



STEEPLE ASTON VILLAGE ARCHIVE TRUST

A Jobseeker in Steeple Aston around 1790

For some three hundred years, between the Dissolution of the Monasteries under Henry VIII, until the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, the needs of the poor and needy were the responsibility of their home parish. Up to the 1530s the abbeys played an active part in feeding the hungry and clothing the naked, but once they were gone, the country faced a growing problem from both the deserving and undeserving poor – those who fell on hard times through no fault of their own, and those who were seen to be able but unwilling to work. Numerous Poor Laws were passed during the period, gradually building up a system in which the poor would be supported by the ratepayers of the parish in which they were “settled” – either their place of birth, or the last parish where they had last been in regular work. Women who married took on their husband’s place of settlement.

Naturally, communities were wary of admitting newcomers who might become a burden on them, unless they knew for certain which parish was responsible for their upkeep, and so parish authorities began to collect written evidence – Certificates of Settlement – on anyone trying to move into the neighbourhood. By providing a measure of reassurance, these papers allowed people far greater freedom of movement than they might otherwise have had to go looking for work.

Thousands of settlement certificates have survived, giving social and family historians a vivid insight into the lives of ordinary folk who were mostly buried in unmarked graves and left no other record beyond a baptism in one place and perhaps a marriage somewhere else. Preservation of these documents is patchy, however – some parishes kept piles of certificates, others just threw them out once they were no longer needed. Adderbury and Witney kept dozens, Steeple Aston just one – now stored at the Oxfordshire Record Office. It records the examination by two Justices of the Peace in Windsor, Berks., of one James Knibbs, born in Deddington, who named Steeple Aston as his place of settlement (he had also worked at Blenheim, but this was not considered to be part of any parish). This is a slightly edited version:

“The Examination of James Knibbs now residing in the Parish of Old Windsor, Labourer, taken on Oath before us two of His Majesty’s Justices of the Peace February 1813 touching the Place of his last Legal Settlement

... who saith that he was born in the Parish of Deddington in the County of Oxford where his Father then resided and was legally settled as he has heard and believes, that at his age of Fifteen Years or thereabouts he was hired for a Year by John Pain of the Parish of Steeple Aston in the said County of Oxford at the Yearly Wages of Forty Shillings together with his Board and Lodging, that he continued in that Service Two Years, received his Wages, and Boarded and Lodged in his Master’s House in Steeple Aston the whole of that Period;

... that he was afterwards hired for a Year by Smallbones of Blenheim Park, Park Keeper to His Grace the Duke of Marlborough, who agreed to give this Examinant three pounds a Year for Wages and his Board and Lodging, that he served Smallbones under that living two Years at the like Wages, boarded and lodged in his Master’s House and received his Wages, that the said Smallbones took him under a fresh hiring for another Year at three pounds ten shillings for the Year’s Wages and his Board and Lodging, that he served the said (third) Year received the last mentioned Wages and boarded and lodged in his Master’s House in Blenheim Park during that

time. (He further saith that he believes the whole of Blenheim Park to be Extra Parochial), subsequent to which this Examinant has done no Act whereby to gain a Settlement elsewhere,

...that about Seventeen Years ago he was married to his present Wife Elizabeth at the Parish Church of Kidlington in the said County of Oxford by whom he hath six Children, five of whom are now living with him, namely James aged about thirteen Years, Richard aged Five Years, Sarah aged nearly three Years and Joseph and John (twin Children) aged nearly seven Weeks’.

The fascinating story of the wandering Knibbs family, and of the Poor Law system which enabled James Knibbs to go looking for work, was the subject of SAVA’s annual illustrated talk, given on 26 April by Deborah Hayter at the Village Hall under the title “The Peripatetic Poor”. Deborah Hayter is a local historian and a tutor at the Oxford University Department of Continuing Education (Rewley House).

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