



Photo: Charles Wells's boyhood home, The Barns at Fenlake

A BREWERY IN BEDFORD

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THE HIGGINS BEDFORD IN PARTNERSHIP WITH WELLS & Co

The Barns, Fenlake



Hand-coloured photograph
of Charles Wells as a boy

The Wells family had a long connection with the Kingfisher, originally a private house called The Barns, Fenlake. The house was old, and the tithe barns beside it older still.

Charles Wells founded the Bedford brewery in 1876 and had fond memories of boyhood summers at The Barns. His grandfather Thomas Wells (1774-1857) and grandmother Mary (Mary Marks 1772-1850) lived in half of The Barns, though their winter home was at Castle Lane in Bedford: when the River Ouse was high in winter, the dining room floor at The Barns would flood.

Thomas came from St Neots and was a considerable businessman. He made baskets and rush matting, which he supplied to the House of Lords. In the days before plastics, agriculture - for example - needed enormous numbers of baskets. Thomas had a large work force and owned fishing and reed harvesting rights on the Ouse from St Neots upstream to Bedford.

His wife Mary came from a prosperous Bedford family, they had three daughters and six sons. In 1850 Thomas wrote to their eldest son George: *“The Barns’ Sept 5th 1850: George, I could wish you to come over as your Mother departed this afternoon about 1/2 past 3 o’clock. She breathed her last without a groan or struggle, may the Lord receive her soul. Your father, Thos Wells.”*

The March 1851 census finds widower Thomas at Castle Lane in Bedford, with two servants and another of his sons (another Thomas, 1810-1863) who worked as a tailor and never married. Thomas the father died in April 1857.

His son George Wells I (1800-1876), Charles Wells’s father, moved into The Barns after his father’s death. He and his wife Sarah (Sarah Hayward Waldron 1812-1871) had two daughters and four sons, first of whom was George II (1840-1912) and then Charles the brewer (1842-1914).

George I was as entrepreneurial as his father. A 1916 family history by Dorothy Wells (1856-1956), wife of Sir Richard and daughter-in-law of



Watercolour miniatures of Sarah and George Wells, c1837

Charles Wells, says *“George was started in a furniture business by his father and owned the present premises of Wells & Co the High St with most of one side of Castle Lane, and large timber yards near St Cuthberts. After his father’s death he too lived at Fenlake in the summer, inhabiting the whole of the house. Once or twice a week he went to London by coach and was considered very up-to-date as he brought down cylinders of gas... this of course being then considered a most modern convenience.”*

He lit his Bedford showroom windows *“and people used to stand and wonder at the novelty.”* This was many years before electric light of course, and trains: “portable gas” first became available in the 1820s.

It seems that on one of these trips George I met his future wife Sarah. Orphaned when still a schoolgirl in Marlborough, she was living with her only relative, a married cousin in London. As Dorothy recorded *“The story goes that when travelling from London to Bedford as quite a young lady, her only surviving relation (a cousin married to a M. de Combe, a Swiss gentleman) put her in charge of a fellow passenger, our grandfather. This was the romance of their first meeting.”*

Quite how accidental this meeting really was, one can only guess. Perhaps cousin Mary had heard that a handsome and most eligible young man was a regular on the Bedford coach, and she thought up some errand there for the young lady - who, travelling alone, would naturally need a protector?

“She is said to have been a very pretty woman, sweet tempered and calm. They were reputed the handsomest couple in Bedford of their day and I think their marriage was a very happy one” wrote Dorothy. Her sister-in-law added ***“My father has told me in his youth when expensive embroidered silk waistcoats were worn he had two alike so that his father should not consider him extravagant. Once for a Ball he had his hair curled: the tongs were too hot and his hair came off as he danced! He and my mother were Beau and Belle of a public Ball in Bedford, so I expect they were a handsome couple.”***

Their son George II (1840-1912) took over the Bedford furniture business and his younger brother Charles went to sea before founding the brewery, proving himself no less entrepreneurial than his father and grandfather before him.

George Wells I was living at The Barns in the 1871 census, a widower like his father, with daughter Ellen (22) and son George II (30) and a couple of servants. He died in July 1876, and at the sale at Fenlake ***“the most beautiful Chippendale chairs went for a few shillings each”***. One item that stayed in the family was ***“a very fine satinwood table out of the nursery at Fenlake”***.



Josephine Wells in the garden at Castle Close feeding Chickens, 1931

The family albums have one photo from Fenlake in the C19th, showing the back of The Barns across the River Great Ouse, depicted on the front of this leaflet.

Josephine Wells in her later years, following Charles's death in 1914, lived in what had been the Higgins family home at 2 Castle Close.

Thanks to Mike Wells for content provided.

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