

The Surgeon Extraordinary and the Grange



Thomas Davis of Steeple Aston was the elder of two sons of an earlier Thomas Davis (1736 –1812), who was a surgeon in Bicester. Thomas, the son, trained as a doctor, and married Maria Spicer in around 1815, settling initially in London where he had his practice. He had recently been attached as a surgeon to the 1st. Regiment of the Lifeguards. When their aunt died the following year, the family home in Steeple Aston – nowadays known as the Grange- was left to Thomas and Maria, who proceeded to establish their country residence there, and started a family. There is a memorial to this family in the church.

In due course, Thomas became a “royal” surgeon to King William IV (reigned 1830-1837) and the King of Hanover, and must have spent much of his time travelling between London and Steeple Aston. He is listed in the Court records held in Windsor as “Surgeon Extraordinary”, which means he was one of the junior members of the medical team attending the monarch. The reference to Hanover appears to suggest that there were two Kings involved, whereas in fact William IV was also King of Hanover. It is possible, however, that Thomas was also surgeon to Ernest, William’s brother, who succeeded him as King of Hanover after Victoria came to the throne, and continued with this title until his death in 1851.

At some point, reputedly, Thomas acquired much decorative and other building materials from the Castellated Palace at Kew, designed by James Wyatt for William’s father George III- the “mad king”. This extravagant building took decades to build, but was eventually demolished in 1827/8 without ever having been occupied. Davis allegedly incorporated these materials into his considerable expansion of the Grange, but no hard evidence has yet been found that this attractive myth is really true. The Grange is indeed an extraordinary house, described by Pevsner as “an eccentric ornamental castle”. It was originally built around 1720 as a modest country house, but had substantial grounds which over time were developed into a small country estate. Around 1824 Thomas Davis started to alter and expand the house. Building work appears to have continued for up to 20 years, although for much of that time it may have been to outbuildings such as the dairy, stables, head gardener’s cottage, and so forth. All were carried out in a highly decorated Georgian Gothick style, much in fashion at the time. The house was the crowning glory, the additions doubling its size, with battlements, gothic windows of all shapes and sizes, and most particularly sculptures, gargoyles and friezes incorporated into the brick and stonework, both externally and internally.

The house remained in the ownership of successive distinguished families, of whom the most recent was headed by Capt. Richard Bradshaw, who became a Vice-Admiral of the Fleet. His youngest son Arthur, known as Moses, inherited the Grange, where he lived until his death in 1939. Moses was married to Bet, and they had 3 children, amongst them Eira, who now lives in Cornwall. There were numerous staff and servants, amongst whom she particularly remembers:

- The butler Charlie Hart, who lived at the Stables cottage, was paid five shillings a week, and started with the family when Eira was two years old. One of the footmen for whom Mr.Hart was responsible was called Frank.
- Will Butler, the chauffeur, lived in one of a pair of cottages on the other side of North Side, now called Kralingen. He drove a variety of cars for the family, including a Lanchester and a Rolls Royce, for which he received special training from the company. Will Butler's job included closing the dark green painted wrought iron gates to the driveway (opposite his cottage) every night. The gates were removed for melting down in the second world war, and were never replaced.
- Dick Wadham was the head gardener, in charge of 6 other gardeners. Dick lived in the head gardener's cottage on North Side, adjacent to the service entrance gates. Violet Preston, the daughter of Dick Wadham, lived there until she died, leaving it to her son Richard Preston who still owns the kitchen garden. The cottage has been re-named Primrose Cottage.
- Tommy Nelson, the cowman, lived in the cottage adjacent to Will Butler, and was responsible for supplying milk to the Grange dairy and others in the village.
- Nancy Barrett, the kitchen maid, still lives in the village. There was also a head housemaid, who had responsibility for three under-housemaids and a "boots" (who did many odd jobs including cleaning the cutlery).

The Bradshaw children, however, could not afford to keep the house going, and the noise of aircraft from Upper Heyford, even in 1950, was a further discouragement, and they moved away. At some point in the 1950s the Grange was used by the USAF as staff quarters, and then fell into disuse for the first time in its history.

Sadly a developer bought the estate in the 1960's. Within ten years, much of the grounds had been made into a housing estate of 41 dwellings- appropriately called Grange Park. Fortunately, many of the specimen trees in the grounds were kept, and the wooded walk around the fields to the north of the house, known as the Poly (for polyanthus walk) still exists in a very overgrown state. The house itself, only just saved from demolition, was eventually subdivided into three, and belatedly granted listed building status. Despite these changes, the Grange manages to retain its extraordinary character, and the exterior is largely as Davis left it, even though the servants and the park are now long gone.

Martin Lipson
West Grange
SAVA Hon. Treasurer

This article is a synopsis of a much more detailed history of the Grange prepared by the author, and forming part of SAVA's local archive. If you have any additional information about the life and times of the Grange, SAVA would be very interested to hear from you.