

SAWBRIDGEWORTH HISTORY.

AN EARLY ENTREPRENEUR. JOHN PRIOR 1748 - 1829 AND HIS FAMILY.

A brief note on the spelling of names.

Throughout this article, the surname spelling 'Prior' has been used. However, in the 18th and 19th centuries, with the majority of the populace being illiterate, the spelling of names was somewhat arbitrary. As a consequence of this, in the earliest documents referenced, the surname is given as 'Pryor' or 'Pryer'. Cross referencing though confirms that all three spellings are indeed one and the same person/family.

John Prior was born in the year 1748. Although records are uncertain, it is probable that he was born at Much Hadham, the son of John and Susanna Prior. He had a younger brother, William, who was also born at Much Hadham late in the year 1754 (baptized 1st January 1755). John had a good education. Extant documents show that he was literate with a good command of the English language.

John's father was reasonably well to do. He owned property, not only in Much Hadham, but also in Sawbridgeworth. Near to what was Walnut Tree Farm, close to the junction of what is now Cambridge Road and Station Road, John's father purchased from a Thomas Bishop several cottages and premises on the Cambridge Road. The cottages were rented to tenants, however, the other premises, judging from son John's later will, were used in connection with his bricklaying business.

John Prior seemingly first came to Sawbridgeworth because of his father's bricklaying business. This, John inherited from his father, and he was to continue with the bricklaying business until his death in 1829. However, his great love was the King of Prussia public house.

John Prior is first recorded as being at the King of Prussia in the year 1778 when John is only thirty years old. At this time, the pub is owned by the Mumford family, so John must have been working with them when his other business allowed. But, in 1796, John finally purchased the King of Prussia from the then owner John Mumford. He then went on to extend the premises by the addition of further properties. From William Whithead/Whitbread (the surname spelling is handwritten and unclear), John purchased some adjoining cottages and added them to the pub. From John Doyley in c1827, John also purchased a 'Barn, Ground and Premises' lying North and North-West of the pub, and included them as well. It was reported that at this time John was brewing his beer in a barn at the rear of the pub. This was presumably therefore the barn noted, which must have been rented before the c1827 acquisition.

Furthermore, from a Philip Edridge of High Holborn, John Prior purchased a 'Barn, Granary, Stable, Outhouses, Yard and Premises' opposite the pub on the 'East side of the Turnpike Road'. This would be the present site of 'Budgens' supermarket.

John Prior was very proud of his pub business. In his will he was foremost a 'Victualler', then a 'Bricklayer', and finally a 'Farmer'. Even on his tombstone he is noted as being '50 years at the King of Prussia'!



Figure 1. The 'King of Prussia' from a photograph dated 1929.

In order to help with the victualling, John enlisted the help of his younger brother William. They did not stop with just the King of Prussia though. In the Hertford Quarter sessions for 1806, John and William are jointly named for both the King of Prussia and the Half Moon at High Wych. Further, John is named individually at the Bell and Feathers in The Square, and the Grey Hound (sic) at Spellbrook.

In the Hertford Quarter Sessions for 1824, William is named only in relation to the Half Moon, but John is also at the Old Bell in Cock Street (now Bell Street).

In 1826, the Hertford Quarter Sessions gives William as a victualler at 3 pubs. The Half Moon, the King of Prussia and the Greyhound.

Sadly, the Hertford Quarter Sessions for 1828 (QS/Var/2221), recorded the 'recent demise' of William, and on the 28th March 1828 transferred the license of the Half Moon at High Wych from the late William to a Thomas Dalton.

As has already been noted, John Prior was also referred to as a 'Farmer'. This does not mean that he was personally involved in the running of a farm (he could not have had the time), but it does mean that he owned the lease for (Great) Penny's Farm at Allen's Green.

The question one must ask is 'where did the money come from to invest in all this'? Obviously, the money could not all have come from just the initial Bricklaying business. The answer lies in the other properties then owned by John Prior.

John Prior seems to have taken a lesson from the cottages he inherited from his father near Walnut Tree Farm. Here he was making money from renting. Accordingly, John proceeded to purchase

many other properties for the purposes of renting. In the late 18th century, he acquired numerous properties from both Richard Alger and John Parsons (d. 1806, owner and licensee of the Old Bell) in Sawbridgeworth itself, plus 5 cottages in Clay Lane (now West Road). One of these cottages (the thatched one) is still existing. Furthermore, John obtains yet more property further afield. He is known to have owned and rented out houses in Stepney, now in East London, but then in Middlesex.

It would therefore seem that as well as 'Victualler, Bricklayer and Farmer', we must also add 'Property Speculator' to John's business interests. It is because of that, that he can truly be termed an 'Entrepreneur'.

Whilst he was at the King of Prussia, John Prior was an active member of the Sawbridgeworth Friendly Society, who used to meet at his pub. Therefore, he must have made quite a few personal friends. One of his closest friends was William Sharp (the elder), 1765-1853. This William was always known as 'the elder' (even in official documents) in order to differentiate between him and his son of the same name. William owned a few properties in Sawbridgeworth, the most well-known being the public house in Knight Street now called the George the Fourth, (it was apparently unnamed before 1840). Clearly there was a professional kinship between them. Another close friend was Samuel Patmore Groves 1796-1870. Samuel was a Wheelwright whose house and work premises were situated in London Road adjacent to where the petrol station now exists, almost opposite to the King of Prussia pub. Samuel's middle name of Patmore is interesting, as it implies a relationship to the Patmores of Bishop's Stortford, who owned both the Cock and the Anchor public houses there.



Figure 2. Former home of Samuel Patmore Groves (photographed in 2017).

Upon the death of John Prior, 11th February 1829, it is both William Sharp and Samuel Groves who are named as trustees and executors of his will. In this, they perform an excellent job, as the will is proven shortly after John's demise, on the 5th March 1829.



Figure 3. Tombstone of John and Richard Prior in Great St. Mary's churchyard.



Figure 4. Tombstone of John's wife Elizabeth, and daughter Elizabeth in Great St. Mary's churchyard.

Although difficult to read due to its language and handwriting, the will of John Prior (written 1828) is very interesting. The executors, William and Samuel are both given the properties which existed in Stepney for their troubles.

John's eldest children, Elizabeth and Richard are given the King of Prussia and its associated buildings including those opposite. They also get (Great) Penny's Farm with land and buildings, and all the 'waggons and ploughs'.

Son William is given the cottages and premises at North End by Walnut Tree Farm, together with the bricklaying business and 'the ladders'. Of interest, William has a son, another William (born 1808) who in 1871 is noted as a 'Bricklayer' employing 9 men and 5 boys. Obviously continuing the family business. This son William died in 1877. By now though, he was not only the owner of the properties at North End, but also another 20 'properties and messuages with rental income' in Sawbridgeworth, (another entrepreneur obviously).

Edward and Mary are both given an annuity of £50 per annum.

The three children of his deceased son John, are each given an annuity of £20 per annum.

The youngest son Charles is given the five cottages in Clay Lane with some 'waste ground'. In 1839 he was still living in one of them, but the other 4 had been sold.

Astoundingly, his second wife Hannah is given nothing by John. However, she is willed an annuity of £20 to be paid in arrears quarterly from Elizabeth and Richard. Furthermore, she is willed another annuity of £50 per annum to be paid by her son Charles. However, these payments were to continue only for as long as she remained his widow and was unmarried.

With the demise of John Prior and the finalisation of his will, one would expect that this would be the end of the story. However, there is a twist in the tale.

In 1829 there is a formal transfer of ownership to Richard and Elizabeth for the King of Prussia. The two siblings seem to almost immediately run into problems though. These problems seem to have been of a monetary nature, possibly a cash flow problem, or possibly because of inexperience, or possibly both. The result was that later on the 30th December 1829 they took out a loan using the King of Prussia as collateral, (a mortgage), with William Sharp and Samuel Groves for £200 at a rate of interest of £5 per annum for the duration of the loan. Importantly, this loan was repayable to William Sharp, Samuel Groves *or their heirs*, (my italics).

The problems for the siblings continued to get worse. On the 24th April 1830, Richard died. Sometime shortly after this, either Elizabeth's brother Edward or his son James took over (Great) Penny's Farm, (James has tenure in 1839). The circumstantial evidence is that Elizabeth was struggling. Accordingly, in 1834, Elizabeth sold the King of Prussia to Thomas Bird (the brother-in-law of John Mumford who sold the pub to John Prior) and it subsequently became a Hawkes' Brewery public house. The mortgage however, was not settled and was still outstanding!

William Sharp and Samuel Groves do seem to have genuinely been good friends to John Prior. They no doubt felt that they were adequately looked after in John's will. Thus, at the time of Elizabeth's death in 1859, nothing had been paid off from the outstanding mortgage, and it had not been followed up by them.

William Sharp, his wife Catherine, and their daughter Mary were all deceased at the time of Elizabeth Prior's death, and William Sharp (the younger) passed on in 1879 leaving no heirs.



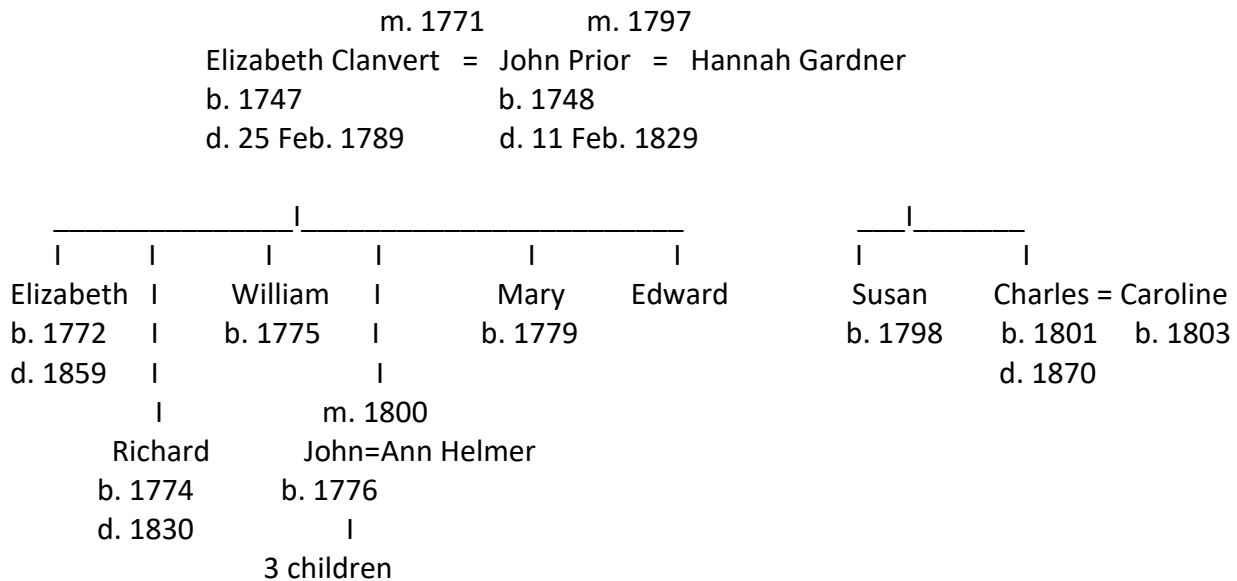
Figure 5. Tombstones of the Sharp family in Great St. Mary's churchyard.

It was almost the same with the Groves family. Samuel and his wife Sarah had both passed on by 1870 without worrying about the outstanding loan. However, they DID have a surviving heir. Their daughter Fanny Groves had married a local builder, Thomas Waller Burton, who had premises in Cock Street (before relocating into Samuel Groves' now vacant London Road premises), and was the father of Thomas Burton, later to become the owner of Sawbridgeworth Mill.

Thomas Waller Burton had no ties to John Prior or his family, and upon finding out about the outstanding mortgage, he began to take action to recover the money on behalf of his wife. It must be remembered that with the 50 years accumulated interest, the amount now owed was close to £450, a not inconsiderable sum in those days. Obviously, Elizabeth Prior was deceased with no direct heirs. However, the property of the King of Prussia clearly still existed. Consequently, on the 31st July 1878, a warrant was issued to 'enter satisfaction on the conditional surrender of the King of Prussia'. Basically, Thomas Waller Burton is claiming that through his wife, he owned the pub and wanted bailiffs to reclaim that property! The final outcome of this warrant does not appear in surviving legal records. Nonetheless, Thomas definitely did not get the pub. As already stated, by now it was a Hawkes' Brewery pub, and the licensee in 1878 was named as James Glynn. Both these parties remained unchanged. (Of interest, James Glynn married a Sarah Prior in 1839. Presumably she was a relative of John Prior). It is likely though, that Thomas Waller Burton did get some satisfaction in the form of a payment, presumably at least the amount of the original mortgage, from the brewery.

It is sad that the great love of John Prior, the King of Prussia, was reduced to an argument over money, but then again, John Prior as an 'entrepreneur', may well have expected nothing less!

Figure 6. John Prior and his immediate family including dates where known.



Neither Elizabeth, nor Richard were married.

William and Mary were both married, but the dates and their spouse's full names are not confirmed. (William's wife was named Amy or Amey. Mary married someone with the surname 'Scruby').

John (b. 1776) is deceased by 1828. In census records for 1841, a Richard and a John Prior are both named locally as 'Bricklayers'. Possibly they are sons of John (b. 1776).

I found no dates for Edward. He may be older than Mary. Edward has a son James who in 1839 is noted as being the owner of Great Penny's Farm. Edward was alive in 1837 (he was noted at a wedding), but presumably he was deceased by 1839.

Apart from her birth year, nothing is known of Susan. She is not mentioned in the will of her father John, so it must be assumed that by 1828 she is deceased with no children.

In the churchyard of Great St. Mary's, near to John's grave, there is a very worn tombstone which may just possibly read 'Hannah Prior 1836'. However, it is so worn that almost anything could be interpreted.

Afterword.

It is possibly a coincidence, but in the Hertford Quarter Sessions for 1824 and 1826, a Robert Prior was named as a Licensee for three public houses. It is unclear whether this Robert was related in any way to John or William, however, he is mentioned with reference to the 'Bell' and the 'Swan', both at Widford, and at the 'Three Rabbits' at Hunsdon. He was born in 1782 at Much Hadham and in 1841 was living in Nether Street at Widford. He passed away in 1849.

In the 19th century, the surname 'Prior' was extremely common in the vicinity of Sawbridgeworth. The associated forenames 'John' and 'William' being especially so. I have attempted without success to produce some form of genealogy in order to place everyone into their respective positions in time, however, the records for this time are sparse and the task has proven to be too great. Therefore, if there is descendant of the Prior family who has an associated family tree, Sawbridgeworth Local History Society would be interested to hear from you.

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