



STEEPLE ASTON VILLAGE ARCHIVE

Dr Peacock's House As remembered by Adrian Bell

SAVA has recently acquired an article entitled 'Dr Peacock's House', referring to the house now known as Payne's Hill House. The article was originally published in 1967 in the Eastern Daily Press as part of 'A Countryman's Notebook', a regular section written by Adrian Bell. Dr. William Ernest Peacock was Steeple Aston's village doctor during the early 1900s. Adrian, his nephew, made several visits to Steeple Aston during his childhood. His childhood memories form the basis of the article, which was donated to SAVA by another relative of Dr. Peacock, his granddaughter Rachel Moustafa.



The position of Dr. Peacock's House on the brow of Paines Hill seems to have been a source of much amusement. *“The wheels of wagons were locked with an iron "shoe" before descending the steep hill beyond the house. Sitting on the wall I witnessed runaways, overturnings at the bottom of the hill - splintered shafts, flailing hooves and a majestic load tumbles and scattered.”*

Dr Peacock had a particular technique for negotiating the incline.

“He used to charge that hill in his De Dion motor car, with me sitting beside him. He accelerated hard down the opposite hill, tore along the level, then up, up, the furious rattle of the engine dying to laboured grunts, recovering briefly when he changed gear, dying again. Everything depended on him getting into bottom gear before we stalled and started to go backwards. If he muffed that last gear - and double declutching and getting the lever through a complicated "gate" was difficult - he shouted "Sidney! Sidney! Sidney, dressed as a chauffeur but in fact only a village lad, then leaned out of the dickey with a big stone kept there for the purpose, and chocked a rear wheel. Then my uncle had another go at the gear. Sometimes we so nearly reached the top of the hill that we all leaned forward as we did to help the horse uphill when we were in the gig. Sometimes we swung into the yard beside the house with even a little to spare.”

As well as Sidney, there was *“a cook who ruled the kitchen, with a kitchenmaid and a parlourmaid, also two nursemaids. ... A coachman, gardener and a lad worked outside. It was quite an establishment.”*

There are a few insights into the house itself. *“On the first floor of the house my aunt Kate had a white and gilt drawing room, with silk brocade upholstery and small white chairs with gilt cane seats. There was a bedroom at the back to which broad steps had been built outside, so that it was possible to descend to the garden from the window. There was minimal plumbing, and, of course, no electricity. Oil lamps lit the whole house, with pink-shaded candles on the dining-room table and sideboard.”* The house was the setting for the Mummers who, at Christmas, *“came and performed in the kitchen, using the scullery beyond for their entrances and exits ... how their hobnail boots rang on the bricks”.*

Adrian had fond memories of Steeple Aston. *“As a child I used to think there could be no more beautiful place.”* He says that, as an adult *“I went out of my way to revisit it, thinking it would seem a less enchanted spot than it was to me as a child. But I found it as beautiful as the picture of it stored in my memory.”* I'm sure many of us view our delightful village in the same way.

If you would like to save your memories of Steeple Aston for future generations to enjoy, whether as articles, photographs, audio tapes, videos or some other form, please contact SAVA (Chairman Martin Lipson 01869 347046, or drop into the Village History Centre on a Saturday morning). We can help you collate your material into a format suitable for archiving.

Bridget Lewis