

## GAMMONS FARM, WATFORD



\*Gammons Farm, 1978. Photo courtesy of Geoff Mallord.

Gammons Farm was located in and around what is now Gammons Farm Close, off Gammons Lane. Various theories have been advanced about the origin of the name Gammon, suggesting that it comes from an early owner or tenant of the farm and/or that it is derived from the French word for leg.<sup>1</sup>

Gammons Farm dates from at least 1798, when it was owned by Lady Capell. In 1798, the occupier was Mr Francis and he grew barley, wheat, seeds, oats and pease.<sup>2</sup> North Watford has well-drained soil on a foundation of chalk overlaid by drift,<sup>3</sup> which was particularly well suited to the growing of crops, the main ones grown being wheat and barley.<sup>4</sup>

In 1844, Gammons Farm had 238 acres of land, most of which was arable, with 20 acres being meadow.<sup>5</sup> Lying between Gammons Farm and Leggatts Farm was a strip of 55 acres of woodland, with more nearby. The owner at that time was the 6<sup>th</sup> Earl of Essex, and the occupier was John Horncastle. John Horncastle became something of a hero amongst tenant farmers when he managed to get compensation from the Earl of Essex for damage done to 40 acres of corn and clover by the Earl's preserved ground game.<sup>6</sup> A dinner was held in his honour in 1845 in St Albans, attended by John Bright MP, one of the leaders of the Anti-Corn Law movement, who also campaigned for the rights of tenant farmers.<sup>7</sup>

By 1851, John Horncastle had moved to St Albans, perhaps as a result of falling out with the Earl of Essex, and the new occupier at Gammons Farm was a farm bailiff, Samuel Drury. He had a large household which included his wife, two daughters, two visitors, a female house servant, and 8 male servants, all agricultural labourers.

In 1861, another farm bailiff, Henry Stacey, was in occupation at Gammons Farm. One of the people living with him was his 18 year old son, a shepherd. This shows that there were sheep being kept at Gammons Farm or nearby. It was common practice, even for mainly arable farmers, to also keep sheep, which fertilised the soil.<sup>8</sup>

In 1871, the occupier of Gammons Farm was recently widowed Mary Rebecca Ginger. She is described in the census as a farmer of 130 acres, employing 3 men and 11 boys, but none of them were resident at Gammons Farm. Mary's 23 year old son's occupation is described as farmer's son, so he was probably also working on the farm.

In 1881, Richard C Downing was the occupant of Gammons Farm. He is described as a farmer of 123 acres, employing 2 men and 1 boy, but they were not resident. Richard Downing is the last farmer listed by the censuses as resident at Gammons Farm.

In 1891, the head of household at Gammons Farm was Guy Seson Barber, a 'stock jobber'. Living at Gammons Farm Cottages was a shepherd and his family and an agricultural labourer – William Jones - and his wife. By 1901, the head of household at Gammons Farm was Arthur C Faulconer, described in the census as 'living on own means'. William Jones was still living at Gammons Farm Cottage, now employed as a 'stockman of cattle on farm'.

In 1919, farmland from Gammons Farm was sold to The Watford Rural City Society Ltd of 7, Bradshaw Road; William Dutton of 192, St Albans Road; and The North Watford Allotment Society Ltd, of 159, Sandringham Road.<sup>9</sup>

After this, former farmland of Gammons Farm was used for housing and allotments. Orchard School, which opened in 1958, is built on a former farm orchard. However, Gammons Farm continued to exist until at least 1978, although not as a working farm. Later residents of Gammons Farm included Edward William Roberts in the 1920s and 30s, Mrs Allibone in the 1940s, and Bernard Heavey in the 1950s, 60s and 70s.<sup>10</sup>

In 1962, Bernard Heavey was resident at Gammons Farm, but also listed was BJC Westcott, sand merchant.<sup>11</sup> In 1963, BJC Westcott and Son, haulage contractors, said to have been based at Gammons Farm, went bankrupt. At this point Basil Jeremiah Claude Westcott and his partner were living at 35, Gammons Lane.<sup>12</sup>

In 1975, planning permission was granted for the establishment of a Council-owned mobile home site, intended as temporary housing, in what became called Gammons Farm Close.<sup>13</sup> The mobile homes have now been removed and the land is currently up for sale. It is hoped that the Council will require an investigation of the site for any remains of Gammons Farm buildings before the land is built upon.

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<sup>1</sup> Ball, Alan W, *Street and Place Names in Watford*, 1973

<sup>2</sup> *Watford Terrier*, 1798

<sup>3</sup> Longman, G, *A Corner of England's Garden*, 1977, vol 2, p 18

<sup>4</sup> Agar, Nigel E, *Behind the Plough*, 2005, p 40

<sup>5</sup> *Watford Tithe Apportionment*, 1844

<sup>6</sup> Agar, Nigel E, 2005, op cit, p 86

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p 86

<sup>8</sup> Jones-Baker, Doris (ed), *Hertfordshire in History*, 2004, p 249-50

<sup>9</sup> *The London Gazette*, 21 November, 1919; and 9 December, 1919

<sup>10</sup> *Kelly's Directories of Watford*, 1901-1974

<sup>11</sup> *Kelly's Directory of Watford*, 1962

<sup>12</sup> *The London Gazette*, 20 September 1963

<sup>13</sup> *West Herts and Watford Observer*, 24 Oct 1975, p 1