

WHILTON LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

At our September 2009 meeting, entitled “Landlubbers and boatmen”, we looked at the history of the canal in Whilton, which is over 200 years old.

The boat people spent their whole lives working on the cut, with their own traditions, dialect and costume. Whilton Locks developed as a “service station” for these forerunners of long distance lorry drivers. The Spotted Cow pub (now Foursquare Farm) provided a meeting place, alcoholic refreshment, especially Guinness, and sold fresh produce.

In 1891 it was sold by auction at the Peacock Hotel, Daventry. The sale details described it as a : *“brick-built and slated old-established Public House, very eligibly situated near to the road from Daventry to Whilton, and adjoining the towing path of the Grand Junction Canal, having an extensive frontage thereto. The house contains taproom, bar, two sitting-rooms, pantry, kitchen with room over scullery, top and underground cellars, and four bedrooms.*



An old photo of “The Spotted Cow”

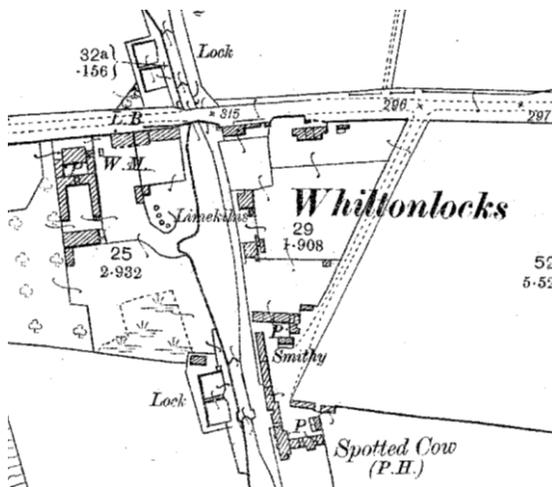
The outbuildings comprise stabling for ten horses, granary, hen and coal houses and piggeries, large yard with pump and well of good water, and extensive garden. Well planted with fruit trees, the whole occupying an area of one acre, or thereabouts. The property was for many years in the occupation of the late Mrs Elizabeth Elliott, and is now of Mr William Elliott, the proprietor. It is in close proximity to Whilton Locks, and is much used as a halting place for boats, there being no other licensed house within a considerable distance.”

Memories of the first half of the twentieth century included fishing competitions, clog dancing, and cricket matches with teas provided by the Spotted Cow. The blacksmith, Sam Tomlinson, shod the horses for the boat people and the hunters from Whilton Lodge, while his wife was a dressmaker. Bonnets and shirts could be ordered on one trip and collected on the next. It took a skilled needlewoman to work these intricate designs.

Because of their nomadic way of life, few boatpeople learned to read and write, and had to have their letters read by Mrs Wright at the Spotted Cow. We also heard how small boys (Will Adams in the years before the First World War and Jack Wright between the Wars) were fascinated by the blacksmith’s forge, which was also making bikes, and by the threshing tackle, engine box, elevators and a set of saws in the yard which is now the site of Saxon Lifts. Small boys nowadays would not have the freedom to roam in such places!

We noted the bewildering variety of activities undertaken by the Victorian entrepreneur, Thomas Henry Reynolds. Among others, these ranged from being a farmer, coal merchant, miller, grain merchant, lime merchant with lime kilns at the Locks, farm steward for John Craven at the Lodge, Rural District Councillor, four times Mayor of Daventry, Guardian for the Daventry Poor Law Union, Whilton School Manager, Churchwarden and Parish Councillor.

In his spare time he was colour sergeant of the Althorp Company of Volunteers. It was he who fired the first shots on the new range at Brington in 1897. Shooting was one of his leisure pursuits, and with two others, he rented the shooting and fishing rights of Daventry Canal Reservoir, although it was generally agreed that his favourite sport was angling. Perhaps this was one of the few opportunities he had to sit quietly! Going home would not have been quiet, as he and his wife, Tryphena, had nine children.



The Reynolds family lived in the farmhouse, which was demolished in order to build the Bannaventa pub, which has now become the carpet shop. The farmhouse, outbuildings and lime kilns can be seen on the left of this map of about 1880.

The house faced the road with an orchard in the area beside the railway embankment. If anyone has a photo of the front of this house, I would be very interested to see it. Needless to say, a photo of the energetic Mr Reynolds would be equally interesting.