



The Eagle Public House at Watchfield

The history known so far

One of the sources that has been invaluable in tracing the origins of local public houses has been the census returns of the 19th century. The return for Watchfield for 1861 provides clues. We have already identified that John Bowden's beer house on page six of that census was the Royal Oak (Demolished in 2011). On page ten we know that Adin Sly ran the beer house that was known as the Star Inn, in Oxford Square (burned down in 1928). But there is another property on page six called a, '*Public House,*' being run by William Carter who was described as a, '*Pig Dealer & Beer Seller.*' He also appears in the Oxford Journal newspaper on 9th August 1862, described as a, '*beer-house keeper of Watchfield,*' who was fined for possessing an unstamped half-pint measure. The Berkshire Chronicle dated 1st October 1859 reports at the electoral registration hearings at Faringdon that, William Carter, James Green and Adin Sly all failed to appear. It's also significant to know that these three budding electors, all had strong connections with the three Watchfield beer houses. Even though the beer house that William Carter was running was not named, the evidence would strongly suggest that it was the Eagle.



The Eagle at Watchfield in 2020. Photo by Neil B. Maw

An inquest that took place in 1870 is the first documentary confirmation of the name of the pub. The Reading Mercury newspaper dated 31st December 1870, reported on the evidence given at the Eagle, concerning the circumstances of the death of Mr Edward Jefferies, a local farmer. Apparently, he went missing and a shepherd was sent to look for him. After searching all the likely places about his farm, he was found lying face down in the water at the edge of a brook. A Dr Wollaston gave evidence that the deceased man was known to him and confirmed that he had health problems. The jury returned a verdict of, '*Found Drowned.*'

The census of 1871 provides the information that Charles Williams then had the licence for the pub. He's listed as age 54 with his wife Lucy 53, and their four-year-old grand-daughter Janet. He's described as a, '*Carpenter & Joiner & Beer Retailer.*' We know from later events that Charles Williams had purchased the property as freehold. It is also likely that he added the extension to the western end of the property.

The North Wilts Herald newspaper for 30th August 1873, printed an extraordinary exchange of views between the solicitor and the bench at a licensing session in court at Faringdon.

Solicitor Mr Lovett, speaking for landlord Charles Williams, pre-empted his application for a spirit licence for the Eagle, by referring to the fact that the magistrates were considering a similar application for the Royal Oak, and that they might conclude that one spirit licence was sufficient in such a small township. When asked if Mr Lovett wished to oppose the Royal Oak application, he confirmed he did not. Therefore, the licence was granted. When Mr Lovett put his application for the Eagle, he went to some length to point out that many travellers passed through Watchfield, and that the Eagle was on the main thoroughfare. It was a house with eleven rooms as against a house of only five rooms (Royal Oak), that no complaint had ever been made against his client, the house was substantial and cleanly kept with accommodation for travellers. The magistrate said he had the strongest objection towards granting it, because he thought it would be highly abused by the poorer people and not used by the travellers. Mr Lovett argued that the labouring classes were more addicted to beer than spirits. The Bench refused the application. Can you imagine such a conversation 140 years later in 2020?

The North Wilts Herald for 30th June 1879, reported on another inquest that was held at the Eagle, that time on the body of an infant girl of James and Ann Titcombe. She was suffocated accidentally.

Charles Williams is listed with the Watchfield Parish Records as having died in 1876 aged 63. He was buried in St Thomas' churchyard on 13th November. It would explain why the census for 1881 listed that Lucy Williams, widow, was the Inn Keeper. Listed with her is 19-year-old grand-daughter Juletta. The licence was officially transferred to Lucy in January 1877. Later that year there was another Inquest held at the pub; this one on the body of a child named Albert Edward Wyatt, aged 11, who had been killed by a falling tree brought about by gale force winds.

The census of 1891 shows that Lucy Williams was still holding the licence for the Eagle, and an article in the Wilts & Glos Standard dated 31st December 1892, shows that she was still there then. A young lady called Lucy Mary Dilks, who had worked at the pub, pleaded guilty to stealing a gold ring and some cigars from Lucy Williams. Then the Reading Mercury for 25th February 1893, printed that a holdover licence for the pub was granted to

John Chivers of Shrivenham, because sadly, Lucy Williams died and was buried on 17th January of that year at St Thomas'.

We cannot pass this point in Watchfield history without mentioning the notorious, *'Watchfield Horror.'* This was the time when a local man called John Carter was found guilty of not only murdering his third wife, but also his second wife some considerable time previously. He was a brutal man and duly suffered the ultimately penalty that was so often used at the time, death by hanging at Reading Gaol.

It was normal at the time and therefore likely that the Will of Charles Williams directed that upon the death of his wife, his property should be sold. And that is what happened in 1894. The Reading Mercury for 19th May carried a large advertisement offering the Freehold Pub and a Freehold Cottage. It also gives a very good description of the property. It is particularly interesting to note the description that, *'Adjoining is a newly erected and substantial building, containing a large trap-house and stabling for three horses, with a spacious and well lighted workshop over.'* And the scars of this can still be seen today.



The wall of the Eagle pub showing the entrance though which the horses and traps would have gone through to the stables. Photo by Neil B. Maw

The advertisement also suggests that the cottage attached to the pub would make a very good extension and again, that is what happened.



The little cottage next door now incorporated into the pub. Note the door and the tiny window, a typical early hovel. Photo by Neil B. Maw

Norton, and Banbury, Oxon.
TO BREWERS, INNKEEPERS, AND OTHERS,
WATCHFIELD, NEAR SHRIVENHAM,
BERKS.
SALE of a FREEHOLD BEERHOUSE STAB-
LING and PREMISES, and a COTTAGE and
Garden adjoining thereto.
MESSRS. BISHOP and PRITCHETT are
favoured with instructions to Sell by Auction, at
the Barrington Arms Hotel, Shrivenham, on Wednes-
day, June 6th, 1894, at Four o'clock in the afternoon,
the following FREEHOLD PROPERTIES:—
*By direction of the Trustees of the Will of Mr.
Charles Williams, deceased.*
LOT 1.—All that old-established and well-accustomed
FREEHOLD BEERHOUSE known as "THE
EAGLE," with the Stabling, Garden and Premises there-
to, situate in the Village of WATCHFIELD, in the County
of Berks, and close to the main road leading from High-
worth to Shrivenham and Faringdon. The House con-
tains a bar with beer cellar adjoining, tap-room, parlour,
six bedrooms and wash-house with a good well of water
therein. Adjoining is a newly erected and substantial
Building, containing a large trap-house and stabling
for three horses, with a spacious and well lighted work-
shop over. At the rear is a closet, also a yard and
garden with back entrance.
This property was for many years occupied by the
late Mr. Charles Williams, and also by his widow, and
the same is now let to Mr. John Chivers, Carpenter, on
a tenancy which may be terminated on September 29th
next, at £25 per annum, tenant paying all usual rates
and taxes.
By Order of the Owner.
LOT 2.—A FREEHOLD COTTAGE and GARDEN,
adjoining Lot 1, and in the occupation of Mrs. Angus,
at a rent of 2s. 6d. per week inclusive of outgoings.
The Premises occupy a corner position, and have a
frontage of about 29 ft. to the main road leading from
Highworth to Shrivenham and Faringdon.
This Property would be a valuable addition to Lot 1,
inasmuch as it would enable the purchaser of the Beer-
house to extend the premises and thus considerably
improve them.
For further particulars apply to Messrs. Bradford and
Butterworth, Solicitors, Swindon; or to
The Auctioneers,
Regent Circus, Swindon.
A plan of the Properties will be produced at the
Auction, and in the meantime may be seen at the Office
of the Auctioneers.
Sale on Thursday next.

The advertisement that appeared in the Reading Mercury for 19th May 1894

The property was purchased by a Mr J.H. Godwin, meaning that the pub was still in private hands rather than a Brewery. It seems he bought it for investment as the Faringdon Advertiser for 29th June 1895 shows that John Chivers was still the landlord, and that he was required to give evidence when George Enstone of Shrivenham was charged with being drunk in charge of an, '*entire horse.*' However, it was the start of an unsettled period for the pub with many changes of landlord. The Reading Mercury for 7th July 1900 records, '*The Eagle Beerhouse, Watchfield, from Christopher J Parsons to J. H. Tyack.*' Then the Faringdon Advertiser for 19th January 1901 records the licence going to William Cousens. The same newspaper for 26th September 1903 records the licence going from Cousens to Robert Edward Townsend. In June 1904 the landlord of the Royal Oak, Charles Parker, applied to the court for an extension for the customary, annual Friendly Society Festival which was granted. Robert Townsend of the Eagle thought he would try his luck and applied for an extension too. But Supt. Gamble of Faringdon police informed the magistrates that the society did not meet at the Eagle. The application was refused. (Faringdon Adver 11/6/1904). It could be that this knock-back made Robert Townsend reflect on his career choice, because the following month a holdover licence was granted to Edwin Hunt and in October it was transferred fully to him. (Faringdon Adver 15/10/1904). The following year the licence was granted to Alfred Brown from Edwin Hunt.

In 1907, Mr J.H. Godwin decided that he would retire from the pub trade and put the Eagle up for sale by auction at the Goddard Arms Hotel, Swindon. The Faringdon Advertiser for 17th August noted that the premises was knocked down to Messrs. W.G. Phillips & Sons, of the Tower Brewery, Oxford & Faringdon for £650. The Eagle was then no longer a '*Free House.*'

WATCHFIELD

SALE OF THE EAGLE INN.—At the Goddard Arms Hotel, Swindon, on Monday, Mr E. Bishop (Messrs. Bishop and Fisher) offered for sale by auction the free beerhouse, known as the Eagle Inn, Watchfield. The average trade has been for the past five years £156 per annum ; the rent is £12 a year, and the property is subject to a land tax of 19s. The property came into the market as the result of Mr J. H. Godwin, the owner, retiring from business. Bidding started at £400, and the lot was knocked to Messrs. W. G. Phillips and Sons, of the Tower Brewery, Oxford, and Faringdon, at £650. Messrs. Kinneir and Co., Swindon, were the solicitors for the vendors.

The Faringdon Advertiser 17th Aug 1907 selling the Eagle to a Brewery for the first time.

The brewery wasted no time in trying to obtain a new landlord as an advert appeared in the Faringdon Advertiser for 24th August 1907 offering the pub to let and it also noted that the, *'premises suited for Carpenter.'* Was this a reference back to when Charles Williams bought the pub circa 1870, *'a Carpenter and Joiner,'* who might make good use of the, *'spacious and well lighted workshop?'*

Before the new landlord could move in, some preparation was needed when Messrs. Dyke, Jackson & Chandler announced in the Faringdon Advertiser of 26th October 1907, that the brewery had instructed them to sell a quantity of useful household furniture and effects. However, at the moment we do not know the name of the first landlord after the brewery had acquired the pub. By 1911 an advertisement announced that the Eagle Inn was to let again, but this time the owner was Halls of Oxford Brewery (Faringdon Adver 30/9/1911). There was much change in general among the pubs and the breweries at this time. The following year there was a change of licence from Jonathan Jordan to a C.B. May (Faringdon Adver 6/1/1912). But the following year there were more big changes when an advertisement announced that the Eagle Inn was to let and possession may be had, *'at once,'* and furthermore, the ownership had changed again, to the Eagle Brewery, Faringdon (Faringdon Adver 18/10/1913). But the outbreak of the Great War of 1914 brought stability to the pub with the arrival of Mr & Mrs George Wheeler (Faringdon Adver 10/1/1914).

The tenure of George Wheeler was to be a long one and the only note we have of him during that period is a newspaper article from 1920, when he was obliged to give evidence at court for the prosecution of a local man for drunkenness (Faringdon Adver 7/2/1920). The next piece of documentary information is dated 13 years later when the newspaper reported the death of Mrs Annie Louisa Wheeler, wife of George, and Landlady of the Eagle Inn for 19 years (North Wilts Herald 6/1/1933). She was a popular lady and had been the secretary of local Slate Club and a keen member of the Shrivenham Women's Institute, having served on the committee for a number of years. Annie and George had three daughters and one son. We know from the parish records that George Wheeler died in 1942 at 12 Park Cottages, Shrivenham, but we do not know who replaced him at the Eagle.

The only information we have between then and the present day is from living memory and the tenure of Jack Vincent who began his time as licensee in 1958. Jack was still there in 1975 when the notorious Watchfield Rock Festival took place at the old Watchfield Airfield. (See SHS Catalogue Nos N591, N594 and N1527 for details on the Airfield). Jack was adamant that he was having, *no Hippies*, in his pub. The front door would be locked and the shutters up, but the back door was open for locals who knew how to get in. Eric Thomas however, Landlord of the Royal Oak, he stayed open as normal, and did ok out of it.

Pop 'yobbs' are out at the inn

By JEFF SAMUELS

THE SHUTTERS are going up at Jack Vincent's village pub—on the doors and windows.

The barricades will stay there for nine days as his answer to an invasion by 20,000 pop fans.

He has called "time" for fans



visiting the massive pop festival due to start next Saturday in sleepy Watchfield, Oxfordshire.

"I'm staying closed until the last of these long-haired yobbs have gone and left us in peace," said Jack, landlord of The Eagle.

Jack has been at The Eagle for seventeen years—the same time that Mr Eric Thomas has been landlord of the village's other pub, the Royal Oak. Eric will stay open. But it could still be a dry festival for the fans. He only has three dozen pint glasses.

The 600 villagers of Watchfield set up a storm of protest when Home Secretary Roy Jenkins agreed to switch the festival there from Windsor, where it caused riotous scenes last year.

Some parents plan to send their children away to avoid them mixing with the fans.

Headlines from the Sunday Mirror of 17th & 24th August 1975. In spite of the fears the festival was fairly trouble-free

Jammed session

By JEFF SAMUELS and CHRIS HAMPSON

THE Great Watchfield Pop Festival began yesterday — as the Great Pop Flop.

A thin scattering of just 4,000 fans (pictured below) arrived at the tiny Oxfordshire village for the start of a nine-day rock orgy.

So where had all the fans gone?

Apparently to the other big holiday pop gathering — at Reading. There 25,000 youngsters (above) sat shoulder-to-shoulder on the pop site.

But even the desertion of Watchfield (one policeman to ten fans) for Reading (one policeman to 800 fans) didn't compare with the big surprise at Windsor Great Park.

Hippies had planned a protest picnic at the Park to mark last year's festival — which ended in a punch-up with police and the choice of Watchfield as a new festival site.

But yesterday only TWELVE fans turned up. They had a bread and cheese lunch—watched by 370 police and twenty journalists.

It was a quiet day all round on the pop front. At Watchfield there were nine arrests—and none at all at Reading.

In fact, the only place really buzzing was the Watchfield beer tent. It was plagued by wasps.

Regulars only

Down in the village the locals had no such bother. At the Eagle, landlord Jack Vincent kept the back door open for regulars.

"They know the way in across the garden," he said. "I'll not have any hippies in here."

Last word on the quiet day of pop went to the Rev. John Packet, spiritual adviser at Watchfield.

"We've even had Hell's Angels in," he said. "They seem to have a lot of problems."



OVERFLOWING: At Reading

Shrivenham Heritage Society members will continue to work on this and will update it from time-to-time on discovery of further information.