

THE PEEPING TOM

I recently visited a fellow Earlsdon resident, Eunice Pyke, and whilst walking through her house remarked that I recognized some of the antique photographs on her walls: they were of the old Peeping Tom pub in Burton Green. Eunice told me that the owners of the Peeping Tom in the photographs were ancestors of hers and she had documents concerning the pub. This sparked my interest and I decided to research more about the Peeping Tom.

The Peeping Tom was established as a beerhouse. These came about because in the early nineteenth century there had been rising indignation over the price and quality of the beer sold by the great breweries through their tied houses. Whilst prices rose from 3 1/2 pence a quart in 1791 to 5 1/2 pence in 1819, per capita consumption declined by almost 20%. The brewers' response was to brew more economically, cut alcohol content, raise prices even more and use adulterants, which caused a greater outcry. Much of the problem was blamed on the licensing system under which Justices withheld licences, restricting supply which caused brewers to tie pubs and create local monopolies. If the authorities of the day thought they had problems with monopolies they should see the situation today, where with the benefits of globalisation the choice is between one brand of ersatz Eurofizz and other brands of ersatz Eurofizz!

Although these problems applied primarily to London and did not occur in the provinces, nevertheless a national solution was sought by the governments at the time. From 1807 Bills were introduced into Parliament, Select Committees established and Acts passed all of which had little or no effect on the alcohol trade until 1830. In that year the Duke of Wellington's administration became unpopular as a result of amendments to the Corn Laws and the Catholic Emancipation Act. It needed some popular legislation to revive its fortunes and hit upon free trade in beer so the Beer Act was rushed through Parliament in early 1830.

Under this Act any rate-payer could serve beer or cider, either on or off his premises, after obtaining a two guineas permit from the Excise. Magistrates had no influence over this system. The result was that 24,000 beerhouses arose in the first year of the Act. By 1835 nationally the number of beerhouses was 75% as large as the number of magistrates' licences. In the same year in Coventry there were 117 licensed premises and 77 beerhouses. Whilst the majority of beerhouses sprang up in urban areas, there were also plenty in the countryside.

The farmhouse that was later to become the Peeping Tom obtained a permit from the Excise in the early 1830's for an off-beerhouse, meaning that it could only sell beer and only for consumption off the premises. Quite probably this was beer brewed on the premises as at that time brewing on a farm for the family and the army of land workers was commonplace, it was part of the everyday domestic chores. I remember as a young man working on my brother's farm in the 1970's where the labourers still received a daily allowance of two pints of Davenport's bitter in the fields and then at the end of the day the farmer bought the first round in the Queen's Head in Meriden. After a day in the fields it didn't touch the sides!

The beerhouse at Burton Green opened at much the same time as the London to Birmingham Railway was being built from 1833 to 1838. Railways seem to have had some significance in the history of the Peeping Tom. It is said that later the Peeping Tom became a sweet shop, but I suspect that this meant that it obtained a licence to sell 'sweets' as well as beer. In fact, 'sweets' were what we today call country wines. Later the Cox family, Eunice Puke's ancestors, moved into the beerhouse. Charles Cox had been born in Radford Semele in 1842 and married Emma Rose of Offchurch. Charles was a farm labourer and their son, Edmund Cox, was born in Radford Semele in 1861. Edward seemed to have advanced in the world as he moved into a house and 6 acres in Burton Green: this was the beerhouse that was to become the Peeping Tom. He married Elizabeth White, who had been born in Coventry a year later than Edmund. She probably took over the brewing for the off-beerhouse.

In 1881 the branch railway line from Berkswell to Kenilworth was authorised by Act of Parliament and construction began. The line went through a cutting to pass under Cromwell Lane and the navvies who

constructed the cutting were quartered in huts near Hodgetts Lane. Edmund Cox sensed an opportunity here, to sell his wife's home brew on the premises to these thirsty workmen and so he obtained an on-licence for his beerhouse. At this time it was described:

‘In the beginning there was only one room available to customers. A living room was converted into a tap room. Beer was kept in a small room at the rear and fetched as required. There is no cellar at the ‘Peeping Tom.’

By Acts of 1869 and 1872 the issue of future retail beer licences had been put back under the control of magistrates. Existing beerhouses, termed ‘pre-1869 beerhouses’, were given protection and the Peeping Tom continued to be referred to as a beerhouse until 1912.

Edmund Cox was probably a tenant as in 1896 the beerhouse, with six acres of land in the parishes of Stoneleigh and Berkswell was owned by Thomas Sammons Hands of Corley, a farmer and grazier. In 1896 Elizabeth Hands senior leased the beerhouse to William Ratliff of the Coventry Brewery, Leicester Row, for fourteen years for £40 per annum, by which time the name ‘Peeping Tom’ had been adopted. When Phillips and Marriott took over Ratliffs in 1900 consent for the transfer of the lease was given by Elizabeth Hands senior, Elizabeth Hands junior, Helen Mary Waters and Thomas Sammons Hands. The lease continued at £40 per annum, to expire in 1910. In 1906 the owner was named as T. J. Hands. From 1910 the lease was renewed yearly by Phillip and Marriott until 1914 when Southam and Company took it over.

It was during Phillips and Marriott's lease, when the Cox's were still licensees that the beerhouse obtained a full public house licence. By 1961 the pub was owned by Mann, Crossman and Paulin of London and a new pub was built alongside the old one, which was then demolished. Today the railway navvies have returned with the construction of HS2, but I can't imagine any of them popping into the Peeping Tom for a pint, since it is no longer a pub but a ‘Hickory Smokehouse’, part of a restaurant chain. I have yet to identify this smokehouse!



SOURCES:

Kenilworth Weekly News 2.9.1961

Coventry Evening Telegraph 24.11.1961

Eunice Pyke private papers and personal reminiscences

Fred Luckett unpublished research