

Trading Stories, Working Lives

Graham Barker delves into the newspaper archives to meet his ancestor John George Collis, a Victorian licenced victualler.



How I'd love to step back to the late 1870s, nip into the Hinckley Road Brewery – seen here on the right – and request “A pint of your finest ale, Uncle George”. There amongst the tap-room hubbub, John George Collis – always known as George – would regale me with family stories, and maybe a song or two.

I can but dream. Uncle George has long gone, of course. And the Hinckley Road Brewery has also disappeared. But I'm still keen to get a sense of his working life as a licensed victualler in Victorian Leicester. In search of stories, I head for the British Newspaper Archive (www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk) – a searchable resource, spanning virtually a century's worth of Leicestershire's day-to-day history. Who knows what might come to light?

Before dipping in, I remind myself of George's background. Census returns, trade directories and family records give me the basic outline. Born in 1843 at Navigation Street, George was the eldest surviving son of engineer-cum-publican George Collis and his wife Elizabeth. Like his father, he starts out in engineering – he's variously described as a whitesmith, machinist, and engineer. In 1862 he marries Emmeline Jennings and together they settle in Sanvy Gate and start a family.

The pub trade is familiar territory to young George – after all, he'd spent much of his childhood living at the Foundry Arms and Dixie Arms – and in successive census returns I track him to the North Bridge Inn (1871), Hinckley Road Brewery (1881) and Magazine Hotel (1891). He appears to prosper, retiring to a comfortable house at 79 London Road.

So far, so good. That gives me the bare facts. Now I'm keen to add some colour.

From 1869, all pub licences needed to be approved by local magistrates. Even so, I'm surprised to find George appearing in the 1870 newspapers in a rapid succession of magistrates' hearings: in July he starts at the Sir Thomas White in Russell Street, by October he's moved to the Red Lion on Highcross Street, before finally doing a licence swap in November for the North Bridge Inn. Such an energetic hop, skip and jump – appropriately, finishing at Frog Island – just wouldn't register in the trade directories.

TRANSFERS.—On the application of Messrs. H. and F. Tarratt, the licence of the Red Lion, Highcross-street, was transferred from Geo. Collis to Jno. Cooper. On the application of Messrs. Marris and son, the licence of the North Bridge Inn, Frog Island, was transferred from Jno. Cooper to Geo. Collis.

Moving to the North Bridge Inn is a wise move; workers pass on their way home from town, and it stands right beside a lock-gate on the Leicester Navigation.



Sales particulars in the newspaper reveal it's a substantial establishment:

"The Premises comprise entrance passage, smoke-room, vaults, sitting-room, large tap-room, kitchen with range, club-room, four bedrooms, and cellar; also BREWHOUSE, brick and tiled WORKSHOP; and LARGE YARD with gateway. There is a good supply of soft and hard water."

The water supply is an important consideration; most Leicester pubs brewed their own beer until the late 19th century, as shown by the brewhouses on builders' plans and mentioned in sales particulars. As Chris Pyrah explains in 'Inns and Taverns of Leicester' there were few tied houses at the time, "In this, the town was years behind developments in London where brewing companies had long been supplying the vast majority of pubs with their ale."

It isn't all plain sailing. In December 1875 the Chronicle reports a case of alleged drunkenness: "Inspector Landgate... visited the defendant's house, the North Bridge Inn, Frog Island, at quarter-past ten at night. There were nine or ten men in the tap-room, two of whom were drunk." Column inches are devoted to the whys and wherefores of the case.

By today's standards it sounds rather tame – serving two men who'd already had a couple of pints at the nearby Foresters Arms. Mr Fowler, defending, says "The defendant had occupied this house for five years, and there had been no previous conviction against him. The house was owned by a gentleman of respectable position, who had surveillance over it, and who would be the last person in the world to allow any improper conduct to go on in the house." Thankfully, the case is dismissed.

Soon, it's time for another move – to the Hinckley Road Brewery in July 1877. The 1870s is a time of rapid change; the 1869 Wine and Beerhouse Act is the first in a long series of acts and measures designed to restrict the drink trade and reduce the numbers of pubs – partly to clean-up the rougher beer shops, and partly to appease the temperance lobby. In Leicester however, pub openings continue apace – beer consumption peaks nationally in 1876 at an astonishing 34.4 gallons per head per year – and by 1880 the town is crammed with 485 pubs.

George has an eye for prominent sites; the brewery stands at the junction of Hinckley Road and Great Holme Street, a spectacle for those approaching down Narborough Road. From the sales listing, you can almost walk room to room.

ALL that Valuable Old Licensed Inn, known as "The Hinckley-road Brewery," situate Hinckley-road and Great Holme-street, Leicester, now and for some years past occupied by Mr. J. R. Johnson, the owner.

The PROPERTY comprises entrance hall, bar, parlour, tap room, kitchen, pantry, five bed-rooms, capital bre w-house, spirit stores, barrel-shed, hop room, five excellent, cellar-malt room, large loft, stabling for eight horses-carriage house, cart shed, good piggeries, yard and gate way entrance, hard and soft water pumps, and other appurtenances thereto.

Also all that exceedingly valuable Plot of BUILDING LAND at the back thereof, now used as a garden.

The advert signs off with a final flourish: “NB – A grand chance for an enterprising Businessman”. George is certainly enterprising, but even now he continues to work as an engineer as well. It was common for publicans to combine running a pub with other work. During the daytime, Emmeline his wife is ‘Waiter in house’ (1871 census) and eldest daughter Cary is ‘in charge of the tap in her father’s house’ (1878 cutting) and works as ‘assistant in the business’ (1881 census). One or two servants add to the team. And no doubt George’s engineering skills come in handy for fixing the beer engine used to draw beer up from the cellar.

Drinks are served in three rooms – the bar, the tap-room and the parlour. Chris Pyrah again: “The bar would be just a bare wood or tile-floored room, originally without seating. Tap-rooms were still fairly basic but they would have contained iron tables, wooden benches and stools, simple screening and possibly a fireplace. The parlour was the ‘best room’ of the house, originally to be used only by the landlord and his invited guests; it would have been very homely, perhaps with carpets, upholstered seats, moreen or chintz curtains, paper and pictures on the walls, possibly an electric bell to summon service, and certainly a good fire or iron stove.”

By 1888, he has sold up. But after a brief sojourn he’s back in the trade, as licensee at the Narborough Hotel and the Magazine Hotel, in parallel. Without a news search I’d have missed his Narborough connection, but instead I find him hosting the Oddfellows’ anniversary repast, standing witness in a Narborough railway accident, and joining the Granite Lodge of Freemasons, who meet at his hotel on the second Thursday of the month.

As this evocative photo from the 1920s suggests, the Narborough Hotel is a 17th century coaching inn, with close-studding and coved eaves. Let’s hope the Oddfellows and Freemasons weren’t troubled by the ghostly figure reputed to walk through its walls.



The exact relationship between ‘proprietor’ George Collis and ‘owner’ Everard’s Brewery needs further research, but what’s clear is the prominent role Everard’s played on Leicester’s pub scene. Starting in 1849, William

Everard claimed “No effort shall be found wanting in the production and supply of genuine ale of first-rate quality”. As demand rose, production was split between Leicester and Burton upon Trent, and their estate of tied pubs expanded; by 1901, Everard’s had acquired freeholds and leases of over 70 pubs.

Meanwhile, back in Leicester, the Collis family lives at the Magazine Hotel – once a distinctive landmark on Newarke Street. Pub opulence reaches its apogee in the 1890s. “Larger and richer Victorian pubs could be grand affairs indeed with their customers comfortably drinking amidst seeming acres of carved and polished dark wood, cut and etched frosted glass, gleaming brass beer engines, mirrors, snob screens and other ornamentation.” writes Chris Pyrah.



The premises incorporate a large concert room and club room, but George’s predecessor, Joseph Noble, has struggled – a licence for dancing, singing and music for Noble’s Varieties has been repeatedly refused. At a magistrates’ hearing in 1887 Noble presents a petition “signed by 376 licensed victuallers, and 2,420 other persons in favour of the application” and to satisfy the fire regulations “pointed to the absence from the hall of a gallery or scenery. There was not even a decent excuse for a fire; in fact he might defy the Fire Brigade to create a fire there (Laughter).”

Soon after, George Collis steps in to take on the Magazine Hotel. The 1891 census reveals a team effort: George as hotel-keeper, Emmeline as assistant hotel-keeper, and daughter Cary as barmaid. Barmen and potboys – originally

employed to keep pewter drinking mugs clean – collect glasses and act as general servants.

Around this time, George develops an appetite for singing. At a concert in 1885 “Mr J G Collis was heard to great advantage in Reyloff’s new song ‘Steering for Home’ and the enjoyment derived from it was such that the audience demanded a further exhibition of his powers.” Now I can imagine him performing ‘The Jovial Beggar’, ‘Good Night’ and other party pieces around the pub piano. On a more serious note, he takes a keen interest in town affairs; in 1892 he’s elected to represent St Martin’s Ward on the Board of Guardians and is “closely concerned in the management of the Conservative Club.”

In the late 1890s, speculation in public house ownership became popular. After eight or nine years George and Emmeline sell up for a tidy sum; in 1901, we find them retired and ‘living on own means’ at 79 London Road. From his obituary in 1912 we learn of his forthright nature: “Mr Collis was a deeply respected member of the Board [of Guardians] (hear, hear). He was a very outspoken man, he always said right out what he meant... He never bore malice (hear, hear). He told them his views to their face, and that was always the end of it.”

The newspaper archive has turned out to be a treasure trove; licence transfers, sales particulars, drunken incidents, and concert performances all help build a picture of George Collis. Best of all, newspapers offer a source of unexpected stories, a way for family historians to add colour to their ancestors.

What trace remains of his pubs today? The Hinckley Road Brewery and Magazine Hotel have been demolished, and the North Bridge Inn is boarded up. As local historian Jack Simmons wrote: “It is sad to think that, what with the city’s modern redevelopment and the lavish expenditure of the brewers, only a few fragments of these Victorian pubs have survived. For they played an intimate and vital part in this increasingly prosperous town.”

Thankfully, the Narborough Hotel still stands. I shall be sure to visit and toast the memory of George Collis, with words from Hilaire Belloc:

“When you have lost your inns
Then drown your sorry selves,
For you will have lost the last of England.”

[With thanks to Chris Pyrah for the North Bridge Inn and Magazine Hotel photos.]

Auntie Mabel: inspiring family histories

To read Graham’s previous ‘Trading Stories, Working Lives’ articles – and for ideas on writing your own family history – visit www.auntiemabel.org or follow him on Twitter @auntiemabel.org