

Plant Pints - 19th and 20th century Plants running Walsall pubs

by Linda Mason, 19 Aug 2019

Every now and then whilst researching the main branches of the family tree, a diversion presents itself and you then make a detour down a branch of non-direct ancestors. You can spend weeks, even months following a twig away from that main branch but the stories unearthed can be fascinating and no less relevant just because the connection is not direct, as in one of my 4 x Great Uncle's who become one of the original Oregon pioneers!

This little story is neither as romantic or exciting as pioneering in Oregon but as it is to do with ordinary folk running Walsall Pubs, I thought I would share it with you.

My 3 x Great Uncle, George Plant was born in Lichfield in 1826. In 1849 he married Elizabeth Miles in Birmingham and shortly afterwards the newly married couple followed his brother, my 3 x Great Grandfather Thomas Plant, to Walsall where George and and Thomas attempted Walsall wide domination in Green Grocery. Alas their attempts to carve up greens in Walsall failed fairly early on as George diversified into licensed victualling firstly becoming the licensee at the Durham Ox at 24 Park Street between 1864 and 1870 and then the landlord of the Freemasons Arms on Park Street. Clearly each of the brothers found their niche, as years later the successful Greens man, Thomas, took over as licensee at the Orange Tree on Wolverhampton Street but didn't last very long. Next stop for him was Aldridge and farming!

It was whilst I was searching for further information about The Freemasons Arms that I came upon a wealth of discussion on the ever reliable blog belonging to my good friend Brownhills Bob. [THIS](#) discussion links nicely into the history of a hostelry in Walsall Wood, the Royal Exchange. It is also where this delightful photograph of the Freemasons Arms was found.



Courtesy of Ann Cross

Thanks to the wonderful [Hitchmough's Black Country Pubs](#) and to Bob's readers, I've been able to put together part of the story of this lost Walsall pub with my family connections added as free extras. Call it the free peanuts on the bar.

At some point Park Street was renumbered as the Freemasons appears in census under two different numbers, being 58 and later 24. From what I have been able to ascertain it stood towards the Town End Bank part of Park Street, which during the 1800s must have been a busy thoroughfare as it was during the latter half of that century that the business and busier part of Walsall gradually gravitated towards the Park Street area and of course Park Street was part of the newly 1920s designated A34.

The Freemasons was originally called The Square and Compasses and a list of licensees can be traced back to 1834.

My 3x Great Uncle George was the third licensee, taking over in 1871 when the previous licensee had been declared bankrupt. Clearly the business required building up and this must have been a successful enterprise as the pub remained in the Plant family for over three decades.

It seems that George had become successful because by the time he moved to The Freemasons Arms, his two sons Thomas age 21 and William age 16, had obtained useful employment as an engineer and a clerk respectively.

The Freemasons Arms was a substantial premises. In 1925 it was described as having stabling for four horses. The public bar was 19'7" x 16' x 9'4" with a lobby, smoke room, snug, billiards room and five bedrooms.

Since originally publishing this I have been contacted by a 4th cousin 2 x removed (yes, distant!) with more information about George and his sons and who also provided the beautiful photograph below of a token that George would have issued from the Freemasons.



Courtesy of Chris Plant

Poor George died in 1877 being only 50 years old. His widow Elizabeth took over the license and the running of the establishment and it remained so until she died in 1891. William her youngest son, remained resident with her throughout and appears to have taken a different route in his career by becoming a saddler. (Finally, I have discovered a saddler in the family!) He also remained single and one can imagine that as Elizabeth got older, having William there with her was of great help and support.

Elizabeth died in 1894. The license was transferred to her son William at the licensing session held on 1 September 1894 at the Guildhall and in the following February William became a member of the Walsall and District Licensed Victuallers' Society. Due remembrance was given to Elizabeth, who although not allowed a vote in local and general elections because of being female, was allowed to run a pub under licence and be a valued member of the LV Society, when the following August the Walsall and District Licensed Victuallers' and Beer Retailer' Friendly and Protection Society, noted in their minutes her sad passing and the fact that they had been represented at her funeral by Mr George Maund, who was the licensee of The Vaults on the High Street. It was not the only Plant funeral Mr Maund attended that twelve month period as we shall see later.

It seems that William, having left saddlery for running a pub had ideas for improving the Freemasons and diversifying because by 1901 he describes himself on the census of that year as a 'hotel proprietor'. This maybe but as yet, I have not turned up any evidence that this was a successful venture. My thoughts are that it was more B&B than Hilton, with a Walsall spin. It may have something to do with that during 1900 William also took on the license of The Three Cups at 17 Park Street, which apparently did have rooms to let. The license was transferred to him in November 1900 after the owners of The Cups decided they wanted done with the previous licensee Joseph Russell, owing to his infamy in providing what was then illegal bookmaking services from the premises. Apparently The Cups had a telephone! Never a good sign so it seems.

William looks to have been attempting pub domination of Park Street!

In June 1909 William retired at just 55 years of age, the license being assigned to Thomas Watson. This is confirmed on the 1911 census where William is described as a retired licensed victualled. He had clearly made a decent amount of money over the years but there is a little mystery concerning him. Sometime between 1891 and 1901, probably the summer of 1896, William got married however thus far, I have not been able to trace his wife nor any potential children. More work to do on this diversion!

On 2 March 1933 The Freemasons Arms closed its doors for the last time and the license was transferred to the Red House in Station Street, just around the corner. Presumably the pub became another shop or perhaps was demolished.

Let's backtrack for a moment though. William had an elder brother called Thomas who back in 1871 was described as an engineer. What happened to him?

Thomas had been busy in the 1870s, getting married, having children and becoming a shop keeper and beer seller at 1 and 2 Butts Street Walsall. I now know that at number 1 Butts Street stood the Black Horse and Thomas had the beer licence assigned to him in 1872. In 1886, Thomas too became a full licensed victualler at The Stand Tavern in Newport Street. The Plants were now attempting pub domination in Walsall and not for the last time! This is backed up by the fact that in November 1885, just before taking on The Stand, Thomas purchased the Elephant & Castle on Wolverhampton Street for the princely sum of £700. He held the licence there until 1890.

The Stand is now better known as The Starting Gate and I was amazed to discover a previous albeit tenuous connection with this pub, as way back in my youth, I worked there for a short time at evenings and weekends. It was also the pub where I first came across the phenomena known as Space Invaders and Asteroids!



Elephant&Castle 1968 Courtesy of A Click in Time

Back in 1887 Thomas Plant was having problems with a different type of phenomenon, that of false pretences when 14 year old Charlotte Sadler obtained two shillings by way of a forged note asking for a loan. He wasn't the only one as it appears she to have used the same trick across town. To be fair to Charlotte she had been kicked out of her home and disowned by her family, so I guess she was just trying to avoid the workhouse in the only way she knew.

In 1887 Thomas also had the misfortune to lose his dog. Daisy was a white bull terrier (think Bull's Eye in Oliver twist!) who disappeared in November. Adverts were placed in the local paper and it would seem she was returned perhaps due to the reward being offered. I'm not sure if Daisy was a well loved family pet and guard dog or whether there were other nefarious reasons for advertising her loss taking into account her breed, she lived in a pub and Walsall had rather a bad reputation back then for dog fighting. Whatever the reason more adverts appeared six months later when she had gone missing once again.

By 1891 Thomas and his wife had four children and were able to afford to employ a domestic servant but as we know, life was a precariously balanced existence back then and when poor Thomas died in January 1895 at just 45 years old, the Walsall and District Licensed Victuallers' and Beer Retailers' Friendly and Protection Society were obliged to cover the cost of his funeral expenses and make a donation of £5 10 shillings to the family. Mr Maund attended the funeral of a second Plant family member in less than twelve months.



The Stand Courtesy of A Click in Time

The family you will be pleased to know did come through this and Thomas' son another George continued in the family trade by becoming the licensee of The Crown in Long Acre Street between 1920 and 1936.

So ends my historical connections with Walsall Pubs, well at least for the time being. You never know what diversions lie ahead however, it does amuse me no end that I have discovered three Plants that ran pubs and for while two of them must have dominated victualling in Walsall. Knowing how the Plants over the years have enjoyed an odd tippie or two, there's a great big smile on my face!



Freemasons Arms courtesy of A Click in Time