

The Royal Oak

Evidence about the pubs at The Folly is patchy and ambiguous.

- Many of the records name the licensee but do not name the pub.
- The term 'The Folly' is sometimes used as the name of the area and sometimes as the name of a pub.
- The boundaries of the census districts changed from 1871 onwards with a consequent loss of continuity.

Bearing this in mind, there appear to have been two pubs at The Folly. The Hertford Mercury dated 27 August 1859 included an advertisement for an auction of 30 plots of land at The Folly 'very pleasantly situated on the Wheathampstead and Luton road, near the Folly and Rose and Crown public houses'. The pub later known as the *Royal Oak* was open at this date so this account is based on the conclusion that records that refer to a pub as *The Folly* relate to the *Royal Oak*. When this account refers to 'The Folly' it means the place; when printed in italic – '*The Folly*' – it refers to the pub.



The pub that later became known as the *Royal Oak* was established in a late 17th or early 18th century building that the Mumford map dated 1799 shows as a 'pest house' standing on the south side of the Lower Luton Road almost opposite The Folly, with a field alongside the river. It was what would today be called an 'isolation hospital' located at a safe distance from other dwellings and for people with infectious diseases such as smallpox and tuberculosis. It was the only building between Wheathampstead and what is now Cherry Tree Lane.

It is not clear when the building first became a beerhouse but three pieces of evidence from 1841 help to establish the situation at that date.

1. The Tithe Map shows only one building on the south side of the road between Wheathampstead and Cherry Tree Lane; it is on plot 582, opposite The Folly, in the same location as the pest house on the

Mumford map. The Index to the Tithe Map lists two cottages with a garden and field on the plot, owned by Sarah Smith and occupied by her and 'Another'.

2. The census lists William Smith, aged 35, his wife Sarah (30) and their son William (12) as one of two households living on the south side of the road at The Folly.
3. The Poor Rate Assessment lists William Smith as tenant of an unnamed beershop at The Folly with a rateable value of £3, the lowest of all the 16 licensed premises in the parish.

We can conclude that the beershop listed in the Poor Rate Assessment was located in the old pest house and was in a small way of business. It later became known as the *Royal Oak*.

Ordnance Survey maps of the later 19th century continue to show the old pest house as the only building on the south side of the Luton Road between Wheathampstead and Cherry Tree Lane. The 1851 census shows two households at this location, one of which is headed by Charles Groom, agricultural labourer, living with his wife Ann, three young children and two lodgers, William Crawley (32) (also an agricultural labourer) and Mark Roberts (24) who was a sawyer. The Grooms came from Gustard Wood where the 1841 census shows that their families lived next-door-but-one to each other and that they were aged 18 and 17 respectively. They married at St Helen's Church in Wheathampstead in the same year.

Craven's directory of 1854 lists Charles Groom as a beer retailer at an unnamed beerhouse.

The Herts Guardian dated 24 November 1857 reported a case in which Daniel Nickols, a labourer aged 24, was accused of stealing six bushels of acorns. A witness, Amos Attwood, stated that:

"Mrs Groom gave Nickols 5s. for four bushels at 1s. 3d per bushel: Nickols and Day emptied them in the barn and brought the bag away...".

The next witness was Anne Groom.

Anne Groom: My husband keeps a beershop: I bought some acorns of prisoner: did not ask where he got them: we have been a buying ever so many acorns, and in course I thought he had been a picking on 'em up.

When the jury could not reach a verdict after half an hour, a new jury was sworn in. After deliberating for 45 minutes, they found Nickols 'not guilty'.

There is no explanation of why the Grooms were renting a barn or were buying so many acorns but it suggests that they had another business

besides the beerhouse, possibly keeping pigs for which there was ample room in the field attached to the old pest house.

The 1861 census lists Charles Groom (39) as a labourer and beer retailer living at a beershop at The Folly with Ann (39), Susan (19 and working as a straw hat maker), John (15 and an agricultural labourer), Elizabeth (11), William (9), Thomas (5), all three of whom were at school, Maryann (2) and George (2 months), plus Charles' mother Ann, who was aged 80 and a widow. This household of ten people would have needed the space available in the old pest house.

Kelly's Directories of 1859 and 1862 and the 1866 County Directory all list Charles Groom as a beer retailer, as does Kelly's 1870.

By 1871, several of the children had left home, leaving Charles (described in the census as 'farm labourer and beer seller') and Ann ('publican's wife'), Thomas (14, farm labourer), Mary (13), George (10) and Martha (8) (all three at school). William was at this time serving in the 4th Battalion of the Rifle Brigade, based in Cheriton, Kent.

Easy access to beer was Charles Groom's downfall; he died aged about 53 on 23 September 1875 with his death certificate giving the cause of death as 'softening of the brain from drink'. His widow Ann must have been having a difficult time for many years and received another heavy blow when her son William died on 25 August in the following year, aged only 23. Nevertheless, she carried on the beerhouse business, as is confirmed by Kelly's 1878 directory and the 1881 census, where she is listed as a beerhouse keeper with one lodger, George French, a labourer aged 28.

An advertisement by Mr Cumberland, auctioneer, in the Hertford Mercury dated 25 June 1881 shows that there was to be an auction of several properties from the estate of the late James Mardall, including '10 eligible plots of freehold building and garden land being part of the land held with the beerhouse in the occupation of Mrs Groom'. Perhaps this brought an end to Mrs Groom's supplementary business of keeping pigs, though Kelly's Directory 1882 confirms that she is still selling beer at The Folly. The 1891 census, however, shows her, aged 70, 'living on own means' (ie retired) and sharing her home on the north side of the road with her niece Augusta Norris, aged 9. She was a daughter of Susan Norris, née Groom, who lived next door with her husband John (47) and their son Charles (12), perhaps named after his grandfather. Ann Groom died on 19 January 1906, aged 86. She is buried in the churchyard at St Helen's with her husband Charles and son William.



There is a gap in the evidence about *The Folly/Royal Oak* from 1882 until 1885 when a report in the Herts Ad of 8 August names the pub for the first time. George Elmore, who said that he 'kept the *Royal Oak* beerhouse', gave evidence at an inquest held there into the death of James Hawkins, aged 75, who had been found dead in a ditch behind the pub in the early hours of the morning. He was a resident of the St Albans workhouse and had been visiting his son who lived at The Folly. Witnesses gave evidence that he was not a habitual drinker but that several people had bought him a drink that evening. The jury brought in a verdict to the effect that 'the deceased, being an aged man, stupefied from drink, fell into a ditch, and from the shock caused by the fall and the immersion in the water, died there.'

George Elmore had married his wife Sarah late in 1884; he came from Wistow in Huntingdonshire and his wife came from Gustard Wood. The parish records for 1886 show that Frederick John, infant son of Sarah and George Elmore (publican) was baptised at St Helen's church on 25 April.

Three years later, in June 1889, Elmore was fined 10s. with £1 11s. costs for permitting drunkenness at the *Royal Oak*. At the hearing, his solicitor stated that there had been no other charges against him in the four years that he had held the licence, ie since 1885. His licence was renewed in October that year but he was warned 'as to his future conduct of the house'. He was aged just 32 at this time; Sarah was 26.

The trade directories from 1890 to 1906 confirm that George Elmore continued as a beer retailer even though the censuses for 1891 and 1901 describe him only as a labourer living at The Folly.

The minutes of the County Licensing Committee in 1904 again refer to *The Folly*; it is owned by Glover & Sons and is valued at £14 per annum.

The 'beer on' licence for *The Folly* beerhouse was temporarily transferred from George Elmore to Charles Fullbrook in 1906 (Herts Ad 22 December).

"THE FOLLY."—The "Folly" beer-house was temporarily transferred at the St. Albans Divisional Sessions on Saturday from George Elmore, who was said to have held the house for 23 years, to Charles Fullbrook, until lately of Aldershot. It was stated that the tenant who held the licence previous to Elmore had occupied the premises for 37 years.

If George Elmore had indeed held the licence for 23 years, he probably took over from Mrs Groom in about 1883. If the '37 years' is correct, it suggests that the Grooms held the licence from about 1846 to 1883. It is interesting to note that the pub was being called *The Folly* again, despite having been named the *Royal Oak* in reports such as that of the inquest described above.

There is no trace of a Charles Fullbrook living in Aldershot in the 1901 census but the name 'Fullbrook' was quite common in Hampshire at that time. The 1911 census lists a Charles Fullbrook living in King's Walden; he is described as a 29-year-old groom so it seems unlikely though not impossible that he is the Charles Fullbrook who took a temporary licence at the *Royal Oak* in 1906.

There is a gap in the evidence from 1906 to 1911 when the census shows that Walter James Dew, aged 36, is the publican at a beerhouse at *The Folly*. We know that Amos Smart was licensee at the *Rose & Crown* at this date so Walter Dew must have been at *The Folly/Royal Oak*. He was the son of an engine-driver from Huntingdonshire and was married to Sarah who came from Drogheda in Ireland. Their 10-year-old daughter Edith attended school.

By 1914, Frederick Arnold was licensee. He is recorded as a hay binder in the 1911 census. He still held the licence in 1920 when the *Royal Oak* was sold by the Hatfield Brewery. The auction notice described the property as:

"a Brick Building with tiled roof, containing:
 On the first floor: three Bedrooms, one with fireplace
 On the ground floor: Tap Room, Sitting Room, Small Living Room, Scullery with brick floor, Cellar with brick floor
 At the rear: Washhouse and Privy
 Outside: Two Good Garden Plots, Barn and Urinal

The property is let to Mr Arnold on Annual Tenancy, subject to three months' notice (tied for all malt liquors) at the annual rent of £10.

The rent of £10 compares with £10 for the *Elephant & Castle*, £15 for the *Swan* and £20 for the *Railway Hotel*.

Later records indicate that the *Royal Oak* remained open as a public house until it closed in 1954; it is now a private house.