

The FILO story

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The plot of land upon which today stands the public house and brewery that we know by the sign of the First In and Last Out, has borne witness to much architectural change. Evidence uncovered during archaeological excavations on adjacent plots suggests that buildings of the Wealden type were in existence in this part of the High Street as early as the middle of the fifteenth century.¹ These original buildings were probably replaced by a more substantial, yet still timber framed construction, around the time of the final demise of the harbour that had once allowed Hastings to perform in the time honoured role as a member of the confederation of Cinque Ports.² In a terrible storm of 1656 the last vestige of what was already a forlorn example of an Elizabethan harbour was finally swept away consigning the once proud port of Hastings to its future lot as nothing more than a small fishing village. Neglect of maintenance to the fabric of the harbour through a continual lack of finance, an unheeded petition to the King for his financial intervention, and an ever changing coastline all contributed to the loss of the never ending battle with the elements, and the decline of Hastings as a significant port. Looking for less parochial reasons for this traumatic demise, the rise of the Royal Navy inevitably reduced

the power of the Cinque Ports and left them with little more than the traditional privileges that accompanied their earlier role. However, the fortunes of Hastings were to change beyond its role as a fishing village, and during the protracted period of naval warfare that was fought between 1778 and 1815 when the Royal Navy was engaged with fleets from France, Spain, Holland, and America, ship building flourished in the town and many of the local vessels acted as privateers in support of the Navy under a grant of Letters of Marque.³ This was a period of prosperity for those involved in the trade of a privateer, and doubtless financed the building of some of the smart town houses that supported the growth of a fishing village into the Old Town that we know today.

It is likely that 14 & 15 High Street, the buildings that today are better known as the First In and Last Out, came into the ownership of those engaged in the pursuit of privateering, and it was around this time that a brick built construction replaced the old timber framing.⁴ Placing an exact date on the original buildings that occupied this plot or their subsequent reconstruction is extremely difficult without the benefit of an archaeological investigation. The assignment of owner-

ship to those very early buildings is also difficult to establish with all such records being lost in time. The first actual documentary evidence of ownership occurs within the deeds to the property, whereby a reference is made to an indenture drawn up in 1686 granting a loan of forty pounds to William Prentis against the title to the property which would default to Thomas Boys in the event that it was not redeemed. The property is described within that indenture as 'All that messuage, tenement and garden adjoining, with their appurtenances, and lying within the Parish of St. Clements.' The extent of the property is further described as being bounded:

To the common watercourse there called the Bourne towards the East, to a certain lane there called Cobbys Lane towards the South, and to the King's High Street leading from the Sea towards the Minnis towards the West, to a tenement late belonging to William Slater Jurat towards the North.

The southern boundary here called Cobby's Lane was also known as the Upper Lane, one of the two crossing points of the Bourne stream, and subsequent to Wellington's great victory, Waterloo Passage. Despite frequent changes of ownership over the years these boundaries remained intact and the land contained therein was developed to include a large workshop and two cottages known as numbers 7 & 8 Waterloo Passage. Although these outbuildings were demolished during one of the Bourne clearances, the extent of the land

was not reduced until 1964 when Hastings Borough Council purchased from Page and Overton, the titular owners of the time, the eastern most portion of the plot which was to form part of the current Bourne car park.⁵

Through the years many names closely connected with the history of Hastings have been associated with the property that was to become the FILO. For instance there was Edward Milward, many times Mayor of Hastings, and possessed by an obsession to acquire land and buildings in the town. Others included John Goldsworthy Shorter holder of many civic positions in the Town including that of Town Clerk and Solomon Bevill one of the most noteworthy of the privateers. In those early days the property was almost certainly given over to private accommodation and it was not until the eighteen thirties that the first record of commercial usage is found.⁶ George Pierce is recorded at number 14 High Street trading as a corn and seed factor, while next door at number fifteen the premises are occupied by John Mills a fruiterer. Within twenty years this had all changed and Charles Pearson is recorded as a tailor plying his trade from number 14 High Street, whilst a member of the Hide family was using the adjoining premises as a laundry. Tailoring could not have been the most profitable of enterprises as within a few years Charles Pearson's new occupation was one of a corn dealer. It was about this time that further change was taking place with his business, and for the first time in the his-

tory of the FILO the sale of alcohol was attributed to the premises when they were listed as those of a corn dealer and beer retailer.⁷ Undoubtedly he had taken advantage of the Licensing Act of 1830 to supplement his meagre income, whereby he was able to sell beer upon the purchase of a simple Excise Licence, no longer requiring a full Justice's Licence. It was this piece of legislation that led to the creation of thousands of beer houses and beer retailers just like the FILO, a state of affairs that was finally repealed in 1869 when all such matters were once again returned to the Licensing Justices.

Upon the death of Charles Pearson in 1874 the property was inherited by his son Joseph Pearson whose combined occupation was shown as a beer retailer and seedsman. Once again untimely death intervened and through a subsequent marriage by the late Joseph Pearson's wife the landlord became Joseph Groombridge, although the ownership of the property was now with a minor, Joseph Pearson's infant son. It was during this period in the early 1880s that further reconstruction took place, when number 15 High Street was incorporated into the existing licensed premises at number 14, thus creating the combined floor area that the FILO still enjoys to this day.⁸ The Groombridge family were far better known around Hastings as saddlers and harness makers than publicans, with premises in both High Street and Old London Road. By 1890 it was clear that harness making was proving a far greater attraction than

beerhouse keeping not only to the Groombridges but also to the late Joseph Pearson's young son, and it was this that prompted the appointment of George Crampton to run the FILO on their behalf. Once the young owner had attained his majority in 1896 he very quickly looked to sell off his inheritance, and it was the resident landlord Crampton who sought to raise the necessary finance with which to secure the freehold. Up until this point the FILO had always been free of tie to a brewer, most likely obtaining its beer locally from either Breeds or Burfields, and unlike today it was certainly not brewing its own beer on the premises. In raising the funds he needed for the purchase of the freehold, Crampton obtained two mortgages on the premises one of these being with the Ashford Brewery Company, which contained a covenant requiring him to purchase all of his beers from this source up until the mortgage was redeemed.⁹

With the growth of the tied house system, made possible by the ever improving road and rail network, both the national and regional brewers were looking to increase their retail outlets through this method. Within a year of entering into a mortgage with the Ashford Brewery, Crampton had been approached by another regional brewer, Ballards of Lewes, keen to expand into Hastings Old Town as potential new territory. In this instance Crampton did not look for a further mortgage but sold the freehold to Ballards for a sum that not only allowed him to redeem his mortgage, but also

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At Rear thereof, with Frontage to **WATERLOO PASSAGE**;

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Figure 1. An auction document for the sale in the 1890s

gave him a good profit. Part of this transaction allowed Crampton to continue in the role of landlord on behalf of Ballards a position that he held until 1903.¹⁰ In those early days of vertically integrated business chains arrangements of this type would have attested to the good standing and quality of George Crampton as a landlord. A lesser man could so easily have broken the licensing laws of the day, and consequently forfeited not only his living but also that of the owning brewers, whose business was subject to a clean and continuing licence held by their landlord.

The name First In and Last Out was most likely derived from the location of the public house on the original coach route from Old Hastings to London, being the last hostelry for the coach going out, and the first one for the London coach coming in. Considering the proximity of the FILO to the main coaching inn, the Swan Hotel at the seaward end of the High Street, coupled with the fact that by the time the FILO first existed as a public house most horse-drawn traffic covering any significant distance had been lost to the railways, little or no trade would have come from this source. In fact virtually all of the business of the FILO was drawn from local patronage a situation which most certainly persisted for at least the first hundred years or so of its existence. Whilst the FILO first obtained its licence under the loose provisions of the 1830 Licensing Act, in keeping with the majority of the other beer houses in the Old Town its survival was in doubt for many

years following the implementation of the 1904 Licensing Act. This piece of legislation, enacted following the report of the Peel Commission in 1899, sought to reduce the number of licensed premises opened outside of the jurisdiction of the licensing Justices during the period 1830 to 1869. Under this draconian law it was no longer necessary to prove improper management of a beer house as the only grounds for the removal of its licence: the act provided other reasons such as difficulty in policing the premises, and most controversially of all by reason of redundancy. The other feature of this act was to set up a fund by means of a levy on all existing licenses in the Borough, out of which a sum in compensation would be paid to any licensee who fell foul of this new legislation. Dozens of licenses in the Old Town of Hastings and central St. Leonards were lost in this manner, and as late as 1930 the licence of the FILO was still challenged at the annual Brewster Sessions on the grounds of redundancy. Fortunately common sense prevailed with the Licensing Justices and the FILO was allowed to trade on as a beer house until the nineteen fifties, when this same regulatory authority finally granted the premises a full licence, and the FILO arrived as a fully fledged public house.¹¹

Between the passing of George Crampton in 1903 and the present landlord Mike Bigg taking up occupancy in 1988 there have been at least fourteen others who have ministered to the bibulous needs of the Old Town in those



Figure 2. The FILO in the 1920s with the fire brigade's march taking place

intervening years.¹² However, it was not only the landlords that changed, the brewers also rang their changes, as regional brewers were gobbled up by national consortiums, and in turn even these giants fell prey to the international combines. In the case of the FILO, Ballards of Lewes were taken over in 1924 by Page & Overton of Croydon although Ballards continued brewing for a further six years, whilst their Southover Brewery in Lewes remained in existence until 1980. Page & Overton themselves were taken over in 1929 by Hoare & Co. of the Red Lion Brewery in Smithfield, but once again Page & Overton continued as brewers until 1954. Even a brewery as ancient as Hoares, possibly founded as early as 1492, was not safe from the marauding giants of the licensed trade when in 1933 they were taken over by Charrington & Co. Ltd. of the Anchor Brewery in Mile End, and all brewing by Hoares ceased a year later. Charringtons remained as the owners and suppliers of beer to the FILO until 1967 when they in turn combined with what was then Bass, Mitchells & Butlers to form the huge Bass Charringtons conglomerate complete with a huge new and short lived 'megakegery' at Runcorn in Cheshire.¹³

The next twist in the tail of the Filo came in 1983 when Bass Charringtons tenant David Harding reversed the principle of vertical integration and purchased the freehold of the premises. Although the usual tie for the provision of a quantity of alcoholic product formed part of the agreement for the first five years of the

FILO's return to the free trade, in 1985 part of the premises was converted into a brewery. This bold excursion into self sufficiency, utilising much improvisation including converted dairy plant, brought brewing back to Hastings for the first time in over fifty years. It was in 1931 that Breeds, the last brewer prior to the FILO, were bought out by George Beer & Rigden and the brewery that once dominated the Old Town, was closed. The new St Clements Brewery, its original name bestowed in recognition of the parish in which it operated, proved extremely popular, with its first brew called 'Old Crofters' selling at a price that considerably undercut the competition from the major brewers who had previously monopolised the area. This excellent bitter was soon complemented with a second, stronger and darker brew called 'Cardinal', and a third was created by a mixture of the two and known as 'All Saints' ensuring that the parochial representation of the Old Town within the FILO, was now complete.

In 1988 the current owners of the FILO, Mike Bigg and his family took on both the pub and the brewery, with Mike and subsequently his son Dominic assuming the role of brewer. By this time the 'real ale' revolution brought about by CAMRA had taken a firm grip throughout the UK and discriminating drinkers of beer produced through traditional methods were prepared to travel all over this island in search of the product that Mike was now producing. This renaissance of the traditional brewery not only forced home



Figure 3. The FILO in the 1950s

the message to the multi-nationals that there was more to beer than the insipid pasteurised content of a pressurised keg, it also provided for a new discerning clientele which added a welcome bonus to the income derived from local patronage. The introduction of live music, the creation of a number of sporting societies, and the full participation by the pub in the many cultural and charitable activities that are part of Old Town life, all served to create the perception of the FILO as being integral to that community. By the turn of the millennium Mike had completely rebuilt the brewery with a new five barrel plant, had introduced new beers to complement the existing range, and taken on the services of Tony Champion as his brewer. All of this activity firmly established the FILO Brewery, as it was now known, among the notable microbreweries of the United Kingdom, an accolade sought by many, but achieved by only a few.

References

1. Various publications and reports of archaeological digs in the immediate vicinity of the FILO by the Hastings Area Archaeological Research Group (HAARG).
2. *ibid.*
3. Baines, J.M. (1955) *Historic Hastings*. F.J. Parsons: Hastings.
4. Hastings Area Archaeological Research Group, *op.cit.*
5. Deeds relating to 14 & 15 High Street, Hastings.
6. Various street directories eg *Pikes*, *Pigots*, and supplemented with information from the early guide books to Hastings such as Powell, Diplock, Osborne, etc.
7. *ibid.*
8. Deeds relating to 14 & 15 High Street, Hastings.
9. *ibid.*
10. *ibid.*
11. The records of Hastings Brewster Sessions covering the period 1848-1974 and reported in the local press.
12. Various street directories, *op.cit.*
13. Barber, N. (Eds. Brown, M. & Smith, K.) (2005) *A Century of British Brewers, plus, 1890 to 2004*. Brewery History Society:New Ash Green.