

SOME MEMORIES OF HOOK 100 YEARS AGO¹

[Written in about 1930, annotated by Nigel Bell 1998, transcribed by Martin Whittaker 1998]

Perhaps I may be allowed to generalise before I start along the road I wish to travel. 'Hook': time and, time again has the question cropped up as to the origin of the name. It is a bit obscure but comes, I understand, from the Saxon *Hoc* meaning a piece of metal bent into a curve for catching, holding and sustaining anything: a snare, a trap, or from the Welsh *Hoc* meaning a scythe, a curved instrument for cutting grain – a sickle, and in this connection it is generally supposed by authorities that the name originated from the curved highway². In passing I might say that there are about fourteen 'Hooks' and each one has, or had, a curved road passing through it. Hook itself owes its importance to being situated on this great highway extending from London to the West. During the centuries of the past British, Roman, Saxon, Dane³, Norman and the various European Traders to the great Fairs and Markets have passed on conveyances of their day with their goods and chattels. Kings, Queens, Statesmen, Soldiers and Sailors, all kinds of men, both high and low have passed through our humble hamlet.

About a mile from this road, as you all know, are the remains of a castle just across Bartley Heath - generally spoken of as Hook Common. We hardly claim this as part of Hook proper, although it is only in the next parish, and about as close to this Band Hall as it is to Odiham church.

That restless Monarch, King John, spent some time at this Castle. It is recorded that he visited it on no less than 19 occasions, and three days before signing Magna Charta at Runnymede he was residing there. Now the nearest way to Windsor from the Castle would be across the common over the back way direct to the Holt, which means 'Little Wood', and thence on to the main road by Finchampstead, and through Windsor Forest. It may be remembered that John was noted for rapid moves from place to place on horseback accompanied by the cavalcade usual with magnates of those times. Now to take one's mind back seven hundred years, and endeavour to picture Warnborough Castle at that time is difficult, it being fairly certain that the whole country surrounding it was one vast wood⁴; and why such a military building should have been constructed there antiquarians are at a real loss to explain⁵.

Our highway was probably a mere trackway, and narrow at that. To see what the old British tracks were like, the curious may like to pay a visit to Five Lanes End and follow the sunk road to Bidden Water and Upton Grey. On a good Ordnance Map you will see that this road comes

¹ A talk given in about 1930 to a Hook audience.

² This is incorrect: Hook is derived from the Anglo-Saxon *hoc* meaning a spur of land or where a ridge falls away or a bend in a river. The 'bend in the road' theory, likened to a sickle, is a commonly held error

³ There is no certainty that the main road through Hook was significant before the mid-1400s. Then the old road from the West Country via Salisbury was re-routed from its previous, slower, route via Winchester and Farnham, to a faster route via Basingstoke, Hook and Bagshot to London. If British, Romans, Saxons or Danes used the road it was probably mainly for local travel.

⁴ By 1216, and probably much earlier, there must have been extensive land clearance and the thought that the area was a huge wood seems improbable

⁵ Odiham contained a Royal Manor and it may have been deemed appropriate to protect it. Also along local river valleys there are several mottes (and baileys) which may have played a part in discouraging marauders. On the Whitewater there is another at Holdshot Farm in Heckfield. On the Loddon there is one at Turgis, others at Sherfield are at Sherfield Court, Breach Farm, Lance Levy Farm, at Bramley there are moated defences at Beaurepaire and Cufaude Farm, and perhaps the best known was at Basing House

from the West, on to Farnham, and is considered one of the earliest, unaltered [roads]. A nearer example, although perhaps not such a good one, is by *Swains Spittle*⁶ or a continuation of *Searles Lane* which joins the Reading road at the foot of *Thorn's Hill*⁷. The roads were in a very poor state even up to the year 1724 and Daniel Defoe, who travelled over most of the main roads in that year and was a very keen observer and recorder, states that Watling Street - the great thoroughfare of the day - was impassable during the winter months, horses sinking to their bellies in some parts. He travelled on horseback, and states that in the case of cumbersome coaches of this date, they often sank in so deeply that they had to be dug out.

Talking of coaches may I here be permitted to read an extract from a poem written by the author of the 'Beggars' Opera', to wit, John Gay, who in 1750 wrote an account of his journey to Exeter.

*'Twas on the day when city dames repair
To take their weekly dose of Hyde Park air,
Whenceforth we trot, no carts the road infest
For still on Sundays country horses rest.
Thy gardens, Kensington, we leave unseen
Through Hammersmith jog on to Turnham Green,
That Turnham Green where dainty pigeons fed,
But fed no more, for Solomon is dead.
Three dusty miles reach Brentford's tedious town
For dirty streets and white legged chickens known
Thence o'er wide shrubby heaths and furrowed lanes,
We come where Thames divides the Meads of Staines,
We ferry'd o'er for late the winter's flood
Shook her frail bridge and tore her piles of wood
Prepared for war, now Bagshot Heath we cross
Where broken gamesters oft repair their loss.
At Hartley Row the foaming bit we prest
While the Landlord welcomed every guest.
Supper was ended, hearths the glasses crown'd
Our host extolled his wine at every round.
Relates the justices late meeting there,
How many bottles drunk and what their cheer.
What Lords had been his guests in days of yore.
And praised their wisdom much, their drinking more.
Let travellers the morning vigils keep,
The morning rose but we lay fast asleep.
Twelve tedious miles we bore the sultry sun
And Popham Lane was scarce in sight by one.
The stragglng village harbour'd thieves of old,
'Twas here the stage-coached lass resigned her gold -
That gold, which had in London purchased gowns
And sent her home a Belle to country towns.*

⁶ Swains Pightle on the Tithe Map.

⁷ This seems to be a new identification of a name that might otherwise have become lost.

It is necessary to lead up to my subject to mention some of the travellers who 'posted' along the way, and while one, mayhap, sketched in colours the Posting Inns, and incidents, another wrote a description of the journey. Today by aid of a camera, such a collection of odds and ends of a journey would present no difficulty.

At Portsmouth in 1782 a sad calamity happened to the Navy by the foundering of the 'Royal George' which sunk with the loss of 600 souls. This event is ably described by Cowper in his poem.

Rowlandson⁸ the artist and caricaturist, and Wigstead, determined to post down from Wardour Street, and visit the wreck of the Royal George. They started early, passing Hounslow, and reached Bagshot: another 17 miles - they say - brought them to Hook, on the Basingstoke and Odiham road, and here they halted at *the Spread Eagle*, now the *White Hart*, and which hostelry Rowlandson proceeded to sketch introducing into the scene the 'Salisbury Stage and Post'. All the sketches on this trip were reproduced for the first time in the 'Graphic' Summer Number of 1891, and are good specimens of Rowlandson's style.

I now propose to commence along our highway at the old Posting House known at one time as the *King's Head*, afterwards as the *Wellaby Arms*, at Murrell Green, now occupied by Mr. Booth, and thence onward to the *White House*, or as all of us in these posh days say, *The Dorchester Arms*, and note some of its buildings and former inhabitants of a past generation.

The *King's Head* was kept in early years of the last century by John Webb, who in addition farmed some 100 acres. To give us moderns some idea of what a posting house was, we must have recourse to the Badminton Library in which you will find from the pen of the Duke of Beaufort the following,

The great Post horse proprietors, all keepers of Hotels and inns used to have in their stables thirty or forty pairs of horses and a post boy and cad to each four horses, the whole superintended by an experienced ostler; the 'boys' were brought up to it from childhood, a strong, small hardy race of men, about the size of the modern Flat Race jockey. On arrival at an Hotel of a Post Chaise, if there were ladies in the carriage, the landlady would come out in a rich black silken gown and a stiff high white cap, attended by neatly dressed handmaidens bearing trays with a glass of most excellent cherry brandy for each, and with charming voice and manner, would bid them alight at her humble abode.

However, back to the *King's Head*. The landlord was a member of a well to do family who must have been resident in the locality for many years, as numerous tombstones to their memory at the south west angle of Newnham church shows.

At this time the Turnpike Trust was in charge of this road and a toll bar covering the West Green road was placed at the end of the garden and tolls were taken even in the [eighteen] seventies⁹.

We now pass over the Whitewater rivulet. The old bridge removed two or so years ago was built in 1825. On our right is the *Crooked Billet* inn dating back to Tudor times, a quaint old

⁸ Thomas Rowlandson (1756-1827)

⁹ The local turnpike trusts were abolished and at "noon on 1st November 1871 the turnpike gates were removed".

structure, the chimney not being the only crooked part. The landlord in 1830 was Richard Barton. On our left is the roadway over which King John would pass.

Turn a short way down the lane on the right we come to the Mill. It is said that it was originally a paper mill¹⁰, but be that as it may, it appears to be contemporary with the *Billet*. In the [eighteen] seventies it was run by Joseph Steer, and flour was made satisfactory to its consumers, and probably to the proprietor. The last miller there was John Burningham, the father of the present landlord at the *Billet*¹¹.

Mills all over the country are now derelict, and on its course from *Bidden Water* to Hook four or five mills formerly operated on this small stream. It is rightly named the Whitewater, and is referred to as one of the chalk streams by Charles Kingsley.

Forward the road has been straightened and widened, it formerly curved and passed immediately in front of Hook House, for many years the home of the Bird Family of solicitors. *Searles* was the home of 'Old Winniker' one of the ghosts of which there are still many memories. If you were unfortunate enough to be accompanied by 'Old Winniker' on your walk abroad, sure enough your days were numbered. It has been said that this visitation came to just one of a number walking together, and in less than a week the one who was thus 'visited' was dead.

We now arrive at the *Raven* kept in 1830 by James Hewitt. Here we have a fine example of a house built in the Parliament days, 1653¹². The brick herringbone nogging was formerly covered with perpendicular tiling. (Referring to brick nogging, the finest example in this whole country is the 14th Century partition in the Chapel at Andwell Priory, and to admirers of good brick work is worth a visit.) At this house Jack the Painter, the man who set fire to Portsmouth Dockyard on Dec[ember] 7th 1776, was taken prisoner¹³.

Passing on our left is an old wheelwright shop in which a well-known inhabitant for many years plied his trade. This was Mr. Budd, who was succeeded by his son-in-law, and it is still carried on [by], I believe, his grandsons. If I am wrong here, I should be happy to be contradicted by Mr. Beeston.

Further on we come to where the Reading Road joins the main road, and it is believed that this forms the 'crook' to act for a scythe, in forming the name Hook¹⁴. On the right hand stood until quite recently a very quaint old thatched cottage¹⁵, which attracted many painters to sit for hours at the corner with their easels. For many years it was the residence of George Goodger and his wife. For years the Goodgers kept a cow or two making use of the common as pasture. It is said that Mrs. Goodger thought a good deal more of her cow than her husband. If her husband was ill she had one remedy only and that was 'Hartshorn'. Whoever happened to say they had a

¹⁰ Originally probably a flour mill (i.e. in 16th century and perhaps before); certainly a paper mill in the 18th and early 19th centuries.

¹¹ James Burningham in 1927 (Kelley's Directory of Hampshire).

¹² This is incorrect. The note carved over the front door states 'Old Raven House 1653', but it is improbable the householder would call a new-built property 'old'. The brick work is almost certainly Tudor and it seems not impossible it was being constructed in 1536 (see article in Local History Group Journal No.1, 1991 by Nigel Bell.)

¹³ It has been impossible, so far, to confirm he was in fact captured here

¹⁴ See footnote 2 above.

¹⁵ Its name seems to have been 'lost', but a photograph appears in *Do you the Raven* by Anne Pitcher (page 17).

complaint, the old lady would say, "Ah, Garge had that too, and I gi'ed un Hartshorn"; but if her cow was bad that was another matter entirely, and she would sit up and tend it very carefully all night.

The *Spread Eagle*, then the Bell, and now the *White Hart* now attracts our attention. This is a very old house, with thin bricks to some of the chimneys. Rowlandson's 'sketch already referred to shows quarry lead lights. The landlord in 1830 was James Waterman. The row of cottages was originally the stables and quarters of the postboys.

Across the way is *Crossways* long occupied by the late Mr. Burberry, This was built about 55 years ago by John Charles Vine. Having a brickworks and bricks, he wanted some outlet for them so he built this structure, putting such a lot of bricks into the building of it, that he became bankrupt, and [it] is even now referred to as *Vine's Folly*.

Where the Post Office now stands¹⁶ was Hook's most wonderful establishment in years gone by. Here in 1830 John Varndell carried on the business of grocer and general shopkeeper. His son John was much in evidence in the [eighteen] seventies, and his, "Anything asides?" was a very familiar remark. A visit by a 'long customer' once found John unable to oblige personally. Apparently it was difficult to obtain the services of a [chimney] sweep then, as now, and John volunteered to get up the chimney and do it himself. When well on with the job the 'long customer' arrived and had to be served by Mrs. Varndell, who had to go to the bottom of the chimney and call out the next thing on the list, and John had to call back the necessary directions.

An Academy now demands our attention. This was known 100 years ago as Rose Cottage and belonged to Ann Willis, one of the family who owned and originated the rooms known as the 'Willis's' and still known as such in London. It passed to her nephew John Webb of Murrell, who died quite young. On his decease his widow came to reside at *Rose Cottage* and, with her sister Miss Parsons, commenced a school for young ladies, which was successfully conducted for over forty years. During this time an addition was made to it in the shape of a schoolroom and bedrooms. Later these ladies were joined by Miss Huggins, a most precise lady with permanent curls (some wag at the time insisted that it was a wig), and she was very rigid in her movements. The ladies of tuition were, and still are [alive?], as there are one or two still about, past mistresses in the art of department, and knew how to enter a room and bow with [the] easy grace of the past century. Fortunately she was spared the 'Modern Miss' and silk stockings. At the death of Mrs. Webb and Miss Parsons, the house, now known as the *Grange*, was sold in 1878 to the Gower Family. It might interest my listeners to know that this house stood on the edge of the common in those days.

Proceeding on the left we come to the *Old White Hart*. This establishment, in early years of the last century was run by John Beeston the owner. In common with most inns of this period, a brewery was attached and considerable business was done. This again is an old hostelry and [it is] possible the soldiery engaged round Basing House, on both sides, have made use of it, and some of them may have helped themselves. For a short period the sign was altered to the *Machine Maker's Arms*. The last real brewer in Hook was Daniel Harfield, who turned out some very good beer, I am told. He went as far as providing a Malt House and planted some hops. Nearly all of us know of his malt house, now turned into four cottages close to *Black*

¹⁶ In 1930 the Post Office was situated at the western end of the *Acorn* building almost opposite the *White Hart*.

Bridge. From about where Mr. Dearlove's top shop now stands to the malt house stood the hops. Soon after planting, however, the monopolist came along and Hook was no longer favoured with the pleasant aroma of the 'mash'.

The *Foundry*, for well over a century, has played an important part in the everyday life of our village, and it may be of interest to you to hear of its struggles. In the early part of the last century a Suffolk man named James Smyth had invented an improved Lever Corn Drill. He was a man of great ability and indomitable will and he did not intend to 'hide his light under a bushel' so he sent his emissaries with a drill into most of the Southern Counties, to drill at so much per acre, and also to teach the natives the art of drilling. He had been in the habit of staying at the *King's Head* and was very friendly with the host, John Webb. In the year 1819 he was awarded a prize of a silver cup by the Hampshire Agricultural Society of that day, at Southampton. He had commenced business in 1800 in a small way, but had made headway by 1825. When calling on his friend Webb, he mentioned that he was looking for a site for his son-in-law, Andrew Woodgate Gower, to enable him to make a start on his own account. A.W. Gower had been apprenticed to him, and at that time was the foreman in his works.

John Webb stated that his aunt, Mrs Willis, had the Road Wagon Station opposite the *Old White Hart* vacant, and suggested that they should drive over to near Basingstoke, and see the lady and put the matter before her. This was accordingly done and the result was that she agreed to build a house and some workshops on the site, and they were occupied in the year 1826.

The first implement made appears to have been a plough. As time went on, and work was obtained, but not without a great deal of effort, but helped by work from Suffolk, and workmen from the works there, a business was built up. In those early days journeys to Reading market were made on foot, with sometimes the help of a friendly lift. Business improved in the [eighteen] forties, shows were attended, and things were fairly flourishing right up to the year 1851, the year of the Great Exhibition.

It was customary for the family to attend the Independent Chapel at Odiham each Sunday. A large kind of vehicle drawn by one horse was used, and was known amongst the family as the 'Leviathan'. On Whitsunday 1851 the family were at service at the Chapel as usual, and A.W.G. (who was very fond of music) was swaying with pleasure as some familiar hymn was being sung, when a messenger hurriedly passed up the aisle, and touching him on the shoulder said, "Mr. Gower your place is on fire". Forthwith he called his sons present, proceeded to the *George* for the Leviathan and hurriedly drove to Hook, only to find his house and premises almost completely destroyed. The Odiham Fire Brigade arrived, Hook pond was emptied, but there was a strong wind blowing, and nothing could stop the destruction. This was indeed a calamity, and was caused by careless larking of some boys. The best account of the damage done is that by A.W.G. himself, who when commencing a new ledger in 1852 wrote the following:

Goodbye 1851, you began the last half of your century with me in a very unsocial manner. I suppose as you had to boast of the Grand Exhibition in London you thought you would make an exhibition of the ruins of my property. I hope I shall never find any of your followers so mischievous and unkind. You burnt down my dwelling house, my two organs, my bedsteads and a good deal of my other furniture, all my workshops, my bellows and tools, part of my stock in trade, one new Manure and Corn Drill all ready to

be sent away, a good many of my models, all my harness on the premises at the time, and a great many other things, making such havoc as is but rarely seen in a country place, and to make the worst of it took me at a time off my guard and uninsured, which was most cruel, and perhaps I might have said a good deal more if you had not waited and seen your master assist in renewing it again. May the Great Almighty God grant that though he was permitted a great sacrifice to be made in my property, that myself and my family may not be forsaken, but granted health and the necessaries of life in this world and everlasting happiness in the world to come, through the blessing of our Grand Redeemer, Amen.

A recovery was made after all this trouble, and manufacture went on. The mowing machine was introduced, and many machines in use today were designed and introduced. It may be of interest, in passing, to say that our friend George Goodger was one of the first workmen at the Foundry.

Further on the left we come to the red brick and tiled cottages, and I want to dwell for a little while on the doings of the gentleman who had them built, as for many years he was an important figure in the village. He was indeed a 'character', and the only approach to the 'squire' the village possessed. After a free worship of the often up-tipped glass at the *Old White Hart* he may have been heard by all within a quarter of a mile loudly proclaiming to the world at large that he was "William Goring, Yeoman of Sheldons Farm". The story is that one night after his usual visit to get a drink, he got home and often dropping off to sleep was awakened by an owl which had fluttered down the chimney, and was settled on the foot of the bed. William was under the impression that he was being visited by the Lord, and immediately knelt upon his bed and promised that, "he'd never get drunk again". I am afraid that this was only a temporary promise, however. William was a typical Dane, a fine upstanding man, red haired and large freckled. He was quick to anger, but it was soon over. He was a great sportsman, and hunted the common with his pack of beagles, and attracted to his workmen who were always happy with a gun and a dog or two.

A famous landmark, in the shape of a fine tree which stood in front of the one-storied thatched cottage (now occupied by Mr. C. Essex) was taken down much to the regret of the inhabitants some fifty-five years ago. It was a Scotch Fir, the top shaped like an umbrella, and could be seen for miles around and was much admired. At the back of this cottage, at that time common land unenclosed, was the old time smithy, the proprietor being a Mr. Lovegrove, a family long connected with Hook.

On the opposite side of the road might be seen a building in the form of a small granary, supported 011 posts some seven feet high, access being afforded by a step ladder. Underneath was a frame carrying a flywheel with a belt running up into the building, actuated by a crank turned by manpower. This was the laboratory of a man, an original genius, possessed of a name known at he present time in nearly every corner of the Earth, and I might say nearly as good an advertiser, as the present owner of the name. His name was Ford, and I can assure you that he was a very enterprising person. In his building he compounded the lure and rat poison, the composition of which he kept secret. His clients were the farmers for many miles around, and in the days when a farmer made it his business to have many stacks of corn in his farmyard, which were worth protecting from the ravages of what an old Greywell celebrity, John Grigg, used to call, "those damned Hanoverians" referring to the brown rat which arrived on these

shores about the time of the first George of that line. The old English black rat, smaller with a longer tail, was eventually killed out by them.

Some considerable skill was necessary to apply the rat bait, and then the poison, and Master Ford was a past master of the art. This was done in each case by using 'brooches', short lengths of hazel wood of a kind used in thatching. They were tipped with the lure or poison. Now to advertise and accomplish these operations a peculiar form of cart was used in the form of a box on wheels and drawn by a piebald cob. This form of conveyance attracted the attention of all and sundry. A charge of some five shillings a rick, I am given to understand, was the fee. So successful was Master Ford that he was able to secure enough rat-tails to fill a large number of sacks. With these proofs of his prowess his next move in advertising was to appear at Salisbury, Winchester, Reading and other markets with this peculiar cart and piebald cob, and some dozen sacks of dried rat-tails aboard. Much grist came to his mill as a result of this advertising tactic. A further enterprise of Ford's can only be comprehended by referring to conditions existing at this period. With no organisation, aggrieved workers in those very hard times had only recourse to Mob Law. Threshing machinery was just being introduced of the horse gear type, and let out to hire, in some cases worked by the farmers' horses. So severe were the times for the poor labourers that they became so incensed that gangs of them, no doubt helped by some lawless tribe, roamed the district in 1830 breaking all the machinery they could come across, carrying sledge hammers, etc. for the purpose. They were known as 'The Mob' and much alarm was caused in the district.

Now, notwithstanding this unsettled state of affairs in the agricultural world, our Hook Ford purchased the first Portable Steam Engine and suitable thrashing machinery, and let it out on hire, he being one of the first men of the country to do so, and continued in this line until the time of his death. His first steam engine had a brass plate over the firebox with the name 'Farmers Glory'.

Onward the old road passed by the present Newnham Road, and then across the common past the door of the *Dorchester Arms*, on up to *Hethero* and thence by a circuitous route to the foot of *Scures Hill*. The Post Office those days stood on a spot about where Mr. Stimpson now resides, and was kept by the Saundes Family. Here again could be found a Toll Bar.

To close our meanderings along our highway, we now come to perhaps the most noted inn of all, *the White House*. To the natives of the past century this was a great place for village meetings, gossip, with traditions of the doings of their forefathers and the glory of the 'fights'.

The first competition for the transport trade of our 'Great Highway' came about 160 years ago when the Basingstoke Canal was made, called Inland Navigation. The men employed in the work of construction were selected for their physical toughness and strength, and were termed 'navigators'. Then shortened to 'navvies', a name this type of worker retains to this present day. The longest tunnel constructed up to that time in this country was that under Greywell Hill, and the Nately end is only a short walking distance from the *White House*, and the navvy found his way thither for a refresher in considerable numbers. Old inhabitants have been heard to say that much wagering and sporting events took place. Wrestling, single stick, and quarterstaff, not to forget real Prize Fights, in which locals were pitted against the stranger. During a 'rough house' there was a favourite saying always used, but I'm afraid that this is hardly the place to express it.

After the 'Barge River' the next competition was the Railway. Rumours of the iron road reached customers of the inn in the early [eighteen] thirties, and the pros and cons thrashed out. The bargee backing his barge, and the coachman his coach and horses for ever. A few years later another army of navvies arrived and the great cutting was commenced. The *Water End* embankment made, and 'Puffing Billy' commenced his reign.

So my brothers we leave the past and think of Hook today, so glorious in the summer, with our commons all a-flower with gorse and heather, and that other rare flower the Blue Gentian and God's pure air for our heritage. May we let our thoughts rest for a while on those natives of a past in our closing hymn,

*Time like an ever-rolling stream
Bears all its sons away.
They fly forgotten as a dream
Dies at the opening day
Amen*