



STEEPLE ASTON VILLAGE ARCHIVE

Orchard Lea and Rousham House

In 1754, Orchard Lea on South Side was purchased by John Clary. Clary was best known as the gardener who was responsible for laying out the Rousham House gardens according to designs by the eminent William Kent between 1738 and 1741. The fact that Clary chose to live so close to his finest work offers a clue to the nature of the man who, to follow a gardening metaphor, was no shrinking violet. To begin with, he was born not as Clary but as John McClary or Macclary and removed the Scottish overtones of his name to gain some association, according to the garden historian Mavis Batey, with the prestigious Clary family who were possibly maltsters, and therefore landowners, around Steeple Aston in the 17thC (though little trace of them can be found in parish records).

It is likely that Clary's purchase of Orchard Lea coincided with the demise of one Antony Jepson, a glazier, who found himself in financial difficulties after adding rooms to his house. John Clary combined his gardening vocation with that of a money lender with a fierce reputation for collecting his dues. Jepson fell into his hands, eventually having to forfeit his house. Once ensconced at Orchard Lea, Clary set himself the task of reshaping the gardens in the manner of a miniature Rousham, probably with the intention of broadcasting his connection with his greatest project. Moreover, he built a summerhouse in the Kentian style with small ogee arches at the top of the windows so that he could, according to Mavis Batey, "look out onto a miniature landscape".

Further events cemented Clary's association with Rousham. By 1760, the Cottrell Dormers were generally absent from Rousham in their capacity as Master of Ceremonies at Court. Horace Walpole, the builder of Strawberry Hill House, the famous Gothic revival villa in Twickenham came to view Rousham during a tour of Oxfordshire. Walpole was a great admirer of Kent as a landscaper and Clary, acting as guide, showed Walpole how Kent had set out Rousham as a landscape whose beauty was best appreciated by taking specific routes through it. Walpole writes in July 1760 that his "greatest pleasure" had been in visiting Rousham, admiring 'the sweetest little groves, streams, glades, porticoes, cascades and river imaginable'. This was at a time when Walpole was actively planning his own gardens at Strawberry Hill. Possibly fortified by Walpole's praise and feeling that the beauty of Rousham was insufficiently appreciated both by the family and publicly, Clary was emboldened to write to his employers to gently chide them for their neglect and absence.

'Madam, I am afraid my Master and all of you have forgot what sort of a Place Rousham is, so I have sent you a description of it that it might not creep out of your Memorys'.

This "description" of Clary's walking guides around Rousham and the letter itself has been given some prominence by English gardening historians such as Mavis Batey as articulating Kent's philosophical and poetic intentions in garden design. This is somewhat at odds with William Wing who, in his 1874 copy of "History and Antiquities", presents Clary as near illiterate and uncouth in his letters to business acquaintances. Whatever the case, when the Cottrell Dormer duties as Masters of the Ceremonies became less onerous later that same year and they returned to Rousham, the now full-time mistress of the household, Jane Caesar, promptly dismissed Clary. However, within the Steeple Aston context, Clary had gained some standing as a petty squire even if his personal ill reputation remained and he was appointed surveyor of the Steeple Aston Enclosure of 1767. The grave in the churchyard for a John Clary who died in 1786 is possibly his.

As for Clary's garden at Orchard Lea, a succession of owners over the last 258 years have made their own mark and little or nothing remains of the original. Only the summerhouse remains as a monument to John Clary's ambitions.

David Jarratt and Geoffrey Lane

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