

## 20 Year Research began with a Clock

A talk by Martyn Webster - Reported by Terry Sutton

The intriguing story about how a burglary in a Dover shop led to the diaspora of a local family was told at the annual meeting of The Dover Society in April. Martyn Webster, a Dover-born Immigration Officer living in Brighton, related to the meeting why members of the Steber clock-making family came to Dover, traded in the town and eventually emigrated to the USA. He also explained that his 20-year research into the Steber family began because of his family ownership of a Steber-made long case clock.

John Steber (born about 1778) from Bavaria arrived in England with a German mercenary regiment and, during the Napoleonic Wars, in 1805 was stationed among the garrison of Dover Castle. Demobbed from the army John Steber settled in Dover and opened a clock-making shop at 11 Cannon Street. For some reason, possibly illness, he hanged himself, aged 40, from a bedpost at his Cannon Street home and was buried in St Mary's churchyard in 1819.

John Steber left a widow and 10 children, the eldest being David, who continued the business. David was born in Barbados while his father John was serving there in the British army. Tragedy struck in the evening of September 27th in 1830 when a thief used a diamond to cut open the shop window to steal gold and silver watches and jewellery, resulting in David Steber being made bankrupt.

An enforced auction by Dover estate agents Tersons at their Snargate Street mart included two "excellent" eight-day clocks and other items along with 250 gross of fashionable buttons. As a result of this David Steber, by now a Freeman of Dover, with help from French relations, emigrated to the USA where, in 1835, he applied for American citizenship. A year later he was in business as a watch and clock maker.

Mr Webster told how David, married three times, moved from place to place and ended up in Jamestown, Texas. The wealthy David and Elizabeth Steber began laying out streets in the town and sold lots for building purposes. The 1860 Texas census listed David, aged 61, as a farmer. His wife Elizabeth was a year older. In 1867 the Stebers donated two acres for a Methodist Church. Then came the civil war and the freeing of David's workforce, causing his virtual bankruptcy this was compounded by the construction of the railroad that bypassed Jamestown and turned it into a ghost town.

Elizabeth died in 1863 and David was drowned on 18 December 1869 at Demopolis, Alabama after falling into the river from a packet ship while on his way from Mobile to visit his sister Henrietta Warren in Tuscaloosa. At that time, virtually penniless, he was living in Mobile with his son, a steamboat engineer.

Mr Webster added that all the family descendants of the Steber family he had located, today either live in Alabama or New South Wales, Australia where they were engaged in the manufacture of fishing boats.



*Some of the Steber family*