

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE HISTORIC BUILDINGS TRUST

RESTORATION OF 2/3 HIGH STREET, HIGH WYCOMBE, - A WHEELERS PUB UNTIL 1903

“THE WHEATSHEAF PROJECT”

A brief history of the oldest secular building in High Wycombe (erected 1399). If you can help us with more historical information we would love to hear from you. Please email marianjanemiller@gmail.com

If you would like more information about the project please contact the Trust’s Chairman and Project Manager

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Architectural Heritage Fund**



Built in 1399, was this Wheelers' oldest ever public house?



The timber-frame has been dendro-dated to 1399 but we don't know the original function of the building, except that what remains is only part of an originally much larger building. There was an open hall on the top-floor, which may have had some civic function, or was possibly connected with the market or nearby parish church.

But when did the Wheatsheaf become a public house or inn?

It seems that there was a Wheatsheaf in High Wycombe in the 17th century because of trade tokens bearing the sign of a wheatsheaf and issued by a Thomas Butterfeild. Such tokens were issued because of the lack of coinage during the Civil War.



Reproduced courtesy of Buckinghamshire County Museum

It is said that the Wheatsheaf was a coffee-house by 1700, held by one Henry Franklyn. A deed of 1695 at Buckinghamshire Archives also mentions a coffee house near the Hog Market (now Church Square) and this may well have been a reference to our building.

We are on safer ground in the 18th century when we know for certain that the Wheatsheaf was in the ownership of the Squires, a brewing family. Daniel Squire senior was a brewer, originally from Beaconsfield. We don't know if he owned the Wheatsheaf but his daughter Sarah definitely did since she left "all that my messuage or tenement.. wherein William Creed late dwelt...known by the name or sign of the Wheatsheaf" to her sisters, Mary and Ann.

When Mary died she left her share to her sister Ann. It seems that none of the Squire children, Sarah, Mary, Ann or their brother Daniel, (who was mayor in 1790) ever married.



The Wheatsheaf in 1772 (detail from a painting by William Hannan – private collection) The publican “Major” William Creed stands outside puffing on his clay pipe. Mrs Sarah Cockburn leans on the stall of her shop, where number 1 High Street now stands.

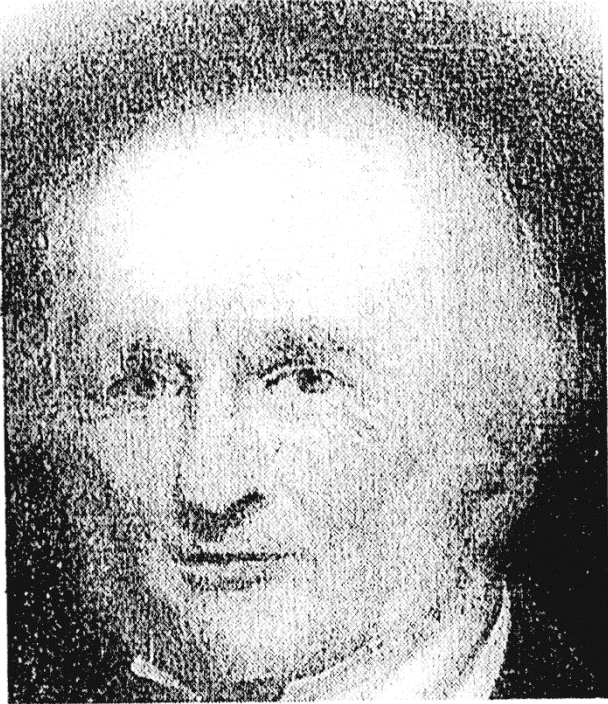
Ann Squire died in 1799 and the building was sold probably to the brewer, Andrews Edward Biddle, who already had a lease of the Wheatsheaf. Biddle went into partnership with Robert Wheeler in 1808 and the Wheatsheaf was one of the pubs transferred to Wheeler after Biddle died in 1827.

The Wheatsheaf had not changed much by 1884 when this photograph was taken.



Detail from SWOP photograph ref. RHW32001

So for most of the 19th century the Wheatsheaf was one of many “Wheeler’s” pubs in the town. Robert Wheeler, a Londoner who arrived in High Wycombe in 1808, soon established himself as one of the major brewers and leading businessmen of the town. His first mayoralty was in 1812 and he served as mayor for a further eight terms, dying in harness in 1853. His son Thomas followed in his footsteps, both as brewer, banker and multiple-times mayor.



Robert Wheeler

(from *Yesterday's Town*
Museum)



Thomas Wheeler

(painting reproduced courtesy of Wycombe
Museum)

Robert's tomb dominates the southern side of High Wycombe churchyard



Whilst the Wheeler family were a constant presence there were frequent changes of publican at the Wheatsheaf, as we can see from the censuses, trade directories and newspapers. From the Squire wills we know about William Creed, Joseph Rolls and Stephen Young in the 18th century. Here are the names of the ones we know about from the 19th century;

- William Swinden
- George Swinden
- Thomas Reeves
- James Moore
- Matthias Oliver
- George Greetham
- Charles Lane
- John Newton
- Samuel Haydon
- Ernest Waltham
- W. Henry Barnes
- Charles William Johnson
- William H. Pilgram

The census returns show that the publican and his family usually had lodgers living with them and the publican and his wife probably also had alternative jobs to help make ends meet.

In 1861 the militia were in town, taking up billets in the many pubs and inns in Wycombe. Fourteen “privates in the militia” were listed as lodging in the Wheatsheaf.

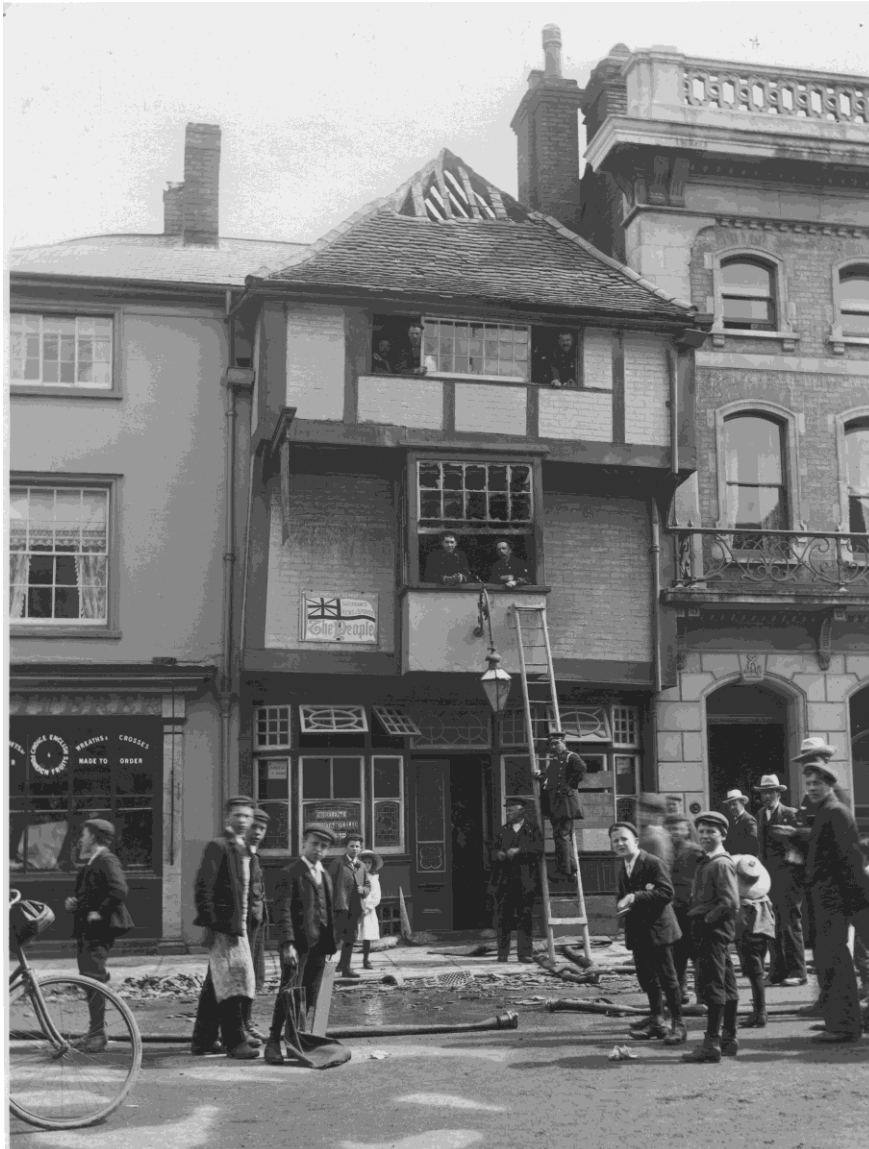
By 1895 changes were afoot and Wheelers had evidently decided it was time for a “makeover” at the Wheatsheaf. Local architect, Thomas Thurlow’s plans proved somewhat controversial and the local press reported in some detail on the debate, apparently somewhat heated, over the plans put before the Borough Council. After some modifications by Thurlow the plans were approved. They involved moving the door of the pub to the centre, with bay windows either side. The new front can be seen in this postcard of about 1902. It also looks like the pub had been given a more fashionable “black and white” look.



But the Wheatsheaf’s days as a public house were numbered. There were just too many pubs in the town and the Wheatsheaf was one of several pubs due to surrender its licence in September 1903. However disaster struck one night in July 1903 when fire broke out in the cellar and spread up the stairs.

Fortunately there were only two people in the building, the publican Mr French and his son Alfred both of whom managed to escape through an upstairs window. The local fire brigade attended the blaze. They had to make a hole in the roof to get water to the flames. You can still see charred timbers on the top floor today.


A photographer was on hand to record the aftermath of the fire:



SWOP ref. RH46124

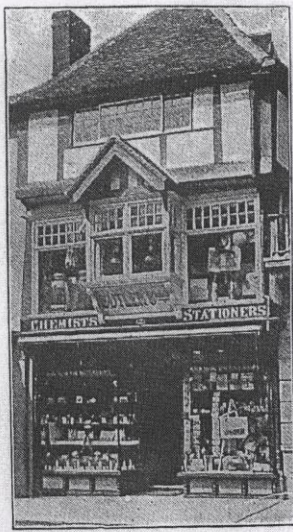
Whealers put the Wheatsheaf up for sale by auction. Thomas Thurlow was the successful bidder, paying £850. He was probably acting as agent for William Harsant Butler who already ran a chemist's and stationer's shop around the corner at 5 Church Square. After converting the Wheatsheaf Butler moved his business into the building; there was a shop on the ground floor, a showroom on the first floor and a warehouse on the second floor.

Although the pub had gone the Wheatsheaf name survived as we can see from Butler's advert for the "Old Wheatsheaf Pharmacy" in the Homeland Handbook for 1907. (Reproduced courtesy of Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society)

BUTLER BROS., 

"Old Wheatsheaf Pharmacy,"
2, HIGH STREET, HIGH WYCOMBE.
Chemists, Booksellers, Stationers, etc.

AERATED WATERS IN SYPHONS,
 LONDON MADE FROM DISTILLED WATER.

<p>PRESCRIPTIONS CAREFULLY DISPENSED.</p> <p>PURE DRUGS AND CHEMICALS.</p> <p>STORE PRICES FOR CASH.</p> <p>EVERY REQUISITE FOR AMATEUR PHOTOGRAPHERS</p> <p>DARK ROOM FOR THEIR USE.</p> <p>SURGICAL BANDAGES. ELASTIC STOCKINGS. ENEMAS, &c.</p> <p>TOILET, NURSERY, AND KITCHEN REQUISITES.</p>		<p>BOOKS, BIBLES, PRAYER AND HYMN BOOKS.</p> <p>LARGE STOCK OF LEATHER GOODS DESKS, & WORK BOXES.</p> <p>PRESENTS TO SUIT ALL. STATIONERY.</p> <p>ACCOUNT BOOKS PICTURE POSTCARDS AND ALBUMS.</p> <p>OIL & WATER COLOURS.</p> <p>CANVASES & ALL ART MATERIALS.</p> <p>DIE STAMPING. COPPER PLATE PRINTING.</p> <p>BOOK-BINDING, &c.</p>
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THE WYCOMBE LEMON ESSENCE.
 4½ Bottle makes 40 Tumblers nice Lemonade.

Up-to-date Dark Room, lighted by Electricity.
Free use to Customers.

Large and convenient Showroom for Fancy Goods.
Novelties in all Departments.

Visitors or New Residents are respectfully invited to call, or enquiries by post will be immediately attended to.

By 1930 there had been more changes. The ground floor was divided into two shops and Cyril Roberts photographic studio occupied the two upper floors.

However the W heatsheaf name persisted in the shape of “Ye Olde W heatsheaf Tobacco Shop” as can be seen in this photo from 1944.



Reproduced courtesy of Historic England

The building housed a variety of shops for the rest of the 20th century but gradually tenants moved out and were not replaced until only one shop was left, in number 3, with the rest of the building standing empty. In 2017 Wycombe District Council bought the freehold with the Trust taking a 125 year lease containing an option to buy the freehold.

Under our Chairman and Project Manager, Dr. James Moir, the Trust has assembled a team of historic-building experts to investigate the building and develop plans for its repair and conservation. With financial support from the Architectural Heritage Fund consultants were appointed to investigate options for viable and sustainable reuse of all parts of the building. This year the Trust has been successful in securing a further grant from the Architectural Fund to enable it to carry out works for which listed building consent has just been granted. Work should start soon. This is what the Wheatsheaf may look like with the ground floor as a cocktail bar and the upper floors in use as a charitable/community hub.

