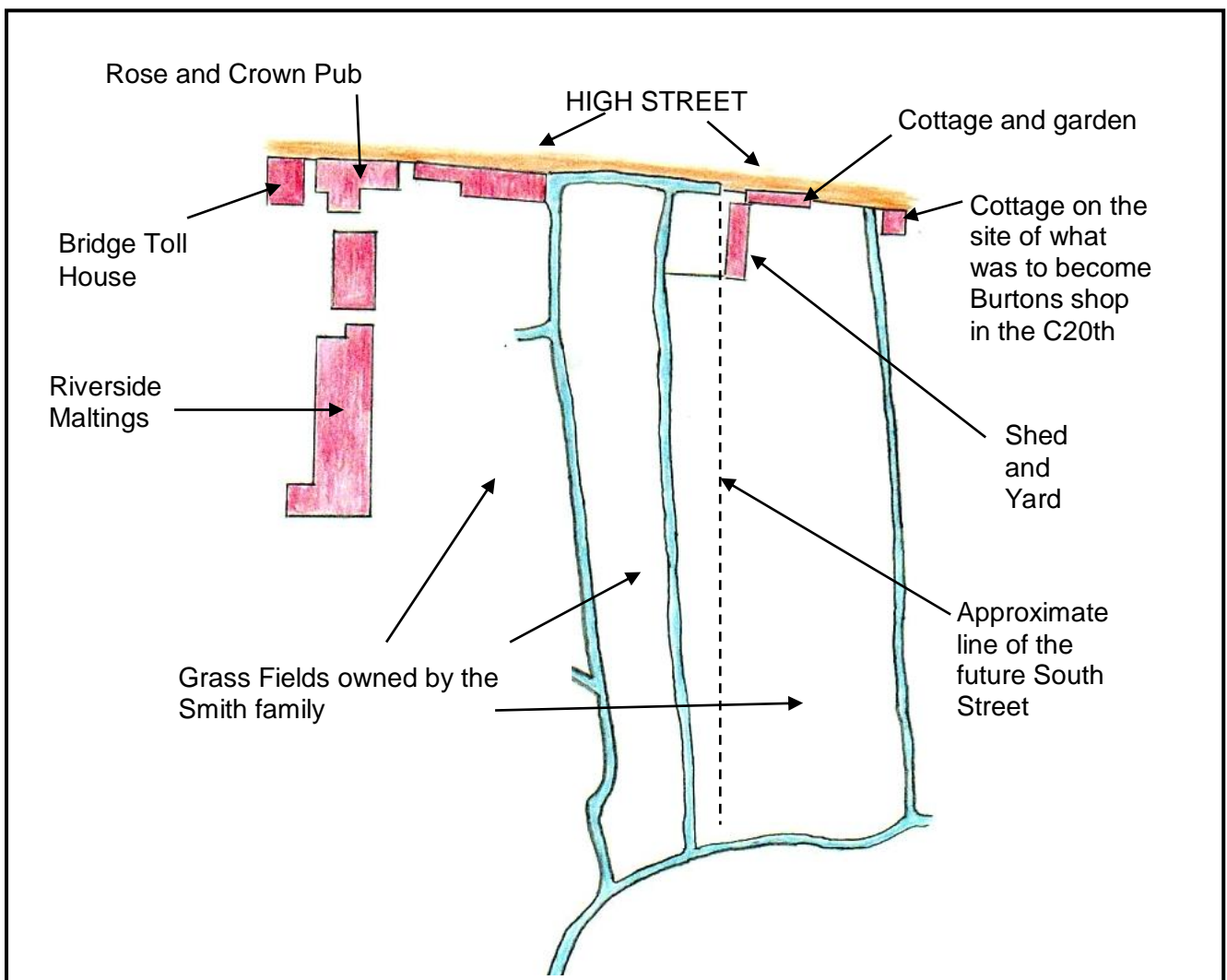


SOUTH STREET A HISTORY BY STUART MOYE

This article attempts to plot the course of the development of South Street Stanstead Abbots from 1840 to 1910. During this period it changed from fields upon which were built a street lined mainly with typical Victorian and Edwardian cottages. It provided much needed housing as the local village population grew as well as accommodating families moving into the village from elsewhere.

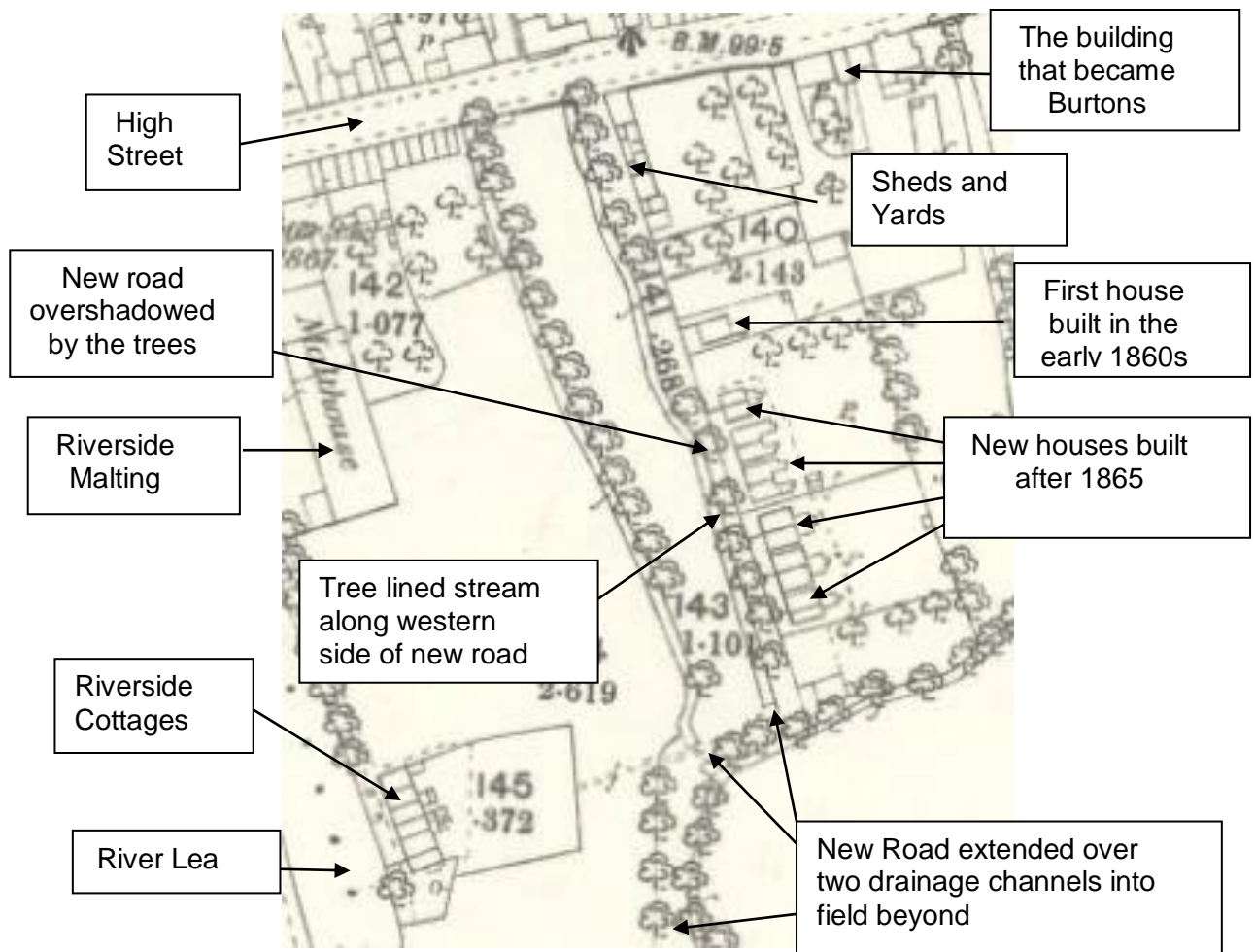
In 1840 the area which was to become South Street was three fields separated by drainage channels which ran from the High Street. These ran southwards, joining together and then eventually draining into the tail stream from the mill. These drainage channels were part of a larger connected network which drained the land on both sides of the High Street. Remnants of this system of channels can still be seen today at the bottom of South Street and in the boatyard.

South Street area in 1840



It is perhaps difficult today to imagine that a drainage channel of some width and full of water ran alongside part of the High Street. But this was the case in the 1840s, running from where the chemists shop currently stands towards the river bridge as far as the houses located next to the modern Bridge Shop. A narrow entrance to the field existed next to the shed and yard shown on the 1840 map. It is this gap between existing buildings and the drainage channel that was to be used to create a dirt track off the High Street which was eventually to become South Street. In the early 1860s a short road led down to the first house built in South Street. The site of this house is now occupied by number 6 South Street. Later that decade and perhaps into the early 1870s further houses on the left hand side were constructed which were known to have been completed by 1872.

South Street 1878



The new road that was to become South Street was built so that a drainage channel was on its right hand side lined with attractive trees. The road itself was little more than compacted soil, dry and dusty in the summer and muddy in the winter. The new road was built in a straight line until it reached the drainage channel that cut across in front of it. The road was then extended to follow the curve of the drainage channel crossing two more channels by short culverted sections. This curved road still exists today and leads into the boatyard. This new residential street was known as New Road until the official name of South Street was decided upon in the early 1880s

The houses built in brick were mostly of the two up and two down kind with a lean to scullery and small outside toilet built at the rear. These early houses in South Street had no sewers and fresh water was provided by communal pumps accessed by a pathway running along the backs of the houses. The toilets were of the bucket type with "Night Soilmen" collecting the waste from each household. The houses were being built at a time when the St Margarets Gas Works was being built so the early residents had to rely on oil lamps. The landlords of the houses had to pay for the initial cost of gas piping and connecting up to the gas main. This meant that it was down to the landlord as to when the houses were able to enjoy the benefits of gas lighting. Once installed it was of course the tenants who then had to pay for the gas used. It is interesting to note that the local gas works, while being built, underwent an enlargement of 25% due to the considerable number of additional houses being built in the village in the second half of the 1860s.

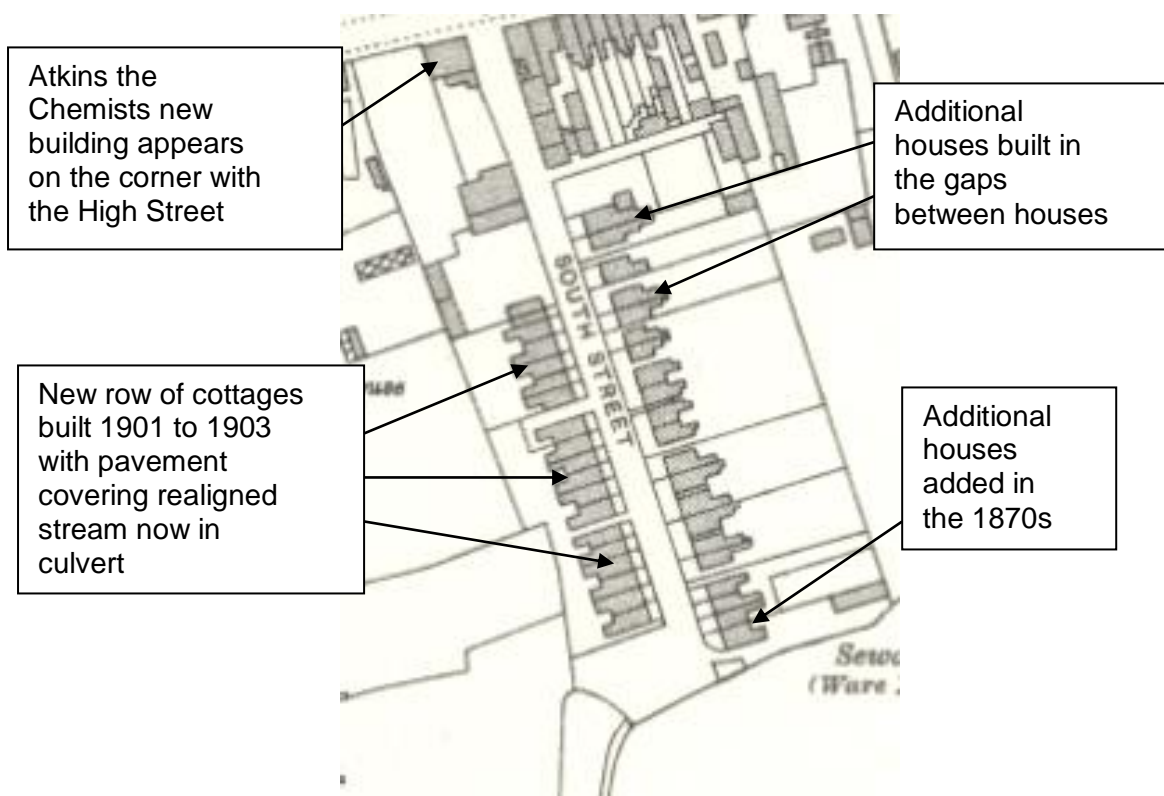
The houses themselves were built fairly cheaply and contained a considerable amount of material salvaged from older buildings. This was particularly noticeable in the doors, windows and metal fittings. Some of the doors showed signs of an earlier hard life and the previous positions of door knobs and hinges could be seen well into the C20th. The majority of these houses were built using the local yellow bricks. They were in the main the cheaper lower temperature fired bricks which tended to be somewhat porous after a few years of exposure to the weather, but were considerably cheaper to buy. The front room downstairs and the two upstairs bedrooms were fitted with cast iron black fireplaces of a fairly modest kind. The living rooms downstairs had a large coal fired black range for the heating of small amounts of water, cooking and the main source of everyday heating in the houses. The scullery to the rear featured a square brick built coal fired copper boiler with a short brick chimney. This provided the facility to warm up large quantities of water for the weekly wash and the traditional Friday night bath in front of the fire. Early residents of therefore had few of the household facilities we take for granted today. Some improvements were to become available fairly quickly to the residents of South Street others were to take a great deal longer.

In late 1879 the Ware Rural Sanitary Authority discussed the intended sewer for South Street in Stanstead Abbots. They received three tenders as follows;- Mr George Hitch of Stanstead £36 4s 1d, Mr William Cooper of Luton £34 9s 4d and Mr George Castle of Hertford £32 3s 8d. The decision by one vote to award the contract to the highest tender was explained by the fact that Mr Hitch was a well known local man whose quality of work was valued. The work was carried out in 1880 and meant that the houses in South Street now had flushing toilets. However as there was no piped water supply the flushing was done by a bucket of water filled up from the communal hand pump. The residents may well have been pleased to know that the sanitary authorities were discussing the supply of fresh piped water for Stanstead Abbots in 1883. This had first been promoted as a possibility as early as 1875. However the villagers were to be disappointed as the scheme was officially abandoned. It was in fact to be 1938 before the village was provided with piped water, a wait of 55 years and an awful lot of buckets of water carried from the pump to pour down the toilet.

One of the key points made by those who were in favour of providing a piped water supply was the need for the proper flushing of the sewers. This point was generally ignored and those who thought that buckets of water poured down the toilets would be sufficient won the day. Events in 1884 began to suggest that there were significant problems in relying on this bucket system as the High Street sewer was blocked. It must be mentioned that the system did not entirely rely on the somewhat irregular flushing of individual toilets by villagers who were not used to doing this task. Over time a system of tanks were erected at key points in the village to allow the sanitary authority to flush out the sewer with a sudden rush of a significant volume of water. Indeed it was reported in November 1884 that the new flushing tank in South Street was working well and efficiently cleansing the sewer culvert in South Street. However by mid 1886 the sewers in the village were regarded as totally unacceptable as the smell was odious and they were frequently blocked. So bad in fact had it become that a government advisor was contacted to inspect and provide improving guidance.

As an interim measure the sanitary authority wrote to all households in the village connected to the sewer instructing them to pour a bucket of water down their toilet just before noon each day. Needless to say this would only work if they all did so at pretty much at the same time which did not happen. A more permanent solution was sought by the erection of bigger flushing tanks including one that was erected in South Street. This improved system seems to have removed the foul smells and the complaints. The residents of South Street appear to have been able to then live at peace with their sewers after that.. Into the 1890s there were few changes to South Street. Houses lined one side of the road only and the front room windows looked out across a fairly narrow dirt road to a tree lined channel in which the children of the village could dip for minnows. Beyond the back garden fence was a large field which gave an almost rural countryside feel to the houses. Just after the turn of the century more houses were built which lined the western side of the road. This saw the removal of the attractive trees and the culverting of the realigned drainage channel under the pavement outside the new houses.

South Street Around 1910



Once the new houses had been built on the west side of South Street the vast majority of the houses we know today had been built. The street was still a well compacted earth roadway and was to remain so until the 1970s. The street was lit at night by two gas light standards. Not a bright illumination but sufficient for the residents to find their way home at night. South Street at this time did not lead to anywhere but the fields which were after WWII to become the boatyard and for a time Hankins lorry depot occupied a site at the bottom of the road.. The busy days of frequent lorries moving up and down the street and today's road lined one side with residents parked cars was but something for the distant future. In 1910 a rather quiet road in fact away from the hustle and bustle of the High Street.

South Street about 1905



This view from the early years of the C20th shows South Street shortly after the newer houses on the right had been built. Residents considered the later houses to be of considerable better quality than the earlier build.

South Street 2010



A modern view of South Street taken from approximately the same position, illustrates how little in some ways the street view has changed. Today's residents are no doubt pleased that the days of gas lighting and communal pumps for water are now long past.

Stuart Moye January 2018