

A NOTE ON CHARLES MASON'S ANCESTRY AND HIS FAMILY*

H. W. ROBINSON

Lately Librarian of the Royal Society of London

THE story of the Mason-Dixon Line is well known but the personal history of the two men who were employed in this work is very scanty. We do know a few details of the early life of Jeremiah Dixon, but nothing whatever was known of Charles Mason until he joined the staff of the Royal Observatory at Greenwich in 1756. To trace his ancestry and obtain other information regarding his early life has been a long and difficult task. From clues contained in original letters which have been found at Greenwich, the British Museum, and elsewhere, it has been possible to gather together many details of his parentage and family. These clues led to enquiries being made at Tetbury, Sapperton, and Bisley in Gloucestershire.

It will be remembered that James Bradley, the Astronomer Royal who appointed Mason to Greenwich, was a Gloucestershire man and that he had married a lady from Chalford, which at that time was in the parish of Bisley. It was known that Mason in signing his "Lunar Tables" gave his address as Sapperton, in 1780. A further clue was obtained from some letters addressed to him from Maskelyne in 1769 and 1771 to the care of Robert Williams, teacher of Mathematics at Tetbury. This Robert Williams eventually became Head Master of the Grammar School of that town.² All these indications pointed to the fact that Charles Mason was either a Gloucestershire man or that he settled there. The following extract taken from the *Gloucestershire Journal* of 1 January 1777 added weight to this assumption:

A few days ago were laid before the Hon. The Commissioners of the board of longitude solar and lunar tables, by Mr. Charles Mason, *of Sapperton*, in this county.

Enquiries at Tetbury and a search of the registers there produced no result. Similar enquiries and searches of the registers at Sapperton and Bisley resulted in the discovery of much of the information desired. In the churchyard at Sapperton there is a tombstone with a memorial tablet attached with the following words :

Sacred to the Remains of Rehekah, Wife of Charles Mason, Junr., A.R.S. With the greatest serenity of mind She departed this Life the 13th of February 1759, at Greenwich, in Kent, in the 31st Year of her age.

The view from the churchyard at Sapperton is quite one of the most lovely in Gloucestershire and Rebecca certainly had a charming spot in which to be laid at rest.

The family of Mason is mentioned in the earliest registers of the parish of Bisley in the year 1547. They were millers and bakers and lived at a village or hamlet which in those days was known as Wherr or Wharr. It is

now remembered as Wear Farm and Little Wear.⁸ It was in the parish of Bisley between Chalford and Sapperton; a quaint and remote parish among the hills near Stroud. At the beginning of the eighteenth century it was a very large and scattered parish, well populated, and it included many villages such as Oakridge Lynch and Chalford. The latter lies in the Golden Valley, its steep sides glorious with trees. So steep are some of its little streets that it is only possible to this day to deliver supplies to the inhabitants by donkey. Chalford has been a separate parish since the late eighteenth century.

On the Ordnance Map of 1828, at a spot just south of Oakridge Lynch and on the north bank of the Thames-Severn Canal is a house marked "Bakers Mill" and it seems reasonable to suppose that this was the residence of Charles Mason, the father of the astronomer, and that the latter was born there.

Charles Mason, senr., was born at Bisley about 1700. He is recorded to have married Anne Damsel of Daglingsworth at the parish church of Sapperton in 1723. Records of the baptism of four of his children also occur in these registers, as follows:

Samuel, baptized 25 November 1725

Anne,

Charles, baptized 1 May 1728

Hester, baptized 6 May 1731

The Rector of Sapperton has very kindly searched all the registers of his parish and has supplied the above information. He also mentions that as Bisley parish stretched at one point to within 3/4 of a mile of Sapperton Church and that Bisley Church was 3½ (very hilly) miles N.W. of Sapperton, it would not be surprising if people who lived at that end of Bisley parish might ask that their children should be baptized in Sapperton Church, quite apart from any family or residential association.

The astronomer apparently lost his mother before 1771 since there is a record in the Bisley registers of the second marriage of his father on 24 June 1771 to Mary Gardiner. There were two children of this marriage, Sarah (baptized 15 Jan. 1772). and George (baptized 23 Oct. 1774). All the children are mentioned in the will of Charles Mason, senr. which was proved in 1778. Of passing interest is the following extract of the will since it gives further evidence of the fact that the astronomer was living at Bisley at that time, as he was being supplied with bread and malt from his father's bakery:

Item, I give and forgive my Son Charles Mason the Sum of Ten pounds of good and lawfull Money of Great Britain which he due and lawfully owes me for the following particulars, Viz. Bread, Malt, and Timber. I give to my above son Charles Mason one shilling to be paid by my executors.

We can now be certain that Charles Mason, the astronomer, was born at Wherr in the parish of Bisley in Gloucestershire in the early part of 1728, for he was baptized at Sapperton Church on 1 May 1728. He married, firstly, Rebecca (died 13 Feb. 1759) and secondly, Mary,⁴ and records have been found of the following children of these marriages :

William C. and Doctor Isaac 5 who were probably children by the first wife, and the undermentioned, whose records occur in the registers of Bisley :

Charles, baptized 2 June 1771

John, baptized 13 Sept. 1772

Robert, baptized 19 June 1774 (10 weeks old)

Susannah, baptized 15 Feb. 1777

It is known that when Charles Mason and his wife arrived in America they were accompanied by seven sons and one daughter. We have records of the six mentioned above and these were, no doubt, the eldest. The remaining two boys were probably born between 1778 and 1786 as towards the end of the century Mrs. Mason was asking for support from the Board of Longitude for the benefit of her younger children. No records have so far been found of either marriage but it is reasonable to suppose that as Mason's first wife, Rebecca, was buried at Sapperton, she came originally from that part of the country and that probably they were married before the astronomer went to Greenwich. It seems possible that the second marriage occurred in 1770 or a little earlier. Their first child by this union was baptized on 2 June 1771 but as late as January 30 in that year Charles Mason gave his address as care of Robert Williams at Tetbury, so it would seem that he and his wife were living in Robert Williams' home. May not Mrs. Mason have been a sister or even daughter of this Robert Williams?

All efforts to ascertain where Charles Mason obtained his mathematical knowledge have failed.

Unfortunately the records of the schools are very incomplete but it is thought that he had the help of Robert Stratford, a schoolmaster and a mathematician of Sapperton between the years of 1730 and 1750.

Apart from the monies Charles Mason received from the Royal Society for the various expeditions he undertook and the payments he received from Lord Baltimore and Mr. Thomas Penn, he was given many grants by the Board of Longitude for his computations, catalogues of stars and his lunar tables. The latter were used extensively in making calculations which were afterwards published in the *Nautical Almanac* over a period of years. For his work in this connection, Mason received sums of money totaling 1317 pounds 10s between 1770 and 1781.

After Mason's death in 1786 his widow sent a "Memorial" to the Board of Longitude in 1791 claiming a further reward on account of her husband's work and in 1792 she proceeded to England and was interviewed by the Commissioners of the Board.⁹ An award of LSO was made to her and she was also paid 50 pounds for two manuscript books.¹⁰ For further papers she was paid 20 pounds and 100 pounds.

Mason's eldest son, William, apparently came to England at the end of the century and remained in London up to the time of his death, which appears to have occurred in or soon after 1816. On 3 June 1802, from an address in Lombard Street, London,

he petitioned the Board of Longitude,¹³ on behalf of his brother, Doctor Isaac,¹⁴ and himself, for a grant in consideration of his father's labors. The Board ignored this demand, as also a further one made in December 1815.

It is interesting to record that many letters, documents, and original manuscripts of Charles have been found in the archives of the Royal Society, at Greenwich Observatory, at the British Museum and elsewhere. Many of Mason's original tables and calculations are at the Royal Observatory. The Astronomer Royal was good enough to grant permission for the inspection of these. Our thanks are also due to Mr. Brian Frith of Gloucester for his kindly interest and cooperation in this effort to trace the family history of a notable

Gloucestershire astronomer. He has been good enough to search the Bishop's transcript copies of the Diocesan Registry at Gloucester and has supplied much other information. The Vicar of Bisley kindly gave permission for the registers of his church to be searched.

Other problems remain and it is hoped that further search will clear up the outstanding questions in order to complete the story.

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¹Hollis, H. P., Jeremiah Dixon and his brother, *four. Brit. Astron. Assn.* 44 : 294-299, 1934.

²Lee, Rev. Alfred T., *The history of the town and parish of Tetbury, 301*, London, Parker, 1857.

³Rudd, M. A., *Historical records of Bisley with Lypiatt Gloucestershire*, 274, Gloucester, Jennings, [1937].

⁴It will be noted that both father and son married a second time and that the Christian name of the second wife in each case was Mary.

⁵Royal Observatory, Greenwich, Minutes of the Board of Longitude. MS. 7: 5 June 1802,-"A letter from Mr. Mason and his brother Doctor Isaac Mason (who was christened by that name)." The original letter is in Board of Longitude Papers, XI: 41.

⁶Cope, Thomas D., Collecting source material about Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon, *Proc: Amer. Philos. Soc.* 92 (2): 111-114, 1948.

⁷Royal Observatory, Greenwich Board of Longitude Papers, XI: 41.

⁸Royal Observatory, Greenwich. Minutes of the Board of Longitude. MS. 17 Nov. 1770; 28 Nov. 1772; 15 Jan 1774; 25 June 1774; 6 June 1778; 28 Nov. 1778; 6 March 1779; 3 March 1781.

⁹*Ibid.*, 3 March 1792.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 5 March 1791.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 2 June 1792.

¹²*Ibid.*, 1 December 1792.

¹³*Ibid.*, 5 June 1802:

¹⁴There is no evidence that William had his brother's consent to use his name. "Doctor Isaac" had remained in America and was settled with his wife and family in Philadelphia.

¹⁵Royal Observatory, Greenwich. Board of Longitude Papers, XI: 41.