

## ***Amersham in 1914***

In Amersham in 1914 people's lives and employment had changed little since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with many people working in agriculture or for the town's main employer, the brewery. The cottages along the High Street, on Market Square and Broadway were small, cramped and usually without modern services. Larger houses employed a small staff, whilst many other people were directly employed by the Lord of the Manor, the Tyrwhitt-Drakes at Shardeloes. The town's many coaching inns continued to accommodate coaches on overnight stays.

The arrival of the railway in 1892 signalled a change of focus, geographically and economically. Station Road was constructed to enable carriages to transport passengers up and down from the station to the town. Land around the new station was auctioned, with early developers buying up multiple plots of land. A new town was beginning to emerge on the hill, with the prospect of new residents and employers moving out from London.

In 1914 the majority of the population lived in what would today be referred to as Amersham Old Town, with the boundary marked by Shardeloes House in the west, Bury End in the east, the old Rectory on Rectory Hill in the north and the end of Whielden Street in the south. There were established communities elsewhere, notably in Amersham Common (the area around Blackhorse Bridge today), Chesham Bois and Coleshill. Amersham-on-the-Hill consisted of a number of shops and houses around the newly opened station.

The Lords of the Manor continued to exert considerable influence over the town in 1914. The Tyrwhitt-Drakes owned the majority of property in the town and they held the charter for the annual fair and weekly market. The estate also employed many people in the town. Although they were the most influential family, there were several wealthy middle and upper class families living in the High Street, including those at Broadway House, Elmodesham House, Alwyns (Apsley House), The Firs (Piers Place) and Liscar (Hinton House). These homes were spacious, with plenty of bedrooms and a cohort of servants to make life easy – domestics, gardeners, nursemaids, cooks and coachmen.

Bury End was at the eastern edge of the town, almost outside the main town. Bury Farm house and the Chequers Pub are two of the last significant buildings in the little hamlet. There were once nine cottages which made up Washington Row, opposite the pub, which housed large families who worked at Bury Farm or the brewery. In 1914 there was also a working mill at this end of the town. The Waterworks building on London Road remains, but you can no longer see the Wheatsheaf Hotel on the edge of Tesco car park, the gasworks, or the small shops at Bury End.

The most significant building at the southern edge of the town was the Union Workhouse, later Amersham Hospital, in Whielden Street. The workhouse was large because it was formed by a union of a number of parishes. It was governed by a Board of Guardians and residents paid poor rates to finance the scheme. Those without a home or income often ended up living in the workhouse and the 1911 Census shows that there were 190 residents. The workhouse was run by a master and his wife, with a cook, tailor, needlewoman, porter and several nurses. People, including older residents living in the workhouse, were subjected to hard labour, working the land or breaking stones. More fortunate women were given a place in one of the almshouses in the town. There were six homes for poor widows of farmers or tradesmen at Drake's Almshouses at a rent of 7/- a week, but only 6/- a week at Day's Almshouses across the road. The women each received a new gown every two years.

At the centre of the town was Market Square, framed at one end by the Market Hall and at the other end a double row of cottages, Church Row and Middle Row, which have since been demolished. The Square would have been a busy place, particularly on market day, when people came from outlying districts to sell their wares and animals. Coaches would have collected passengers outside the Crown to take them to the station. People would stop to talk and children to play games.

Living conditions were basic for the majority of the population, with large families living in one- or two-bedroom houses, with no gas or electricity. Although utilities were available it was unlikely that many houses could afford to connect to the supply. Men worked in physically demanding jobs, including farming, for the brewery or in a local shop. Women had to take in laundry and extra jobs at home as well as cope with back-breaking domestic work and caring for large families. Many households took in lodgers and some families provided lodging for school children, whose families had sent them to take advantage of the respected schools in the town.

Many working-class men worked for Weller's brewery on Church Street or on one of the nearby farms. The brewery was the biggest employer in the town, producing and supplying beer to all the inns in the town and beyond. Weller's owned land to grow corn, they ran the brewery and the Maltings at the back of Barn Meadow and were substantial owners of cottages in the town. In addition to labourers there were coopers, to make and repair barrels, and draymen to deliver across the county. Office workers were employed to keep the books, and stables, horses and garages had to be maintained.

There was a variety of shops throughout the town, enabling residents to locally source everything they needed. The shops also provided valuable employment in the town. There were butchers (Gurney's, Steven's, Brazil's and Welch's), at least four bakers, two chemists and several grocery shops, including Elizabeth Keen's, James E. Mead, Hill's Stores and Bizzell's. A grocer's shop was very different from the small shops and supermarkets of today. Many of the goods were not pre-packed; when serving butter, the grocer would slice off the right amount from a large tub, weigh it and wrap it in paper; sugar and dried fruit were weighed from large packs into blue paper bags, twisted to keep them closed. Shoes were made and repaired by Morten's (beside the Gables), Bright's in Market Square and Wilkinson's at the far end of the High Street, and there was a local tradition of saddlery. In addition to small shops selling toys, crockery and domestic items, the town boasted an 'emporium', Fuller's in Whielden Street, offering a wide range of drapery and household goods.

The main Post Office, located at 51 High Street, was considerably extended just before the war with sub-offices in the new town and at the Common. There were early deliveries of mail from London and Berkhamsted every day of the week and collections for London daily from roadside letterboxes throughout the district.

Despite work dominating people's lives, there were annual events for the community to enjoy. The town fair in September, first established in 1200, would have been much enjoyed by all. Many events and outings were organised by the Church, including outings for adults and for Sunday School children by coach. The town gaily celebrated the coronation of King George V in the weeks before the war, in addition to the annual Jack 'i' the Green festivities.

There were many influential people in the town in 1914, particularly the wealthy landowners and business men such as brewery owner Mr Weller, Mr Darlington and Mr Matthews (both local builders). With hindsight, perhaps the most significant character was George Ward, who lived with his wife Bessie in Tan Yard. He established and led the Town Band and, as first manager of the gas-works, he was required daily to light all the gas-lamps in the town. Later George became a cycle and hardware dealer and, with his sons, he established the first motorbike and car repair business in Amersham. Bessie ran a shop in the High Street selling crockery, toys, tea, coffee and tobacco. We especially remember him as an enthusiastic amateur photographer and his large collection of images informs our understanding of what life was like in Amersham in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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