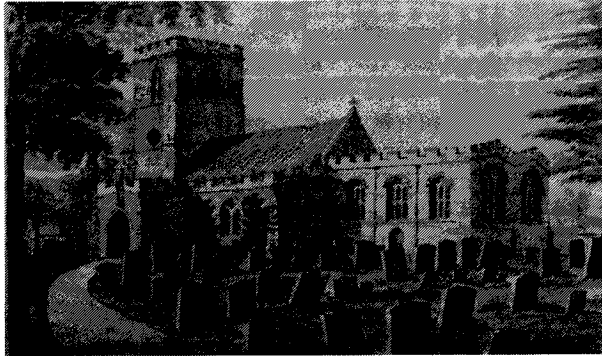




STEEPLE ASTON VILLAGE ARCHIVE TRUST

SAVA is very grateful to Mel Smith for the donation of two water-colour paintings of Steeple Aston, which belonged to the late Mrs Daphne Smith, of Holly Tree Cottage, South Side. One, showing the village church, is signed by the Deddington artist Joseph Wilkins, and dated October 5th 1865. The other painting also appears to be by Wilkins, though any signature is still hidden by a glued-on mount – it shows the wheelwrights' shop at the Heyford-road end of South Side, now known as The Old Forge. Geoffrey Lane reports:



Joseph Wilkins: Steeple Aston Church in 1865 and the wheelwright's house & shop on South Side

The pictures: Our first picture is a charming impression of the church from the south-east, if slightly inaccurate in some details – the side-windows of the chancel should have four main lights each, not six, and the niche over the porch door should not extend above the parapet. And isn't the Rectory a little too far to the left?

The second picture shows the carpenter and wheelwright, James Durran (1796-1880), and his wife Ann, who occupied The Old Forge for about 40 years. James bought the land from the creditors of Charles Harris at an auction held at the Red Lion in July 1840, and the buildings shown were erected soon afterwards. The business was eventually bought by another wheelwright, Nathan Field from Duns Tew (father of Laurence), after Ann Durran's death in 1883.

The artist: Joseph Wilkins (1820-91) is probably best known as a painter of bird's-eye views, including a fine one of Steeple Aston from the south-east. This is now in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, which owns the copyright. Two birds'-eye views of Deddington can be seen on the website Deddington Online (look under "maps"). Wilkins came from a working family and at first called himself an agricultural labourer. In 1850 he married Ann English from Barford St John, and they lived in The Stile, Deddington, in a cottage shared with Ann's mother Temperance, and increasingly crowded with children. Wilkins is believed to have worked as a sign-writer, and used the description "painter etc" in the 1861 census. But as early as 1845 he had come to the notice of Deddington's Squire-cum-Vicar, the Rev. William Cotton Risley, who recorded in his diary "A man named Wilkins came to sketch our tabby cat Jerry".

The patron: Although Risley never mentions Wilkins again, another local diarist, George James Dew (1846-1928) from Lower Heyford came across him in 1866 and gives us a vivid picture of the artist and his working methods:

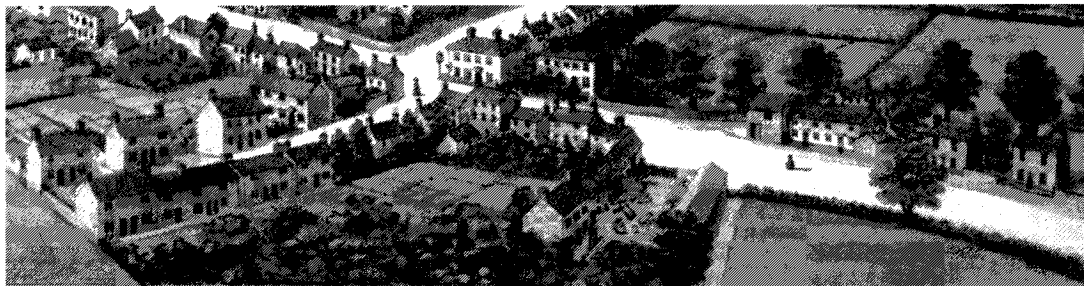
Dec 1: Saturday: ... Wilkins from Deddington brought me a view of the canal bridge at Heyford as it appeared before the railway was made, for which I paid him 1/- & father gave him 6d. he being so very poor. He had with him also two views of the south side of Rousham House done very well indeed. No one would ever think that so poor, stuttering creature possessed so great drawing abilities.

Dew – just rising 20 at the time – had several further dealings with Wilkins that month, and encouraged his brother John to take an interest:

Dec 4: Tuesday: ... Wilkins from Deddington took a sketch for a view of this part of L. Heyford. It will comprise our house with a view of the Chapel, Miss Hore's, Charles King's where my father's grandfather (Thos. Dew) lived & Foster's opposite, where my grandfather lived & all his children were born; making a very interesting family picture. We gave him orders for a bird's eye view of Lower Heyford. ...

George Dew was slightly disappointed with the fine detail of his bird's-eye view when it reached him less than a fortnight later, but thought it made "a pleasing-looking picture". He went on to collect several more pictures of Lower Heyford and other places, which were eventually donated to the Bodleian by his daughter Dorothy Dew.

Cont'd....



*The Heyford Road end, part of Wilkins' Bird's-eye View of Steeple Aston
(by kind permission of the Bodleian Library, Oxford)*

The Steeple Aston connection: As already mentioned, Dew's collection included the well-known Birds'-eye View of Steeple Aston, which he probably commissioned. It shows the village very much from the Heyford Road end – which turns out to have several odd connections with the Dew family. In the right foreground is Lansdowne House – built about 1844 by George's father, the builder and carpenter John Dew, but sold after the death of John's first wife. The left foreground is dominated by Harrisville, developed in the late 1840s & 1850s, where John Dew owned (and probably built) two of the cottages. One of John Dew's tenants was Thomas Wilkins, from Deddington – not only an older cousin of the painter, but married to Hannah English, Ann Wilkins's aunt! It is quite possible that George Dew first came across Joseph Wilkins while collecting his father's Steeple Aston rents.

Later on, George Dew himself inherited the two Harrisville cottages. He also acquired the Old Post Office, next door to The Old Forge, and put in his wife's name. And when Nathan Field needed a mortgage after buying The Old Forge, who should come up with the money but George Dew's sister-in-law, Emily Banfield.

FOOTNOTE: G J Dew's Diaries, edited by Pamela Horn, were published in 1983 and 1986 under the titles *Oxfordshire Village Life* and *Oxfordshire Country Life in the 1860s*.

The Banbury Historical Society issued part one of *Early Victorian Squarson: the Diaries of William Cotton Risley* in 2007; a further volume is in preparation, but does not mention Joseph Wilkins.

Photographic copies of the Steeple Aston Birds'-Eye View can be purchased from the Bodleian Library.

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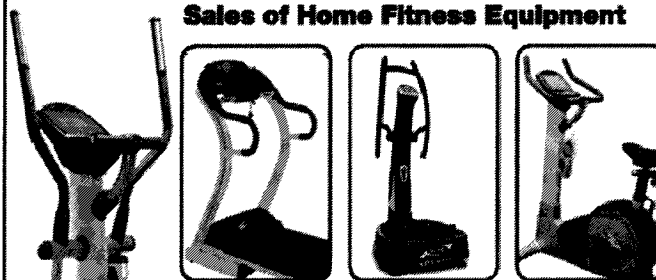
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