

DOWN MEMORY LANE

Malting and brewing of beer when it was safer to drink beer than water.

Agriculture has always been central to life in Stewkley and the malting and brewing of beer were closely connected to it. There were three 'maltings' or malting yards in Stewkley. One was in Fishweir, another at The Old Swan, and the third on the site of today's Maltings Close, where Jones' bakery once stood.

It was a ritual fundamentally unchanged from medieval times using threshed, germinated barley, boiled in great coppers with yeast and hops in the fermentation process. The first brewing was taken off as 'best beer'. More malt and water were then added, and the brew boiled up yet again to make 'small beer'.

Before mains tap water came to Stewkley in 1940, drinking water depended on locally dug wells and pumps. This had been so for centuries, and drinking water was sometimes unsafe and unpleasant. To maintain hydration, households, workplaces and even schools, had small beer to drink. It was generally between 0.5 and 2.8% ABV and was a staple of daily life, and indeed often safer to drink than water from the wells. Both 'small beer' and the higher alcohol content 'best beer' were consumed in large quantities. Because of this phenomenon, in the mid-19th century, there were ten licensed public houses or beer houses in the village, serving a village total population of about 1,500. An even more astonishing statistic, towards the end of that century, there were only about 300 adult males in the population who might have felt the need to quench their thirst with a 'best beer', but only half of that number ever visited a pub (perhaps because they were Methodist?) By the mid-1950s (a dozen years after



Swan public house, Chapel Square, Stewkley, 1907 above and current day below.



mains water arrived in Stewkley), the number of pubs remaining had fallen to six, and today we're down to just the Carpenters Arms. However, that's another story and not just because the water's now safe to drink!

Kate Mayne (*Stewkley, Bucks, 1955*) recalled that the principal village brewery was at the Old Swan on Chapel Square. In the mid-19th century, the Old Swan was owned by Thomas Hedges who also owned the White Horse Hotel at Islington Cattle Market in London. Beer for his London premises was brewed at the Old Swan in Stewkley and hauled by horsedrawn waggon up to London. The beer was apparently much liked by dealers and drovers attending the cattle market. When they called at the Islington White Horse, they invariably ordered a pint of 'Old Stewkley'.

FROM THE GRAPEVINE

10 YEARS AGO...

From April 2014, little Lucia Pollard was pictured enjoying her 1st birthday...94 years young, the late Bert Brewer hung up his Grapevine delivery bag for the final time...obituaries were published for the late Roger Olney, Joan Bowsher and Ian McNally...the annual Senior Citizens' Afternoon Tea was as well attended as ever...approval by AVDC for a single-storey extension to create storage to the Village Hall was announced at the latter's AGM...Stewkley Explorers enjoyed a practice Duke of Edinburgh's Bronze Award expedition in the Chiltern Hills...Nature Watch reported that the drier, sunnier first half of March had brought out some insects early from hibernation, especially the bumble bees...and dog poo was again the subject of consternation with fouling on the Recreation Ground.



FROM THE GRAPEVINE 20 YEARS AGO...

From April 2004, nine new streetlights were to be erected by the Parish Council in particularly dark spots to enhance public safety...the sound of St Michael's Church bells rang out through the village once again as the major conservation works by Hayward Mills Associates to the bells and ringing chamber were completed. Vicar the Rev Norman Cotton paid particular tribute to churchwarden and bell ringer John Sheldon for the countless hours of frustrating difficulties he spent in "shepherding the project through many meetings and mountains of e-mails, negotiating with national committees and ringing experts who couldn't agree with each other!"...Tennis Club juniors enjoyed a successful year in MK League with U-15s, Shane Orchard, Chris Collins, Joel Lewin, and the U-18s, Daniel Willey and William Oakes, all unbeaten...Stewkley was about to be reduced to its pre-1946 state of only one village public phone box...and parish charity, the Stewkley Fund for Disabled Ex-Servicemen was wound-up

