

COCK AND CROWN YARD IN ACTON

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SUMMARY

This paper traces the development and eventual disappearance of the yard of a medieval inn in Acton High Street.

Like many people with an interest in their local history, we are often asked for information by folk looking for their ancestors. Surprisingly, several of these were looking for Cock and Crown Yard. This led us to a realisation that this area of Acton had never been properly researched.

It all began with the Norman Conquest. William of Normandy found among his new possessions a hunting lodge in a place called Wudustoc, known to us as Woodstock, north of the Thames ford known then as Oxenford. It was a delightful spot, quickly enclosed with a large park where one of William's castles was soon erected. The mound is still there. It became a place of retreat from London for the early English kings. In particular Henry I and Henry II spent a great deal of time there, holding courts and assizes. A study of King John's itineraries shows he often went there.¹ Constant use produced a road from London. There was a long spit of gravel for most of the way, except near Illing (Ealing) where it made a kink to the north. This use of Woodstock meant much travel. It has been estimated that the court used 40 wagons to move material from London, let alone the curious long covered wagons for the court ladies that are shown on a number of early manuscripts.

In the 12th century, the bishops of London built churches by the roadside where it ran through parishes over which they had control. The church at Acton was dedicated to the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth and that at Ealing to the Assumption. The parish church of Ealing shows where the road ran in early times,

as does the parish church of Hillingdon owned by Evesham Abbey and dedicated to Saint John the Baptist. Some of the rectors of Acton served the King and there are documents sealed in Acton as a result.²

From the end of the 12th century the establishment of colleges in Oxford added to the traffic on the road, especially since a number of the colleges were endowed with properties in London. It is indeed this that first introduces us to the 'Cock'. The accounts of Merton College from 1350 to 1450 have survived. Twice a year three dons made the journey to London on horseback to collect the London rents and check their properties. It took them two and a half days and every time they stayed at the Cock or the Tabard Inn in Acton. The road produced not only churches but also inns.³

A conveyance of 1380 now in the London Metropolitan Archives shows us where those two inns were. It is very detailed. It shows a collection of premises across the High Road just to the west of the church. On the east there is a lane followed by a farmhouse and then the Tabard. Then come three cottages, with their names and details of the owners' holdings in the common fields. Finally, on the west there is an alley or lane leading to the Cock. This presumably was the first beginning of the Yard.

There are no further references to the Tabard, but the Cock appears in 1377,⁴ 1405, 1506, and 1552 – the last in 'Victuallers Recognizances'. It is sometimes called 'The Cock in the Hoop' because of the custom of hanging a 'hoop' or wreath around the inn sign to announce a new brew of ale. In 1636 the inn is mentioned in a poem by Walter Taylor.

After the Restoration there was hardly any small change, so shops and inns produced their own 'trade tokens'. There were three with the

Cock on; Anne Finch was the landlady in 1664 and 1667.⁵ From 1735 onwards the Cock appears in Victuallers' Licence Lists almost every year with the name of the current publican.⁶ In 1747 the name was changed to the 'Cock and Crown'. Perhaps this was an act of loyalty after the Jacobite rebellion was put down in 1746 by the Duke of Cumberland.

In 1793 the premises of the 'Cock and Crown' were recorded in the Churchwardens' Rate Book as 'Empty' and in 1795 as 'No longer an inn'. It was owned at the time by Sich, brewers at Chiswick, who decided to give it up.⁷ The American War of Independence resulted in shortages and corn laws were introduced, a situation worsened by the Napoleonic Wars. The result in Acton was a reduction in the number of public houses from fifteen in 1773 to eight in 1798. There were four flourishing houses nearby at the time, the Three Bowls, the King's Head, the George and Dragon, and the Red Lion. They all had some connection with the coaching trade, which the Cock did not, nor did it ever house parish bodies like the Church Vestry or take part in the Beating of the Bounds.

In 1800 'Cock and Crown Yard' was said to be 'opposite the King's Head' and in 1811 was described as 'land formerly the Cock and Crown'.⁸

In 1802 William Charlton enters the scene. He was a plumber, painter, and glazier who lived in a fair sized house three doors to the west of the entry to Cock and Crown Yard. In 1802 he owned one tenement 'in the yard'; during that year this increased to at least five, with possibly two more, since residents are named. In 1811 William Charlton died and his widow took over control of the five tenements, while his son Francis dealt with the business and shop in the High Street. By 1829 Mrs Charlton had increased her holding to seven 'tenements in the yard' and by 1830 to eight. They were marked 'not assessed for rates'. Later in 1830 she held ten tenements.⁹

Knowing their trades, it is possible that the 'tenements' were old buildings in the Yard which William or Francis Charlton were able to improve. Francis Charlton who took over the Yard after his mother's death was an important person in Acton. He was people's churchwarden for two years and at one time or another filled most of the parish offices. He appears often in the Parish Vestry Minutes.¹⁰ His sister married into the Perry family who carried on both the family business in the High Street and control of

the tenements in the Yard. It was in fact a Perry daughter who dealt with the eventual sale and demolition of the cottages.

Where these tenements were and what they were like we do not know at this stage. It is not until the 1851 Census that some information emerges (they do not appear in the 1841 Census).¹¹ Acton at that time was still an agricultural village with a population of 2,500. It had grown from about 1,400 when the Yard began to have residents, so it is likely the tenements in Cock and Crown Yard would be regarded as useful, if not desirable. There are several men in 1851 who work on the farms, but most of them are in other trades. They come from a variety of places, but the children up to twenty years old were born in Acton. Several of the women are described as laundresses or washerwomen. One actually runs a small laundry. At this stage the Acton laundries had not really begun, so it is likely they took in washing. There are eleven 'tenements', three of the tenements are said to be empty. In all 43 persons are housed there.

Between 1851 and 1861 Acton underwent a great change. The four common fields were enclosed in 1859. Those who held strips or pieces could purchase one larger area in exchange. So a great deal of land became available to speculators and builders.¹²

Only one family recorded in 1851 was still there in 1861, but residents included a number of labourers, probably working in the building trade. There are twelve 'tenants' then, with four tenements vacant and 47 persons in all. If the figures do not seem to add up, it is because different residents use more or less rooms in a building.

In 1871 there were 17 'tenements' with 56 persons. By then many new houses had been built but rents in the Yard will have been much cheaper. After all they paid no rates and here you could get from one to four rooms. By 1881 there were 74 persons in 15 'tenements'. By then, too, 18 new pubs had been built many within the areas of the new housing.

The 1891 Census gives the number of rooms inhabited by each tenant. Only 13 tenancies are shown with one empty; 40 persons are listed. No family has more than four rooms, but in general they have more space than before. The 1891 Census also, for the first time, gives the addresses. There are three without numbers – the first, and seven with numbers one to seven. Two tenants

are shown at Nos 2, 3, 4 and 7. There are a greater number of labourers, a greater spread of places of birth for the adults, and hardly any women in laundry work, despite the enormous number of laundries by then in South Acton. This is probably because the proprietors usually took workers from their own vicinity.¹³

Very few tenants stayed more than ten years and it is difficult to trace families. One family can be traced. Benjamin Buggy was born in

Acton in 1810. He became a worker in the Gravel Pits at Notting Hill. His first wife died. In 1854 he married Elizabeth Gibbs in St Mary Abbotts, Kensington.¹⁴ She was born in the Steyne, Acton. It is possible she was in service there. They moved back to the Steyne in 1861 and then to Cock and Crown Yard by 1871. Benjamin died of bronchitis in 1871.¹⁵ He was described as a labourer. Elizabeth stayed there at No. 6 with her daughter, also Elizabeth. The

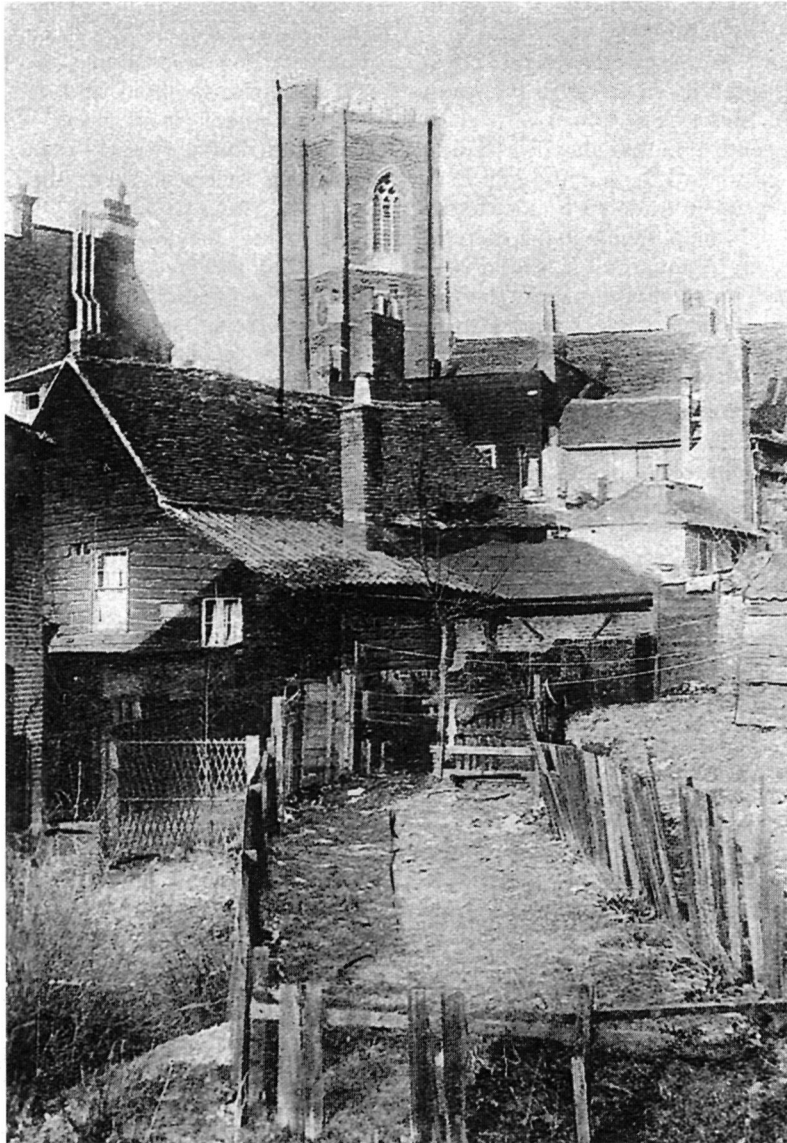


Fig 1. Seymour Cottages and gardens in Cock and Crown Yard with Acton parish church on the opposite side of the High Street (from Old Acton)

other children moved away. Elizabeth, the daughter, married Thomas Simmonds, born in Ealing. They lived in the family house at No. 6, and had four children.

In 1891 there were proposals to extend the Tramways which ended at the Windmill. London United Tramways would take over the line. To make two tracks would involve widening the High Street in places. In 1893 the Mount, on the north side of the High Street, with its cottages to the west of the church, was demolished and the King's Head rebuilt further back in King Street, but on its own land.¹⁶

Looking for further improvements the Local District Council turned its attention to the south side of the High Street. The proposal was to construct a new road, opposite the new King's Head, which would turn to the left and join Park Road North as an easier route to South Acton. It was hoped it would help people living there to shop more easily in Acton too. It would also provide an excuse for demolishing the houses and shops on either side of Cock and Crown Yard as well as the yard itself. There was talk of 'slum clearance'.

At that time the 'tenements' in the yard were in the hands of William Wagg and Benjamin Seymour of 262 Goldhawk Road and were called accordingly Wagg Cottages Nos 1, 2, and 3, and Seymour Cottages Nos 1-7. Subsequent documents and plans show those Wagg Cottages were in the north-east corner of the Yard, No. 1 separate from the other two; Seymour Cottages were on the west side soon after entering into the Yard.¹⁷

The Council had to make a case for obtaining and demolishing the cottages. They brought in the Inspector of Nuisances, W.T. Bovey, and D.J. Ebbetts, the surveyor to examine them and make a report. No money could be borrowed by Acton Council without the approval of the Local Government Board, and before that everything had to follow the proper procedures. They inspected Nos 1-7 and No. 12. This was Seymour Cottages. They reported as follows:

These cottages are in very old buildings having little height in the rooms which are partly in the roof; they are in a very dilapidated state requiring expensive repairs throughout. The woodwork is decayed, broken and defective, the floors are dirty and greasy and the plastering is in many places loose, bulging and cracked. The access to the first floor is by means of narrow winding stairs and the danger of fire would be very great. The amount of

air space is very limited on account of the small height. In our opinion these houses are not reasonably capable of being made fit for house habitation and we consider they should be immediately closed.¹⁸

A provisional order for a closing Act was made by the Council on 9 February 1903. In March 1904 Edwin Bridger Athawes, Estate Agent, made an offer for the Yard but was refused. On 5 December 1904, following an application to the Local Government Board, the Council bought from Benjamin Seymour Nos 1-7 Cock and Crown Yard, via Mrs Rayner for £428.6s.6d. The Charlton descendants, the Perry daughters, still held the freehold and the sale agreement was with them 'in common' with Seymour. At the same time through Joseph Narroway, who had some interest in them, the Council acquired Nos 1-3, Wagg Cottages.¹⁹

All this, including a full report of the Inspection, was given publicity in the local paper. Clearly the Council wanted as much support as possible. Hence such remarks as in Rowland's *Street Names of Acton*: 'A much applauded act of slum clearance'. The Council did not say it was about to clear a whole row of 18th-century houses, if not 17th-, many in good condition.

The order of 1905 said the dwellings in December 1904 were occupied by '30 or more people belonging to the working classes'. In 1907 the Council made application to the Local Government Board for permission to recover £2,463.2s.11d. which they had expended so far under the 'Cock and Crown Yard Improvement Order'. The Board replied saying they must first be assured that the inhabitants of the Yard had been rehoused. There are two lists of these, one in 1904, another in 1905.²⁰ Did some people move out and others jump in to fill the vacant rooms? One of the problems was that a number of the tenants owed rent. To get rid of them the Council said it was ready to accept whatever was offered. The Council's eagerness appeared again here. They told the Local Government Board that there was a great deal of suitable accommodation nearby. Their lowest rent was £18 a year i.e. 7s a week. At the time the lowest working class rent was 3s.6d a week, so it would make a big difference to move from Cock and Crown Yard where possibly the rents were the lowest. And some of the tenants had other perks. Mr Dudman the tenant of No. 1 Wagg Cottage used the gardens of the Wagg Cottages to grow vegetables. The Council allowed him to continue

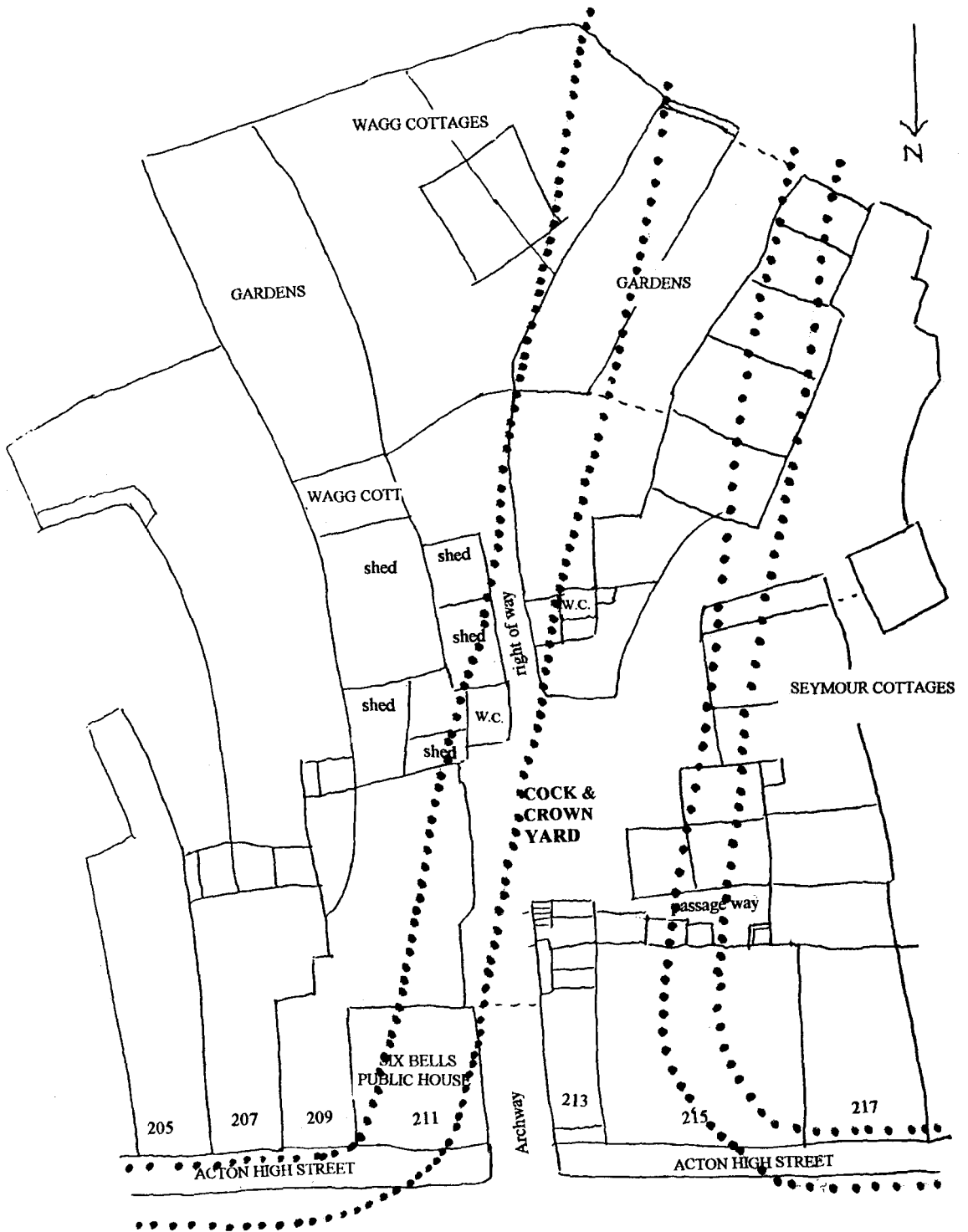


Fig 2. Map showing line of proposed new road based on items in Acton Terrier 1 (Ealing Local History Library)

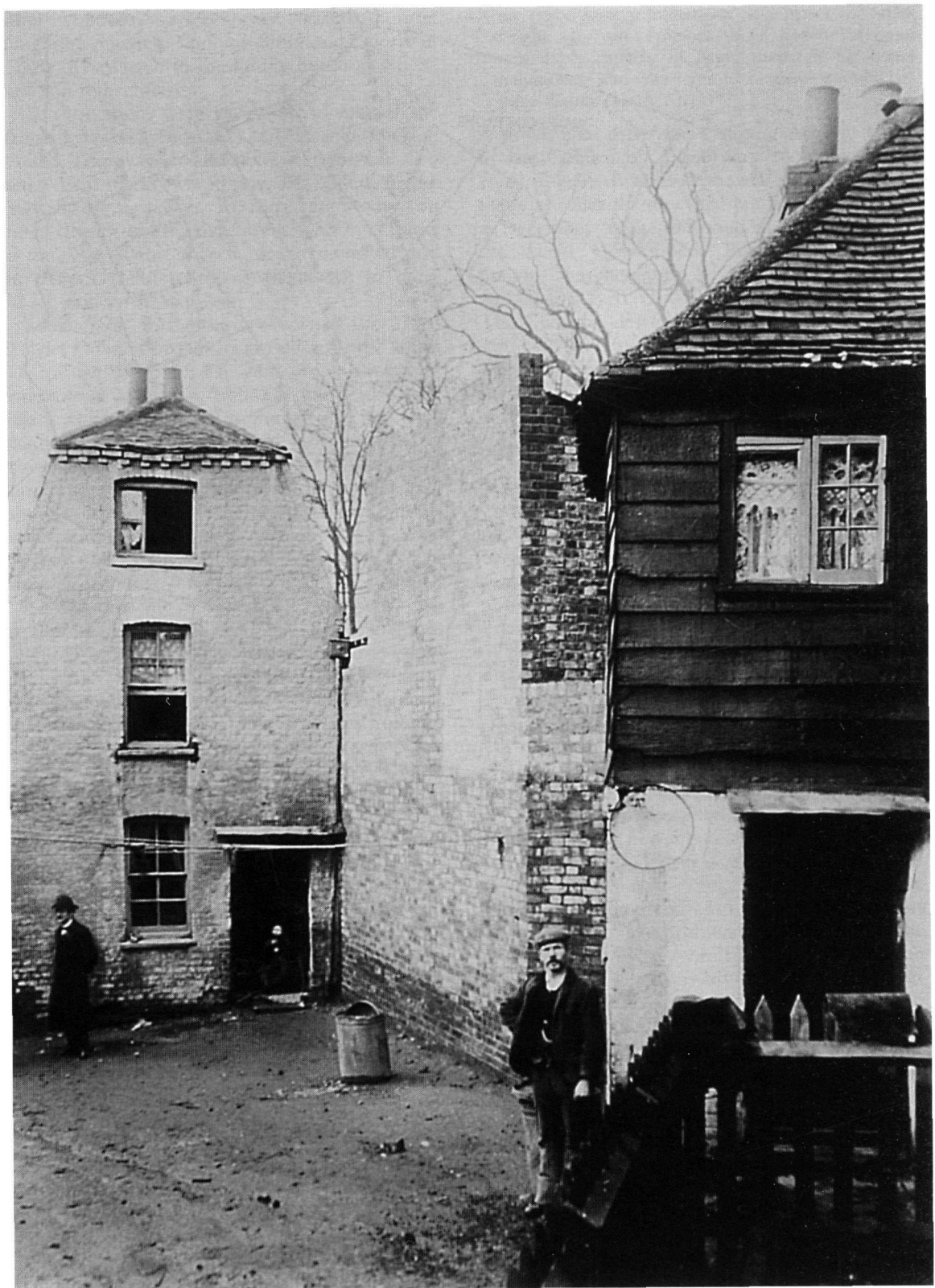


Fig 3. View of Cock and Crown Yard showing on left the remains of the much rebuilt inn and on right part of Seymour Cottages (Published by permission of Ealing Public Libraries)



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OLD ACTON 11
High Street, c 1905, showing 'Six Bells'
and entrance to Cock and Crown Yard

Produced by
Pamlin Prints 
Croydon

Fig 4. View of Acton High Street c. 1905, showing Six Bells and entrance to Cock and Crown Yard (Published by permission of Ealing Public Libraries)

to use the garden of No. 1 until the harvest, provided he left the house. Further research showed he was the local greengrocer!

As it turned out, and no doubt to the joy of the Council, all the tenants found their own accommodation. So where did they go? They were not on the whole the sort of people who appeared in the local directories. Indeed the very places they moved to were not likely to be entered. And you had to pay to get in! We were fortunate to find six of them. One went to Elizabeth Cottages, next door to the Midland Bank, but they were to have a very short life, another to the Steyne, yet another to Nelson Place, built on the site of Bank House on the edge of the Steyne. One went to Mill Hill Terrace, over the wall from the Yard, one to Mill Hill Road nearby, and one down into South Acton. Of course they may only have taken rooms.²¹

When proposing the demolition of the Yard, the Council ordered that twelve photographs of it should be taken. These have never been discovered. In fact we have collected only three photos taken inside the Yard from various sources. They are clearly by Upjohns whose premises were still next door to the Midland Bank. It would have been the younger Upjohn,

for his elder brother had by then set up in the West End. The posed figures, added afterwards, are a sign of their work. Indeed he uses the same ones. There are several pictures of the entrance to the Yard, including two which show Charlton's house when it had been changed into the 'Bon Marche' about 1870. There is also a small reproduction of a poster that shows the Yard from behind with its gardens.²²

Scymour Cottages were demolished in 1907 to make material for road building, which suggests they were built of more than wood. It was hoped to refurbish Wagg Cottage No. 1, but the Council decided it would cost too much and so it, too, was demolished.

Slowly the premises west of the Midland Bank were sold to the Council from Upjohns at No. 201 High Street to the Boster's sheds at 219. At 211 was the Six Bells public house, established in the 1840s, and possibly enlarged at a later date. It stood just to the right of the entry to the Yard. It was to have to wait some time before being rebuilt – from 1905 to 1914 – for both the Council and the Licensing Authority continually delayed it. Some parts of houses in Mill Hill Road were also required.²³

Having reached this stage the Council met new problems. They laid the curbstones for the

new road only to discover they had not left space on the west side for pavements and shops. So they had to turn to Miss Clara Williamson who still owned that piece of 'Woodlands'. The rest had already been sold to the Council and Middlesex County Council partly for the erection of a school and partly for a recreation ground. And so finally the road was laid and named Crown Street; of course, there were new problems at once.

Crown Street was intended to link with Park Road North, but the latter road was never sufficiently widened. Indeed in 1965 it was planned to become a footway through the tower blocks of South Acton. So instead Crown Street merely became another way of reaching Gunnersbury Lane via Mill Hill Road.

There was much discussion and disagreement as to whether costers would be allowed in the new street. Their stalls were allowed in the end, but were found to be a nuisance since they blocked the road. A place was found for them on a piece of the Woodlands land towards the south-west end. There was a reluctance, too, to take space and erect shops. It was not until Poore and Sons decided to expand after the Great War that the west side of Crown Street was developed using material from the War – old Army huts. In 1926 they added 129ft frontage on the south and east and opened a covered market there in 1928. In 1933 they replaced the shops on the west which masked the open market they had set up in 1921. Poores called it the first Town Shopping Centre in Acton.²⁴

All this was eventually replaced by a block of flats with a few shops below on the east side, and a surgery and chemist's shop on the west with flats above. The road is now mainly used as a

cut through to and from Gunnersbury Lane into Acton High Street.

NOTES

- ¹ P Hindle *Medieval Roads* (1982).
- ² PRO C 54/43 m 16 Cal. Chart. Tolls 1257–1300.
- ³ 'Journey by Warden and Fellows of Merton 1315–1470' in GH Martin *Road Travel in the Middle Ages*.
- ⁴ PRO Cal. Close Rolls Edward III 1374–77, Richard II 1377–81.
- ⁵ *Acton Gazette* 22/8/1924.
- ⁶ LMA MR/LV Victuallers Annual Licence Lists 1716–1829. LMA PS W W4 1-4 Petty Sessions Records 1873–1923.
- ⁷ LMA DRO 52/286.
- ⁸ LMA DRO 52/288.
- ⁹ LMA DRO 52/288–300.
- ¹⁰ ELHL Acc. 84/3 Vestry Minute Book. (ELHL: Ealing Local History Library)
- ¹¹ PRO RG 12/1035.
- ¹² Acton Inclosure Award 1859, copy at LMA and elsewhere, for more details of development *VCH Middlesex* Vol VII, 1 ff.
- ¹³ ELHL photocopies of Acton Census Returns 1851 to 1891.
- ¹⁴ Kensington Marriage Register, General Register Office: 1854 no. 43.
- ¹⁵ Brentford District, Acton sub-district no. 322: Death Cert. 17/2/1872.
- ¹⁶ *Acton Gazette* 20/2/1892, 11/2/1893, and 17/11/1894.
- ¹⁷ ELHL *Acton Terrier* 1, 63, 154.
- ¹⁸ ELHL Minutes of Acton Urban District Council 1903–1910.
- ¹⁹ ELHL *Acton Terrier* 1.
- ²⁰ PRO HLG 1/65.
- ²¹ *Kelly Directories*.
- ²² Photographs eg in Rowland *Acton As It Was* (1990).
- ²³ ELHL Minutes of Acton UDC.
- ²⁴ T and A Harper Smith, *Poores of Acton. The Story of a Business* (1994); reports in *Acton Gazette*.