

The Plough

The Plough (later The Old Plough) stood at what is now the entrance to the Mid Herts Golf Club in Lamer Lane, Lower Gustard Wood. The building probably dates from the 18th century and is now a private house. Compared with some of the beerhouses and alehouses in Gustard Wood, it appears to have been a model of respectability, with the licence being held by members of the same family for nearly 80 years.



1906 - The Old Plough when it was still in use as a public house

The Plough in 1906.

In 1837, the Poor Rate Assessment showed that The Plough was a beerhouse owned by Thomas George, with George Clark named as licensee. It was valued at £8.

In the same year, White's directory lists John Edmonds as licensee. This is confirmed by the 1841 Tithe map and schedule, which also lists Thomas George as owner of the house, and by the 1841 Poor Rate Assessment when the valuation had gone down to £6.

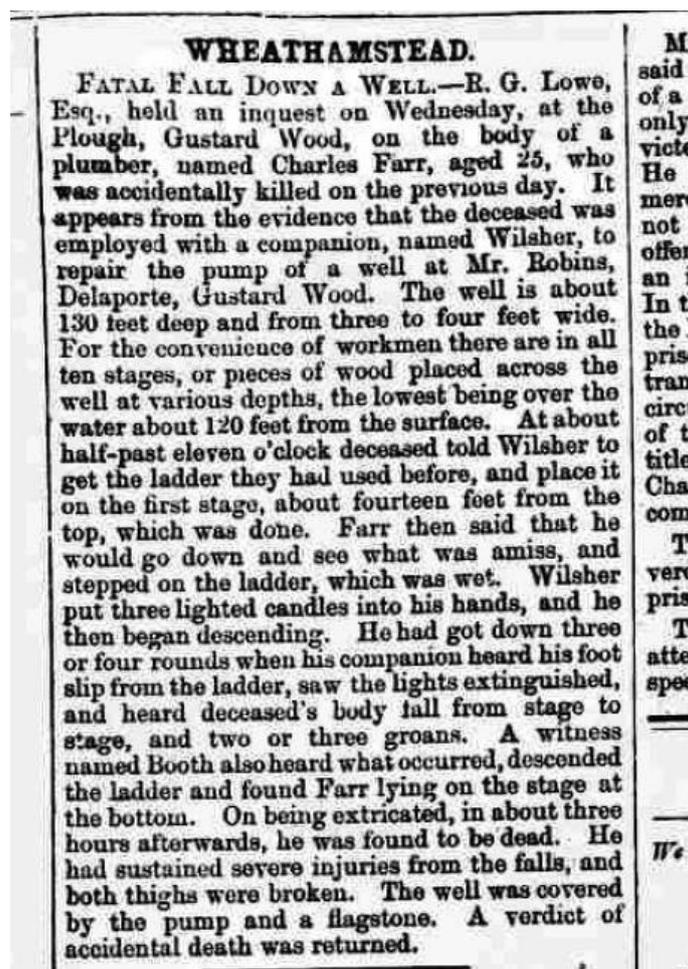
The evidence from the 1851 census is less clear. It shows two George Clarks living in Gustard Wood, one aged 39 and one aged 69 but both working as agricultural labourers, and a John Edmonds, 39, also an agricultural labourer. There is no mention of beerselling. Another John Edmonds appears in the 1851 census, lodging with James Dunham, a beerseller in Wheathampstead High Street. It is not possible to identify with certainty any of these with their namesakes shown above.

It is therefore not possible to conclude who was licensee at The Plough in 1851 but a report in the Herts Mercury in 1857 states that Francis Russell, beershop keeper, had been acquitted of a charge of theft at the Liberty Petty Sessions. The 1851 census shows that Russell was at that date an agricultural labourer aged 26 living in a cottage near Herons Farm in Gustard Wood. Herons Farm is on the far side of what was then the Common (now Mid Herts Golf Course) so it may be that Russell was already living at and possibly selling beer from the cottage that became known as The Plough.

Francis Russell is listed as a beer retailer in Gustard Wood in Kelly's directories from 1859 to 1870 but the earliest evidence that links him specifically with The Plough does not appear until 1877 (see below).

The 1861 census shows him as a beerhouse keeper, aged 36, living at the right location in Gustard Wood though The Plough is not named. He had been married to Lucy for 15 years and they had seven children under 14 of whom five, including a six-year-old, attended school, a relatively high proportion for the time. The baptism of the youngest, also named Lucy, is recorded in the Parish Register on 21 August 1859. She later became licensee of The Plough (see below). Their neighbour Alfred Kilby, a 23-year-old carpenter, was the son of John Kilby who appears in the 1851 census as a master carpenter employing six men and two labourers. There must be a family link with William Kilby who was a wealthy man when, at the age of only 54, he sold his building business and neighbouring properties in 1877. The business was bought by Fenwick Owen and that part of Lower Gustard Wood is still known as Owens Corner.

On 8 May 1869, the Herts Ad reported a rather gruesome inquest being held at The Plough. The fact that an inquest was held there suggests that it was considered to be a respectable venue and had a large room.



Francis Russell, now aged 48, appears in the 1871 census as a 'dealer and beer seller' living with his wife, four children and two lodgers.

A report in the Herts Ad on 15 September 1877 shows that Russell (misnamed in the report as George) 'who had kept house for 23 years without the slightest complaint' (ie since 1854) 'and whose premises were the only licensed property within half a mile'¹ applied to the Annual Licensing Session to extend his licence to sell beer on the premises so that he could also sell wine and spirits. The application was supported by a 'requisition' signed by Lord Kilcoursie of Wheathampstead House and was granted.

Nine months later, The Plough featured in another Herts Ad story when George Archer, who lived next door, was convicted of assaulting Frederick Low in the road outside. The magistrate found that Archer 'had had some beer at the time but certainly knew what he was about' and a witness, Ann Atwood, thought that 'defendant must have had a little'. Archer was fined £1 including costs, or 14 days' imprisonment.

The 1881 census shows that Francis and Lucy Russell were still keeping The Plough, which is named as The Old Plough. Their daughter Lucy is living at home and there is a 16-year-old servant, Jane Freeman, who was born in Kimpton. Francis is listed as a beerseller in Kelly's directories for 1882, 1886 and 1890. His wife Lucy died aged 61 following a fall down the cellar steps at a neighbour's house in 1886. The 1891 census shows Francis Russell as a 67-year-old widower, publican and farmer, living with his daughter Lucy and a boarder, Elizabeth Clark (28), who was a seamstress.

The next event in the history of The Old Plough was momentous: the Mid Herts Golf Club, formed in 1892, opened a course on the Common in 1893 in the face of some opposition from local residents. The main access to the course was past the front door of The Old Plough. There can be little doubt that business boomed in the following years. The Club built its own clubhouse in 1897 and employed Miss Lucy Russell at a salary of £20 per year to manage the catering and caretaking². No doubt The Old Plough continued to attract steady custom from Club members.

A curious court case involving The Plough was reported at length in the Herts Ad dated 25 March 1899. Aubrey Simmons, whose orchard was next door to The Plough, was summoned by the RSPCA for 'wilfully placing upon certain land meat, to wit bread, impregnated with poison intended to destroy life'. First, Simmons' solicitor argued that there was no case to answer because bread was not meat as specified in the relevant statutes. He cited related legislation and Stone's 'Justices Manual' to support his argument. The magistrates, however, after consulting 'several dictionaries', decided that meat did include bread so the case proceeded.

¹ This was not strictly true. The Royal Exchange was open at this time and a short distance down the road.

² Information about the Mid Herts Golf Club is taken from *The History of Mid Herts Golf Club* published by the Club in their centenary year, 1892.

The first witness, Ernest East, who was 14 years old at the time, said that he had been working for Mr Straw when he saw bread coming over the fence into Straw's yard. He looked through the fence and saw Simmons walking away. Several fowls had eaten the bread before he could pick it up and take it to Mr Straw. There was 'blue stuff' on the bread. He thought it was phosphorus. He did not like Mr Simmons.

Henry Straw then gave evidence. He admitted that the fowls had got over into Mr Simmons' orchard and had been a trouble to him. One fowl had died after eating the bread. Lucy Straw gave evidence that several fowls had been 'very seedy for a few days'. The bread had been handed to the police and then to the County Analyst. He confirmed that the 'blue stuff' was phosphorus which was a slow poison that could kill fowls.

Aubrey Simmons denied being in the orchard at the relevant time and that he had thrown the bread; he knew nothing about the bread or poison though he had had words with Mr Straw about the fowls getting into his orchard.

The magistrates retired for only a few minutes before finding Simmons guilty and fining him £3 with costs of 14s. 6d. He had previously served two long prison sentences.

In 1901, the census records that Francis was still the inn-keeper at The Old Plough, now aged 78. His grandson Bert Russell, writing in the 1970s, recalled that "Grandfather Russell kept the Plough pub, and also ran a contractor's business with horses and carts and my father helped to cart the bricks etc"³.

Francis' daughter Lucy had married Henry Straw in September 1897 and the two of them were living at The Old Plough, with Henry working as a butler. His origins are unclear. The 1901 census says that he was born in Cotmanhay, Derbyshire, in about 1858 and the 1871 census shows that he was the son of a coal-miner. However, probate for his will in June 1916 included the statement 'Resealed at Dublin. Effect in Ireland £200', which suggests there may have been a family link in that country.

In August 1901 the members of the Mid Herts Golf Club provided a 'substantial tea', together with games and a coconut shy, for 200 local children and adults from Gustard Wood Common. Henry and Lucy Straw did the catering. The Herts Ad reported that 'Nearly every child had a present of some kind, many had several, while the elderly people had either tea or tobacco given to them.' The entire event was paid for by the Golf Club – perhaps it was an attempt to improve relations with local people who resented the golf course being built on the Common.

Francis Russell died at the age of 79 on 30 May 1902, having been licensee of The (Old) Plough since at least 1857. Henry Straw took over the licence and held it until he died aged 58 in 1916.

³ Source *Tales from Old Wheathampstead and Gustard Wood, 1900* ed. Ruth Jeavons, published by Wheathampstead Local History Group (2001)

Postscript

After Henry's death, Lucy Straw took over the licence which she held until she died in 1932, meaning that The Plough had been in the same family for more than 70 years. She was also a Sunday School teacher at St Peter's church which was built just up the road in 1910. She was Stewardess at the Golf Club during the Great War and later "did rather well with her business supplying refreshments to the hungry golfers."⁴ Her nephew Bert Russell recalled that she had made a footpath between The Plough and the church. Bert himself was licensee at the Tin Pot for some years in the 1930s.

The 1937 Post Office Directory lists Frank V Russell as licensee of The Plough. He was then aged 53 and married to Lydia. It has not been possible to establish a link between him and Francis Russell but he was born in Wheathampstead and his name suggests a family connection.

The Plough closed in 1982.

⁴ Op.cit.