

## Pettits of Wallingford & Benson by Dave Rushton and Jane Farquharson

Most readers will be familiar with the well-known store called Pettit's in Wallingford, but how many will know of the strong Pettit connection with Benson?

The store was founded in 1856 by two brothers – William & Thomas Pettit. Both born in Newmarket (then in Suffolk), the sons of Thomas Pettit (a saddle maker), in 1851 they were both serving apprenticeships in the same drapers shop in Newmarket. However, within a very few years they had opened their store in Wallingford and William had married his first wife Sophia Arthur of Benson. Sophia was the daughter of Benjamin Arthur, a coachmaker in Benson. Married in 1858, the Census of 1861 shows William & Sophia, plus two young children living on the shop premises in Fish St, Wallingford – along with brother Thomas and 10 shop assistants! (Fish Street was later renamed St Mary's Street.)



William Pettit



Sophia Arthur



Amelia Jacques



Margaret Maynard

William & Sophia had seven children within nine years, but sadly Sophia died after giving birth to the youngest in 1868. By 1871 William – a widower - had moved to Benson, living in Oxford Rd with six children (the seventh was away at boarding school), a housekeeper and a domestic servant. Brother Thomas had married, but remained in Wallingford with wife Caroline and their seven children.

At some time in the 1870's William moved his family into a new large house in Littleworth, a house known as Thames Villa – but now known as “The Red House” - where they lived for over twenty years.

William re-married in 1873 to Amelia Sutherland Jacques, and together they had an additional four children. Tragically, Amelia also died after giving birth to the youngest in 1877, so poor William had lost two wives in just nine years. William did marry again in 1891, his third wife being a Benson widow – Margaret Alice Maynard (nee Preston).

By 1911 William and family had moved, with the Census showing William (now aged 78) & Margaret at “Roselea” in Benson High St, living with his daughter Esther and Margaret's daughter Gertrude Maynard. Gertrude was recorded as being a school mistress, presumably in one of the Benson schools.

William Pettit died in August 1915 at the age of 82, and Margaret in 1928 at 84 years old.

William had been part of Benson for 40 years or more and there were interesting links with other Benson families. William's elder sister - Frances Pettit - married Sophia's elder brother - Henry Arthur. Even stranger, William's daughter (from his first wife) Caroline married a Baptist minister, William Maynard, who was the son of Margaret from her first marriage; they married ten weeks before their parents were married in March 1891. Thus William Maynard's mother and stepmother were one and the same person, whilst Caroline's stepmother was her mother in law!

As for the family business in Wallingford, it flourished and continued under the same management until 1896, when the two sons of the founders – Henry Pettit and William Holland Pettit joined their fathers. Pettit's of Wallingford continued as a family business until 1987 when it was bought by another local family – the Rowses.