

The Three Oaks

The Three Oaks, now Three Oaks Cottage, was located at the southern end of Down Green Lane near the junction with Ferrers Lane between Amwell and Nomansland. Today, it seems quite isolated but in 1851 there were 17 households with 72 residents living on Nomansland with another 14 households and 48 residents at Hamwell (now Amwell).



The earliest photograph we have of the Three Oaks, probably 1950s

The first definite record of the Three Oaks is in the 1851 census, where John Rainsden is described as an agricultural labourer and beershop keeper aged 42 living with his wife Martha (32), son John who, though only 11 years old, is described as an agricultural labourer, and sons William (4) and Isaac (2). The name of the house is not given but with the address of Nomansland it can be confidently assumed that it was the Three Oaks.

The same assumption can be made for the references in the 1854 Craven Directory, when the address is given as Hamwell, in the 1859 Kelly's Directory, and in the 1861 census when it is Nomansland again. In the directories, Rainsden is described as a beer retailer while the census return of 1861 describes him as a labourer and beershop keeper aged 52, living with Martha (42) and their five sons, William, Isaac, Richard, Edward and a newborn baby. His widowed sister Mary Bent (41) lives with the family and is described as a nurse (perhaps for the newborn son?), as does his 64-year-old unmarried brother William. John has left home and was working as a shepherd at Hatches Farm in Great Gaddesden at that time.

Like most beerhouse keepers, John Rainsden had another source of income. The Herts Ad dated 15 June 1861 reports his death in an accident, describing him as a beerhouse keeper and drayman for the Lattimore brewery.

FATAL ACCIDENT.—John Rainsden, beer-house keeper, and drayman to Mr. Lattimore, brewer, of Wheathampstead, was accidentally killed on Monday night, by jumping off the shaft of the dray to stop his horse, which had shied and become unmanageable, in consequence of being frightened at the passing of a horse on the road. In his attempt to stop the animal, the reins broke, and he fell down, when the wheel passed over his body, breaking some of the ribs on his left side. The poor fellow was most anxious to be taken home, but on arriving at St. Alban's the medical attendant, Dr. J. T. N. Lipscombe, would not allow him to go farther. He was then taken to the Duke of Marlborough publichouse, and died soon after he got there. His medical attendant was very attentive to the poor fellow, but his skill was unavailing. He has left a widow and family. An inquest was held on the following evening before G. Lowe, Esq., when a verdict of "Accidental Death" was returned.

By January 1862, the licence for the Three Oaks had been transferred to his widow Martha; she is listed as a beer retailer in directories dated 1863 and 1864.

The 1870, 1874 and 1878 directories list the licence holder as Sarah Rainsden. The 1871 census shows that she was born in Great Gaddesden and was living in Hamwell with her husband John (eldest son of the late John so she was Martha's daughter-in-law) and their three young children. Presumably, they had met in Great Gaddesden when John was working there as a shepherd. However, she is described as a straw plaiter and the Three Oaks is not named. The widow Martha Rainsden, now aged 56, is living in a cottage on Nomansland with her sons Isaac (21) and Edward (15) both of whom are agricultural labourers.

By the time of the 1881 census, Martha reappears as the licensee, described as "Beerhouse Keeper and sewer" and living with two unmarried sons Isaac (30) and Richard (27). She held the licence for only three more years; the Herts Ad dated 20 December 1884 reports that it was transferred to John Burton, about whom nothing more is known but who must have transferred the licence to Charles Ivory who is listed as licensee in the 1890 directory.

The 1891 census names the Three Oaks and shows Charles Ivory as a beer retailer and labourer aged 29 living with his wife, Rebecca (38) and their four children aged from 6 months to 6 years. They were all born in Wheathampstead. The household included William Bent, aged 14, who is listed as their son. The previous mention of this surname in the history of the Three Oaks was in the 1861 census when Mary Bent was there on census night and described as John Rainsden's widowed sister. Further research shows that young William Bent was Mary's grandson and in 1881 had been living with her and her daughter, his unmarried mother Rebecca Bent (28), at

Pipers, a short distance from Nomansland and Hamwell. It appears that Charles Ivory had married Rebecca, ten years his senior, and accepted William into his family. Charles Ivory was therefore Mary Bent (née Rainsden)'s son-in-law so the licence was held within the same family, with one short break, from at least 1851 to 1900.

A Protection Order for the licence from Charles Ivory to Robert Thomas Miles was taken out in 1898 (Herts Ad 23 April) but the valuation done for the St Albans Guardians in the following year was still in the name of Charles Ivory. Later that year, on 18 August, the Herts Ad reported that the licence had been transferred from Thomas Miles to Thomas Jones. Six months later, on 14 April 1900, the Herts Ad reported that a new licence had been granted to Jane Jones.

The licence was changing hands at bewildering speed at this time; the 1901 census records that it was held by William Holmes, aged 54, who came from Heybridge in Essex and was married to Sophie (50). Holmes was the first licensee not to have been born locally; it was becoming increasingly common for this to be the case for many of the beerhouses in Wheathampstead. He was one of seven children, his widowed father being shown in the 1851 census as a "cow keeper and stage carriage owner and in 1861 as a "mail contractor". In 1891, William Holmes was a clerk in Hackney, though he and his wife had a shop and three boarders – perhaps this gave them a taste for the licensed trade.

By 1905, the licensee was Alfred Franklin, who is shown in the 1901 census as having been born in Redbourn, living in Ayres End Lane just up the road, and working as a nightwatchman. He is one of the defendants in a case at the St Albans Divisional Sessions that was reported at length in the Herts Ad dated 14 October 1905 under the somewhat tongue-in-cheek headline "Publican's Supper Party".

The report recounts that three men and one woman, Mrs Weston, had been summoned at the Divisional Sessions for being on enclosed premises during prohibited hours on 27 September. Alfred Franklin, landlord of the Three Oaks, was summoned for selling intoxicating liquor during prohibited hours. Acting Police Sergeant Bowyer gave evidence that closing time on that date was 10.00 pm and that he and PC Lovell had "kept the house under observation" from 9.45 to 10.30. The landlord had called "Time" at five minutes past ten and one person left and went home. The landlord turned out the light in the taproom and locked the door. A minute or two afterwards, the two policemen had looked through the window of the parlour and saw the landlord and the four defendants. There were two jugs and five glasses on the table, some of which contained beer. Between twenty and twenty-five past ten, Sergeant Bowyer heard someone say "There is no more beer left" and a minute or two later the landlord placed a jug on the table. He "saw no money passed but heard the jink of it". He then entered the house and asked the landlord what time he had closed to which Franklin replied "Ten o'clock; these are my guests ... I asked them in to have a bit of supper".

This was Franklin's defence to the charge; as guests rather than customers, he and the four drinkers were not subject to the licensing hours. There followed a debate about whether it was reasonable to infer from Sergeant Bowyer's evidence that the four had paid for their drinks and were therefore customers. If they had, Franklin was guilty as charged; if not, he was innocent. In his evidence, Franklin stated that he had given his guests a bread-and-cheese supper and that Mrs Weston had drunk only ginger beer. After hearing evidence from Mrs Franklin and five other witnesses, the Bench

"...retired for some time and on their return the Chairman said the case against Mrs Weston would be dismissed. The other three men they convicted and they would be fined 5s. including costs. So far as the landlord was concerned, the case against him would be dismissed. They hoped however he would bear in mind that it was absolutely necessary for him in the future to be very particular as to what he did."

We may conclude that, while Franklin would have been pleased with this outcome, Sergeant Bowyer may have felt that his 45-minute vigil on a late September evening had not been worthwhile.

Alfred Franklin is recorded as licensee of the Three Oaks in directories dated 1906 and 1908 but the 1911 census lists the licensee as Charles Palmer (57) living with his wife Mary (56); they came from Wiltshire. Born in 1854, he is shown in the 1871 census as a farm labourer, then in successive censuses as a gamekeeper, a garden labourer, and a gamekeeper in Surrey before he turns up at the Three Oaks. The 1914 directory confirms that he and his wife were still there.

Postscript

The Three Oaks was sold by auction as part of the Hatfield Brewery estate in 1920.

The Three Oaks
(Leasehold Beer House).
Amwell Lane, Wheathampstead.

A Rough-Cast Building with slated roof, containing :

ON THE FIRST FLOOR :—Two Bed Rooms (one with fireplace), Two Attic Rooms.
ON THE GROUND FLOOR :—**Tap Room**, Sitting Room, Scullery and Cellar, all with tiled floors.
AT THE REAR :—Vegetable Garden, Coal Shed and Privy.

The Property is held on Lease, expiring 24th June, 1923, at the Annual Rent of £14, and is let to Mr. Palmer, on Annual Tenancy, subject to three months' notice (tied for all Malt Liquors), at the Annual Rent of **£6**, Landlord paying Rates and Taxes.

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The Three Oaks was open until the early 1980s, as shown in this photograph.

