

The Cooks of Benson.

The story begins in the mid-18th Century with William and Mary Cook who lived in Benson. William's trade is unknown but he and Mary had eight children baptised at Benson Church.

The prosperity of Benson village in the latter part of the 1700s and early 1800s had much to do with its geographic position as a convenient stopping place on the London to Oxford coaching route. This resulted in a larger number of hostleries than would be expected for the size of the village, and many of Benson's inhabitants were involved in servicing the coaching traffic, including the trades of wheelwrights, blacksmiths and coachbuilders.

William Cook died in 1803 and our line of descent follows his son John who was born in 1769. John Cook married Martha Coates. The Coates were a Benson Family.

John Cook of The High Street

John Cook seems to have had a number of occupations, and to some extent they seem to reflect some of the opportunities presented by the burgeoning village of Benson. The last part of the 18th century saw the establishment of a number of inns in the town to cater for the coaching trade. By this time journeys between London and Oxford could be accomplished in a day and Benson provided a suitable place en route for refreshment of both people and horses. In 1829 eight coaches a day travelled in each direction through the village. The Castle, the Crown, the White Hart and the Red Lion were all inns established at this time. By 1832 there were reported to be fourteen beer shops and public houses in Benson for a resident population of only 1200. On top of the hostelry trade Benson became a centre for carriage building and repairs.



Part of the tithe map of 1841 for Bensington

John and Martha lived on the High Street in Benson in one of the cottages marked with an arrow. In the early part of the 19th century John was earning his living as a fishmonger and looking at the position of his house, one might speculate that he had access to, and used the Fish Pond which is located only a very short distance directly south of his abode¹.

By the middle of the 1800s John was described as a blacksmith and his son described him posthumously as having been a wheelwright. In the garden of John and Martha's cottage is a building which could have housed a wheelwright or smith workshop.



Benson High Street at about the end of the 19th Century. John Cook's cottage on far right.

John and Martha had four sons, three of them growing to maturity.

Martha died in Benson in 1848, her cause of death is given as “debility from disease of the hip joint”. John died in Benson in 1849, cause of death “old age”, he was 88 years old.

Their eldest son Thomas (b. 1805) took over the wheelwright and blacksmith business. Thomas never married.

The second son William (b. 1813) became the landlord of ‘The Horseshoe Inn’ in Benson (see below)

The third son James (b. 1815) first became a general dealer and then in the late 1850's he became the landlord of ‘The Horse and Harrow’ in Roke Marsh. (see page 7).

¹ Identified on the 1876 OS Map as a fish pond.

William Cook of The Horse Shoes

William Cook (born 1813) married Mary Wallis in 1837. It was probably at about this time that William became the landlord of the Horse Shoes. William and Mary had only one child, James, who was born in 1838.

The Horse Shoes probably started life as just a 'beer shop'. It would have catered for the surrounding agricultural population as well as the local Benson inhabitants and probably the coachmen and grooms:

The Government of the 1820s and 1830s were keen to promote beer drinking instead of spirits, especially gin. Widespread drunkenness through gin consumption was believed to be detrimental to the working class and this had led to the rise of the Temperance Society which campaigned for closure of the 'gin shops'. The former drink of the working man: beer, was taxed which meant the cost of beer could be prohibitive to the working classes despite that fact that beer was safer to drink than water. Water at this time was untreated and dangerous to drink.

The Beerhouse Act (1 Will. IV, c.64 1830) was introduced by the Duke of Wellington's Tory government. It abolished the beer tax, extended the opening hours of licensed public houses, taverns and alehouses to 18 hours a day. Previously it was 15 hours. These were subject to the control of the local justices and a license was required.

The Act also introduced the Beerhouse and Beershops. Premises which could sell only beer. The opening hours could be from 4am to 10pm. For a small fee of 2 guineas payable to the local excise officer, anyone could brew and sell beer.... Supervision of these establishments by local justices was severely curtailed which led to many local complaints by magistrates and local gentry keen to control the working classes in their area.

Within a few months over 24,000 beerhouse excise licenses were granted. The beerhouses provided not only beer, but food, games and some even lodging. They were also known by the name 'small beer' or 'Tom and Jerry' shops. In villages and towns many shopkeepers opened their own beershop and sold beer alongside their shop wares. Beer would be brewed on the premises or purchased from brewers.

The Wine and Beer House Act of 1869 brought about a change in the law which brought licensing of the beerhouses back under the control of the local justices. Many then closed, or were purchased by breweries and changed to fully licensed public houses.ⁱ

The 1841 census and Tithe Apportionment of 1841 lists William and Mary at the Horse Shoes Public House and Gardens in Benson.

There is mention of William Cook in various criminal and newspaper records:

On the 19 December 1846 William was convicted of 'keeping his house open for the sale of beer outside licensing hours'ⁱⁱ.

The occupation of Public House landlord has its hazards and on 5 January 1856 James Green, a labourer of Benson was convicted of an assault on Williamⁱⁱⁱ

In 1861 William was mentioned in the papers. The Oxford Journal of 28 December 1861 gives the following:

James Green, of Benson, road contractor, was charged by Wm. Cooke, innkeeper, of Benson with assaulting him, on 14th of December; fined 7s, costs 13s, which Green paid. A summons was taken out by Green against William Cooke and Mary Cooke, for an assault, on the same date but the charge was dismissed.



The Three Horseshoes in May 2019

The nature of the village of Benson began to change. The prospering village began to suffer towards the end of the 1840s. The railways were being built and the Great Western Railway opened a station some five and a half miles away on the Reading Road south of Wallingford.

The 1851 census for Benson shows a village in decline. Some of the houses are empty and the occupations of the villagers has changed showing only 3 near neighbours of the Cooks involved in the coaching trade. By 1854 there were now only three Oxford to London coaches each week.

The book 'Rambles in the Neighbourhood of Wallingford' was written by William Allnatt in 1873. He recounts his visit to Benson at this time:

'Mr Allnatt then proceeds to Benson which proves a great disappointment to him – having 'fallen from thine high estate since I first remembered thee!' How Mr Allnatt mourns the loss of the halcyon days of horse drawn vehicles, overtaken by the 'iron roads' – the railways, as he discloses that only 32 years earlier some fifty stage-coaches and innumerable carriages daily rattled through Benson to the financial benefit of the villagers. By 1873 it was - 'purely a country village of the quietest description, after having formerly been one of the greatest thoroughfares in the country.'

James Cook (b. 1838) of Littleworth

James Cook the son of William and Mary followed in his father's footsteps as Publican. James married Mary Hutton in about 1860. James and Mary joined William and Mary at The Horseshoes in Benson where their first 3 children were born.

The Oxford Journal of the 18 March 1861 gives the following:

Accidents – James Cook, aged 23 of Benson, with fracture of right leg, run over by a cart, March 12.

James presumably had a fiery character as James's problems were compounded by an incident in the July of that year.

From the Oxford Chronical and Reading Gazette 27 July 1861.

James Cook, of Benson, innkeeper, appeared by summons upon the complaint of Mr Edward Glanville, of Benson, builder and innkeeper, charged with wilfully and maliciously throwing down and breaking a large stone which was being worked for repair of Benson church, in a shed contiguous, on Sunday afternoon, the 7th instant. Mr. Egan, barrister, appeared for the defendant, and severely cross-examined the several witnesses, but without materially shaking their evidence. Ordered to pay damage 10s 0d, and cost £1 2s 6d, or in default to be committed for 14 days. Allowed a fortnight to pay.

Either James hadn't the money or felt he shouldn't be liable and The Oxford Chronical and Reading Gazette for the 31st of July gave the following:

James Cook, of Benson, innkeeper, was committed for 14 days, in default of paying 10s damage, and costs £1 2s 6d, for damaging a stone, the property of Mr Edward Glanville, on the 7th of July at Benson. The case was heard on the 20th of July, and time allowed to pay.

James was involved in further trouble with James Green a few years later:

Oxford Journal 9 May 1864

Charge of Robbery

James Cook, of Benson, remanded from last week, appeared on the charge of stealing a sovereign, belonging to James Green. The following additional evidence was given:- William Gilbert, a machinist, living at Shippon, said he was at Lewis's on the 10th of April, and heard the altercation between the prisoner and the prosecutor about shewing a receipt for some timber. Saw prosecutor put a sovereign on the table, and it was knocked down under a chair; prosecutor picked it up and put it on the table again; it was again knocked down, and the prisoner put his foot on it, but did not know what he did with it; he thought they were joking; did not see the prosecutor leave the door, did not know who knocked the sovereign down.

By Mr Dodd – There were several people in the room.

For the defence the following witnesses were called:-

John Kingham, of Warborough, straw dealer, said he was present when the bet took place, and saw Green put a sovereign on the table, and it fell off; Cook picked it up and put it on the table; did not notice whether it fell off again; Green accused witness of taking it, and offered to fight him; did not know what became of the sovereign.

Thomas Saywell, of the Sweet Home Beer-house, Roke, said he heard the prosecutor accuse the last witness of taking the sovereign; he considered the prosecutor had been drinking, and thought it was a bit of fun between them all.

John Bridcot, of Benson, labourer, said he heard Kingham challenged with having the sovereign by the prosecutor, and not Cook; Green called for beer, which was refused, because of the bother; Cook emptied his pickets, and all he had was 1s 6 ½ d.

George Bridcot, of Sunningwell, machinist, heard Kingham challenged with having the sovereign. Kingham said, 'Perhaps Cook has it'. Cook offered to be searched, and pulled out his pockets.

Committed for trial, bail being accepted.

It would seem that James and Mary (nee Hutton) continued living with James's parents, William and Mary (nee Willis), in Benson until about 1866 as their first three children Mary Emily, William James, and Harry were born there in 1861, 1863 and 1865 (census returns). However Mary Emily was christened in Ewelme on 18 October 1861 and at this time her father's occupation is given as Flyman of Benson.

This junior Cook family then removed to the Oakley area of Chinnor where James and Mary ran a beer house. Here in Oakley their next three children, Frank, Kate and Fred were born in 1867, 1870 and 1872. Their eldest son William James may have remained living in Benson with his grandparents (the 1871 census shows William James at the Three Horseshoes with his grandparents William and Mary).

James and Mary returned from Oakley to live back in Benson sometime after 1872 but before 1881. The Oxford Journal of the 6 December 1879 had an advertisement for the sale of Cook property in Benson:

... and a Pair of well-built Cottages, with Out-houses and good gardens, together with a Detached Cottage and Garden adjoining, in the Parish of Benson, abutting on the Oxford and Henley Road, and in the respective occupations of Alfred Whiteman, William Spyer and James Cook, at rents amounting to £15 12s.

The census of 1881 shows James, Mary and their three youngest children living in Littleworth. This might have been on the property held by the Cook family in 1841 (The Tithe Apportionment). The 1881 census also shows James's occupation is now described as a general dealer. In 1883 he is described as a Haulier.

The 1881 census shows James and Mary's eldest son William James was living and assisting his grandfather at the 'Horse Shoes'. James and Mary's son Harry, now aged 16, is an apprenticed wheelwright. (This was in Derby with Joseph Fletcher. James and Mary's daughter had married Joseph Fletcher).

At the beginning of 1886 James Cook was once again in trouble. The Oxford Journal of 9 January 1886 gives the following:

James Cook, of Benson, was charged with having a military coat unlawfully in his possession under the Army Act. P.C.Collett proved finding the coat in possession of accused, and his wife said her husband had lent 5s. on it. It transpired that the coat belonged to a deserter named Horne, a relation of the accused. Fined 2s. 6d. and costs 12s.

The 1891 census shows James and Mary still residing at Littleworth. Living with them are their children Harry, Fred and Kate. Harry (now aged 25), who had served an apprenticeship with his brother-in-law in Crick is described as a general labourer working for his father.

The trade directory for 1898 shows James Cook listed as a farmer at Littleworth. The 1901 census shows the farm comprising James, now aged 63 and his wife Mary, now aged 61. Their son Fred (agricultural labourer) is still living with them but is now married.

Mary died in 1901 and James remained farming at Littleworth. He is enumerated in the 1911 census living at Littleworth with his granddaughter Sarah Fletcher as housekeeper. James farmed until at least 1915 (trade directory) and he died in 1917.



The Grave of James Cook (1838-1917) in the graveyard at Benson in 2019

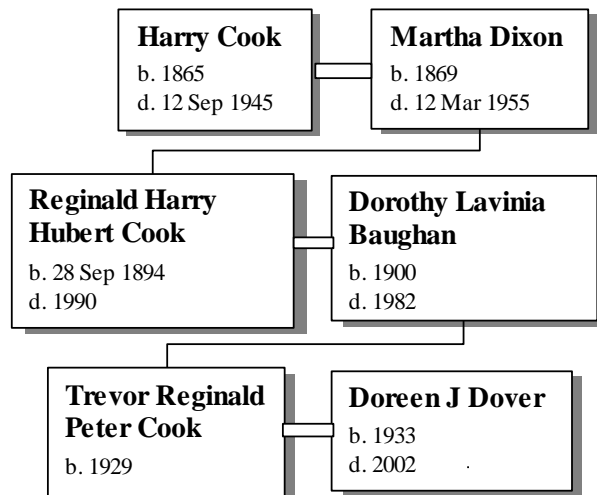
William, the long-term Publican of the Horse Shoes died in 1887. He was 75 years old. William's grandson William James then took over as Publican. Presumably the pub did not provide sufficient income and he developed side lines acting as a 'contractor' and hiring out horses and carriages (1891). In 1893 William James and his family moved to Watlington where he became a general dealer and horse slaughterer. The Horse Shoes was let but William James hoped his eldest son William George would take over as Publican. However in 1904 there was a family row and William George ran away and joined the army. He was disinherited by his grandfather James.

Harry Cook (1865-1945)

Harry was born in 1865 the second son of James of Littleworth. In 1891 he had been living with his parents at Littleworth. Harry married Martha Dixon from Hungerford and they had one son Reginald born in about 1895. At some time before 1901 Harry had decided to follow his elder brother William James into the occupation of Publican as the census of that date shows him at the Sun Public House with his family. Harry was also a contractor and employer. The District Valuation of Benson in 1910 shows Harry Cook listed as owner/occupier of a house and garden in Crown Lane, one of only three. His land was estimated at 3 acres.

The census return of 1911 shows the family living at Hope Cottage, Crown Lane, Benson. Harry is a contractor/haulier and son Reginald, now aged 16, is a writer (?sign) and house decorator. Harry

died in 1945 leaving an estate worth £2372. In his will Harry's son Reginald is described as a builder's foreman.



James Cook (1815-1883) of The Horse and Harrow

James was the youngest son of John and Mary n^èe Coates (see page 1) . James remained living in Benson High Street with his brother Thomas after their parents died. Thomas was acting as blacksmith and James as ‘general dealer’. James married Amy Shipton in 1838, but they had no children. Perhaps influenced by his brother William decided to become a Publican. Sometime before 1861 James and Amy moved to Roke Marsh where James ran the Horse and Harrow.



The Horse and Harrow Public House (now a private dwelling) in May 2019

Amy died on 14 April 1861 aged 55 very shortly after the 1861 census was taken. Her cause of death was given as valvular disease of the heart. Within a few weeks James had re-married. His new bride was Caroline Crowdy and she was 20 years his junior. They married on July 21 1861 in the parish church at Bensington. James and Caroline were to have 6 children, 5 boys and a girl.

In 1867 the family relocated to Britwell Salome where James became Publican at The Plough Inn. This was basically a beer house and James subsidised his income with Agricultural work.



The Plough Inn, Britwell Salome

James's descendants.

James and Caroline's second son James became an agricultural worker specialising in Horses. He farmed first at Swyncombe Down then at Frieth. James's final home was in Wokingham with his daughter Alice. Alice was David's grandmother.

ⁱ <http://www.historyhouse.co.uk/articles/beerhouse.html>

ⁱⁱ QS1847/1/L1/143

ⁱⁱⁱ QS1856/2/L1/8