

Messrs J & R Chapman, cart- & wheelwrights Bridge Street Works in King's Cliffe

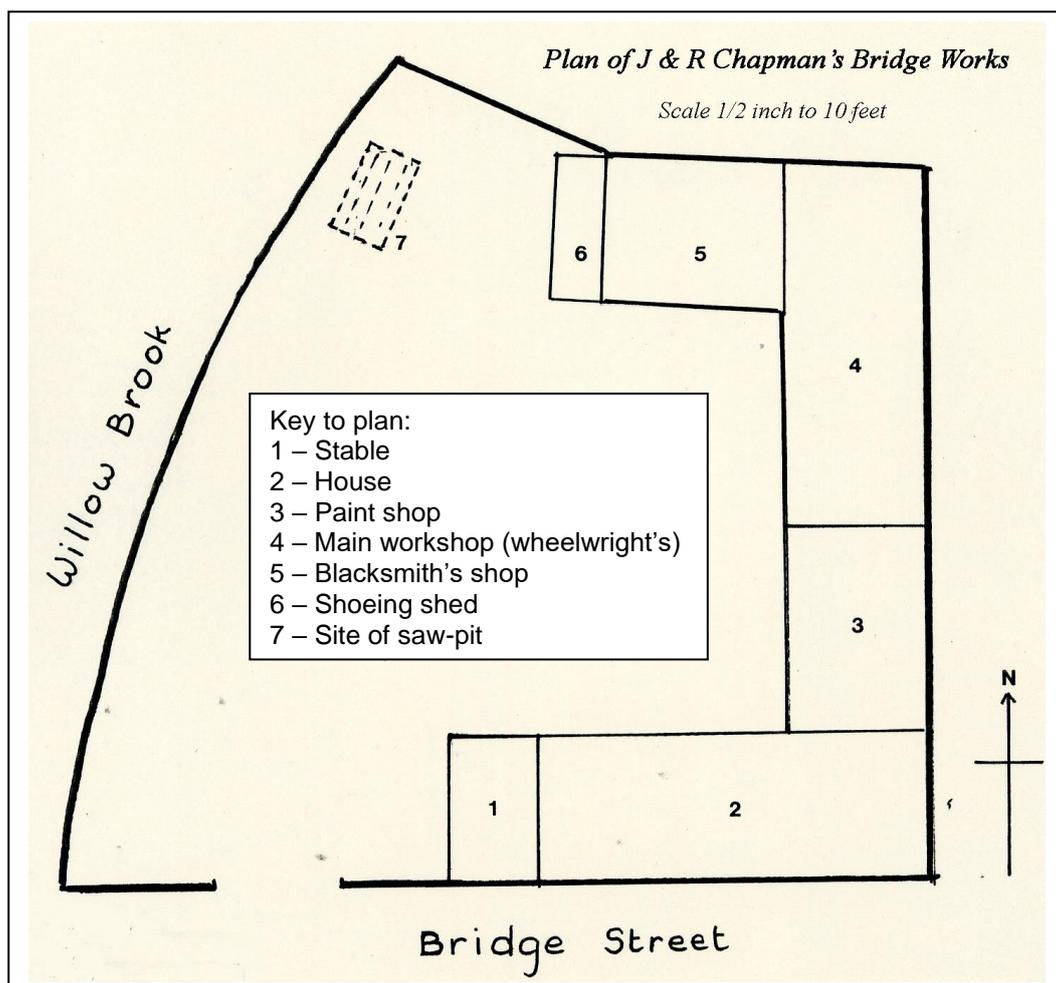
Messrs J & R Chapman were one of two cart- and wagon-building firms in King's Cliffe at the end of the 19th century. The other was Messrs Stokes & Son in Park Street, established there in 1840. Joseph & Robert Chapman transferred their existing business from Apethorpe in 1896 to premises beside the Willowbrook in Bridge Street. These buildings had a long history, with evidence of a tannery there in the 17th century, then a fell-monger's yard, and later a maltings. A date-stone on the gable-end of the house is carved with the initials 'IH' for John Howes – a well-to-do maltster, farmer and business-man – and the date 1827. In 1975 Chapmans' former workshops were converted into living accommodation as part of Bridge House.

What follows are extracts from the memoirs written by Miss Ida Chapman (1882 – 1972), the eldest daughter of Joseph Chapman:

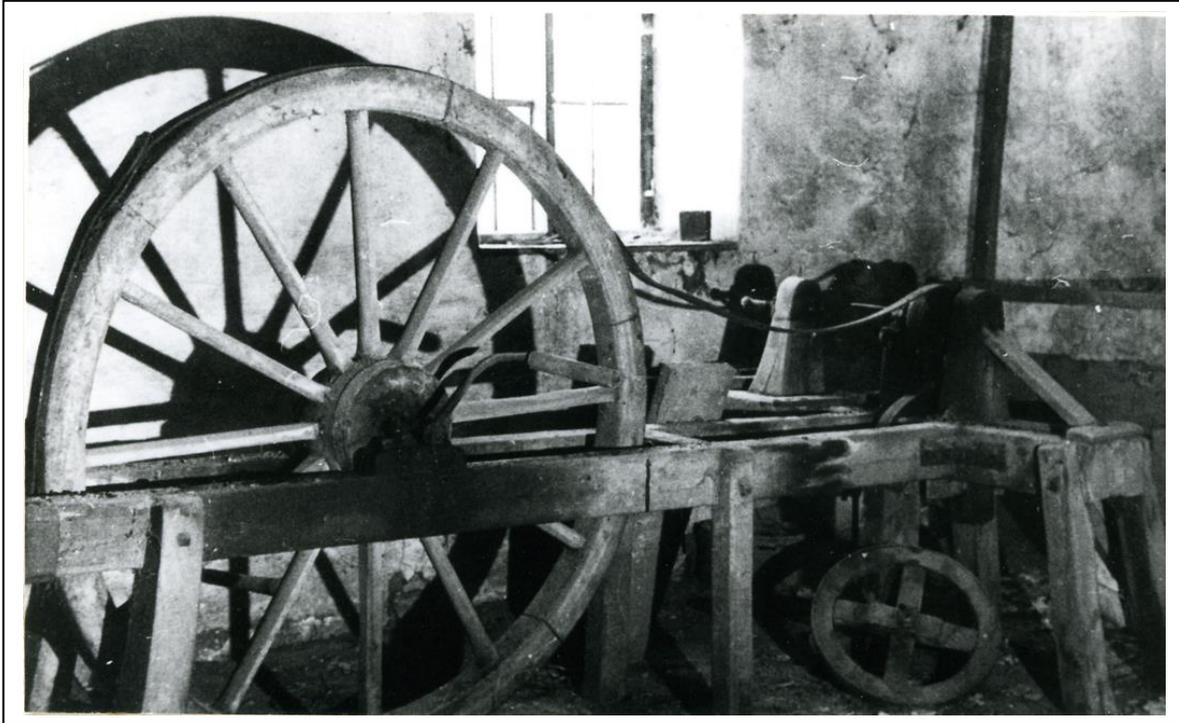
"Although Joseph Chapman and his brother Robert only set up business in King's Cliffe in the year 1896, they were already well-known over a wide area, as previously their works had been at Apethorpe, the village just two miles east of Cliffe. They took over a disused maltings in Bridge Street, which was converted to their requirements by Gutteridge & Son of Peterborough.

"The premises stood on three sides of a wide yard with a wide entrance from the street. When alterations were complete, they consisted of a blacksmith's shop on the north side, a wheelwright's shop adjoining and a paint shop on the east side. Part of the building on the south side, facing the street, was made into an eight-roomed dwelling-house for Joseph

and his family, shared with Robert his bachelor brother. As the shoeing of horses was part of the business, a shoeing shed was erected on the west side of the blacksmith's shop. A stable was built near the entrance to the yard, to house the strong nag needed to convey completed work to its destination and to bring in repair work. All the trade equipment was brought from the Apethorpe premises by the men employed there.



“In the wheelwright's shop, benches were fixed against the walls and shelves to hold the various tools. Strong vices were attached to the end of each bench. Each workman had his own box of tools by the side of his bench. On the upper floor at one end of the shop was an ancient turning lathe used for turning the hubs of the wheels. This lathe [*picture below*] was worked by two men, one either side of a large wheel fixed to a post. Together they drove the wheel, itself driving a leather belt which again turned the hub being worked with chisels until it had the right shape and size.



The old lathe at Chapmans, as it was in 1972. Photo by John Hadman.

“The entrance to the main shop was by a double door which opened outwards to the yard, enabling carts and wagons to be moved freely in and out of the shop. Glass panels in each door let in the light and there were windows at each level through the shop. During the dark winter mornings and evenings, a large oil lamp was hung from a beam and the men used candles at their benches.

“The paint shop was partitioned off at the south end of the main shop. Here were prepared the various paints; on one of the benches a paint-mill was fixed for grinding the paint, with nearby bags of whiting for making putty. White and red lead were kept here in drums. A large stove stood in this shop with a pipe through the roof to take the smoke. This was needed to dry the paintwork in winter and also provided some comfort for the men during their dinner hour. Seats were placed around the stove and a kettle was boiled for tea on top of the stove.

“The blacksmith's shop took the longest to convert as two chimneys had to be built, two forges and two troughs beside each forge, one to hold water, the other for small cobble coals. Long-handled bellows were at the side of each forge and the anvils stood in front. A long bench on the opposite side had a vice, a drill for boring holes in the ironwork, and the tyre-bender. One corner of the shop was used for storing iron - long flat and round bars, iron chains, bolts, nut and screws. Here also were kept the hammers, the largest being the sledge hammer, while a frame on the wall was hung with the different sizes of

horse-shoe. A door led from here into the shoeing-shed. Near to the blacksmith's shop, and outside, was a round iron platform fixed to the ground. Here the completed wheel would be fixed, ready for its red-hot iron tyre to be fixed and quickly cooled to tighten the felloes.

“There was not enough space at the Bridge Street works to store timber "in the round". Previously timber in the round had been bought from the Westmorland Estate; now at Cliffe it was bought from George Miles' timber yard in Park Street.

“If a cart or wagon was to be sold in open market the new vehicle was taken to Peterborough cattle market on a Wednesday or Saturday morning, Joseph Chapman in charge of the firm's horse. There he would place it on show in a corner of the market, awaiting orders; similarly, at Stamford market on Fridays. Each Monday morning Joseph would decide with the men the work that was to be executed that week. Robert Chapman, in charge of the smithy, would discuss with the men the ironwork to be done. The firm had a good trade and was well known for its work over a wide area; vehicles were made for a firm of brewers as far away as Bury St. Edmunds and brick carts for Fletton brickworks. Orders for repairs came in almost daily from farmers.

Ida Chapman remembered the men who worked at the firm:

“They were mostly ‘old hands’ who had joined the firm as apprentices at Apethorpe. The apprenticeship scheme was financed by the Earls of Westmorland; a grant of £25 a year for any lad in that village who wished to learn a trade. As Chapman's had been the only trade outfit in that village it was natural that young lads entered their shop to learn the trade of wheelwright, blacksmith, shoeing-smith or painter.”

The chief wheelwright was **John Paine** - a nephew of the Chapmans - a most skilful and quick workman. Working with him were **Robert Pain** (no relation of John Paine) and **Albert Hunt**, both of them lived at Apethorpe and had been trained and employed by the Chapmans for many years. As skilled workmen they would earn 18 shillings a week at first, rising to £1 a week. The men's hours were from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. except for Saturdays, when they finished at 1p.m.

George Weatherington was a carpenter, a former apprentice in the firm, who worked there until 1914. **Daniel Taylor** from Apethorpe was a general handyman. **Joseph Beasley** was farrier in the firm for a number of years, shoeing horses and making the iron-work for carts and wagons. The blacksmith's shop was a constant surge of sound: the creak of the bellows, the roar of the furnaces, the ringing of the anvils all day long.

William Dixon, a native of King's Cliffe, was good at his trade of shoeing smith and general iron-work. When he left, his place was taken by **Samuel Blake**, another King's Cliffe man, a thoroughly good all-round blacksmith. During the Boer War a brass band was formed in the village [*The Victoria Band, picture on next page*] and Sam Blake became the drummer, selected as the most suitable man for his muscular strength.



King's Cliffe's "Victoria Band", with Sam Blake on the drum.

“During 1913 the country at large became very unsettled; finally the Great War broke out in August 1914. This brought great upheaval everywhere and our business began to go into decline. The Boss's two sons, Harry and Bert, who worked in the firm, went away to the war and two of the remaining men went off to better jobs in town working on munitions. Farmers lost their men to the Army; wheelwrighting work gradually went into decline. The Boss's elder son Harry was a skilled workman able to make any part of a wagon or cart; the second son Bert was an accomplished sign-writer and painter. Joseph and Robert Chapman were growing old, work was falling away, and even though Joseph's elder son, Harry, was eventually released from the army on account of his craftsmanship, so vital for the farming community, business never really recovered. After 52 years with the firm John Paine suffered a breakdown in health at this time and he was obliged to retire. And so this vital industry petered out and with it something of old country life and of the old King's Cliffe.”

Ida Chapman's father, Joseph, died on 16th September 1922 at the age of 75. His obituary in the Peterborough Standard said of him: “He was a member of the Parish Council from 1901 until his death, and Overseer of the Poor since 1902. ... He was a Sidesman of the Parish Church, a Manager of the Cornforth Homes, and served on the Committee of the King's Cliffe Fire Brigade, in which he took a great interest.”

His older brother, Robert, died at the age of 87 in December 1929.

Compiled by Sue Trow-Smith, August 2020