

THE FIDDLE-MAKING SQUIRE OF STEEPLE ASTON

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In 1828 a London violin-maker inherited a quarter-share of the manor of Steeple Aston from a cousin of his mother. Within months he had set about building a new Manor House to reflect the change in his life-style, but the project bankrupted him, and cast a long shadow over his eldest son and heir. The author, a member of the Steeple Aston Village Archive, SAVA, charts the rise and fall of the would-be squire, Charles Harris.

The violin-maker's benefactor was John Marten Watson (1765-1828), who had spent his working life in the Northamptonshire village of Aynho, where he practised as a surgeon and apothecary. Watson had married Sarah, daughter of Edward Burbidge, a previous apothecary there, and had succeeded to Burbidge's house and business. But the couple were childless,¹ and Watson became increasingly concerned for the future of a far more ancient inheritance, his quarter-share of the manor of Steeple Aston, a few miles away in Oxfordshire.

The story goes back to 1501, when the last lord of the old undivided manor, John Dynham, also died childless. His various manors in Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire were divided in equal shares between his four married sisters or their immediate heirs. Some of the portions were later subdivided and sold off. In time Steeple Aston became an "open village" with numerous small freeholders, over whom the lords no longer had much control. However one division of its manor – the Watson share – survived more or less intact. In 1569 it was sold by Sir John Arundell to John Marten of Rousham and Edmund Hutchins. It then passed through several generations of Martens and Watsons, finishing up in the hands of John Marten Watson.

Watson's nearest female relative was a cousin, Marian Dew, married to a London violin-maker, Charles Harris the elder. How this couple met is a mystery but they were married in the Oxfordshire village of Somerton in 1787; Marian herself had been baptised at Fritwell in 1762, and her parents, Richard Dew and Mary Watson, had been married at Godington, north-east of Bicester, in 1760. Possibly Harris, whose

¹ See Nicholas Cooper, *Aynho* (BHS 20, 1984) p.115, where it is stated wrongly that they died intestate. Probate was in P.C.C. Prob 11/1741 f.224 [TNA].