

Weston Aplin had already loaned Harris £100 against his “bond” – an I O U – but Harris had been unable to repay the money. When Charles asked for more, Aplin agreed, but demanded better security, hence the new mortgage. The problem is clear – the debts just kept on growing, and Charles had no way to manage them. By the time his mansion was finished, he was up to his ears, and people knew it.

A Private Act of Parliament 1837

The solution was provided by the owner of Rousham, Charles Cottrell Dormer. He was happy to acquire the Watson/Harris land which lay on his side of the village, adjoining land that he already owned. At his prompting (so Brookes tells us) Harris obtained a private Act of Parliament to break the entail. He then sold Cottrell Dormer the entire 116-acre estate, apart from the land on which his own buildings stood and a small parcel of land across the Heyford road which Cottrell Dormer sold back to him.

The Act required Charles Harris to obtain land elsewhere for his son to inherit, but only enough to reflect the value of the estate when it originally came to him, not the considerably higher price Cottrell Dormer was willing to pay for it. Brookes rather plays down this aspect of the arrangement, but William Wing, who was an eye-witness to these events, clearly thought it a shabby deal, and said so:⁶

In the first year of the reign of Her present Majesty, namely on the twelfth of July, 1837, a private Act of Parliament .. received the Royal Assent. This unique statute recites that John Marten Watson, who died in 1828... directed by his will that neither his manorial privileges nor his estate should be alienated by Charles Harris, his devisee, but should continue from right heir to right heir of his family *for ever*: but that as the intrinsic value of the estate had been valued at £4,335, and Mr. Cottrell Dormer was willing to purchase it at the larger sum of £5,800, in order to make his property more compact, Watson’s will might be deviated from and the privileges and property alienated by Watson’s devisee, upon the condition of his purchasing other land elsewhere at the lesser sum, and retaining the difference, upon the astonishing figment that the next heir was entitled to the intrinsic value and no more. This private Act was carried out, but the attendant expenses and difficulties were so great that instead of benefiting it ruined the person whom Watson intended to do good to.

The original deal between Cottrell Dormer and Harris was struck on 16 March 1837 – three months before Queen Victoria succeeded her

⁶ William Wing, *Annals of Steeple Aston*, 1875, p.81.