



The Royal Oak Public House, Watchfield, Oxon – Demolished in 2011

The history known so far



The Royal Oak at Watchfield in 2001. Photo by Neil B. Maw

Many of our country village pubs started off as simple, '*Beer Houses*,' that could have been little more than somebody making one room of their house available for the purchase and consumption of beer. The Alehouse Act of 1828, followed by the Beerhouse Act of 1830, made the brewing and selling of beer much easier. For two guineas, anyone could obtain a licence to set up a beer house. (*Morning Advertiser* – Poppleston Allen solicitors Feb 2020). It is very likely that the origins of the Royal Oak pub at Watchfield began in this period.

The earliest documentary reference that we can find of the Royal Oak is from the newspaper, Reading Mercury dated 13th October 1860. During the County Registrations for Berkshire for would be M.P.s who were required to produce evidence that they lived in a particular area, John Bowden and James Green (Liberals) claimed shares in a freehold house and garden, called '*Royal Oak*,' in the parish of Watchfield. It ends by stating, '*the claimant Bowden rented the property, paying two-thirds of the rent of £8 to the other parties entitled.*'

The Census of 1861 for Watchfield on number six on the official pages, list John Bowden at age 70, with his wife Mary and three adult children, with profession, '*Beer House – Licensed Victualler.*' From the death records it is listed that John Bowden b.1790, died at Faringdon in 1870, aged 80 years. Looking at the census a decade earlier for 1851, John Bowden is listed with his wife Mary and three infant daughters, with profession simply, '*Beer Seller.*' The even earlier and first census, of 1841 contains a curious yet relevant listing with the head being Ann Hazell, age 75; Mary Bowden, age 45; and Temperance Green, age 30, with profession as, '*Beer House.*' The Hazell family were strongly associated with the beer house trade and the Prince of Wales pub in Shrivenham. The names Bowden and Green are associated with the name, '*Royal Oak*,' as mentioned in 1860 above.

The above evidence provides us with a strong possibility that the Royal Oak public house came into existence circa 1841 or earlier. The Court Petty Sessions at Faringdon, and the subsequent report in the newspaper, Wilts & Glos Standard, dated 7th January 1871, could be ambiguous when it states, '*A new beer-house licence was granted to Thomas Knapp for the Royal Oak, Watchfield.*' With the evidence that John Bowden had died in 1870, we know that this refers to a new licence, rather than a new beer house. The census for that year also shows that James Knapp was then firmly in occupation of what was listed as, '*Royal Oak Inn.*' He was 42 years of age, with his profession given as a, '*Bricklayer and Innkeeper,*' with his wife Ann, aged 50 and five other family members.



The location of the Royal Oak, directly opposite the word 'Oak' on the map

James Knapp didn't run the pub for long, and the Reading Observer newspaper dated 10th January 1874, listed that David Pocock took over the licence. It would seem that he had a flair for catering and he started to demonstrate his ability for it in the summer of 1876. Upon the occasion of the anniversary of the Court Vale of White Horse Forresters, Lord Barrington had allowed them to use Beckett Park for their celebrations. The North Wilts Herald newspaper dated 7th August noted that, '*Dinner, which was provided by Host Pocock of the Royal Oak Inn, Watchfield, was served in a large marquee erected in the park.*' And this set the trend over the next few summers. The Swindon Advertiser for 11th June 1877, reported on the Friendly Society Anniversary that year, and David Pocock had allowed them to make a club room at the premises, where he served dinner for about 40 members. The Friendly Society annual dinner of 1880 was an even bigger affair when about 60 people sat down to eat.

It was quite normal at the time for official inquests to be held in a public house local to where the person had died. On 20th December 1879, the North Wilts Herald reported on the inquest into the death of Amos Binfield, aged 52, who died when a wall fell on him. He was

working locally with other men pulling down a barn at the farm of Mr Fereman (Strattonborough Castle Farm). The inquest was of the opinion that the work being done was, *'in an improper and dangerous manner and without proper superintendence.'*



Photo of the Royal Oak in 1984 taken by Mel A.G. Veal who lived very close by in Watchfield House

The census of 1881 provides the information that David Pocock and his wife Ann were 35 years of age, and at that time had two sons and two daughters. His profession was listed as, *'Mason & Innkeeper.'* An insight into the character of David Pocock can be made from the North Wilts Herald of 20th June 1884. The occasion is another Friendly Society Anniversary and the reporter noted that, *'Host Pocock did his best to make the proceedings pass off satisfactorily, and in this he achieved success. An order having been made some two years since, prohibiting the erection of stalls, etc, on the highway, there were but few as such.'* But this didn't seem to spoil the mood when it was stated, *'there were plenty of pleasure seekers, this always being looked upon as the Watchfield "Red Letter" day.'* Further in the article it was stated that, *'High encomiums (formal praise) were passed upon the manner in which the landlord, Mr David Pocock, had performed his part of the contract in providing such a substantial repast.'* He also proposed one of the toasts after dinner and even received a toast to himself as the host, to which he suitably replied. David Pocock was to go on to be a very active and influential Watchfield resident.

Between June 1884 and the following summer, David and Ann Pocock gave up the licence of the Royal Oak and moved on. But it wasn't far. The Census of 1891 list them as still in the village with David being described as a '*Mason & Grocer.*' His family had also increased to four daughters and four sons. We know he succeeded his uncle as a Grocer and likely kept a shop, but we cannot pinpoint its location yet.

The new licensee was Jason Edward Twine and he continued to host the Friendly (Benefit) Society anniversaries as had become tradition. The North Wilts Herald again sent a reporter along and in the edition dated 12th June 1885, it was stated that the, '*weather was most favourable and the attendance very large, not only of pleasure seekers but those itinerant vendors of amusement, in the shape of rifle saloons, roundabouts, cocoa-nut throwing etc.*' After the dinner one of the toasts included the health of the late host and hostess, '*Mr & Mrs Pocock, eulogising them for their management of affairs during the past eleven years, to which Mr Pocock suitable replied.*'

By the nature of the product that he sells, the pub landlord must expect some degree of trouble from the odd customer and one such event was reported in the Reading Mercury on 4th December 1886. Jason Twine had cause to report to the police, a soldier called Albert Taylor who after imbibing too much had broken glasses and generally made a nuisance of himself. He was dealt with by the court with a fine.

The Friendly Society Anniversary of 1888 was a large affair once again. Included with the guests was noted, The Hon Walter Barrington, who would in due time become the 9th Viscount. The North Wilts Herald newspaper noted that after the morning calls at local houses by the procession, refreshments were had at the Royal Oak Inn, and that the, '*society's headquarters there, came in handy after the long march.*' The reporter also noted that, '*The crowning event of the day was the subsequent dinner in a tent near the Royal Oak, where Host Jason Twine supplied an abundance of substantial fare, which evidently found customers with substantial digestions.*'



The rear of the Royal Oak in 2001. Photo by Neil B. Maw

The Friendly Society dinners continued through 1889 and 1890, but there appears to be no newspaper coverage for 1891. The most likely reason for this is that sometime between April 1891 and April 1892, Landlord Jason Twine died at the age of 65. The listing for his death is within the Faringdon parish records and it is assumed he was buried there. The Faringdon Advertiser for 9th April 1892, reported that his wife Mary Ann Twine officially took over the licence for the pub a few days earlier. And she continued the tradition of catering for the society dinner in the summer of that year. The Faringdon Advertiser dated 25th June noted that, *'the catering reflected great credit on the hostess, Mrs Twine.'* The newspapers carry no report of any Friendly Society celebrations for 1893 and at first one might think that it was because of the, *'Watchfield Horror,'* when local man John Carter murdered his third wife (See SHS Cat ref N196 for details). However, the police did not become interested in Carter until the end of July, and June was always the traditional month for the celebration day.

Mary Ann Twine continued on at the Royal Oak for six years when in July 1898, the Reading Mercury newspaper carried the information that the licence had been passed to Frederick Richard Busby. The new landlord soon integrated into village life and became the Secretary & Treasurer of the Watchfield Cricket Club. The Swindon Advertiser newspaper for 16th June 1899, confirmed that the Friendly Society still had their headquarters at the Royal Oak and their traditional annual festival went ahead as usual. However, Fred Busby and his family were not there for long. The census of 1901 list himself age 29, his wife Amelia, age 32, and two sons Edward and Charles, both infants. We have no official licence issue from

the newspapers, but by 1902, the landlord is Charles Ernest Parker who, in July of that year found himself giving evidence for a court case concerning bad behaviour outside of his pub.

Charles Parker and his wife subsequently played host successfully to the Friendly Society Festivals of 1903 to 1906. The Swindon Advertiser newspaper of 14th April 1905 also tells of a Skittles Match that was held at the Royal Oak between a team from the Goddard Arms, Swindon and the local Watchfield team. It was a close-run game and the local team lost by 10 pins. But the evening was finished in good heart and with lots of singing.

It is likely that there was another change soon after when the Faringdon Advertiser for 8th June 1907 reported on that year's Friendly Society Festival. There are two instances within the article where the caterer is referred to as, '*Host Adams.*' We have no official notice of this and it may be that he was an outside caterer brought in by the Parkers. However, in February 1908 there is no such doubt when the licence is officially granted to William Henry Cook. It seems that the following year the Friendly Society was changed. The North Wilts Herald of 3rd June 1910 reported that, '*For the second time under the new regime, the annual feast took place at Watchfield. In the morning the members of the Watchfield Lodge of the Society of the Wiltshire Working Men's Conservative Benefit Society ...*' It goes on to say that they marched to the Royal Oak Inn, where, '*Host W. Cook provided an excellent repast.*' The census of 1911 provides more information about him; he's 32, his wife is Beatrice age 35 and they have a son Maurice age 3. But they didn't stay long.

The Faringdon Advertiser for 11th January 1913 carried the Licensing Petty Sessions List and a transfer of licence was granted to William John Salter for the Royal Oak at Watchfield. There then follows virtually no information at all, as at this point, the brink of the First World War, the newspapers are tightly controlled as to what they could print, (*basically nothing that might be considered useful to the enemy ie. Everything.*)

At the moment this is about as far as we can go with any accuracy for the landlords. But there is a piece that can be filled in from living memory and the assistance of the Sunday Mirror newspaper from 17th August 1975. This was in the run-up to the Pop Festival that took place at the old Air Base at Watchfield (See SHS Catalogue Nos N591, N594 and N1527 for details on the Airfield). The local people were not happy about it. Jack Vincent, landlord of the Eagle shut

his doors until it was all over, but Eric Thomas, landlord of the Royal Oak, stayed open, and most likely, did well out of it financially. Both landlords had been at their respective pubs since 1958.

From the researches carried out so far, it would be fairly safe to conclude that some small part of the premises that was the Royal Oak, originated in the 1830s or earlier. It had been altered and added to over the following century. As with all the reports by the Shrivenham Heritage Society, the aim is merely to record the existence of the pub, as accurately as possible.



The view from the lane leading to the Royal Oak in the distant right - circa 1955. Photo courtesy of Paul Williams