

The House and Oakley Families of the Grove Farm

1742 - 1911

On 5 January, 1792 the bells of St Helen's Church in Wheathampstead rang out to celebrate the union of two wealthy farming families. Isaac House of the Grove Farm waited for his bride, Mary, to arrive accompanied down the aisle by her father, Richard Oakley (1) of Offley, Hertfordshire, the owner of land in three counties.



St Helen's Church drawn by T.C., 1791

Isaac House (1757 – 1793)

Isaac House was born in Wheathampstead in 1757, where his father, also named Isaac (1729 -1782), had inherited the Grove Farm from his father, John House. It had been built for Thomas Seare in 1712, a wealthy yeoman with an interest in Bamville Wood and the Cross Farms on the edge of Harpenden Common. The Grove farmhouse near Pipers Lane, almost two miles outside the village, was a handsome Queen Anne-style dwelling with 'T 1712 S', the building date and Thomas Seare's initials, decorating the brickwork. On his death in 1742, Thomas Seare left Bamville Wood Farm to his wife and bequeathed the Grove Farm and the Swan Inn in the village to his kinsman, John House, a 'gentleman' and member of Wheathampstead's elite society.



The Grove Farm (now Grade II Listed and known as The Grove)

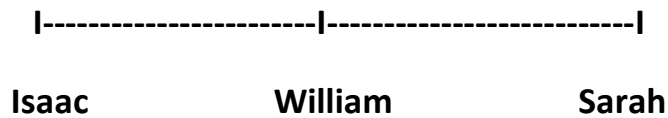
In 1747, Isaac's father had a house built close to The Swan – now 1 Church Street and Grade II Listed. An attractive red brick house, it had a lozenge-shaped brick panel over the door inscribed with the date and Isaac House's initials, indicating his pride of ownership. He may have lived there rather than at The Grove Farm or used the house as a convenient base within the village community near The Swan, where in 1756 his sister, Sarah, ran a malt house where cereal grain was converted into malt for brewing.



1, Church Street

Young Isaac (1757- 93) and his siblings, William and Sarah, may have spent some of their early years there, experiencing both life in the village and in the countryside around the Grove Farm.

Isaac House m Ann Bigge



In 1758, soon after Isaac’s birth, the first Militia Ballot List for the military reserve force was posted on the vestry door in the village, naming all those eligible for service. Lists appeared annually as the population changed but in almost 30 years only 21 men from Wheathampstead parish were actually called to serve. The names of Isaac and William House appeared on the lists from 1781 and Isaac was one of the 21 men called up, all in 1784.



Officers were usually appointed from among the property-owning classes and Isaac was joined by John Seare from Bamville Wood Farm, John Robards, the wealthy miller’s son, and John Ephgrave, a gentleman farmer from Gustard Wood. Isaac could have provided a substitute or paid £10 towards one but he chose to serve. His father had died in 1782, so he may have felt a need for change or adventure. The Militia organised regular training locally and ran an annual camp but full-time employment over three years was in the event of

threatened rebellion or invasion, so Isaac was probably only absent from the Grove Farm for short periods, when his business could be managed without difficulty.



For gentlemen farmers and other businessmen owning or renting valuable properties, the risk of loss from fire was very real and those with means in Wheathampstead insured their properties with the Sun Fire Insurance Company. In 1784 Isaac House insured farmhouse properties at Porters End and Blackmore End, including a brewhouse, granary, stables, cow houses and barns valued at £1,300, together with his business colleagues and contemporaries, James and John Wilkins, local brewers. Isaac and his brother, William, who farmed at Bamville Wood Farm alongside John Seare, also insured properties for smaller sums, valued at £500 and £385.



Bamville Wood Farm

William House died at Bamville Wood Farm in 1788, leaving all his corn, grain, cattle and household goods to his sister, Sarah. She had married William Kingston, a Harpenden farrier, in 1786 and William had appointed her his executrix.

Gentlemen farmers combined business with pleasure, charitable activities and public affairs. Part of Isaac's recreation involved shooting game with his affluent neighbours, Henry Sibley, the owner of The Bell, and James Wilkins, the brewer. By the Gaming Acts of 1784/5 they were all entitled to a shooting certificate for 2 guineas a year, a privilege which set them apart from those who could be arrested for poaching.



Gentlemen farmers shooting ducks

At the time of his marriage in 1792, Isaac House was 35 years of age and was well established as a farmer and businessman, with a range of copyhold and tenanted properties in addition to his ownership of the Grove Farm with its malt house and brewing utensils, barns, stables and outhouses, arable land, orchards, fields and woods inherited from his father.

Mary Oakley (1767 – 1794)

Mary Oakley, Isaac's bride, was one of the six children of Richard Oakley (1) of Offley in Hertfordshire and his wife, Ann Swain. Mary, born in 1767, was almost ten years younger than Isaac, and had five brothers, Richard, Thomas, William, John and James. The family's connection with Wheathampstead is unknown, but by the time of Isaac House's marriage to Mary Oakley, Richard (2), William and James were established in the area.

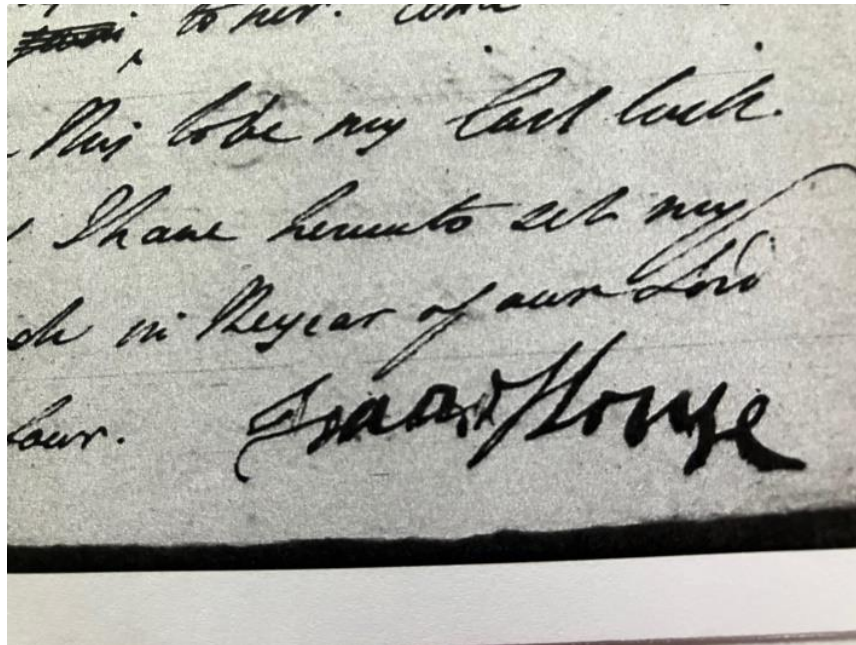
Richard Oakley (1) of Offley m Ann Swain



Richard (2) Thomas William John Mary James

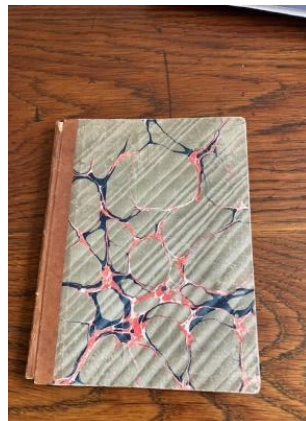
Soon after their marriage, Isaac and Mary House were blessed with a son, John Isaac House, born on 1 January 1793 and baptised at St Helen's on 4 April. A daughter followed, born on 13 February the following year. The couple had just a few weeks with their two young children because Isaac suddenly fell gravely ill, perhaps a victim of the 'usual epidemic fever' recorded that year. Apothecaries were consulted and paid but there was little they could do.

Knowing his days were numbered, on 31 March 1794 Isaac summoned a legal clerk to draft his will. He confirmed the allowance he had made to Mary, his 'dear wife' on their marriage and, as a 'confirmation of his affection', provided her with an additional '£200 for mourning' so she could attend his funeral with dignity and grace. To Richard Oakley (2), Mary's eldest brother, he granted a third part of a farm and land near Whitwell, leaving the residue of his estate, including ownership of the Grove Farm, to his young son, John Isaac House. He appointed Richard Oakley (2) his sole executor and the guardian of his children with his wife, Mary, until they came of age. His baby daughter had not been baptised, but he named her Mary Ann, providing her with a settlement and an additional £500. His sister, Sarah, the wife of William Kingston, was the recipient of the interest for life on £200 for her personal use and a further £200 for their children. Isaac signed his will with a shaky hand, witnessed by close friends, Charlotte and Thomas Wilkins, members of the local brewing family, and William Wilshere. Isaac House died a few days later on 5 April at the age of 37.

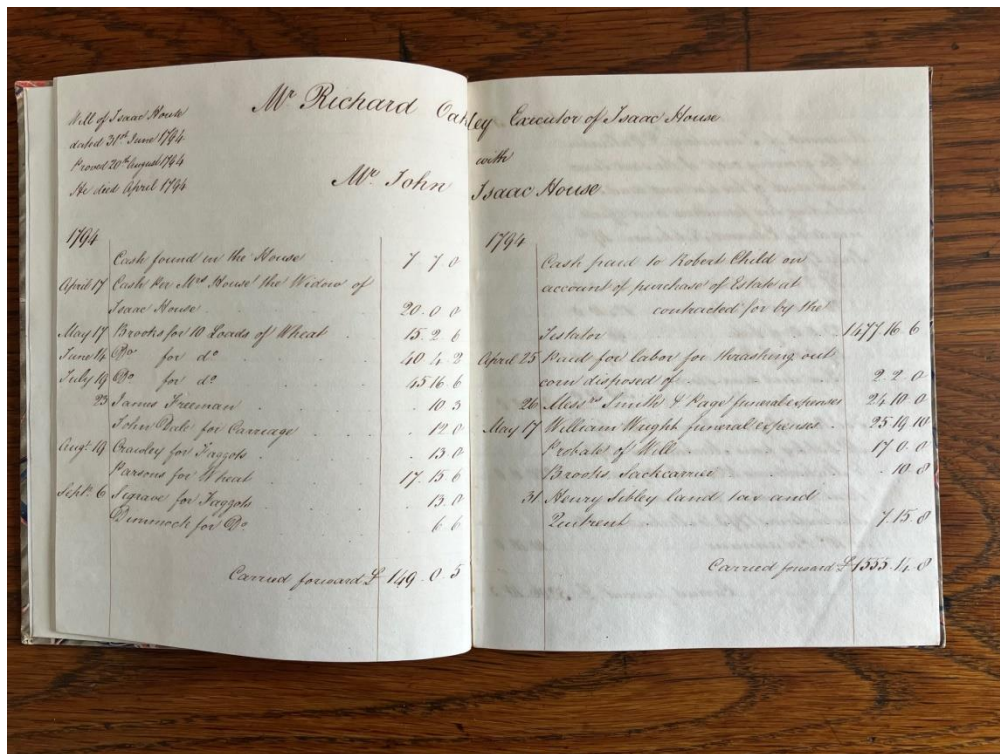


The Account Book

The death of a wealthy farmer, particularly in unexpected circumstances, demanded urgent action. Apart from funeral expenses there was always a farm to run, debts and wages to pay and unfinished business. It was now spring in Wheathampstead, crops were rising, wheat from the previous harvest needed threshing, and live and dead stock at the Grove Farm required attention.



Richard Oakley (2), who was 33 years of age and single, immediately appointed an accountant to record financial transactions. An Account Book was opened in the name of Mr. Richard Oakley, executor, with Mr. John Isaac House, who was just a year old at that time, and the record was maintained until 1830.



The first entry was £7 and 7 shillings found in cash at the Grove Farm and on 17 April 1794 a further £20 belonging to Mary, Isaac's widow, was noted. But before any further entries could be made, just three weeks after her husband's death, Mary House died, at the age of 27, leaving two orphaned children. Although sudden death was not uncommon, the two prosperous families, who had shared great hopes for the future, sadly made their way to St Helen's church as funeral bells tolled for a second time.

The Account Book dealt mainly with the business transactions of the first two years following Isaac's death. Either Richard Oakley or John Isaac House must have considered it important enough to retain, either as a legal document or as a personal memento of Isaac House. It has therefore survived nearly two hundred years and provides a brief but unique snapshot of life at the Grove Farm and Isaac House's relationships with his family, business colleagues and local employees. It also highlights the significant role Richard Oakley played in the House family history, demonstrating family loyalty, support and co-operation and how the House and Oakley families became entwined.

The accountant recorded the expenses of the funeral director and in May a further bill paid to William Wright, probably the local carpenter who made the coffins. (A total of approximately £2,000 at today's value)

In July an Inventory and Valuation was made of the growing crop, the live and dead stock and the furniture and effects of Isaac House, amounting to a total of £847 (Approximately £65,000). Probate was granted in August 1794.

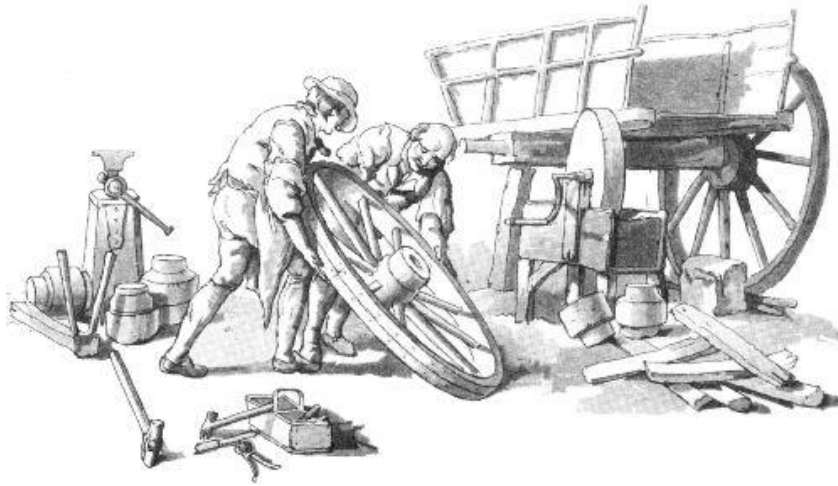
Isaac and Mary's children were members of a wealthy community so, under the guardianship of Richard Oakley, were brought up by relatives with their inheritance secure. Mary Ann, born on 13 February, had not been baptised at the time of her mother's death so a ceremony took place at St Helen's on 19 October 1794.

Richard Oakley (2) Executor

As Isaac House's executor, Richard Oakley had responsibility for incoming and outgoing payments relating to his estate. He established tenancy agreements for the coming decades on Isaac House's properties at Porters End, Blackmore End and Bower Heath, and he paid outstanding wages and the Land Tax and Poor Rate due annually from the Grove Farm.

The Grove Farm estate, held in trust for Isaac's son, required a tenant so Richard Oakley rented it at £200 per annum until Michaelmas 1814, when John Isaac reached the age of 21. He maintained control of the House family estate for at least 20 years.

As a wealthy tenant, Richard Oakley would have relied on wage labour to carry out most of the farm work, but he had responsibility for crop rotation of the oats, peas, barley and wheat grown there, and for managing stock, ongoing building repairs and maintenance of farm vehicles. Daniel Mardall, the village wheelwright, mentioned in the Account Book, would have been an essential member of the Grove Farm community.



The Militia Lists for Wheathampstead, covering the years 1758 to 1786, provide a record of the names of the inhabitants of the village before census returns were introduced. Farm servants and labourers working at the Grove Farm over these years are specifically listed and a further number employed by Isaac House appear in the Account Book. Reapers and threshers, waggoners, carpenters, sawyers and shepherds all played a role in maintaining the Grove Farm throughout the seasons.



The Account Book also refers to financial transactions Isaac House had made with wealthy local farmers and businessmen, including Thomas Cook, who held the tenure of the properties at Porters End and Blackmore End; Robert Child, the owner of an eighteenth-century house called 'Pipers' in Pipers Lane; Mr. Searancke (a name of Flemish origin), possibly a member of the dominant

brewing family in St Albans, and James, John and Thomas Wilkins, members of the Wheathampstead brewing family.

A Family Dispute?

The passing and distribution of wealth and land between families from one generation to another has always had potential for causing problems and it seems that there may have been a family dispute in the years following Isaac House's death. An undated attachment to his will of 1794 reads:

This (paper writing or) Will was shewn to William Wilshere Esquire, Thomas Wilkins and Charlotte Oakley (formerly Wilkins) at the times of their respective Examination in Chancery on the part of William Kingston and Wife competing against Richard Oakley for defendants.

Charlotte Wilkins, who acted as a witness when Isaac House made his will, married James Oakley, Mary's youngest brother, in 1800, so the Examinations in Chancery must have taken place after that date. No details of this matter have come to light but it may be that William Kingston and his wife, Sarah, Isaac's sister, contested the will and that Richard Oakley, Isaac's executor, defended it on behalf of John Isaac House and Mary Ann, who were still children.

So what happened to Isaac and Mary House's orphaned children in later life? Richard Oakley carried out Isaac's wishes as their guardian and both John Isaac and Mary Ann inherited wealth and were provided with suitable marriage opportunities.

Mary Ann House (1794 – 1843)

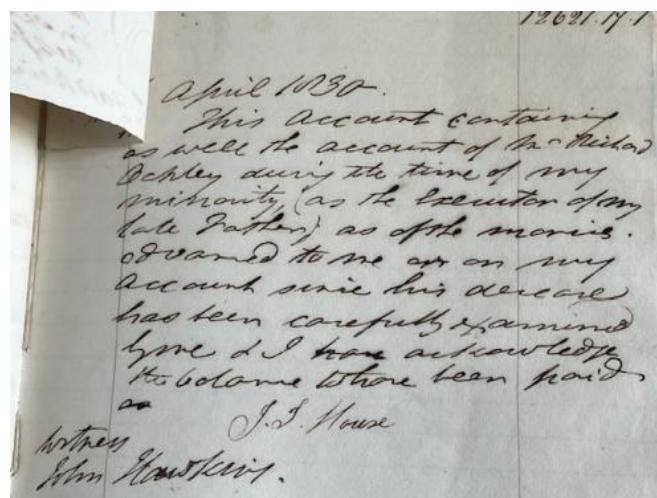
Mary Ann House, who was born and orphaned in 1794, grew up at the Grove Farm. In 1818 she married James Smyth at St Helen's Church in Wheathampstead, a local gentleman whose family had once owned Annables Farm in Harpenden. Mary Ann had two sons, Edward and James, and her husband pre-deceased her. She died in Stevenage in 1843 and her will shows that she was wealthy and educated. She left to her sons, who were still in their minority, her plate and best linen, together with her books and bookcases,

gold rings, pearl bracelets, silver watch and chain, alabaster ornaments and pictures she described as 'by my own working'.

John Isaac House (1) (1793 – 1849)

The final pages of the Account Book date from 1815, by which time John Isaac House had already come of age. That year he married Ann Kidman, whose mother was a member of the Oakley family from Offley. The first entry for that year refers to '£80 cash Mr. House brought from Offley to the Grove', probably linked to his marriage. The execution of his father's will had long been completed, but Richard Oakley continued to advance small amounts of cash to John Isaac during later years. In 1824 he advanced £50 to 'Mrs. House' and in 1826 a larger sum of £900 to 'Mr. House'.

By 1830 the accountant's work was complete and the balance of monies coming in and out over the period of the Account Book was calculated and passed to John Isaac, who formally acknowledged Richard Oakley's management of his affairs. The balance amounted to £1,356 ten shillings and sixpence and after the formal declaration at the end of the Account Book John Isaac House signed his name.



12631.17.1
April 1830.
This Account containing
as well the account of Mr. Richard
Oakley during the time of my
minority, (as the Executor of my
late Father) as of the monies
advanced to me or on my
Account since his decease
has been carefully examined
by me & I have acknowledged
the balance there been paid
as
J. I. House
Witness
Ann Kidman.

John Isaac House (1) and Ann Kidman had six children, three sons and three daughters.

John Isaac House (1) m Ann Kidman



Ann Elizabeth John Isaac (2) James Sarah Thomas

In 1840 he extended the Grove Farm at its south west corner, perhaps to provide extra accommodation for his large family.

John Isaac House (2) - Farmer and Brewer (1817 – 70)

The main interest of his eldest son, John Isaac (2) was brewing and in 1837 he bought at auction a new brewery on Harpenden High Street with living accommodation. It became known as the Peacock Brewery on account of its weather vane and topiary hedges and John Isaac (2), aged 33, was soon established as its resident owner. His brewing interests developed and the following year he had the Silver Cup public house built on Harpenden Common at the end of Harpenden Race Course, where traditionally the winner was awarded a silver cup.



In 1845, in partnership with his brother, Thomas, Isaac House (2) bought the freehold of the Richard the Third public house in Luton, Bedfordshire, which they leased to tenants until 1870.

Meanwhile, his parents, John Isaac (1) and Ann, the owners of the Grove Farm, lived there with their youngest children, Sarah and Thomas, until John Isaac (1) died in 1849. John Isaac (2) the eldest son, inherited the farm but continued his brewing business in Harpenden, while Thomas was recorded as the resident 'Head' at the farm. How much time John Isaac (2) spent at the Grove Farm and if its grain or malt were used at his brewery is unknown.

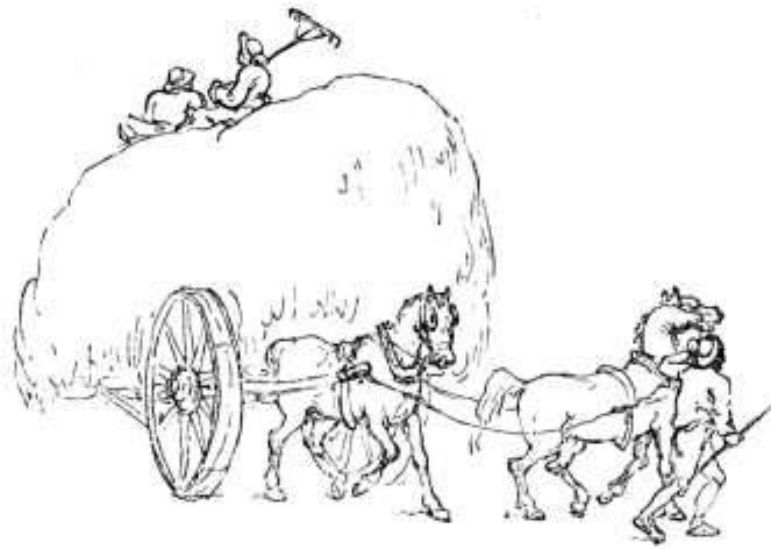
The coming of the railway to Wheathampstead and Harpenden in 1860 increased trading possibilities and over a period of thirty years John Isaac (2) remained at the Peacock Brewery with his sister Ann, and Elizabeth Rowed, her companion and housekeeper. In 1866, at the age of 48, he married Elizabeth Rowed, at St Nicholas Church in Harpenden. She was of similar age and her father was a land agent in Flamstead. They had only a brief married life because John Isaac (2), 'late of Harpenden', died in 1870 at the Grove Farm. The brewery was put up for sale and the sales notice described the property:

A valuable freehold and copyhold property, the Brewery, desirably situated in Harpenden, near the railway station, with malt and hop stores, tun rooms, underground cellars, stabling, residence, with spacious and well-stocked garden, and two closes of meadow land, containing nearly three acres, together with the fixed plant and machinery in excellent condition. The Brewery is abundantly supplied with water of an unusually pure quality from an artesian well on the premises; also Twelve Public and Beer Houses, situated within easy distances of the Brewery, at Harpenden, Wheathampstead, Redbourn, Gustard Wood, Burygreen, Hamwell, Timberlog-green, and Luton. Also the goodwill of the trade carried on for thirty years by the late Mr J. I. House and family.

John Isaac House (2) had developed a flourishing business, which came with 'goodwill' intangibles such as business initiatives, customer loyalty and brand recognition. It was bought by James Mardall for £16,000 (over a million pounds today).

Elizabeth House, now widowed, soon left Harpenden and moved into the House family property as 'foreman and farmer', employing fifteen men and

four boys to work the 300 acres at the Grove Farm. Thomas lived and worked with her.



During the summer following his death, the trustees of John Isaac (2) arranged for his freehold and copyhold properties in Wheathampstead to be sold by auction at the Swan Inn. 31 acres of the valuable arable and pasture land for sale were occupied by Charles Burgess, the publican at The Swan, and the auction included a blacksmith's shop occupied by John Messer, a house rented to William Clark, a London carrier, and cottages and a bakehouse utilised by John McCulloch, a baker and coal dealer. Three cottages opposite the National School were also included in the auction, alongside a property on Gustard Wood known as Brogdell Hall.

WHEATHAMPSTEAD, HERTS.
**IMPORTANT SALE OF VALUABLE FREE-
 HOLD & COPYHOLD PROPERTIES.**
MR. J. CUMBERLAND

Begs to announce that he has received instructions from the Trustees of the late J. I. House, Esq., to Sell by Auction, at the **Swar Inn Wheathampstead** Herts, about the middle of **AUGUST NEXT**, in numerous lots,

31 ACRES OF VALUABLE ARABLE and PASTURE LAND, in the occupation of Mr. Burgess; house and blacksmiths' shop, occupied by John Messer; dwelling house with extensive premises and ground, occupied by Mr. W. Clark; three cottages and gardens opposite the national schools; a dwelling house, bakehouse, and three cottages, occupied by Mr. McCulloch; a plot of meadow land at back of mill, held by the same tenant; dwelling house and grocer's shop, occupied by D. Winch; four genteel residences and gardens, occupied by Mr. Lockhart, Mr. Reynolds, and others; two cottages, occupied by George Roe and widow Lines; all situate in the village of Wheathamstead; also a cottage and garden, known as Brogdell Hall, on Gustard wood common.

Further particulars will shortly appear.
 Auction and Estate Agency Office,
 Market Hill, Luton, July 6th 1871.

Throughout her widowhood, Elizabeth House lived at the Grove Farm with Thomas, her brother-in-law. In later years they remained there together 'on their own means' until Thomas's death in 1906. Elizabeth House outlived all her husband's siblings and died at the Grove Farm in 1907 at the age of about 93. Her effects at Probate amounted to £9,265 (worth approximately £725,000 at today's values). The House family grave in St Helen's churchyard was full, so Elizabeth was given her own grave, plot number 55.06, now overgrown. By the time of the 1911 census the Grove Farm was in the hands of Charles Francis Sibley, a member of another wealthy farming family, who had previously owned Annables Farm in Harpenden.

The Wilkins Family



For decades, the House family had close connections with the Wilkins family of local brewers. James Wilkins senior lived in the village with his wife, Sarah, for about 30 years. For a time he was a tenant of property owned by Isaac House senior and of his arable land called Red Cow Field. He served as a churchwarden twice during the 1770s and the Militia Lists gives his occupation as a brewer from 1758 until 1786, when he died intestate at the age of 55. Before Isaac House's marriage to Mary Oakley and his untimely death in 1794, he had shared ownership of farmhouse properties and land in Porters End and in Blackmore End with James and John Wilkins, who continued their father's brewing business and on occasions supplied beer to the Grove Farm.

The Account Book mentions financial transactions and debts owed to all three Wilkins sons, while the presence of Thomas and Charlotte Wilkins as witnesses to Isaac's will illustrates the close relationship between the families.

Charlotte's marriage to James Oakley in 1800 produced two sons, Richard Oakley (3) born in 1801 and James Oakley (2) in 1803. Forty years later, at the

time of the 1841 census, Thomas Wilkins, aged 70, was living at Piper's Farm, the only member of the original Wilkins family in the area.

The Oakley inheritance

The Oakley family does not have memorials in St Helen's churchyard in Wheathampstead because its members moved away or owned land and properties elsewhere. Richard Oakley (2) was the tenant of the Grove Farm for two decades and, soon after his role as the guardian of John Isaac House ended in 1815, he moved to Harpenden, where he became involved in the local community. As a churchwarden at the original St Nicholas's Church, he was responsible for the first population count in 1831. He died in Harpenden in 1840 at the age of about 80. He had inherited land in three counties from his father and, as he had no children, he distributed his wealth and land among his nephews. His youngest brother, James Oakley, had died suddenly in 1814 at the age of 38, so he appointed his nephew, Richard Oakley (3) born in 1801, as his executor. He left his lands in Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and Middlesex to be shared between him and his younger brother, James Oakley (2), born in 1803. To James Oakley (2), he bequeathed his share of the estate at Porters End and Blackmore End, which he had purchased from Sarah Wilkins. To John Isaac House (1), who inherited the Grove Farm estate and to whom he had been guardian, he left two pieces of common land in Harpenden.

Richard's brother, William Oakley, had died in 1835 at Bamville Farm at the age of 69. He was laid to rest at the church of St Mary Magdalene, Kings Walden, Offley, where the Oakley family had all been baptised. William Oakley also left money and property to his nephews. He bequeathed £1,000 to John Isaac House (1) and passed his estate at Wandon End in Kings Walden to Richard Oakley (3), who in 1839 purchased Bamville Wood Farm and a property in Amwell, later known as the Elephant and Castle. In 1841 Richard Oakley (3) built Lawrence End at Peter's Green, Kimpton, now Grade II Listed, where, as a landed proprietor and magistrate, he lived until his death in 1871.



Lawrence End, Kimpton, home of Richard Oakley (3) 1841 -71

Today three Grade II Listed chest tombs can be seen in the churchyard at St Helen's, although all are now weather-worn and indecipherable. Fifteen metres south of the chancel is the tomb



In Memory of
ISAAC HOUSE
Late of Wheathampstead Grove
Who died April 5th 1794
Aged 37 years
Also MARY his Wife
(Daughter of RICHARD OAKLEY
of OFFLEY)
Who died April 26th 1794
Aged 27 years

Appropriately close by, ten metres south of the chancel, is the tomb of the Wilkins family, friends and business partners of the House family for many years. The third Grade II Listed chest tomb is where John Isaac House (1), his wife Ann and all their children are buried, members of the wealthy family from Wheathampstead who owned the Grove Farm for seven decades.

Dianne Payne 2024

Sources

HALS, 64HW32, Will of Isaac House of the Grove Farm, 1794.

Account Book of Richard Oakley, executor of Isaac House, with John Isaac House (1794 - 1830) - purchased by Mike Martin, a founder member of the Wheathampstead History Society.

Ancestry.com

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Census returns.

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Wills proved by the Prerogative Court of Canterbury:

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PROB 11/1887, Isaac House of the Grove Farm, 1782.

PROB 11/1171, William House of Bamville Wood Farm, 1788.

PROB 11/1629, William Kingston of Harpenden, 1820.

PROB 11/1650, Richard Oakley of Offley, 1822.

PROB 11/1848, William Oakley of Kings Walden, 1835.

PROB 11/1932, Richard Oakley of Harpenden, 1840.

PROB 11/1981, Mary Ann Smyth of Stevenage, 1843.

Probate Calendar, John Isaac House of the Grove Farm, 21 Jan 1870.

Probate Calendar, Thomas House of the Grove Farm, 17 June 1906.

Probate Calendar, Elizabeth House of the Grove Farm, 21 Jan 1908.

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My thanks to Mike Martin for the photographs of 1 Church Street and Isaac House's grave and to Ruth Jeavons for a copy of the Will of Isaac House, 1794.