

The Bennetts and The Firs, High Street, Shrivenham

What we know so far – By Neil B. Maw



To start we use more detailed information from the Letters of George Merryweather, the Beckett Estate Steward to Lord Barrington, published by Shrivenham Heritage Society in 2020. John Bennett was the tenant occupier of Home Leaze Farm on the Beckett Estate. It no longer exists and the large house that apparently suffered a serious fire during World War II, was demolished, along with most associated buildings. George Merryweather, new to his post, decided that an increase in rent was long overdue on the farm and in 1816, he informed John Bennett that he would have to pay the new price of £650 per annum or leave. That was an increase of £110. Merryweather added that it was a well-known fact that John Bennett was a wealthy man and worth in the region of £40,000. Bennett paid a visit to Beckett House in April 1816, and with him was one of his sons. George Merryweather described that he thought, *'John Bennett had been asleep for the last 20 years,'* meaning that he had not kept up with the latest farming practices. Of his son, but we don't know which one, he described as a, *'young gentleman who really seemed to have a good shape of mind to address oneself to.'*

In June 1816, George Merryweather mentioned in a letter that John Bennett had bought a house in Shrivenham for £450, which by comparison of other houses was very dear. We

know by the contents of another John Bennet's Will, and the tithe survey of 1844, that it must have been what is now The Firs, in High Street (See below). The following month Merryweather described that, *'John Bennett is a good deal soured and by way of showing his resentment he lets all the thistles grow in Home Leaze without being mown and he has refused to let the incoming tenant mow them at his own expense.'* His attitude was understandable as the Bennett's may well have been at Home Leaze for many years. The survey of 1771 named the tenant as Bennett, probably his father John, who died in November 1796. (BCA D/Ex 1424/1). Merryweather further described that, *'He goes to Coxwell for the bricks awaited in the filling up of the house he had bought at Shrivenham, passing by the Beckett Brick Kiln which is at his own door.'* This statement provides us with a clue as to just how early this house may be. For Merryweather to use the term. *'in the filling up of the house.'* Could this be the filling up of the panels of a timber-framed house ? It was common to replace the wattle & daub panels with bricks.

John Bennett officially left Home Leaze Farm at Lady Day (25th March) 1817. George Merryweather referred to him in his letters on numerous occasions as, *'old Bennett.'* Shrivenham Parish Records give no account of the death of a John Bennett at anywhere near that date. Therefore, we don't know what happened to him or where he went.

The Tithe survey of 1843/4 showed that the premises known as The Firs today, next to the Grocer's shop run by Edwin Cox, was owned by John Bennett but occupied by Benjamin Fairthorne. The census of 1841 showed Benjamin Fairthorne listed with his wife Harriet and the entry is close to the one for the Barrington Arms, so it would suggest that they were there in the early 1840s. However, the Will of a John Bennett of Hardwell Farm in the Parish of Uffington, dated August 1850, provided more information. (PROB 11/2117/269). It is clear from this that John was a member of the same family, but we cannot be certain if it is the original John from Home Leaze Farm or, more likely, his son. In the Will he refers to the, *'House at Shrivenham, late occupied by Mrs Ann Bennett and then by Robert Saunders.'* The 1841 census listed two families, both with a Robert Saunders as head. The parish records list that an Anne Bennett was buried in Shrivenham churchyard on 14th May 1825, age 76.



The Tithe Survey of 1844. 194 = Barrington Arms. 195 = Grocer's Shop. 196 = House owned by John Bennett

The 1851 Census on the very first page would seem to indicate that the Commissioner actually started at The Firs and worked his way along towards the pub, showing that Benjamin Fairthorne was still there. The census of 1861 confirmed this and it seems again that the Commissioner started at The Firs with Susan Bennett, followed by the Grocer's shop, then run by Robert Green.



The Barrington Estate Map of 1866. 164 = Barrington Arms. 165 = Miss Bennett. 166 = Robert Green - Grocer.

In his Will, John Bennett of Hardwell Farm, wanted his house in Shrivenham to be used by his six daughters, Elizabeth, Susannah, Sarah, Ann, Margaret and Caroline, for them to inhabit as they grew up, free of any rent, until they either married or didn't want to live there any further, but the ownership of the house was with his son Thomas. The 1871 census showed that three of his daughters, Susanna, Ann and Margaret were living there, and that they were ladies of financial independence. The same three ladies were still listed as living there in the next census of 1881. But by 1891 there was only Margaret Bennett left. Ann died and was buried on 3rd June 1881 age 66, and Susannah was buried on 25th August 1889 age 60. Margaret was to live another three years and was buried on 22nd May 1894 age 77. All three were buried in Shrivenham churchyard.



Gravestone of Ann Bennett who died 30th May 1881 and Susannah Bennett who died 20th August 1889



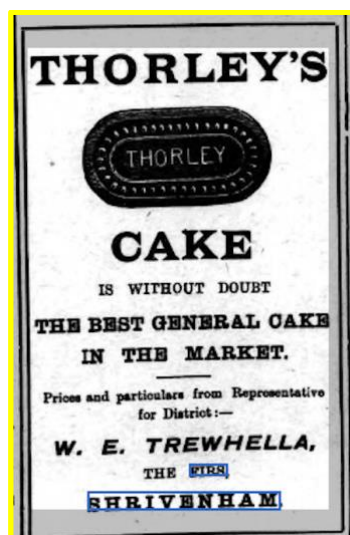
Gravestone of Sarah Bennett of Hardwell Farm, who died 27th April 1852, aged 39

SHRIVENHAM

WEDDING—A wedding took place on Wednesday last, in Shrivenham Church, the contracting parties being Mr William Butler, son of Mr George Butler, of Shrivenham, and Miss Louisa Sophia Bennett, youngest daughter of the late Mr John Bennett, of Wootton Bassett. The bride was tastefully attired in grey nun's veiling, with silver trimming, and wore a veil with orange blossoms. Miss Susan Bennett, sister of the bride, acted as bridesmaid, and Mr Henry Hutt, of Shrivenham, was the bridegroom's 'best man.' The ceremony was performed by the Rev. E. F. Hill, and there were a large number of villagers present. At the conclusion of the service, the organist played the 'wedding march.' Breakfast was served at "The **Firs**," Shrivenham, the residence of the bride. Later in the day the bridal pair left amid showers of rice for London, en route for Brighton, where the honeymoon will be spent. Many handsome and useful presents were received.

Faringdon Advertiser Sat 25th August 1894

The announcement shown above provided the information of the Butler and Bennett connection, when William Butler, the son of Shrivenham Postmaster, George Butler, married Louisa Bennett of Wootton Bassett. It is not certain as yet which branch of the Bennett family she came from, but the article above names The Firs as belonging to her. The next year, the Swindon Advertiser for 8th June announced the birth of a daughter on 1st June to the couple.



This man must have been an agent for Thorley's
Cake - animal food. Faringdon Advertiser 30/1/1915

The Kelly's Directory for 1895 included under 'Residents' for Shrivenham, 'Misses Bennett.' Unfortunately, it doesn't name the property, so we can only assume that it is The Firs. Kelly's for the year 1915 listed Miss Bennett and named the property as Fir Tree House. The Swindon and District Year-Book for 1927 also listed a Miss Bennett at The Firs. (SHS N1146). From this point we consult a hand-written note, the author unknown, in SHS Listing N203, which stated that by the Will of Louisa Sophia Butler (nee Bennett) of 1935, the property was passed to her son and daughter, Bernard St John Butler and Evelyn Florence Bennett. They in turn sold it in 1938 to Miss J.M.K. Dowling.

BUNGALOW SITE.
A letter was read from Mr Dawson, of The Firs, Shrivenham, asking the Council if they would sell one of their building sites for the erection of a bungalow.

Faringdon Advertiser 27/8/1921

for Weston-super-Mare.

WILTSHIRE—BUTLER.
The wedding of Mr. Herbert Blake-man Wiltshire, son of Mr. Wiltshire and the late Mrs. Wiltshire, of Stud Farm, Eaton Hastings, and Miss Evelyn Florence Butler, only daughter of the late Mr. and Mrs. Butler, The Firs, Shrivenham, took place at Shrivenham Parish Church on Saturday morning.

The Rev. C. G. Seymour Metford conducted the ceremony whilst the groomsmen were Mr. Leslie A. Sollis, of Faringdon, a friend of both bride and bridegroom.

Given away by her brother, Mr. B. St. John Butler, the bride was attired in a pink georgette gown with silk net overdress, picture hat to match, pink satin shoes and carried a bouquet of pink roses.

The bridesmaid was Miss G. Wilt-

North Wilts Herald 16/7/1937

The Electoral Register for 1958-9 listed the occupiers as Francis and Pearl Louis.

And that is as far as we can go at the moment. If any reader has further information on the premises known as The Firs, please get in touch with us:

info@shrivenhamheritagesociety.co.uk

This property is a Grade II listed building. The DofE description: *18th century of rubble stone and brick dressings stuccoed and painted grey with a gabled slate roof and end brick stacks. North front of two storeys, three bays with eight pane sashes throughout and a centrally placed six panel door with three rectangular fanlights.*