



## Hero or Murderer?

In 1878, Steeple Aston vestry (the forerunner of the parish council) nominated a recently-arrived gentleman – a certain Mr Eyre – to be sworn in as an overseer of the poor. Edward John Eyre had bought The Grange at auction in 1876 and moved in with his family. It was usual to expect that newly-resident gentry would be only too pleased to serve in such a capacity, but Mr. Eyre did not want to. The Banbury Guardian of April 1878 reported that magistrates had agreed that he did not have to serve. Mr. Eyre's reasons for wishing to stay out of the public eye went deep.

Julia Margaret Cameron – the celebrated photographer – took this haunting portrait in 1867 when Eyre had just returned to England after serving as Governor of Jamaica for three years. Eyre was facing charges of murder and other crimes, orchestrated by an angry group who were deeply upset about how he had gone about putting down a violent rebellion in Kingston in 1865. Eyre had declared martial law and allowed the army to shoot at the crowds of protesters, killing many; he had also put on trial one of the ring leaders – leading to his summary hanging. A Royal Commission set up to investigate what had happened had exonerated Eyre, but he had nevertheless been recalled to England. The attempts to bring him to trial failed, but a persistent group of his detractors harried him for years afterwards, threatening private prosecutions which also came to nothing. The case was a national sensation though, splitting newspapers and public opinion, with celebrities such as Dickens standing up for him, while others such as John Stuart Mill were against him. It was not until 1872 that Parliament finally granted him a pension and allowed him to retire gracefully.

Eyre's career up until his posting to Jamaica had been a success. Born in England in 1815, the son of a curate, he emigrated to Australia at the age of 18 to make a life for himself. He took up sheep farming, but he also had a strong urge to explore the unknown territories of that huge continent. Between 1836 and 1841 he made a number of expeditions across the south coast of Australia, opening up new routes and lands for future settlers, enduring dreadful hardship en route, with an aboriginal guide whose life he saved on one occasion. He became a hero, gave his name to Lake Eyre and today is a celebrated part of Australian history – every schoolchild there has heard of him. Here, no one now remembers his name, besmirched as it was by his later misdemeanours. After his expeditions, he was offered the job of Lieutenant-Governor of New Zealand, and then performed various deputy Governor jobs before he became Governor of Jamaica.

After that sad episode and his eventual acquittal, Eyre initially lived in Somerset. In total he fathered nine children, of whom two died as babies. When he came to Steeple Aston in 1876, he was 61 and his wife Ada was 50. With them, as recorded in the 1881 census, were daughters Ada, May and son Sidney. Daughter Ada had been born in the West Indies and was married in our church of St. Peter and St. Paul in September 1881. A few years earlier he had advertised in the Banbury Guardian for a contractor to build 120 yards of garden wall in the grounds of The Grange – enclosing the walled garden. Eyre also built a new dining room and two bedrooms over it to extend the house to its present-day size. There were six servants also in occupation on census night.

In 1884 Eyre sold The Grange to Admiral Bradshaw. He moved first to Dorset and then to Devon, where he eventually died in 1901 aged 86. He did not play much part in the life of Steeple Aston for the six years he was here, and perhaps we can understand why he kept himself to himself. It is easy to make judgements these days about the British Empire, but life 150 years ago was rather different.

*Martin Lipson*