



STEEPLE ASTON VILLAGE ARCHIVE TRUST

Trouble at the Wheatsheaf



As readers of the SAVA booklet *Business and Trade: 300 years of commerce in Steeple Aston* will know, the former shop building on the corner of Paines Hill and Southside (now a house) had a previous career as a pub, the Wheatsheaf Inn. It lasted from about 1852 until 1868, when the local magistrates refused to renew its licence. According to the *Oxford Chronicle* its troubles began on 1 February 1868, when a local policeman, PC Price, arrested three men, William Burgin, Charles Preston and Thomas Gilks, and charged them with being drunk and disorderly. As PC Price told the magistrates a week or so later “I heard a noise at the Wheatsheaf, and on going to see what was the matter saw Burgin and Gilks in a fighting attitude, and Preston aiding and abetting. There were 13 other persons in the room, some of whom were standing upon forms to give the fighting men space.

“I left the house”, Price continued, “and about a quarter of an hour afterwards the defendants came out. They were very drunk. Gilkes was taken home by two women, Preston went home shortly afterwards, but Burgin said he would not go home till he had had ‘a belly-full at Gilks’.” Each was fined £1 with 14s costs and allowed a week to pay, with the alternative of seven days prison. The landlord, William Ryman, received the same penalty for allowing drunkenness in his house, although he argued – “most foolishly” according to the newspaper report – that the police had no right to visit any public house without being sent for by the landlord. For his part, PC Price told the court that Mr Ryman had prevented his wife from violence: “had he not done so he (Price) should have been scratched to pieces by her. She threw the summons at his head and flew at him like a she-cat, and called him anything but a gentleman”. Ryman paid the fine on the spot but later asked for his money back, saying he would “rather go to limbo”. He was told the matter was settled.

At the annual licensing session the following September, the magistrates refused to renew the Wheatsheaf’s licence, despite a petition signed by nine villagers, named by the *Oxford Chronicle* as “Messrs. Burgess, Ellard, H Fenmore, J Fenmore, Heath, Hiorns, Parsons, Stockley and Weston”, who “markedly and emphatically differ in their opinion with the local bench of Justices”. They argued that it should at least be kept open as a beerhouse. The 1830 Beer Act effectively authorised two levels of public houses – inns, which had a full license to sell beer, wines and spirits, and beerhouses, which could sell beer and cider after a one-off payment of £2 2s. (New stricter licensing laws were introduced the following year, 1869).

The Wheatsheaf had started life about 1852 under John Louch, a baker from Lower Heyford. Louch had bought an earlier bakehouse on the site in 1847 from the creditors of Charles Harris, and rebuilt it in its present form. It got its “full” licence in 1855 – one of the justices, the Squire-cum-Parson of Deddington, the Rev William Cotton Risley wrote in his diary on 7 September: “...all the annual Licences were renewed – & Spirit Licence granted to a person named Louch keeping a beer house at Steeple Aston – there being only one other regular Public House there for a population amounting to nearly 1000 souls...”. Two years later, Risley recorded that he and his colleagues “refused ... the application for a spirit Licence in two cases of Beer Houses, kept by Messrs Burgin & Austin”. Although this time Steeple Aston is not specified (at least not as published by the Banbury Historical Society) the names seem familiar – the Austin family founded the Dun Cow, while Burgin started the White Lion. And hang on a minute – wasn’t William Burgin (or perhaps his son of the same name) involved in the punch-up at the Wheatsheaf?