

## The Cross Keys

The Cross Keys, which is still open and flourishing in Gustard Wood, is one of the oldest pubs in Wheathampstead and has been associated over the years with some of the most long-standing families in the area, including Ephgraves, Sibleys and Russells.

This photograph of the Cross Keys taken in about 1902 shows how Gustard Wood Common was open and treeless at that time.

The 'Cross Keys' about 1902/3



The earliest record that we have of the house as a dwelling dates from 1617 when it was occupied by William Sibley. The first record of it as an inn is from 1756; the billeting survey of that year shows that the licensee was Edward Ephgrave. The Ephgrave family also farmed the land at Herons Farm and part of Lamer Farm.

The Ephgrave family were still in charge in 1806, when William Ephgrave was named as licensee in the alehouse recognisances; this is confirmed in the minute books of the Dacorum Petty Sessions in 1818, 1819 and 1820. In the latter records, George Grey and William Hooper stood as surety. It is highly likely that this is the William Hooper who was licensee at The Bull in Wheathampstead.

The parish burial record dated 1834 states:

“Buried at Wheathampstead, William Ephgrave, aged 96 years, and had taken out 67 licences for the public house called the Cross Keys, and could see to read the paper without spectacles.”

In the 1820s, the evidence is confusing in that it shows the licence switching between Ephgraves and Sibleys almost annually. The Poor Rate Assessment for 1820 shows Charles Sibley as licensee with a valuation of 16 shillings but only a year later the Dacorum Petty Sessions names William Ephgrave, with William Hooper again standing surety. Two years later, the alehouse recognisance names John Sibley but from 1824 to 1828 the licensee is William Ephgrave. Every generation of Sibleys from at least 1638 to 1867 includes at least

one John so it is not possible to track individuals with certainty. They must have been related to the Sibleys who were maltsters in Wheathampstead and licensees of the Bell & Crown in the High Street but the exact connection has yet to be researched.

From 1828 to 1878, the licence was held by one John Sibley or another and business seems to have gone smoothly. The Poor Rate Assessments in the 1830s valued the house at £8, rising to £10, and identified John Garrard of Lamer as owner. The Garrards owned the Cross Keys (and The Bull) until at least 1914.

By 1841, the PRA valuation had risen to £12; the census of that year confirms that John Sibley is in residence, aged 80, described as a 'victualler' and living with one adult son (also John, aged 32) and two adult daughters.

Like many such establishments, the Cross Keys was also used as an auction room, for example on 21 April 1842 when a three-acre field in Gustard Wood was auctioned by Rumball's, a major local auctioneering firm that is still in business today. On 7 March 1844, Rumball's held another auction at the Cross Keys, this time of a freehold farmhouse with buildings, orchard and a few acres. It was described as:

'very suitable for a Higglers<sup>1</sup> or Dealer in cattle, having the advantage of the Commons, good roads in all directions, and near several markets.'

The Post Office Directory of 1851 describes John Sibley as licensee of the Cross Keys and a boot and shoe maker. This is confirmed in the 1851 census, which says he is a shoe maker and victualler aged 43 (and therefore very possibly the son of 80-year-old John Sibley in the 1841 census), living with his wife Mary and two nephews - Thomas Turner (22), journeyman shoemaker, and Norman Thrall (19, and a member of yet another notable local family) who is a journeyman miller. There is also Thomas Latchford (another familiar Wheathampstead surname) who is aged 17 and an apprentice shoe maker, and two lodgers, one of whom is another journeyman shoe maker and the other an agricultural labourer.

The 1859 directory lists a 'John Sibley, baker' in Gustard Wood but this must be another John Sibley.

We can however be sure that it is the same John Sibley who appears in the 1861 census as a victualler and cordwainer aged 51 at the Cross Keys, with his wife, two of the nephews who were there in 1851, another nephew, 18-year-old John Willsher who is a 21-year-old apprentice cordwainer and came from Kimpton, and the same two lodgers as in 1851. This is a particularly stable household and John Sibley's cordwaining business seems to be flourishing.

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<sup>1</sup> A higgler traded in dairy, poultry and small game. There is an obvious link to the more familiar word 'haggler', ie someone who negotiates for a lower price.

The Herts Ad of 21 June 1862 included this story:

### **WHEATHAMSTEAD**

#### **THE GUSTARD WOOD BENEFIT SOCIETY**

The anniversary of this excellent and well conducted benefit club was celebrated here on Saturday the 14th Inst. Perhaps we may venture to say that there is not another club of the same description among agricultural labourers in a more flourishing state than this, and this fact is wholly attributable to the exertions of Mr John Sibley, of Gustard Wood, and his very able management of the society. The dinner provided by the host and hostess of the 'Cross Keys' Inn was as usual of first rate quality.

*.... From a Correspondent.*

After several listings in the directories of the 1860s, the 1871 census shows that John Sibley and his wife are still at the Cross Keys. Their nephews Thomas Turner and John Willsher are still living with them, both described as 'shoe maker' (ie no longer a journeyman). There is also a 44-year-old servant, Samuel Winch, also described as a shoe maker.

John Sibley died on 23 April 1877 and is buried at St Helen's Church in Wheathampstead. The National Probate Calendar shows that his widow Mary was the sole executrix of his will and that he left effects valued at under £600. The licence for the Cross Keys was transferred to Mary Sibley at the County Petty Sessions later in the same year.

We know that by 1881 the licence had been transferred from the Sibley family for the first time in more than 50 years, because the census shows that one George Russell, aged 30, was the licensed victualler. He was unmarried but had a female domestic servant, named only as 40-year-old 'F.Dilly', who came from Shefford in Bedfordshire.

According to the 1880s Post Office directories, George Russell also worked as a farmer. He married in the 1880s and in 1891 was living at the Cross Keys with his wife Elizabeth and son Frank who was seven years old and attending school.

At the Divisional Petty Sessions in November 1893, the licence was transferred from George Russell to Anne McCulloch. She still held the licence in 1895 (named as Annie Maria McCulloch in Kelly's Directory) but transferred it to Samuel White Coates a couple of years later. He was born in Loughborough but the 1881 and 1891 censuses show him living in Hackney and working as a stationer's assistant. He and his wife Mary had five sons and one daughter; the transition from Hackney to rural Hertfordshire, plus the change in his occupation, must have been quite an experience for the family.

The St Albans Guardians valuation of 1897 confirms that 'S.W. Coates' was licensee.

The respectability of the Cross Keys at that time is demonstrated by the fact that an inquest was held there in 1900 and reported as follows in the Herts Ad dated 31 March (*see next page*).

## WHEATHAMPSTEAD.

**INQUEST.**—A Coroner's inquest was held at the Cross Keys, Gustard Wood, on Monday, on the body of Valentine Russell, the three-year-old child of Mr. F. W. Russell, Ashridge Farm, Gustard Wood, Wheathampstead. The deceased previous to Thursday had enjoyed comparatively good health; on that day, however, the child seemed unwell, but not sufficiently so to necessitate medical advice being sought. On Friday morning the child became worse, and died. The jury consisted of Messrs H. Sibley (foreman), H. Hobbs, C. Hyde, W. Swallow, E. Morris, C. Meare, J. Wilshire, C. Carter, G. Hill, F. Williams, E. Jones, B. Baldwin, and H. F. Woollatt. The doctor considered death due to acute bronchitis. A verdict in accordance with his views was returned.

In June of the same year, the Gustard Wood Cricket Club met at the Cross Keys to consider whether to amalgamate with Kimpton Cricket Club because so many of their players were serving in the army. It was agreed that they would so merge.

The 1901 census lists 50-year-old Samuel W. Coates as publican of the Cross Keys, living with his wife Mary, sons Frank (15) and Horace (10), and daughter Edith (9). They had a visitor on census night - Emma Goodman, a widow aged 65 from Surrey.

Samuel Coates remained as licensee into the early years of the twentieth century, the owner then being Major-General Cherry Garrard of Lamer, father of the explorer Apsley Cherry Garrard. When Mary Coates died, Samuel Coates gave up the licence and retired to Harpenden where he lived with two unmarried sons, one unmarried daughter and a three-year-old granddaughter.

A report in the Herts Ad dated 20 October 1906 identifies William George Ellis as licensee in a report of a 'fracas' and unlawful wounding. The first hearing, at an 'occasional court' was adjourned and the accused, 17-year-old Joseph Parsons, a 'respectably-dressed youth', was remanded in custody. The actual trial, held at the Autumn Assizes in Hertford, was reported at length in the Herts Ad of 24 November (*see next page*).

## WHEATHAMPSTEAD STABBING AFFRAY.

Joseph Parsons (17), gardener, was indicted for feloniously and maliciously with the knife wounding Amos Thrussell, with intent to do him grievous bodily harm at Wheathampstead on October 13th. — Prisoner admitted the assault, but denied felonious intent, which, of course, amounted to a plea of not guilty.

Mr. J. H. Murphy, who prosecuted, stated that on the evening in question, prosecutor and a man named Clarke were in the Cross Keys, at Gustard Wood. Prisoner, who had had quite enough drink, was also in the house, and the landlord would not serve him with any more. Prosecutor and Clarke left the house, taking some beer in bottles with them. After they had gone some 200 yards, prisoner came up to them and asked them several times for beer. Clarke gave him some, but prosecutor refused. Prisoner then commenced "spar-ring" with prosecutor, and said he would have five rounds with him. Prosecutor's hat was knocked off, and while he was stooping to pick it up, prisoner stabbed him with a pocket-knife.

Prisoner at this stage repeated his admission that he was guilty of unlawful wounding, but denying felonious intent, which Mr. Murphy accepted.

Mr. Fredk. Wright said he took the prisoner in his employ, and he had worked well and was a good lad. While in his employ, he had been a teetotaler up to the time of this occurrence. If he had not taken the drink this would not have happened. He (Mr. Wright) had retained prisoner in his employment while he had been on bail, and should employ him again when he got clear of his present difficulties.

Acting-sergt. Knight proved a previous conviction against prisoner for house-breaking, at Herts Quarter Sessions.

The Commissioner sentenced prisoner to six months' hard labour, and said that but for the good character given him by Mr. Wright, he would have passed a much severer sentence. He urged him to be a teetotaler, and thereby refrain from a similar outbreak.

Frederick Wright, the character witness, was owner of the nurseries at Bleak House where Parsons was a gardener. He was an important local figure, noted among other things for his vigorous opposition to the Mid Herts Golf Club building a golf course on Gustard Wood Common in 1893.

In June 1907, the licence was transferred to Charles Flexman. He cannot have stayed long because in the 1911 census he is listed as running a pub in Denham, Bucks. The Post Office Directory in 1908 lists the licensee of the Cross Keys as Arthur Kingston. There is no other record of an Arthur Kingston of an appropriate age so this may be an error for Walter Kingston, who appears in the 1911 census as the 57-year-old publican, living with his wife and two of their four children. This is confirmed in the Post Office Directory of 1912 and 1914 and in the electoral register.

### **Postscript**

The licence changed hands several times in the next 100 years and the Cross Keys is today the only pub in Gustard Wood; it is popular with local people, golfers, walkers and other passing trade.