

The Oakley Arms - Brewwood

The History



The History of Brewwood

The remains of a small Roman Villa have been found within the Brewwood parish, and clearly there was a small population in the Brewwood area in Roman Times.

In 1834 William White described Brewwood as “a small but well-built market town, with several good streets and a spacious market-place.” The historic centre consisted of the market place, with Bargate, Newport and Stafford Streets, and Sandy Lane meeting it. Dean Street, south-east of the church, was another important old street. These still contain many houses of considerable age, mostly Georgian, but with many also from the 16th and 17th centuries.

Between 1831 and 1901, the population of Brewwood fell from almost 3800 to just over 2500 – a reduction of almost a third.

Oakley House

The history of the house, a mile east of Brewwood village, is poorly recorded. It is unclear when it was built, but no building is shown on the First Edition 1” Ordnance Survey map of 1834, and the architectural evidence points towards a mid-Victorian date on a virgin site. The name Oakley seems to have been attached to the house when it was built, for it is untraced earlier.

The first known occupier of Oakley House was John Augustus Shiel Bouverie who was living there in 1868. His life was remarkable, but the story starts with his grandfather, Edward Bouverie, who inherited from his father the ancient Delapré Abbey near Northampton, an estate of over 3,000 acres. In 1788 Edward married Catherine, only daughter and heiress of William Castle, by whom he had four sons. The second and fourth sons died without children, but in 1826 the third son, Francis-Kenelm Bouverie, an officer in the army, married Elizabeth Sheil of Castle Dawson, in County Derry where his regiment was quartered. Elizabeth’s father and Francis-Kenelm’s father had known each other: both had been Gentlemen of the Privy Chamber in 1822. Francis-Kenelm was then 29, his bride nearly ten years younger.

The newly-wed Bouverie, promoted to a captaincy, sold his commission and settled with his wife at Castle Dawson. Elizabeth, said to have possessed ‘great personal attractions’, was also rumoured to have a fortune of £4,000.

In 1835 Elizabeth gave birth to a boy under circumstances which for a time ‘clouded the domestic happiness’ of his parents. Elizabeth’s charms and accomplishments, the ‘objects of general admiration’, had attracted the notice of a gentleman named Bell, who induced her to accompany him on a tour to England. This was seen as a scandal at the time. On her return her husband, however, received her back and did everything in his power to keep secret her escapade. It was in 1836, after the English journey, that the boy, John Augustus Shiel Bouverie, was born, but however much his father may have deplored his wife’s affair, he never raised the issue of the child’s parentage, always treating both wife and child with the greatest affection.

In 1837, Captain Bouverie died. The night before his death, the strong feeling of love for his son, then only fourteen months old, made him instruct the nurse to take care of the child: “Be good to my little son; take care of him, for he will be heir of my father’s estate.” After the Captain’s death, all communication with the family at Delapré ceased. The annuity of £100 a year was not paid to his widow and, her circumstances greatly reduced, she remarried into a lowly social position. Young Bouverie eventually joined the Irish constabulary so as not to be a burden on his mother, who appears not to have told him of his claim to the Delapré fortune.

He spent many years in ignorance of his background. Eventually he learnt something which induced him to approach the solicitors to the Delapré estate for information. They refused to enlighten him, and implied that his legitimacy was questionable. His brothers and sisters opposed his application, producing evidence of his mother’s tryst with Bell in 1835. But a change in the law said that whenever a child was born at a time when the husband and wife lived together, and the husband recognised the child as his, the law did not allow the child’s legitimacy to be questioned. In 1862 a verdict was given for the claimant, who was thus legally acknowledged as the successor to the Delapré estates.



What happened thereafter is uncertain, but within six years of the court case John Augustus Shiel Bouverie was living at Oakley House. He subsequently moved to Delapré Abbey in 1871, where his monogram can be seen on the ceiling of the saloon. He died in 1894, having risen from police constable in Ireland to J.P. and High Sheriff of Northampton, responsible for a substantial landed estate.

The next known occupier of Oakley House was Thomas Harris, who was born in Brewwood in 1859 (perhaps the son of George Harris, recorded as a cattle dealer and butcher of Shop Lane in 1851, and as a farmer of Dean Street in 1892), and attended Brewwood Grammar School before studying medicine in London. He rose to president of both the Manchester Medical and Pathological Societies. But it is said that nearly every weekend he would return to Oakley House to tend his garden and greenhouses, rear his game, attend to the netting of the pond, which he kept stocked with trout, and in the season enjoyed shooting. It was following a day's shooting on the hottest September on record that he died in 1906 at the early age of 47.

The Oakley Country Club

Little is known of the history of Oakley House in the 20th century, or when it became a country club, but we do know that by 1984, Oakley Country Club was owned by Frank Gibbs.



Frank Gibbs had two twin daughters, Vicky and Jacky, who were remarkable in that they both married members of the Deep Purple rock band.

Vicky married Jon Lord the Deep Purple founder keyboard player in Oxfordshire, while Jacky married Ian Paice the Deep Purple founder drummer at Brewwood C of E church and had their wedding reception at the Oakley. Both were good friends with George and Olivia Harrison and there have been rumours that the Beatle visited Brewwood, so perhaps a Beatle might have even been entertained at the Oakley?

Oakley Country Club was clearly no traditional, conservative establishment. In an advertisement promoting Valentines night in 2009, it billed the evening as "Re-session –House Music All Night Long", featuring no less than five DJs in two rooms.

Towards the end of its era, however, the club was advertising Thursdays as Singles/Divorced nights, Fridays as 'Over 25's', and monthly soul and Motown nights.

The Fire

When we acquired the Oakley in 2015, it had been unoccupied for a while, and became the target of vandalism. Just before 8pm on Monday 15th June, Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service received a call reporting an incident at the former Oakley Country Club.

Firefighters wore six breathing apparatus and used two reel jets and one covering jet to tackle the blaze. Subsequently investigations revealed that the cause of the fire was deliberate, and that there were three seats of fire within the building.

No-one was injured, and the building was saved.

Simon Gibbs, a neighbour, has been kind enough to send us these recollections from when his family owned and ran the Oakley House Country Club:

"The property was owned and run by my family for over 50 years as The Oakley House Country Club. My Aunt and Uncle - Cynthia and Frank Gibbs ran it as a membership only Country Club from the 1950s until the 1980s and it was previously owned by Cynthia's parents Ted and Hilda Purchase in the 1940s.

Membership by 'invitation only' was strictly controlled by my mother Betty Gibbs. Membership was through an annual fee and a dress code of shirt, tie and jacket for the Gents was rigidly enforced.

I have many happy memories of The Oakley as a child, fishing in the lake and family Christmases with my 3 cousins, Wendy, Jacky and Vicky - the latter 2 being twins who later became models and married into one of the world's biggest rock groups in the 70s.

All the family weddings were held there and Thursday Jazz nights attracted acts from all over the country, as well as the legendary Friday night BBQs with unlimited wine - the first of which closed most of the village shops on the following Saturday due to the shopkeepers being incapacitated.

The premises were licensed until 2am and in the early years operated partly as a casino. The Midlands based companies including all the banks, football teams and building firms competed to book in first for their annual dinner dances.

Numerous celebrities were regulars there, including local band Slade, jazz pianist Tommy Burton and friends from their rock connections - Joe Brown and Jeff Lynne.

The earlier history is less clear, but I understand it was solely a family home prior to the 1930s and that Sir Marmaduke Hussey may have lived there at some stage in his life."