

## FRAN COTTAGE



A white stone cottage by the very edge of The Street, just a few yards downhill on the left just past The White Lion Inn, our house was advertised as “early 17th century” by our estate agent back in 2007, and indeed, contained in a fireplace a cast-iron fire-back dated 1622, but we have found no documentary evidence of the cottage’s existence prior to 1760 – and identical fire-backs exist in at least 3 other places in the county; we recently discovered that a previous owner (Mr Strocchi) had installed the fireback which had belonged to his uncle in Cornwall (although it, or its original, was made for the Talbot family, who lived around Bramber and were connected to the Norfolks ... and intriguingly some Talbots have lived in Thakeham).

It’s easy to speculate, but the house date remains uncertain, and the only way to get a better estimate is to have an expert look at the oldest surviving roof timbers; we’ve not got round to this yet but such an authority at the Weald & Downland Museum who has seen a photo of our loft space commented: “... except for the pegged apex to two rafters, very little original timbering details are apparent I’m afraid but the above would tentatively point towards an 18thC date”.

In 1760, according to the Poor Rate Book, Leonard Soutter paid £6:00 for 4 properties – Perfure, Rowlands, Hungershill and Rodland - and a process of elimination points strongly to this one being *Perfure* as the others are all identifiable and well north of The Street, and we know from census and electoral records that the Souters did live in this house (as well as others) for many decades.

The 1779 will of farmer Leonard Souter (note the variable spelling) specifies no address, but Leonard Soutter the younger paid more than £15 rates for “Prefews, Rowlands and Redlands” in 1783. Nearly 60 years later, in the 1841 Tithe Map, we see a definitive location of the family in number 306, owned and lived in by Meshezebeel Souter, who also owned what is now Appletree Cottage by The White Lion, renting it to a John Hammond. The Souters were

prominent in the village until they disappeared between Leonard Souter's death in 1887 and his widow's in 1909, when 5 lots of property in The Street belonging to their estate were auctioned. The biggest red granite memorial stone in the churchyard marks the grave of this couple.

The following are excerpts from a hand-written article in the WI Scrapbook for Thakeham compiled in the 1940s now in the possession of Storrington Museum:

“At the end of the nineteenth century Thakeham village was in appearance much the same as it is to-day except that tiles have replaced thatch, and some cottages have had the fronts tiled or cemented over and so lost their old-world look.... The house next to the school [*Fran Cottage*] was in by-gone days the village stores when it was owned by the Souter family. In those days the shop-keeper travelled to London once a year with a horse and waggon to get his supplies which he stored in the cellars [*note the plural – there is now only one cellar, stretching between the two chimney breasts*]. The post office had its beginning here – just delivery and collection of letters and the sale of postage stamps. Eventually the shop was moved to where it is at the present day [*i.e. at the Old Post Office at the top of The Street*]. At the time when I first remember it it was truly a wonderful little shop, for practically everything that was needed for the village could be obtained there. The roads to Thakeham were rough and very bad and transport was difficult, so it was necessary for the village to be self-supporting.”



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*NB This account is very much work-in-progress, and any information readers may have about its history and those who have lived in Fran Cottage would be very welcome.*

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