

not known how much importance the Martens and earlier Watsons attached to their “manor”, but for John Marten Watson it seems to have had an almost mystical significance, and he took as much care as he could to ensure that it should remain in the family along with its share of the village farmland. Both were to pass “from right heir to right heir for ever”, beginning with Charles Harris and his son John Marten Watson Harris. In 1837, when things had gone badly wrong for them, it was re-affirmed that the lordship and the land had been “united from time immemorial”.³

The land itself had been radically altered by the Steeple Aston Enclosure of 1766-7, under which Watson’s father, Jacob Watson, had been allocated two large areas of farmland lying on either side of the Heyford Road extending a short distance along Southside (the area now occupied by Harrisville) and alongside Paines Hill as far as the village stream. Jacob was awarded a total of 116 acres, making him the largest landowner in the village after the Rector, the Rev. John Noel, who had 305 acres. Sir Charles Cottrell Dormer and Mrs Lucy Buswell came next with some 83 acres each.

Jacob Watson had owned a similar acreage before the Enclosure, made up of strips or blocks in the open fields, and the Enclosure Map of 1767 shows that he also owned three closes (i.e. gardens, orchards or fields already enclosed in earlier years) within the central part of the village. However they seem to have been disposed of before Harris came on the scene. Jacob had been active among the village farmers, and his signature appears on many of the agreements by which the open fields were managed in the years 1762-5 for which records survive.⁴ To farm their land, store their crops and shelter their livestock, the Martens and Watsons must have had a farmhouse of some sort, with an assortment of barns and outhouses, conveniently situated within the village – their “manor house”, if they chose to regard it as such.

C.C. Brookes speculated that Edmund Marten and his successors had lived in the large farmhouse on Southside, known at various times as the Manor farm-house, or Southfields Farm. The editors of the *Victoria County History*⁵ rejected this theory, suggesting instead that in 1767 Jacob Watson occupied the cottage now known as Acacia Cottage, “a relatively small 18th-century building of two storeys, with a decorative lunette between its first-floor windows” which lay further east along

³ C.C. Brookes: *History of Steeple Aston & Middle Aston*, 1929, p 86.

⁴ i.e. the *Steeple Aston Parish Book*, now at the Oxfordshire Record Office.

⁵ *V.C.H., Oxfordshire*, Vol. 11, 1983.