

Stoke Shop - The First Hundred Years

Before the Shop



Before the 19th Century, very few Stoke residents would have ever seen a shop, let alone been inside one. Some may have brought back stories to the village, having been to Taunton on the carrier's cart and seen the wares of the town's tradespeople displayed outside their workshops. They may even have been inside one of the town's emporium style shops, but what would be the point of a shop in Stoke?

Along with the rest of the English rural community, Stoke people had no need of shops. The basis of the economic system was self-sufficiency within the community. The people lived on what they could produce on their own land. Some of the family would work for the wealthier individuals or landowners, but even then they would likely be paid in kind or by the free use of a small piece of land. The village would need iron for the blacksmith to use, and salt to cure the bacon. Hawkers and chapmen would bring other goods that could not be made locally. This subsistence economy depended on hard work and co-operation between neighbours. It also depended on the use of the commons. Those with commoners' rights were not only able to supplement their animals' diet on the poor summer grass of West Sedgemoor. They were also able to use the few remaining commons in the village throughout the year, with various rights to cut turf, collect firewood, and in some cases even lop branches from trees for buildings and fences.

Enclosure

At the end of the 18th Century there were still four commons left in the parish. Curload, or 'Curlwood Green', Meare Green (a long thin strip between the set back farmhouses, before the road was put through in the 19th Century), Warre Moor at Stathe, and Woodhill Green - the land between present day Windmill and Pincombe Drove, narrowing up to the area around the Rose & Crown. These disappeared in the first decade of the 19th Century, to be followed by the draining and 'allotment' of the land on West Sedgemoor by 1820.

When the enclosures took effect they removed a crucial part of of the peasant culture. The Stoke cottager was left with his garden and a pigsty, and a huge hole in the rest of the resources needed to maintain his economic system. Sedgemoor may not have been prime grazing, but there was no other grass available to replace it unless it was bought. A milk cow was no longer viable. The family pig could no longer spend time eating grass and acorns on Woodhill Green. The animal was already in

'hock', in that part of it would have to be given in exchange for the salt used to cure the hams. Now, food would have to be bought, and turf could no longer be dug to make the fire that would smoke the bacon.

Stoke peasants were forced into a money economy. Many goods could no longer be produced by the hard work of the family. The once self-sufficient cottager turned into a spender of money. Money that needed to be earned. Money that would be spent in the emerging Village Shop. During the first half of the 19th century, many villages began to acquire their own small shops selling general goods. The 1841 census names some of the owners of these early trading establishments, but they would have been just rooms in people's houses, where goods were sold, which would have been bought at urban markets. For many items the people of Stoke and the outlying hamlets in the parish would still get supplies from travelling salespeople. By the 1870s almost half the shops in the larger villages would have been general stores, but would have started as a fairly specialised outlet - 'a grocer with a sideline in drapery or a draper with a sideline in grocery'. Like their urban counterparts, the corner shopkeepers, they would sell not just staples but anything for which there was a local demand. The business would usually occupy part of the owner's home, and, in the days before state pensions, keeping a small village shop saved many a widow or childless couple from the workhouse. The first record of such a business starting in Stoke was the arrival of Jacob Williams, first appearing in the 1841 Census, living in what became known as Jessamine House, and listed as a baker.

The Williams Family

On 31st March 1803, Daniel Williams, a dairyman in Swell parish, had married Ann Boobyer in St Mary's Church, Taunton. It was common practice at the time that those in the outlying villages might marry either at St Mary's or St James'. It is likely that Ann was from the Stoke area as this had the greatest concentration of families with that name. In 1820, still living in Swell, Daniel and Ann Williams baptised their son, Jacob, in the little church of St Catherine, adjoining the Manor House. When old enough Jacob was apprenticed to a local baker. After that he would have completed his 'Journeyman' years, as in 1841 he had set up in Stoke St Gregory as a qualified baker.

It was not the best of times to set up as a baker, as there were still 5 years to go before the repeal of the corn laws. The restriction of imports to protect the landowner class had sent the price of wheat, and hence flour, to an extremely high level. Consequently the average family could not afford to buy bread. By this time, however, despite the restrictions, some wheat from North America would be finding its way in to the ports of SW England. In any event, having got established, Jacob would be in a good position to capitalise on the drop in the cost of flour when cheap imports brought down the price.

The year before, when the Tithe Apportionments were made in Stoke, the building, including what is now Long Cottage) had been owned by Charles Holcombe Dare, one of the big local landowners. It was listed as 'House, Garden and Bakehouse' and

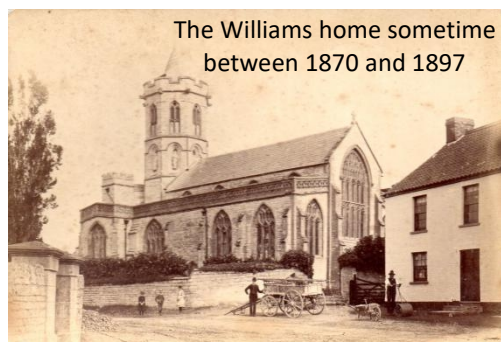
was occupied by a Thomas Parker, who had presumably been one of the local bakers. Dare had bought the property from William & Hannah Brewer in 1826.

When Jacob Williams took over the tenancy, aged 20, he brought with him Charles Squire, also aged 20, who was listed (in the 'next dwelling') in the 1841 Census as a 'Journeyman Baker'. He would have completed his apprenticeship, but was not yet able to go into business on his own account. The other entry at Charles' address is, strangely, a female servant, Martha Burges, aged 12. It is interesting to note that this building was classed as 'uninhabited' in the 1851 census, so Charles Squire had moved on to establish his own business in what is now Ash Grove, Meare Green.

On 2nd July 1841, Jacob married a local girl, Elizabeth Hunt, daughter of Lawrence Hunt, farmer, of Woodhill. By Census night 1851 they had two children who had not long started at Stoke School - Henrietta, 5 yrs old, and Flora, aged 4. Albert, aged 3, and Mary Ann, aged 2, were at home, looked after by a live-in servant, Harriet Haddon, who was 19. Edwin Hunt, Elizabeth's cousin, aged 17 was also living with them and was apprenticed as a baker to Jacob. There was also a visitor - Edward Warns, a Bible Christian Minister. It is not clear whether he was staying because he had come to preach at the chapel (which the Baptists took over before building their own church), or whether he was the resident minister. By now, Jacob was listed as Baker and Grocer. He was following the trend of diversification as the local residents needed to buy more of their weekly goods.

Jacob's wife, Elizabeth, was buried in Stoke Churchyard on 2nd July 1856. She was 33 years old, but by then Elizabeth and Benjamin had been added to the family. We presume Elizabeth died giving birth to her last son. Fairly soon after Jacob married again to Ann, born in Lyng, who was 10 years older than him. They had no children together. Around that time, Lot Watts retired from blacksmithing and moved to Watts Farm. Jacob bought his property, moved in and presumably then installed a new oven in what is now 'The Old Bakery'. He separated 'The Cott' (now 'Long Cottage'), and sold Jessamine to the vicar, the Reverend Richard Watson Moor.

Elizabeth was listed as 'housewife' in the 1861 census, and Jacob was now 'Baker and Shopkeeper', so he may well have already diversified more from simple groceries. Henrietta (16) had left school, and was now a 'Shop Maid'. Albert, although only 12, is no longer at school but is listed as 'Baker'. Mary Ann, Elizabeth and Benjamin are still at Stoke School. We also now have a different Bible Christian minister staying with the Williams' - Joseph Taque. There are also three servants living in. William Winslade is an apprentice baker, and Rebecca Tuttielt is a shop maid. Ann Webber, born in Burrowbridge, is a house servant.



The Williams home sometime between 1870 and 1897

Jacob died the following year, leaving his new wife Anne in charge of the shop. He was buried on 3rd June 1862. In 1871 she was still listed as shopkeeper, along with Henrietta and Mary Ann. Albert, age 22 is the baker, but there is no record of the other children.

By 1881 Anne had retired, and the sisters, Henrietta and Elizabeth, were partners in the grocery business. Albert, aged 32, was still living with his sisters as baker, but was also listed in the census as a farmer.

It was all change in Stoke in the 1880s. The Williams family divided the building, went into the drapery business, and took on the new village Post Office. Albert married and started his own family. Henrietta and Elizabeth were still living in the family home and running the grocery business, but they had further diversified into the growing drapery market. This would also have included selling boots and shoes, whether bought from wholesalers or local makers. They also took advantage of the expanding postal service and enrolled in the new post office system, with Henrietta becoming Sub-postmistress. Also living with them in 1891 was Dorcas Bobbett, age 18, of Woodhill Farm, who was later to marry Edmund Boobyer the willow grower and chair maker at Lees Farm. She was apprenticed as a draper's assistant. Jacob's widow, Anne, died in March 1886, aged 76



Albert had married Kate, who was originally from Stogumber, and they moved next door to live above the bakery. By 1891 they had two children, Albert age 4 and Elsie at 8 mths. Lilly arrived the following year, and Olive two years later. They also had living with them a house servant, Emily Love, originating from Curry Rivel.

The drapery business obviously flourished during the last decade of the century. In 1901, two drapers' assistants and an apprentice were living with the Williams sisters. Maud Pullyblank, aged 32, from Meavy, Devon (of 'Warhorse' fame), and local girl, Emily Batten, aged 16, were the assistants. The apprentice, Mabel Pearce, aged 14 was also from Devon - the village of Shillingford, near Bampton. A fourth assistant, from Stoke, was Mary Garland. By this time Charles Worthy Dare had also opened a shop in Meare Green, the building now known as the Old Stores. Some time before 1919 the post office moved to Griggs Hill, in the house now known as Norman's. Mrs Emily Bird had opened a shop there and she became the new Sub-postmistress.

The Chedzoy Years

In 1931 the Williams sisters retired. Stoke Shop was taken over by Henry Samuel (Harry) Chedzoy, brother of Hugh Chedzoy who had recently moved in to Slough Court. Harry's entry in the 1939 Kelly's directory was as Grocer, Draper, and Boot & Shoe Dealer. He employed Fred House as baker, who lived in North Curry. In 1953 the Chedzoy's moved to what is now Harvest Cottage, which they had built, about 1951, as a retirement home. They sold the shop and house to Ann & Arthur Trollope, from Lynton.



Fred House, Baker, with Harry Chedzoy's Delivery Van - an 'Overlander' with 4-wheel Drive



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The Square and Stoke Stores in the 1950s, around the time Harry Chedzoy sold up after the shop had been open for 100 years