

THE EARLSDON COTTAGE INN

Warwick Street

THE STORY OF AN OLD COVENTRY PUB



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with an update by David Porter

earlsdonresearchgroup.org





THE EARLSDON COTTAGE INN

THE YEAR – 1852 – Queen Victoria on the Throne, Disraeli Chancellor of the Exchequer, Dickens in full flow with Bleak House and the old Duke of Wellington on his deathbed! What else? Oh, yes, the Earlsdon estate was established!

In the Spring of that year, on an area of just over 30 acres of pleasant open farmland to the south-west of the City of Coventry, appeared the outline of eight 30 ft. wide streets. These were later to be known as Moor and Earlsdon Streets, Earlsdon Terrace, Cromwell Street, (later Berkeley Road South) Providence, Arden, Clarendon and Warwick Streets. The land between was neatly staked out into 250 small building plots, varying between about 420 and 460 square yards each, which the developers, the Coventry Freehold Society, offered for sale on the open market.

The new estate stood in a prime position between the two Commons, Hearsall and Styvechale, in lovely countryside away from the overcrowded City with its grime, smoke and disease.

Nevertheless, sale of the plots was slow, even though purchase was made easy by the Society. On the 6th May 1852, a petition was presented to the Coventry Waterworks Committee for a supply of water to be laid on from the Spon End Artesian Wells. It contained 87 signatures of would-be buyers, only 20 of whom eventually took up residence on the estate. One of those who did was Joseph Aston Atkins, Watch Motioner and, although he didn't know it at the time, the future first landlord of the 'Cottage Inn'.

On the 10th May 1852, Joseph was at Browett's, the Coventry Solicitors, signing his name again, this time, however, it was on a conveyance. For the sum of £32.11s.7d., Plot No. 131, Warwick Street, was sold to him by the Trustees of the Freehold Land Society, J. Warden and H. Marston.



In common with most of the other purchasers, Joseph took out a mortgage for that amount with the Society, repayable at 1s.6d. per week.

He didn't build on his plot immediately, probably wanting to pay off at least some of his mortgage first. On earnings of about 26s.0d. per week he couldn't afford to be reckless, and he still had to maintain his present home in Spon Street. It wasn't until three years later, on the 5th February 1855, that he took out a further mortgage, this time for £150, towards the cost of building a house on his plot.

Joseph, like most of the early settlers on the new Earlsdon Estate, was a very highly skilled craftsman. In 1861, out of a total of 148 men between the ages of 15 and 60, nearly 100 were employed in the watch trade, most of them being Freemen of the City, having served their time in a long apprenticeship. These watchmakers had a certain social standing over and above that of the semi-skilled and poorly paid weavers in the City. (Ribbon weaving was the most important industry in Coventry at that time.) It was this knowledge, coupled with a justifiable pride in their craftsmanship, which gave rise to the tradition of Earlsdon folk on their select little estate, being slightly superior to their City neighbours.

The Earlsdon watchmaker, like most of his Chapelfields and City counterparts, worked in isolation in his own small workshop, or at most with three or four others in that of a neighbour, who, if he employed others would call himself a 'Master' watchmaker. The trade was divided into separate processes, each man contributing a part or parts, until the watch was complete and ready for the examiner to assess and adjust for correct running.

Joseph Atkins' task as a 'motioner' was to make the motion mechanism, consisting of two tiny, cogged wheels and pinions, which controlled the rotation of the watch hands. These he then fitted to the 'movement' or partly finished mechanism which had been made and assembled by other workers in the chain. When this was done, he fitted the whole into the prepared case, aligning it and seeing that it was secure, no easy task with each part having been hand crafted, and it required careful tailoring to get each movement to fit exactly. When completed, he passed his work on for the next process to be done, probably for the case to be engine turned or engraved. Of course, all these were pocket, not wrist watches.

Naturally, when he came to build his house, Joseph's prime concern would have been his workshop, and in common with the others in the area, this would have been on the first floor, above the kitchen and scullery area, and, most important, would have had large windows the length of the workshop to let in the maximum of light for the close work to be done. In other words, it would have been a 'top shop'.

The inside of the 'Cottage' of today has been altered over the years to such an extent that it is difficult to picture it as it was in those early years, but in the late 1850s it must have been a typical Earlsdon watchmaker's cottage. A few of these still exist, but for the most part the 'top shops' have been altered almost out of recognition. Amenities in the home were very basic, with one tap bringing water to the earthenware sink in the scullery and a privy in the little shed at the bottom of the garden, but comfortable enough by the standards of the time. When the 1861 census was taken, Joseph Atkins, Watch Motioner aged 37, born in Coventry, was living there with his wife Eliza, aged 35, Eliza's nephew, Fred Webb, aged 18, also a watch motioner, and a 15 year old apprentice, Richard Wimsett. Joseph and Eliza appear never to have had children of their own, or if they did they died in infancy.

At some time between 1861 and 1871, probably 1867 – no reliable records are available – a change took place. Joseph is no longer a watchmaker. Aged about 43 he is now a 'Licensed Victualler'. The cottage has become the 'Cottage Inn'.

Why he decided to take out a licence, we can only speculate. With so many of his fellow watchmakers continually calling on him, sociability apparently began to take precedence over business. No doubt transactions went better over a glass or two of good ale, and Joseph, being a sociable type, found it hard to receive any visitor without offering him the hospitality of the house – an expensive hobby! For whatever reason, he appears to have found the life of a publican more attractive than that of a watchmaker. It is highly unlikely that he brewed his own beer, more probably he got his supplies from one or other of the local Coventry wholesalers or brewers.

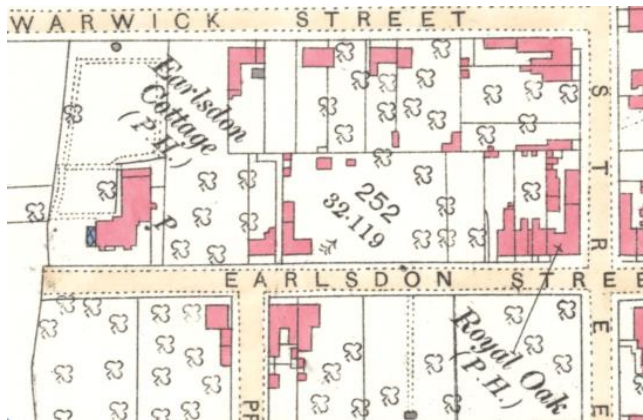
With the City Arms and the Royal Oak already in operation, it may seem strange that there would have been enough trade for yet another pub in Earlsdon. Even as late as 1894, 42 years

after it was first laid out, there were still only some 187 households on the estate. Discounting the women and children and the large contingent of teetotal Methodists, out of a population of at most some 600 souls, there could not have been a potential of more than about 50 customers for each pub! But – they did have the monopoly of Earlsdon social life. The only competition they had was the Methodist Church, no doubt a strong adversary with its thriving ‘Band of Hope’. The Cottage, City Arms and Royal Oak were the only public places where men could daily meet their friends and colleagues (women were only welcome to use the ‘outdoor’ service) to discuss the problems of the day, the fluctuations of local trade, national and world affairs just as they do today, over a sociable pint of good beer.

There was little competition either from the City’s attractions. They were there all right, but not easy to reach from isolated Earlsdon with no direct route apart from a rough dark pathway down to St. Thomas’s Church, or a long trek across the Commons – and no transport!

So, Joseph wasn't taking such a great risk with his pub, and the Cottage apparently thrived. But not so its landlord. On the 21st October 1871, only three or four years after becoming a publican and at the age of only 48, Joseph Atkins died of 'softening of the brain', the probable result of a stroke suffered three or four weeks previously, and Eliza was left a widow.

Meanwhile ... just around the corner in Arden Street, 40 year old George Harper was living with his wife Selina and their four sons. He was in the watch trade too, as a watch case springer, and would have been in close contact with Joseph Atkins in the course of their work, and probably would have been a frequent visitor to the Cottage, first in a business capacity and later, when it was a pub, for pleasure too. It doesn't require much imagination to conclude that he got to know Joseph's wife, Eliza too – very well! In fact, in September 1872, a year after Joseph's death and only a few months after the death of his own wife, widower George and widow Eliza were married. They settled in the Cottage with George's four sons, George took over the licence and reigned as landlord for the next 14 years until he died in 1886 aged 56. Eliza was a widow again.



By this time, the late 1880s, the local watch trade was in its final decline. Work was becoming scarce. The craftsmen tried hard to keep up appearances, giving rise to the criticism from City neighbours of 'Brown boots and no breakfast!' But it must have been a blow not only to their pockets, but to their pride as well, that their skills were no longer required.

George Harper's third son, 24 year old Alfred, the only one to follow their father's trade as Case Springer, must have been glad, therefore, when the opportunity offered of a new career. He took over the Cottage licence and held it for the next nine years, helped in the business by his young wife, Caroline. Then, outdoing both Joseph Atkins and his father for an early death, he died at the age of 33 in April 1895.

Widow Caroline didn't pine for long, however, and within a few months had married George Hatchett, although she retained control of the Inn. The property had been left jointly between the four Harper brothers after the death of their father, and on the 12th March 1896, Caroline Hatchett, formerly Harper, took sole control, buying out her three brothers-in-law for £575, £175 each. Things seem to have been going well for Caroline and the Cottage flourished and trade grew.

The Earlsdon estate by this time, the late 1890s, was expanding fast. It was now no longer the isolated little collection of 150 or so houses with a population of some five or six hundred souls. With the opening of Albany Road in 1898, after Earlsdon had been incorporated with the City of Coventry, it now had a direct route to the City; local shopping facilities grew, other new streets, roads and avenues were springing up all around, and empty plots were built on, until, by the time of the first World War, it was more or less as we see it today, almost swallowed up by the City. The highly skilled watchmakers, capable of such exquisite workmanship, had vanished, and the Earlsdon breadwinners were now employed in making machine tools, bicycles, motor bikes

and, increasingly, cars in one other of the many factories appearing throughout the City area such as Alfred Herbert's, Coventry Chains, Maudslay, Siddeley's or one of the small local workshops - the Rex or Small Tool and Gauges Ltd.

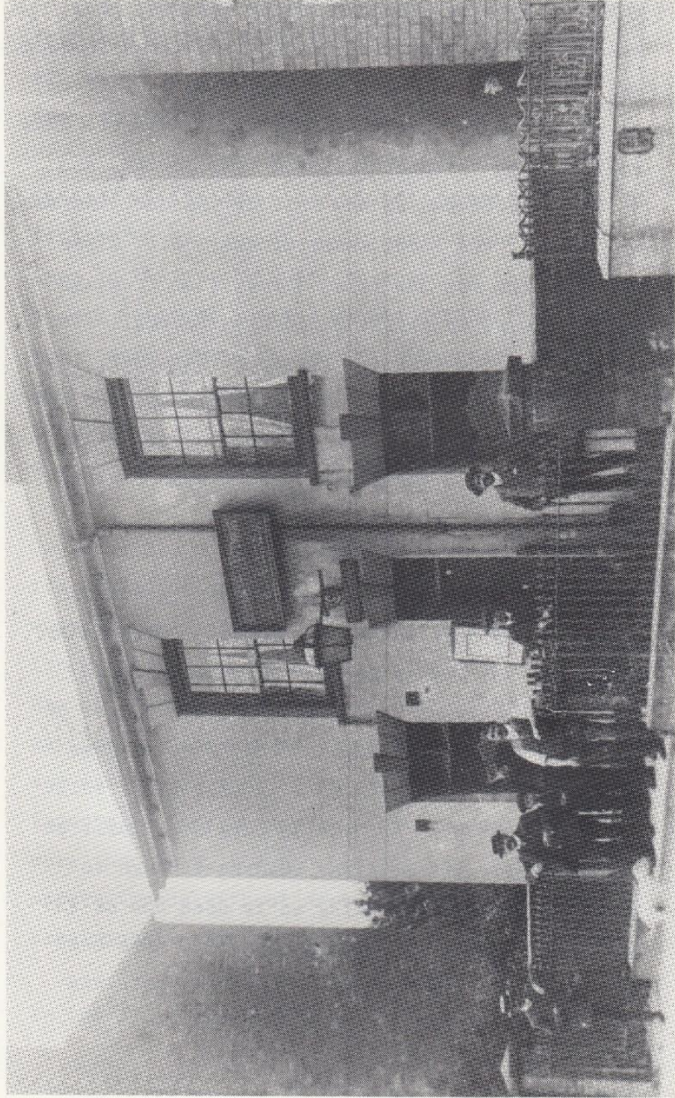
During all this time, to the left of the Cottage, Plot No. 132 had remained vacant. Since being bought for £25.12s.2d. by William Smith, Ribbon Weaver, also on the 10th May 1852, it been bought and sold several times over, one buyer being John Merifield, landlord of the City Arms, who held it for a few months in 1890. Somehow, it had never been built on. Finally, on the 19th October 1899, it was sold to Caroline Hatchett for £100 and the two properties merged.



Just over a year later, on the 15th January 1901, Caroline sold out to the Coventry Wine and Spirits Merchants, T. H. Bishop and J. H. Bates, the probable suppliers to the Inn.

She received £2,500 for the sale, a good return on her original investments of £100 paid for the next door plot and the £575 paid to her brothers-in-law, particularly bearing in mind the low rate of inflation at that time. The business now became a tenancy, with Caroline's husband as the first tenant licensee. He took charge for the next eight years until Joe Haycock came in 1908. Then came a succession of tenants, Tom Hands, in his shirt sleeves on the 1911 photograph, was here from about 1910 to 1918 when he left to go on to the Forrester's Arms, Raglan Street.

The small boy on the photo was his son, Norman, who was known as one half of the duo 'Norman and Betty', who were local entertainers. Bill Clews followed Tom for his first stint, then from 1923 to 1925, George Chaplin the old City football Team Captain was the tenant. It was in December 1924 during George's tenancy that T.H. Bishop, who had already bought out his partner Bates, sold the Cottage to James Eadie Ltd., the Burton-on-Trent Brewers, for £13,500.



THE COTTAGE 1911

With the ensuing refurbishments, the inside of Joseph Atkins' house was gutted and changed beyond recognition and all traces of his 'top shop' disappeared. The front windows were altered, the Smoke Room extension was built on the vacant plot and the Concert Room built on at the back. The alleyway leading through to Earlsdon Street, following as it does one of the old field boundaries, would appear to have been a right of access from the time the estate was first laid out in 1852.

In 1925 George Skidmore took over from Chaplin, followed in 1929 by Bill Clews who this time stayed for 28 years. Bill had served in the army, fighting in the Boer War and apparently his military training had some influence on his running of the Inn. His strict rules included stipulations that there should be no dogs on the premises and no women in the Bar! He was followed in 1957 by Reg and Beattie Nott who stayed until Wal and Sheila Haydon became licensees in 1967, the year that the Eadie Brewery was taken over by Bass Worthington, later Mitchells and Butlers Bass.

Over the years the Cottage Inn had maintained its tradition of being comfortable and homely, where pub-goers could enjoy a quiet – or not so quiet – lunchtime or evening drink in the Smoke Room or Bar with friends, discussing the affairs of the day just as the old watchmakers had a hundred and more years before. With society's changing needs, however, a pub needed to offer more than this, and the Cottage moved to accommodate with modern trends but without destroying its considerable traditional charm.

To this end, in the early 60s the Notts started Friday and Saturday evening concerts of live music, a custom which Wal and Sheila continued and very successfully developed. Patrons came from far and wide to enjoy the entertainment which included Traditional and New Orleans Jazz as well as open mic Free and Easy sessions, offering seven nights of music a week in the Concert Room together with a few renditions of Delilah thrown in for good measure. It was an arrangement catering for all age groups from teenagers to pensioners and all tastes from the traditional to the trendy, with patrons from all walks of life, journalists, computer technicians, factory, shop and office workers, teachers,

broadcasters, even the odd M.P., all rubbing shoulders happily together and constituting a band of 'regulars'.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS :

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COMING UP TO DATE

Since Mary Montes first wrote this history of the Earlsdon Cottage in 1986, the pub has experienced a significant number of developments. In 1988, the Haydons gave up the Cottage, which continued to operate as a managed pub with a succession of managers in place, starting with John Runcorn. However, during the first two decades of the new century, the pub underwent a series of changes of ownership as well as a number of refurbishments, relaunches and name changes, among them The Watchmakers and the Kiki Lounge & Loft.

Most recently, on 26th September 2019 the Cottage was 'brought back to life' in the words of the new owner Wells & Co, serving the public once again with Jack Parsons as general manager. In its new guise, in addition to resuming its role as a community-style pub, the Cottage offers the Wells & Co mix known as Pizza, Pots and Pints, which as the term suggests involves a renewed emphasis on serving food at the pub. To borrow a line from Mary herself, with the beer kept to the usual high standard, but with the innovation of good pub food, it looks as if the essential Cottage spirit will be preserved for years to come.

Update by David Porter, October 2022



The Cottage, Earlsdon, September 2019

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