

## WILLIAM STEER 1767-1850

In 1792 when the South Devon Militia were stationed at Dock Barracks William joined the army 'to the end of the Muster'. This proved to be the start of a ten year career for him, but what led me to the South Devon Militia?

I knew that my paternal ancestors came from a small fishing village in Devon called Beesands in the parish of Stokenham and I found from the Census Records that there were many there by the name of Steer and also in the next little bay along the coast called Hallsands.

To start with the censuses: in the 1841 Census the enumerator only asked if a person were born in the County (Y-Yes, N-No), Ireland (I), Scotland (S) and Foreign (F) and that the ages of persons older than 15 were rounded down to the nearest 5 years and this is what I found:

William Steer	70	Fisherman	Y
Mary Steer	60		Y
Betsy Steer	20		Y
Sarah Steer	2		Y
Emma Tucker	2		Y

There was also a William Steer born (I) aged 40 and his family all born in Devon and a John Steer born (I) and his family all born in Devon.

Making a note of the relevant names I turned to the 1851 Census for Beesands. This was taken on March 31. The elder William was not there of course having died in 1850, neither was the younger one but John said he was born in Stokenham, so no confirmation of the birthplace of Ireland given in 1841 but he did give his age as 49.

Ages of John Steer given on various Censuses:

1851 March 31	John Steer	49
1861 April 7		60
1871 April 2		70
1881 April 4		80

We can therefore see that he was probably born 1 or 2 April 1801. Now Mary and William Steer did not start having children baptised in the Stokenham Registers until 1803 lending some credence to his statement in 1841 that he was born in Ireland. Until 1803 there were no Steers in Beesands or Hallsands.

I had learnt from the Parish Register that William Steer of East Allington and Mary Roper of Stokenham had married in 1792 and assumed it was this couple who were having the children - standard mistake! The fact that 1 mis-transcribed from the Register that the second child of Mary and William to have been baptised was Joanna Query Steer did not help.

I knew from a copy I have of W A Robert's 'Stokenham Names' that there was an MI to William Steer died 1850 aged 83 and Mary Steer died 1851 aged 71 and it did not occur to me until some time later that this couldn't possibly be William and Mary (Roper) Steer as she would only have been 11 years old at the time of the marriage. When it did, I searched diligently for a burial entry for the first Mary or a marriage certificate for a William, widower, but found nothing.

Not knowing where to start looking for another William and Mary, in 1995 I wrote to John Glanville of the Devon Family Historian who looks after the marriage Index and asked if he could find an entry for William Steer and Mary in

the 1754-1812. Back came a reply with three possibles, one of which I hoped was mine:

*William Steer of the South Devon Militia to Mary Avery 21 March 1797 by Banns at Plymouth St Andrew.*

In the Society of Genealogist's Library I found microfiche copies of the Plymouth St Andrew's P.R.s and the entry as follows.

*William Steer of the South Devon Militia was married to Mary Avery of this Parish by Banns 21 March 1797 by me Wm Manley, Lecturer.*

*The mark x of William Steer*

*The mark x of Mary Avery*

*Wits: Sarah Avery (Signed) Thos Richards (Signed) He may have been a clerk as he witnessed many marriages.*

I cannot show it with a keyboard but Sarah signed her name with an old fashioned A and I knew straight away that I should have read the baptismal name in 1804 as Joanna Avery Steer not Joanna Query Steer. Of course I immediately checked and it was very clear to see now that I had the other information!

So now I had a lead for William – The South Devon Militia. I hurried off to the Public Record Office at Kew. It took me several visits to discover what I now know and in fact in May I found some facts which may change the beginning of this story slightly.

As I stated at the beginning William Steer joined The South Devon Militia when they were stationed at Dock on 5 Dec 1792 and his pay was one shilling a day paid at the end of the month, probably more than he was earning at the time. I had found an entry on the Muster Rolls stating that William Steer was discharged 30 May 1797 and then another that William Steer was 'inrolled' on the 12 June 1797 and I had chosen to think that it was the same person but on my last visit to Kew looking at the Exchequer (E182) records thanks to information from William Spencer of the PRO I found a small book containing 'The Return of Marching Guineas paid during the year 25 Dec 1796 - 24 Dec 1797' belonging to The South Devon Regiment of Militia. There were two columns on each page

- 1) Men inrolled in 1797
- 2) Time prolonged for men inrolled in 1792

and in the first column was William Steer in Capt. Spicer's Co. If William did only join in 1797 it must have been at the beginning of the year as he was already in the South Devons at the time of his marriage. I need to do some more research into this.

The Regiment served in various places in Devon and then having volunteered to serve overseas was sent to Ireland in July 1798 and were at Clonmel in August 1798. In September 1798 they were stationed at the main English barracks at Waterford and there at the back of the Muster was a 'Return of Women and Children under 10 years of age with the regiment in Ireland to whom 8d a week has been paid' and there was Mary Steer with William and she was paid 5/81 a week (sometimes 5/11). Mary and her son stayed in Ireland as long as the Regt. was in Waterford and the last entry occurs on 24 May 1799. After that the Regt. was paid at Bideford and there is no more mention of the families. (WO 13 531/2)

## STEER FAMILY

On the 24 August 1799 William was discharged to the 62nd Regiment of Foot and appears on their books on 25 August 1799. (10 12 7168) The names of six men from the Stokenham area who were volunteers from the Sth Devons to the 62nd were stated to have received a bounty of £7 (a huge sum in those days) but William's was not among them. Why not I wonder?

On 25 Nov 1799 William was with the 2nd Battallion and in Jan 1800 was again in Ireland this time at Clonmel, but there was no mention of wives or children. In June 1802 he was transferred back to the 1st Batt and was discharged 5 July 1802 and given £1-8-0 to 'subsist' him home.

In Stokenham on 16 Jan 1803 Nicholas son of William and Mary Steer was baptised. Had he already got two older brothers? I know that he had one - William and if John was not another one, where did he come from?

William's service in the army seems to have been without fault If without distinction and at no time did he have a 'black mark' against his name. The only absence noted was against the William Steer who joined in 1792 'absent for harvest' during the muster Dec 1795-Jun 1795 as also was a Richard Avery and this was when the Sth Devon's were at Plymouth.

With my sister I have looked at the Plymouth microfiches for births at the West Devon Record Office but could find neither William Steer born about 1767 or Mary Avery born about 1781. (On the 1851 census Mary stated she was born in Plymouth Charles, next door to Plymouth St Andrew). Mary was very young when she married. Do you think a giddy young 16 year-old had her head turned by a handsome young man in the striking red jacket of the South Devon Militia?

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## WILL MY FLOPPIES FAIL?

I have been giving some thought to all the information I have stored on my computer hard disk and on floppies. Some of it is now twelve years old and produced on an Amstrad 2086. Most of these files transferred to my 486 and Windows 3.11 five years ago and were re- copied then, but with the ever faster rush to upgrade software and machines will these old files become useless and important information lost? I use the PC to compile our family and farm history. My question is just how long will this stored data last, at what stage will the floppies fail and vital records be lost.

My second point relates to the pages our printers chum out, how long will the print stay on the page before fading, legal deeds and documents compiled by solicitors on modern printers and photo copiers, will these have a limited shelf life? Will my family and farm history printed files fade away to nothing?

In this mad rush to progress and upgrade because of the "2000" bug we must take a look at this if we want to keep old information accessible.

May I take this opportunity to thank everyone in the DFHS who make access to family history that much easier, especially through the availability of the collections and information in the Tree House and the magazine.

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WILLIAM STEER  
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