

Whilton Local History Society

The Society met on Friday 9th March 2018 to hear “**The story of the Spotted Cow pub at Whilton Locks**”. Although it is no longer a pub, the building still stands, now known as Four Square Farm. It is currently being renovated and we were able to welcome the new owner to the meeting.

The first part of the Grand Junction Canal was opened on 25th June 1796. As the canal was being built, bricks had been made along the route, and there was a brick kiln erected at Whilton for this. The kiln would also have been used to bake bricks for the new houses beside the canal. Whilton Wharf began life as a brick yard.

By 1811 a range of new buildings was completed and occupied beside the canal. The first to be finished seems to have been the building to become the pub, described as: “a Dwelling House, Store-Room, Hay Barn, and Straw ditto, Stable for 20 Horses, and a Butcher's Shop, in the Occupation of Mr Hale Marriot.” The mention of thatch suggests it was probably completed before slates and tiles began to be transported here by canal boat, as the other houses had slates or tiles.

Richard Elliott, farmer and coal merchant, who lived in the new Wharf House, owned the building and let it to tenants. By 1834 it had a licence to sell beer and at that time began to be known as the Spotted Cow. The tenant then was Thomas Humphrey, son of the Whilton miller.

Life could be hard and dangerous in Victorian times. Members of the Elliott family ran the pub through most of this period. Crossing the lock gates and walking by the canal could be hazardous. Local children played by the water without supervision. In June 1860 an inquest was held at the Spotted Cow “*on the body of Charles Gardner aged five years, who was found drowned in the Canal the previous day. William Gardner, a brother of the deceased aged seven years, said he left him playing on the bank of the Canal, as he would not come home. He was afterwards missed, and the Canal immediately dragged, when the body was recovered by George Collier and a man named Hillyard from the bottom of Lock 12.*”

There was no lighting, and with some intake of alcohol, regular trips could lead to tragedy. Harry Cattell lived in the modern-named Wheelgate House. He was aged 33 and a saddler and witnesses said on a Thursday night in late November 1892 he was in his usual health and in very good spirits. He drank a little beer in the Spotted Cow with James Dunkley of Whilton but was quite sober. It was a very dark night.

On Friday morning he was found lying in the canal with about a foot of water over him. Once again an inquest was held at the Spotted Cow. William Elliott, the landlord of the Spotted Cow, confirmed that Harry Cattell lived about 100 yards from his house, on the canal side. The canal locks were just opposite his door - about seven yards off - but Harry would not have to cross them.

Arthur Cox, the surgeon from Long Buckby, said he had no doubt but that drowning was the cause of death. He had known Harry Cattell all his life. He was a strong and hearty man. A verdict of "Accidental death from drowning in the Grand Junction Canal" was returned by the jury.

Ten years later there was another inquest at the pub. In late September 1902 Edmund Chapman, a 73 year-old hurdle maker from New Duston had come to Whilton to arrange about doing some work for Mr Reynolds. Henry Jones, a boatman from Wolverhampton noticed Edmund coming out of the Spotted Cow at about 7 p.m. About a minute later he heard a splash. The boatman gave the alarm, and the hurdler was fetched out of the canal and still alive.

George Surrige from Whilton who had been in the pub, said that Chapman was quite sober when he left the Spotted Cow and had said he was going back to his lodgings. As Chapman was unable to speak, a man called Henry Telling, a brewer from Long Buckby Wharf, tried to revive him, using Sylvester's Method of artificial respiration for half an hour, but without success. Mr Cox, the surgeon, again declared the death was by accidental drowning. The various people present on that sad evening give us a picture of some of the customers in the Spotted Cow.

The pub in the 1930s.



The Spotted Cow provided refreshment for passing trade, but also catered for leisure activities for the whole community. On 27th September 1842 a *“most interesting game was played... between a select number of the single and married members of the Whilton Albert Cricket Club, when the latter came off victorious.”* This match was played on the flat field opposite the Spotted Cow between the canal and the new railway embankment (now the Marina). Both landlord John and his brother Richard Elliot were members of the Married team, while brother William was part of the Singles team. *“After the conclusion of the game the members retired to the Spotted Cow Inn, where a most excellent supper was prepared by the worthy host, Mr. John Elliott, and the evening spent with the greatest humour and conviviality”*.

The Spotted Cow continued with the tradition of providing refreshments for sporting activities at the Locks. In 1873 there is a record of supper being provided there after a cricket match. Another account describes a match on 12th August 1875 played on Mr Reynolds' field across the canal from the pub. Whilton Locks was playing Norton *“and resulted in an easy victory for the former club, with 84 runs to spare.”* No doubt the players crossed the lock gates to get their refreshment.

The Spotted Cow catered for a variety of sporting events into the first half of the 20th century, when the landlord William Francis Wright served food and drink for cricketers and fishing competitions between the wars. The Wright family also provided musical entertainment and encouraged clog dancing by the passing boat people. The pub finally closed in 1959 as the canal trade declined, the last landlords being William Thomas and Millicent Hawgood.

We hope that there will now be a future for this old building.