



STEVENTON PARSONAGE

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Visitors to Jane Austen's birthplace regret they cannot see her first home. The following item from the Knight family papers¹ in the Hampshire Record Office, Winchester, may go some way toward explaining why the old house was torn down and a new one built. *Memorandum for a supplementary affidavit respecting Steventon Glebe Apl 1824* is docketed in Edward Knight's handwriting, but the text is in another hand. A glebe is the land included in a rectory for the use of the incumbent.

There is no rectory house in the Parish of Steventon excepting the new one now nearly finished built on a part of the land proposed to be added to the original glebe. The former house was situated low and subject to be flooded, distant from the greater part of the village and in a dilapidated state. The present house is placed above the valley in a more healthy spot and nearer the village. The inhabitants are about 150 persons. The original glebe consisting of only 3 A. O R. 23 P. [presumably 3 acres, or 23 parcels of land] in two disunited pieces was quite insufficient for the necessary accommodation of a resident clergyman's family and as there are besides cottages only farm houses in the Parish and very few resident incumbents in the adjoining Parishes, it is most particularly desirable that the Rector of Steventon should reside there rather than on any other preferment he may eventually have and nothing is so likely to secure that residence as the proposed addition to the glebe which will add so materially to the comforts and in some degree to the respectability of the Rector. There can be no doubt what ever but very sensible advantages will be felt as well in several of the adjoining Parishes as in that of Steventon by securing the residence of the Rector in that Parish.

Edward was put to some effort and expense to carry out this plan. In conveyances dated June 2 and 3, 1823, he exchanged property, which each side valued at £190, with William Digweed, his chief tenant at Steventon. The new glebe would consist of the Long Shrubbery, the meadow bounded by the Deane to Waltham Road and the Deane to Steventon Road, South Meadow, East Meadow, Hanging Meadow, Tower Hill, Hither Nurshanger,

and Orpswoods. Official approval was needed, and bills from various government offices in 1824 and 1825 totalled £275, 3s, 10d.

Edward inherited the advowson of the rectory of Steventon, that is, the gift of the living, which had been part of the Knight estate since 1706. James Austen succeeded his father in the living and, after his death in December 1819, was himself succeeded by his brother Henry. In her *Reminiscences*,² Caroline Austen notes that she, her mother, and brother were offended by Henry's good spirits and eagerness to enter the living when they were so unhappy to be leaving their home. Henry was still deeply in debt to Edward over his bank failure and desperate for income. It appears he had been passed over for a fairly good appointment. In a diary³ entry for May 12, 1818, Edmund Yalden White, a neighbouring clergyman and good friend of Edward's sons, says the "Inhabitants of Alton" petitioned the Bishop of Winchester and the absentee vicar Edmund Poulter "that Mr. Austen may continue as curate." Henry's signature first appears in the Alton registers in October 1817, along with Ben Lefroy's, so he was probably only a temporary curate. Usually, the Alton curate also served as headmaster of the endowed grammar school, received an extra stipend, and probably took private pupils besides.

Henry was only holding the living of Steventon until it could be taken up by his nephew William Knight and so moved on to be curate of Farnham, Surrey, in 1822. The expense of the new rectory house and improved glebe were undertaken by Edward so that his son might have a suitable estate. If the house really was so run down, the Austens themselves were at fault. Incumbents were responsible for upkeep of residence houses.⁴ Their successors had the right to claim from them or their estates the sum necessary to bring the house back to good repair, a claim for dilapidations. George Austen had a small income, a large family, and many students, all conducive to good house maintenance. As his successor, James was unlikely to press his mother for dilapidations, and he too was short of funds. As James's executor, Edward would hardly make a claim for his son William.

The Steventon entry in the *Victoria County History of Hampshire*, printed in 1911, says: "St. Nicholas' Church is on the eastern boundary of the parish. The rectory standing in very pretty and well-wooded grounds of 53 acres is some distance north of the church . . . situated about 500 yards distant from where the old one used to stand. At present no vestige of it remains, but up to within the last twenty years garden flowers used to bloom every season in the meadow where it formerly stood."⁵

NOTES

¹ The major portion of this deposit, HRO 18M61, is damaged and fragile and consequently not available for inspection. I am grateful to the staff of the Record Office for their invaluable assistance.

² Manuscript in possession of Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence Impey, Chilland, Itchen Abbas, Hampshire, who kindly allowed me to read a typed copy.

³ Held by the Gilbert White Museum, Selborne, Hampshire. The curator, Dr. June Chatfield, kindly allowed me to read the manuscript volume.

⁴ A good explanation of the financial difficulties of the clergy and the management of family livings can be found in *Temporal Pillars* by G. F. A. Best (Cambridge University Press, 1964), pp. 11-77.

⁵ Volume IV, p. 171.