Richard Stonhill, for example, started up as a maker and decorator of light traps. He was a well-read man who had been Captain of the Stewkley Vicarage Cricket Club and whose expertise was mainly in the use of paints and varnishes for decorating these vehicles. After the Coles business closed, the house and workshops were empty for several years until Stonhill took them over and set up his son Laurence as a garage proprietor there. When the latter got married, he and his wife occupied the adjoining thatched house where the Coles family had lived for many generations. (*Laurence Stonhill served as an air mechanic in the Royal Naval Air Squadron in WWI. The former garage, workshop premises and home are today's 78 High Street North and known as Stonhill House.*)

The annotations in italics shown in parentheses have been added to E R Hedges' letter by the Grapevine's Heritage Editor to provide background information for our readers.

FROM THE GRAPEVINE**10 YEARS AGO...**

From October 2013, Force 9 Energy surprised everyone with an eleventh-hour appeal against AVDC's planning refusal for their proposed Dorcas Farm wind turbine development...Andrew Beer starred in Stewkley *Desert Island Discs*...Stewkley Local History Group's survey of village wells and pumps unearthed the back story of group member Richard Mayne's 'well sinker' family ancestors...Bill and Sheila Chappell celebrated their Diamond wedding anniversary, both born, bred and wed in Stewkley... Stewkley Singers were to perform Benjamin Britten's *A Ceremony of Carols* in the excellent acoustic of St Michael's Church as their annual Christmas concert...John Heady reported on the successful 2013 grain harvest...and temporary 'facilities' for St Michael's Church in the shape of a portakabin was successfully shoehorned into the vicarage garden.

**FROM THE GRAPEVINE****20 YEARS AGO...**

From October 2003, a new Stewkley six day a week bus service offering multiple daily return journeys to Leighton Buzzard, Bletchley and Milton Keynes was about to commence...Stewkley Players began rehearsing *The Darling Buds of May* for the November production...the village mourned the passing of local Manor Drive resident John Lewis at the aged of 71...the Parish Council organised a well-attended public meeting to discuss the option of buying land off Soulbury Road for youth activities... Stewkley Tennis Club's Under 15 team won their winter and summer leagues...and Terry Brown won the Stewkley VCC single wicket competition.

