

The Railway Hotel

When the railway came to Wheathampstead on 8 September 1860 it widened the world for locals, bringing in goods from all over the country and prosperity to local businesses who could now transport their fresh produce quickly by train to London markets. It also enabled Londoners to escape the big city. The potential for business for an inn next to a railway station was enticing and attracted its first recorded landlord, James Johnson, a middle-aged boot and shoe maker who came from Clerkenwell. A bachelor aged 47, he is recorded in the census return for April 1861 as a victualler at the Railway Hotel with two visitors, Sarah Farr (27) and Charles Farr (17) a painter from North Mimms. His application for a licence to sell 'exciseable liquors' at the Annual Licensing Meeting in Berkhamstead in September 1861 was opposed by Eliza Hooper, licensee at The Bull, but was granted nevertheless.

James Johnson married Hannah at about this time; the parish record shows that their first child, Elizabeth, was baptised on 30 November 1862. A second daughter, Harriett, was baptised 14 months later.

An unexpected visit from the weights and measures inspectors on 7 March 1863 resulted satisfactorily with an announcement in the *Herts Advertiser* that they were 'happy to announce that most of the weights and measures inspected were found correct'. James Johnson was running a well-regulated business.

Later that same year, on Thursday 28 November, the Herts Ad reported an inquest at the Railway Hotel. Marten Herring, a 35-year-old single man from Retford employed by the timber-loading agent, Mr James Wood, had been working with three other men loading timber for the Great Northern Railway Company when a 'great piece of oak timber' slipped from a crane onto him. He was carried into the Railway Hotel where he lasted about three hours before he died. The inquest was held before the deputy coroner the very next day with a jury presided over by Mr John Nash. Dr Crisp attended to give evidence reporting that 'the spine was much injured and there was great internal haemorrhage.' The jury returned a verdict of accidental death.

James Johnson left the Railway Hotel soon afterwards; he was licensee at the Park Hotel in 1866 and 1867. In 1871 he was living with his family in Marford and working as a boot and shoe maker and by 1875 he had taken the licence of the Nelson at Marford.

The licence of the Railway Hotel was then taken by Alfred Hewson, the eldest son of Francis and Maria Hewson who kept the Swan in the 1840s. (When Francis died in 1848, Maria married Charles Burgess; he held the licence of the Swan until his death in 1871 and she stayed on until 1882.)

Aged just 22 in 1866, Alfred Hewson gave evidence at the Liberty Petty Sessions in March that he had been assaulted by Samuel Boyce when he ordered him out of the pub at closing time. There had been a quarrel a few days earlier when Boyce had assaulted Mrs Hewson. Alfred's brother Edward corroborated the evidence and

Boyce, who did not appear in court, was convicted and fined 5s.6d. with 14s.6d. costs or one month's imprisonment.

In September of the same year, the Hewsons' son Francis John was baptised.

There is a report in the Hertfordshire Express dated 5 June 1869 that Alfred Hewson, innkeeper and builder of Wheathampstead, has 'left a list of his debts and liabilities and a statement of his property and credits' at the Court of Bankruptcy in London. He and his wife Helen (or Ellen) moved to a house on Wheathampstead Hill from where he continued to work as a carpenter. The licence passed to William Seabrook, a local man.

At the Liberty Petty Sessions on 20 November 1869, Peter Paul, 'a young lad', was convicted of being 'drunk and riotous' at the Railway Hotel. PC Thomson found him fighting William Rainsden in the street; both were drunk. Paul was fined 30s. and William Rainsden 40s (Herts Ad 4 December). Rainsden had many convictions for similar offences over the years.

William Seabrook gave evidence at the Liberty Petty Sessions in June 1870 that he had been assaulted by John Streaton. Streaton was also charged with being disorderly in the Railway Hotel and refusing to quit when requested. William Seabrook described how, after Streaton had sworn at him, he had 'forcibly ejected' him twice. He (Seabrook) had 'had occasion several times to quarrel with him'. PC Thompson stated that Streaton 'had been drunk nearly all the time he had been employed at Wheathampstead'. Streaton denied this, saying that the constable had been drunk and was also addicted to card-playing. Streaton was convicted of 'refusing to quit' and fined 30s. but the other charges were withdrawn on his paying 10s. costs (Herts Ad 25 June 1870).

The 1871 census confirms that 28-year-old William Seabrook was still licensee at the Railway Hotel. He was living with his wife Anna Maria and baby son Robert aged 5 months and also selling coal. Sophia Lines aged 17 helped the young family out as their domestic servant.

Mr Seabrook must have had a sense of déjà vu when he gave evidence at the Liberty Sessions in May 1878 that a customer, John Worby, had been using bad language in the parlour and had refused to leave. Seabrook ejected him twice and, when he smashed a pane of glass trying to get back in, Seabrook called the police who took Worby into custody. Worby was fined 5s. with 15s. 6d. costs for refusing to quit, and ordered to pay 8s. in damages with 14s. 6d. costs. Given the alternative of 24 days' imprisonment, he said 'I will have the twenty-four days. I shan't pay the money. If I had a pocket full of money I would not' (Herts Ad 4 May 1878).

There was more trouble in November 1879 when Arthur Rosier, a labourer employed by Mr Chennells (presumably at Town Farm), attacked Daniel Foster, a Gustard Wood man employed at the hotel. Foster gave evidence that Rosier was drunk and had sworn at him, knocking him down, beating him, threatening to kill him and breaking his thumb. PC Gibbs told the bench that Rosier was 'the tyrant of Wheathampstead and gave more trouble than all the other inhabitants'. He had a previous conviction for felony. County Petty Sessions, with Viscount Grimston in the

chair, sentenced Rosier to 'the severest penalty it was in their power to give' – two months' prison with hard labour for aggravated assault.ⁱ

By 1881 William Seabrook has added farming (115 acres) to his job as coal merchant and his family has expanded with another three children: George aged 6, and two girls, Anna Maria (8) and Alice Maude (4). The Seabrooks run the business at the Railway Hotel for twenty years until 1890 when William moves up the road to take on the farm at Lamer.

By 1890 we learn from Kelly's Directory that James William Collins is the new proprietor, selling 'wines and cigars of the best brands'. He has a licence to sell spirits as well and is also 'job & posting master'. All letters and telegrams were dealt with at the station before the arrival of a post office. Tom Sparrow had been Yeoman of Signals in the Royal Navy, having sailed on the first steam ship.ⁱⁱ He came to Wheathampstead as signalman at the station and did postal duties there because he knew Morse code. A bell would ring when a telegram arrived and boys would play about outside waiting to take the message to its intended recipient at a fee – sixpence to Gustard Wood or a shilling and sixpence to Nomansland. Presumably Mr Collins at the Railway Hotel took charge of the business side.

Quick to see the possible transport requirements of passengers arriving at the G.N.R. station, he offers the Victorian equivalent of a taxi service with 'flies in attendance on all trains' with the option of 'open and closed carriages on the shortest notice' (a fly being a horse-drawn public coach available for hire). His livery and bait stables offer a further service.



The 1891 census lists James William Collins, aged 37, as the 'Hotel Keeper' at the Railway Hotel and states that he came from Silsoe, Bedfordshire. His wife Agnes Piggott Collins (also 37) is from Gamlingay near Cambridge; six of their nine children were born at Bocket Hall, a maternity hospital at the time. The children range in age from baby Ada Sophia (6 months old) to John William at 13.

It must have been disappointing for James Collins in 1897 when, on applying for an extension of licensing hours on Jubilee night and also for the day of the Wheathampstead celebrations on 24 June, the magistrates at St Albans Divisional Sessions refused him on the grounds that 'ten o'clock is quite late enough'. It may have been some comfort that all the other applicants for an extension withdrew their applications when they heard this decision (Herts Ad 26 June 1897).

An 1897 auction catalogueⁱⁱⁱ for the freehold sale of the 'Railway Hotel' Public House describes it as a substantial red brick and slated house occupying an excellent position close to the railway station, containing on the ground floor an enclosed bar, taproom, parlour, with kitchen, scullery and pantry; a good paved cellar in the basement with five bedrooms on the upper floor. The large yard boasted a wash house with adjoining harness room, a brick and slated four-stall stable and loose box with loft, a lock-up coach house and cart shed. 'And in the rear thereof a good garden.' All in the occupation of Mr William Collins at £20 per annum.

This is an extract from Daphne Grierson's collection of villagers' memories recorded in the 1950s. Termino is Charlie Collins and Wick is Fenwick Owen, builder. Charlie is remembering life at the Railway Hotel during his father James's time as landlord:¹

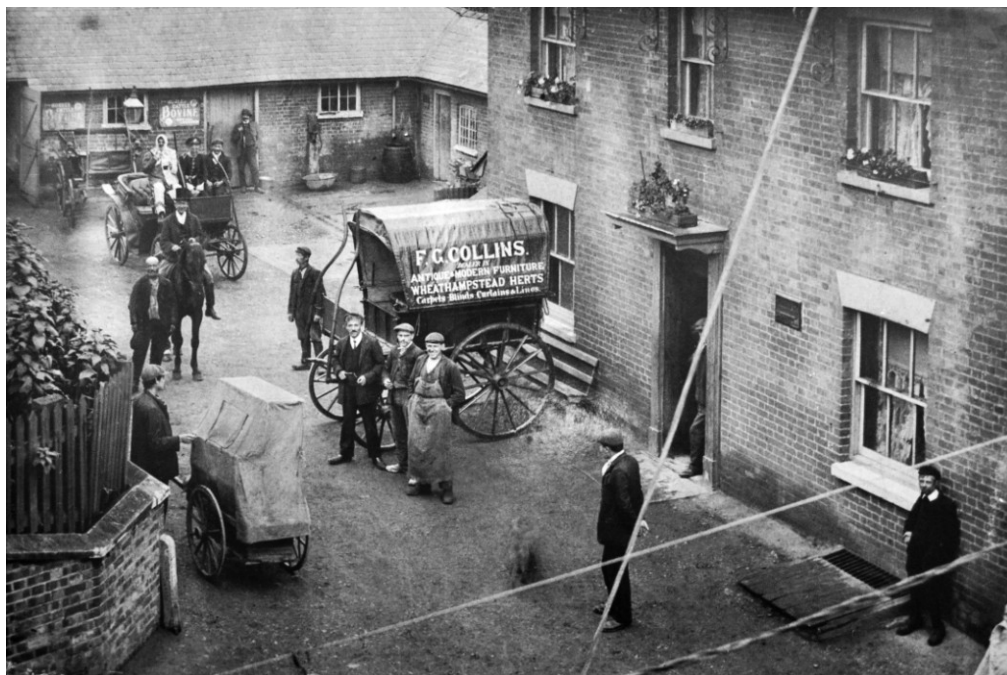
Termino: Then there's my father – here's a story about him. He was always frightened of little animals and insects, and it happened that we had the taproom smothered in cockroaches, all over the floor. My mother put tins down to catch 'em but that didn't do it; one day a man came in and said there's nothing like a hedgehog for keeping cockroaches down, would my mother like him to give her one? My father said, 'Don't you bring any hedgehog in here'. My mother put the hedgehog down in the taproom and one night when the flap in the floor was up, someone gave the hedgehog a kick by mistake and it fell down the flap; it was about closing time and we all went upstairs, except my father who wouldn't stay in the house. He went outside and slept in the brougham to keep out of the way (we hired out a waggonette or brougham) and this hedgehog got up the cellar stairs somehow and ran along and came up to the bedrooms – mother thought it was burglars, she'd forgotten all about the hedgehog and got all us children up and one of the boys said he'd go downstairs and see; the story is he slipped on the stairs and sat right down on the hedgehog!

Wick: There were a lot of stories about your father Term, with all proper respect to him.

Termino: There were; he always said he kept on the right side of the law but only just. On Sunday mornings – no pubs open then – he'd walk across the yard with a bucket in each hand, six pints in the bottom of each bucket, and make out he was watering the horses. In the stables the men had come for their papers – we sold newspapers too – and they'd stand there and have their beer while all the folks went by along the road to church. And my father would sell more beer on Sunday mornings than he'd sell all the week!

The Collins family are still in residence in 1901 having expanded to include ten children. It was a full house with two members of the wider Collins family visiting on census night. John, the eldest son, now aged 23, is a barman working at the hotel and two other sons are working as carpenters. The Collins family continue at the Railway Hotel until 1908. Their landlord brewers from 1904 are Glover & Sons.

Two Collins brothers, Frederick George and Charlie started their antiques business of F. G. and C. Collins in 1907 at the Railway Hotel before moving to the Old Brewhouse on Brewhouse Hill and then the corner site in Church Street after the First World War. In 1931 they put up the conservatory there from the Baxendale estate at Blackmore End when it was auctioned off in August 1926.^{iv}



When the Mid Herts Golf Club opens in 1892 on Gustard Wood Common the list of members includes those travelling from quite a distance – several travelled by train from London. In 1901 the G.N.R. company agreed to issue special golfer's tickets (1st and 3rd Class) to Wheathampstead and back at a fare and a quarter for the return journey on the production at the booking office of a voucher signed by the Secretary.^v Mr Collins ran a horse-drawn carriage between the club and the village station for the benefit of members arriving by train at an annual cost to the club of £2.13s.6d. This service continued until at least 1913 when the Railway Hotel is managed by George Bolding who continues to meet the 10 o'clock train every Saturday with a wagonette returning for the 4.00pm train.

The provision of transport is clearly an important aspect of business at the Railway Hotel which changes over time from horse-drawn to motorised.

George Bolding is in charge at the Railway Hotel from 1911 to 1929; he and his wife Mary (or possibly May) had previously worked in service (he as a coachman).



They came to Wheathampstead from London, having lived in Kensington in 1901, with their daughter Evelyn who was born in 1891 at Exbury in the New Forest. George was Hertfordshire-born at Kelshall, near Royston, and Mary came from Watlington in Oxfordshire. The Boldings were clearly popular among their customers many of whom sent greetings cards from the Front during the First World War, no doubt remembering happier times.

Postscript

The Railway Hotel was sold by the Hatfield Brewery in an auction in 1920. The auction catalogue described it as follows.

Lot 40.

The Railway Hotel

(Freehold Fully Licensed Public House),
Station Road, Wheathampstead.
(Almost adjoining the Railway Station).

A Red-brick Building with slated roof and containing:—

ON THE FIRST FLOOR:—Three Bed Rooms (one with fireplace), Sitting Room and Box Room.

ON THE GROUND FLOOR:—Bar, Smoke Room, Tap Room, Living Room, Scullery and Larder with tiled floor, Wash House and Privy.

IN THE BASEMENT:—Cellar with stone floor.

AT LEFT SIDE:—Four Stall Stable and Loose Box, Harness Room, Coach House and Urinal.

AT THE REAR:—Very Large Garden, Good Barn and Privy.

There is a Good Pull-in at side of House.

The Property is let to Mr. Bolding on Annual Tenancy, subject to three months' notice (tied for all Malt Liquors, Wines and Spirits) at the Annual Rent of **£20.**

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The Railway Hotel lost much of its raison d'être when the railway station closed in 1965. Soon afterwards, it became the Abbot John and closed in 1991 when it was sold by Benskins.

ⁱ *The Herts Advertiser and St Albans Times* Saturday 8 November 1879

ⁱⁱ Daphne Grierson's collection of memories from conversations at the Darby and Joan Club in the 1950s.

ⁱⁱⁱ Harpenden Brewery sale brochure, DE/Hx/E167. £20 p.a. freehold.

^{iv} *Delightful and Bracing: Blackmore End and Porters End: The Legacy of the Baxendales*, Peter Hale, 2004, The Kimpton History Group, p. 66.

^v *The History of Mid- Herts Golf Club, 1892-1992*, Brian Gregory and Anne Thompson, 1992, p. 11.