

The Bell / Bell Inn / One Bell / Bell & Crown

A long-established and significant village inn, the Bell has a long history. The building is a timber-framed house of the 16th or 17th century with a Georgian frontage and is Grade II listed. Earliest records suggest that it started as part of a farm with barns, outbuildings and a maltings that enabled the brewing of its own ale. A sizeable establishment, it continued to offer hospitality for village events and a base for Friendly Society meetings, even the occasional inquest, until well into the 20th century. A series of auctions and sales meant that the property diminished to the single building we now recognise from the bracket for the inn sign of the former Bell & Crown. Now a private house, it retains the name Crown House at 27 High Street.



The sign for the Bell is on the third house, c.1890s

Early records and the Sibley connection

Both the Bell and the Bull were recorded as inns in 1617. The Sibley family owned the Bell at that time and until 1890. Yeoman farmers of long standing in Hertfordshire, they also owned the maltings at the back of the White Cottage. Cussans, in his 'History of Hertfordshire' refers to the Sibley family as 'one of the oldest and most respectable yeoman families in Hertfordshire'. In 1561, John and Nicholas Sibley were both Hertfordshire freeholders, the former in the parish of Kings Walden, the latter in Wheathampstead.ⁱ In 1727 the High Sheriff of Hertfordshire's poll for Knights of the Shire included both Francis and John Sibley for Whethamsted (sic), along with Sir Samuel Garrard and about eight others.ⁱⁱ Reginald Hine describes the three Miss Sibleys at Mackerye End (c.1820), two of whom lived well into their nineties, as 'descended from a family that harked back to a time before the memory of man', enjoying 'what Elia would have called the essentials of gentlemanhood'.ⁱⁱⁱ Peter Sibley, the family historian, has traced a Simon Sibley from 1434 -1437 and discovered references to a William Sibill in 1450. However continuous references to Sibleys begin in 1474.^{iv}

A 1648 inventory following Francis Sibley's death prove him to have been wealthy and prosperous with a well-furnished home in the Street in Wheathampstead (now

known as the High Street) with, on the ground floor, a parlour, hall, kitchen and two butteries, and on the floor above a chamber over the parlour, a dressing room and chambers over both the kitchen and hall. In the cellar, among other items, were seven beer vessels; they brewed their own beer. In the 'Millhouse' was 'a Maulte Mill and furniture to it, a Binn^v, a Tubb, a Kynnell^{vi}, a Syeth, Riddle, 2 hennpenss, a bill and other lumber'. Total value £3 13s 4d.'

Francis Sibley (son of the former) died on 26th May 1708 at the age of 45, possibly of smallpox. It was a plague year and there were many more deaths than usual in Wheathampstead, eleven in all. The rector, John Lambe, had died only a few days before Francis. Francis 'ordained' his wife Mary as his sole executrix and bequeathed her all his goods and chattels.

Mary's inventory of 1710 mentioned 'the Millhouse, one horse Mill and two pairs of stones' as well as 'plate upon the kiln'. Her stepson Francis inherited. When he died in 1765, his daughter Elizabeth managed the business from the 1770s, after which her nephew Henry took on the tenancy of the Bell.^{vii}

The Bell is shown as a public house on Mumford's 1799 map of the Manor of Wheathampstead with the maltings to the south. Still a substantial property with gardens, an orchard and yard, Henry Sibley held the licence and was in charge, continuing the Sibley family connection that had lasted over 180 years.

Nineteenth-century changes

By the start of the 19th century, from 1817 to 1849, the tenancy had passed to the Baker family, first for one year only to Julius Baker then from 1822 to the late 1830s to Fanny Baker. The Bakers were the official letter-carriers to St Albans in the 1820s.

By 1841, the licence had passed to Mrs Mary Ann Baker. Fanny Baker, aged 65, had moved to The Swan, living as a lodger and described as 'Independent'. Mary Ann Baker appeared in court at the St Albans Liberty Petty Sessions at the end of 1842 accused of 'having kept her house open beyond the time limited by Act of Parliament'. PC English gave evidence that he had found two men fighting in the tap room at The Bell. They each had seconds and there were a number of other men present, six of them very drunk. Mrs Baker had come in and asked the men to leave; she was carrying what appeared to be a jug of warm water and gin. PC Spackman also gave evidence. He had asked Mrs Baker why she allowed men to fight in the tap room; she said she was not aware of it. He had been in Wheathampstead for three months and there had been no trouble at The Bell in that time. Having heard two more witnesses, the Bench decided that there was not enough evidence against Mrs Baker and dismissed the case.

On 6 October 1849, an advertisement appeared in the Hertford Mercury for an auction at The Bell where Mrs Baker had ordered the sale of the furniture and effects of 'five chambers, two parlours, bar, taproom etc etc'. Mrs Baker was giving up the licence; it was transferred to Robert Bray. He was born in Wheathampstead and in 1841 had been living with his wife and child in Bury Green and working as a cooper.

By 1851 we learn from the census return that Robert Bray, aged 46, cooper and victualler, is keeper of The Bell with Sarah his wife, George William his 12-year-old son and a lodger, Samuel Beasley, aged 50. The 1854 Craven Directory describes Bray as victualler, grocer and cooper at The Bell. He dies aged only 50 on 26 July 1855 and there is an inquest at the Swan Inn which decides that he died in his bed, a 'sudden death in a fit of apoplexy'. Described as a sober and industrious man, he is buried in St Helen's churchyard.^{viii} His widow Sarah takes over the licence. The inn changes its name to the One Bell.

On 29 May 1858 the Herts Ad reports the annual gathering of the One Bell Friendly Society. 'Ample justice was done to the good things on the table. The members parted at an early hour, and, as we surmised, it was a tour de force.' Clearly widow Sarah is doing a good job as hostess and keeping the business going.

The 1861 census shows that she is still at the One Bell, described as 'innkeeper and victualler' aged 56, living with 22-year-old George who has followed his father into the coopering business. The 1863 Kelly's directory describes her as 'wheelwright and cooper' but this presumably describes the businesses carried on at The Bell by George Bray rather than her personal skills.

The 1861 census shows the Boot beerhouse a few doors up the High Street with an unnamed beerhouse next door kept by John McCulloch who is also a baker and coal dealer. There are then three cottages between this beerhouse and the One Bell, one of which is an infants' school. See below for more about this.

An inquest is held at The Bell on 13th June 1864. The Herts Ad reported as follows.

An inquest held at the Bell Inn

WHEATHAMPSTEAD

AWFULLY SUDDEN DEATH WHILE PRAYING

Again we have to record an instance of sudden death, which occurred at Wheathamstead, on Sunday night last; the particulars of which will be gathered from the evidence which was taken at an inquest, held on Monday, at the Bell Inn, before R. G. Lowe, Esq., coroner, and a highly respectable jury, over which Mr George Brown presided as foreman, on view of the body of Mr Frederick Jennings, plumber and glazier, who was highly respected in the neighbourhood, where he had gained the goodwill of all by his gentlemanly conduct and upright dealings.

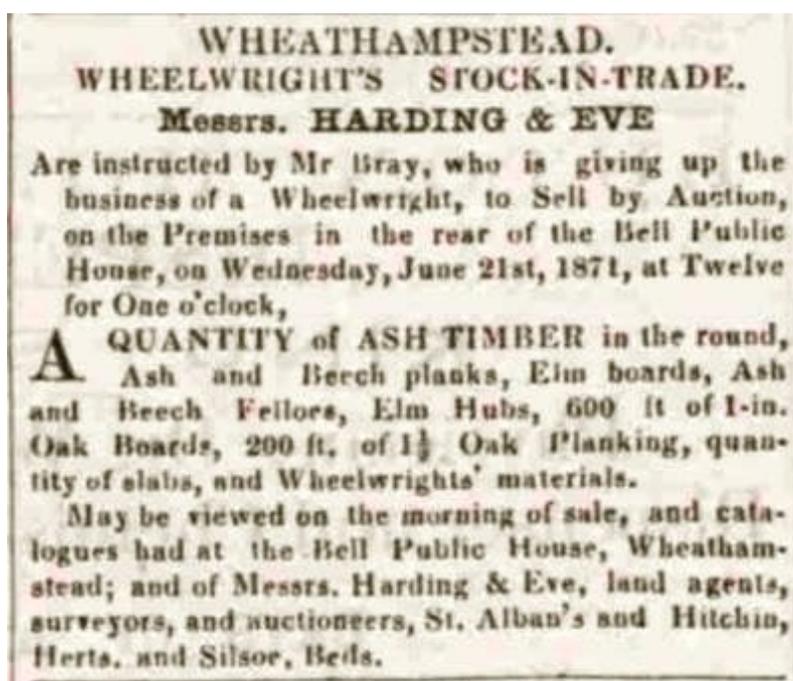
Mr McCulloch said the deceased who lived next door but one to him, was 25 years of age, and had been married about six months. On the preceding evening (Sunday) Mr. Jennings was in his house, at about ten o'clock. He was then in good health. He had been to church in the morning, and to a singing class (he possessing a very good voice) at the school room, for two hours, in the evening. He had lamb and green peas for supper, of which he partook

rather heartily. About half-past eleven, in consequence of an alarm, witness went into the house of the deceased and found him lying on the floor of the bedroom, quite dead. He was undressed and his head was on his wife's lap. Mrs Jennings said he was in the act of saying his prayers, when he fell to the floor quite dead. Dr Crisp was at once called in. Deceased had complained of his arm dropping to his side, and his not feeling able to raise it; but had not said anything about his chest paining him. He was always short of breath.

Dr Crisp said he had attended deceased as a patient occasionally. He was fetched on Sunday night but the deceased was quite dead. He had no doubt the cause of death was apoplexy and heart disease.

The jury returned a verdict of "Natural Death".

Sarah Bray dies on 1 April 1870 at the age of 65, joining her husband in the churchyard at St Helen's. Her son George inherits effects to the value of just under £1,000 and takes over the running of the inn. He also works as both a master cooper and wheelwright, though not for long as advertisements in the local papers soon afterwards show that he is getting out of the wheelwright business and selling off his stock-in-trade. It is interesting to note the different varieties of wood (ash, beech, elm, oak) and how they were used in making a wheel.



(Luton Times 18 June 1871)

The 1871 census confirms that George Bray, still a young man aged just 33, is licensee at The Bell living with his wife Mary (31) and carrying on his work as a cooper.

The Bell has the misfortune to have a visit from William Rainsden 'an old offender' in 1871. The Herts Ad dated 18 March reports that he had failed to appear at the

Liberty Petty Sessions to answer a summons of being drunk and disorderly at The Bell soon after 12 o'clock on a Sunday morning. PC Hill gives evidence that he had found Rainsden 'in a state of intoxication, stripped, and about to fight another man in the midst of a great number of people'. The court hears that Rainsden had several previous convictions. He is fined £2 with 11s. 6d. costs or in default two months' imprisonment with hard labour (Herts Ad 18 March 1871). It clearly had little effect; Rainsden was convicted of a similar offence at the Park Hotel seven years later by which time he had racked up eleven previous convictions.

On 14th December 1871 property and land next door to The Bell is put up for sale in an auction at The Swan. It is part of the estate of John Isaac House. The sales catalogue reads:

Lot 7

A valuable brick and tiled DWELLING HOUSE WITH THREE SMALL COTTAGES at the rear, together with large YARD, capital BAKEHOUSE, STABLE and numerous Out-buildings, and large well-stocked garden, situate in the centre of the Village of Wheathampstead, as now occupied by Mr McCulloch and his under tenants.

This property is Copyhold of the Manor of Wheathampstead Rectory; and is bounded on the south by the "Bricklayer's Arms" Public House, belonging to Mr Pryor, and Property belonging to the Parish Church of Wheathampstead, on the east by land belonging to Mr W. Thrale, and on the north by the "Bell" public house, belonging to Mr Sibley.

Land tax 14s.

'Mr McCulloch' is John McCulloch, an interesting man. Born in Scotland, he was the village policeman in Wheathampstead in 1841. He married a local girl, Mary Ann Lines, and is described as a master baker in the 1851 census. The 1861 census shows him as licensee of an unnamed beerhouse, baker and coal dealer living with his family in a house located between the Boot (aka the Bricklayers Arms) and the Bell. This is confirmed in Kelly's directories for 1862 and 1869. The 1871 census describes him only as 'baker' and living next door to the Bell; similarly, the auction sale notice makes no mention of a beerhouse. It would seem that John McCulloch's career as a beerseller was relatively short. However, Kelly's 1874 lists both him and his eldest son, John Alexander McCulloch, as beer retailers at separate unnamed premises. It appears that Kelly's 1874 was wrong at least for John McCulloch. Neither man, nor their families, appears in the 1881 census but in 1891 John aged 74 is described as a baker and John Alexander, 44, as a painter, both living with their families in Wheathampstead. John senior had eight children, as did John Alexander.

The sale details shown above confirm that the freehold of the Bell is owned by Mr Sibley.

By July 1876 the pub is again known as the Bell & Crown, as shown by this report in the Herts Ad dated 29 July. It is the Court House for the Wheathampstead lodge of the Ancient Order of Foresters which is celebrating its first anniversary. George Bray provides dinner. It is a splendid occasion for which George Bray provides a 'good substantial hot dinner' for 80 brothers of the Order.

WHEATHAMPSTEAD ANNIVERSARY FETE

On Monday, July 17th, the first anniversary fete took place in connection with the Ancient Order of Foresters established in this village in connection with the Luton district in February of the present year, and which Court now numbers 96 members.

The brothers met at their Court House, known as the Bell & Crown kept by host George Bray, at a quarter to one o'clock, where they formed in line and the procession proceeded through the village, headed by brother Warren, mounted, in his Robin Hood dress; next came the chief officers of the Court and then the St Albans Volunteer Band, followed by brothers bearing the banners and insignia of the order. Having arrived at the north end of the village the procession halted in front of Viscount Kilcourse's house, where the band played a short time, then returned through the village, again halting at Mr. W. Thrale's the band played a lively air, and proceeded to the meadow, so kindly lent by him, and here a good substantial hot dinner (which gave great satisfaction) was provided by host Bray in a large open barn handsomely and tastefully decorated by the brothers, 80 of whom sat down. Dinner being over, brother Warren, who was instrumental in raising this Court, was called upon to speak, and in appropriate terms proposed a vote of thanks to the officers of the Court for the way in which they had performed their duties, and also to brother Bar for the active part he took in the decorations.

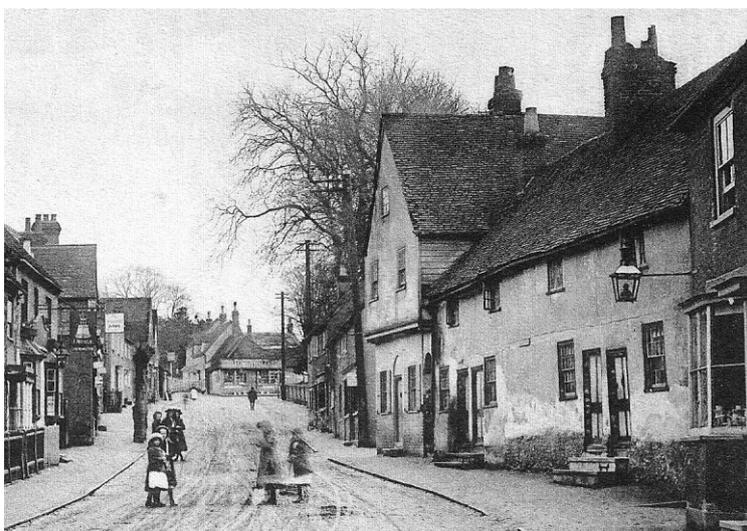
A vote of thanks was then given to Mr. W. Thrale for the use of the meadow and also to Mr. J. Ransome for his kind assistance, which both met with a hearty response. In the meadow various kinds of amusements were provided for the people and children, the admission to the meadow being 3d. – school children half-price. Mr. J. Coles attended with his round-a-bouts, shooting-gallery, and various stalls; there were also foot races, hurdle and juvenile races. Early in the afternoon the tradespeople closed their shops, and the inhabitants generally appeared to spend a happy day. We noticed many brother Foresters from Harpenden, Luton, St. Alban's and Hatfield, who all spoke in high terms of the admirable manner in which everything was conducted. About half-past nine the band marched out of the meadow, and after stopping on the way and giving Mr. W. Thrale three cheers, the company separated.ix

George Bray dies on 22 September 1877 aged just 38; he leaves an estate of under £300. His widow Mary takes over as licensee on 1 December 1877.

Less than three years later, in July 1880, William McCulloch (second son of John McCulloch and brother of John Alexander McCulloch) is identified as innkeeper at the Bell. The magistrates grant him an extra drinking hour for the annual dinner of the Oddfellows and Foresters. The 1871 census had shown him as a lodger at the Bricklayers Arms and described as a plumber and glazier.

In 1881 William McCulloch, aged 32, is living at the Bell with Mary his wife, aged 35, and baby daughter Ethel who was baptised at St Helen's on 29th August 1880. He is described as 'cooper and brewer'. He was carrying on the tradition of the Bell brewing its own beer. Also at the Bell on census night were Mary Irwin (59) a widow and domestic servant from Aylesbury, Annie Warren a junior servant aged 14, and Francis Spence, aged 18, a tailor born in London.

Regular meetings and dinners continue to be held at the Bell. In January 1882 it is the venue for the Loyal Grove Lodge of Oddfellows 37th annual dinner. In July of the same year, the Foresters of Court Wheathampstead join forces with the Oddfellows to hold a 'grand fete'. A procession led by the Codicote Brass Band starts from the Court House, i.e. the Bell & Crown, and parades through the village. Ironically, the fine weather means a lower-than-expected attendance since many villagers and their families have to get in the hay. 'A public hot dinner was provided by Host McCulloch in a large meadow kindly lent by Mr Seabrook'. John McCulloch, secretary of the Foresters, welcomes those present. Mr Warren, chief ranger, says that it was the sixth anniversary of the founding of the Foresters whose court was now worth £325. They are doing grand work in Wheathampstead and are 'bound together in the bond of brotherhood to help each other in times of sickness and misfortune'. The day ends with numerous sports and other amusements but is curtailed by rain which begins to fall soon after six o'clock (Herts Ad 22 July 1882).



The sign for The Bell is visible on the left, with the Bricklayers Arms just beyond and the Swan in the distance with the sign for the Ship standing opposite.

The annual supper of the Loyal Grove Lodge of the Order of Oddfellows is held in the Lodge Room at the pub in January 1884, the meal again being provided by Host McCulloch. It is reported that the Lodge had been established for 40 years and is in a strong financial position with capital that realises £60 per annum interest, enabling an increase in the sick pay payable to members.

A sad event occurs in January 1886 when a lodger, Frederick Farr, aged 44 and unemployed, who has lodged with the McCullochs for about six months, is found dead in bed. The inquest is held at the Bell. Mary McCulloch says she has known Farr for more than five years. On the day in question, he had been in bed all day. She had looked in on him from time to time and taken him tea but when she went to his room at a quarter past six, he was dead. Doctor Wilson gave evidence that he had warned Farr about his heavy drinking and that he had died of 'paralysis of the heart caused by excessive drinking'. The inquest is reported in detail in the *Herts Advertiser*.^x

Robert Sibley, owner of the freehold of the Bell, dies late in 1889 aged 79 and his executors order the sale of his estate. This auction notice appears in the Herts Ad on 12 April.

SALE OF FREEHOLD PROPERTIES
AT
WHEATHAMPSTEAD, HERTS.
MR. A. RUMBALL.

Will sell by auction, at the Corn Exchange, St. Albans, on **FRIDAY, MAY 2nd, 1890**, at Two for Three o'clock, by direction of the Executors of the late Mr. Robert Sibley, in numerous lots,

THE Valuable **FREEHOLD FULLY LICENSED PUBLIC-HOUSE**, known as the "Bell and Crown Inn," situate in the very centre of the village of Wheathampstead, with large yard and numerous outbuildings, well-stocked garden at back, having an extensive frontage to East-lane. The House contains five bedrooms, sitting-room, landing, bar, bar-parlour, large club-room, spacious tap-room, entrance passage, kitchen, larder, beer cellar, coal cellar, and w.c. also Brewhouse containing copper, malt and hop store, cooper's shop, stabling for four horses, hen-house, cart shed, two wells of water and large yard, in the occupation of Mr. William McCulloch, jun., as yearly tenant, at the very low rental of

£46 0s. 0d. per annum,
tenant paying outgoings.

Also the adjoining **FREEHOLD HOUSE**, containing three bedrooms, front shop, living-room, kitchen with copper, workshop at back, and yard with stable and coach-house, in the occupation of Mr. George Temple, tailor, as yearly tenant, at

£12 0s. 0d. per annum,
tenant paying rates.

Two Brick-and-Tiled COPYHOLD COTTAGES,

The brewers Bingham Cox buy the Bell & Crown and the adjoining house for £2090 (Herts Ad 10 May 1890). The Sibley family had owned the Bell & Crown for at least 270 years.

By census night in April 1891 the McCullochs have gone and Edwin Alfred Morrison aged 48 is landlord of the Bell & Crown. Described as a publican rather than an innkeeper, he hails from Rougham, Northamptonshire and lives with his wife Mary (41) who is from Stowmarket, Suffolk. Their lodger, Frederick Scarborough, is described as a groom from Luton aged 27. He is a son of Henry and Annie Elizabeth Scarborough, licensees of the Bull. He is killed when hit by a train on the railway in June the following year; the inquest is held at the Bell & Crown and returns a verdict of accidental death.

Edwin Morrison's stay at the Bell & Crown is brief; the licence is transferred to William Davies in October 1891. He is still there in 1895 and, like his predecessors, successfully applies for an extra hour for the Foresters' annual dinner in March 1897. He dies aged just 39 in spring 1899; his widow Sophia is appointed executor of his estate which is valued at £463. In August of the same year, the licence is transferred to Charles Parker. Parker was a young man to be a publican, a mere 23 years old when he took over. He came from Shropshire and his wife Jane (29) from Scotland. Kelly's directory 1902 records him at the Bell & Crown but by 1906 John Noble, a Yorkshireman then aged 46, has started a long tenancy that lasts until at least 1928. In 1911, he is living at the Bell & Crown with his wife Amelia (48), daughter Elizabeth (24), who helps in the brewery, and son John (22) who is a house painter.

Benskins Brewery owned the Bell & Crown at this time. In 1928, Kelly's Directory included a large advertisement for 'The Bell & Crown Hotel and Tea Gardens'. Clearly Noble was changing with the times and trying to attract motoring and cycling customers from farther afield.



The Bell & Crown in the mid-20th century

ⁱ Cussans, J.E. *History of Hertfordshire* (1879-1881).

ⁱⁱ Peter Sibley's private research on the Sibley Family, 1648-1708. (Donated to Wheathampstead History Society in 2013.)

ⁱⁱⁱ Reginald L. Hine, 'Charles Lamb and his Hertfordshire'

^{iv} Peter Sibley, private communication.

^v A 'binn' was a basket for storing grain.

^{vi} A Kynnell was a cask for containing liquid (=half a barrel or half part of a tun). A kilderkin was an eighth of a hogshead. An Act of 1531/1532 stated that a cask had to contain 18 gallons for beer and 16 gallons for ale.

^{vii} WEA Book 4, 'The Age of Independence', pp. 166-7.

^{viii} *Herts Guardian*, newspaper, 31 July 1855, page 2 for a report of the death.

^{ix} *Herts Advertiser & St Albans Times*, 29 July 1876, page 8.

^x *Herts Advertiser*, 16 January 1886, page 6.