



STEEPLE ASTON VILLAGE ARCHIVE

Steeple Aston in 1801

Earlier this year a sheet of paper in the Oxfordshire Record Office – folded and covered on three sides with spidery writing – was identified by SAVA as Steeple Aston's long-lost census return for 1801. It comes from the first census ever taken in Britain: since then (apart from 1941) they have been done every ten years, but until 1841 only the statistical analysis had to be sent in. There was no requirement to preserve the full lists of names, and many of these earlier lists were simply discarded.

Here the Rector, the Rev. James Armetriding, copied the full 1811 and 1821 lists for both Steeple and Middle Aston into his Parish Register. Those lists were included in a booklet published in 2005. But Armetriding's 1801 list for Steeple Aston, which had survived among other loose papers from the church had never been separately catalogued. Sadly the equivalent list for Middle Aston is still missing, so we have only the statistics, and for some reason the rector did not keep any lists for 1831.

Compared with later Steeple Aston returns, the 1801 is pretty basic – just a list of 68 heads of household, plus six columns of figures giving answers to some very simple questions: How many families live here? How many persons are engaged in agriculture? How many engaged in trade, manufacture or handicraft? How many in neither? How many males? How many females? The columns were then added up to provide the official statistics: Steeple Aston had 70 houses occupied by 77 families; its total population was 333 (173 male and 160 female); of these, 53 were engaged in agriculture, 42 in trade or similar, and 238 not occupied in either.

Still, it gives us our first comprehensive picture of the village – not just the landowners and other well-off folk, but the ordinary working people as well. The meagre information it contains can be supplemented using other sources from the same period – a series of rate books beginning in 1801, detailed accounts of parish relief from 1800, and of course the Parish Registers. Such material is of great interest to family historians, and anyone who has watched the TV series "Who do you think you are" will know what poignant stories can be recovered from it.

Take the Bennet family, for instance. John and Winifred Bennet first appear in our records in 1779 with the baptism of their son John, who died a few months later. Like many of those listed in 1801, they were quite recent incomers, looking for work on the new farms created by the enclosure movement. There is evidence the Bennets had brought with them an older boy, William, born about 1777. They may have come from Ilmington, near Shipston on Stour, where a couple with the same names were married in 1776. Three more boys and three girls followed over the next fifteen years. There is no sign that any of these died in childhood, but by 1801 the family of "J Bennet" was down to three males and one female.

Despite having relatively few mouths to feed, John was struggling, and by 1801 he was receiving parish relief of 2s 10d (about 14p) a week – this might not sound much but others were getting as little as 1s (5p). The top rate was 11 shillings (55p) – for Sary Butler "deserted by her husband", as we learn in 1811. Much worse was to follow, and John and Winifred ended up in the workhouse at Woodstock, where they both died of typhus in 1838. Only their youngest son, Stephen, is known to have stayed in the village – and he died in 1820, aged 25; the others must have moved away and any descendants could now be scattered around the world...

A more detailed account of the 1801 census will be appearing later on the SAVA website.

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