

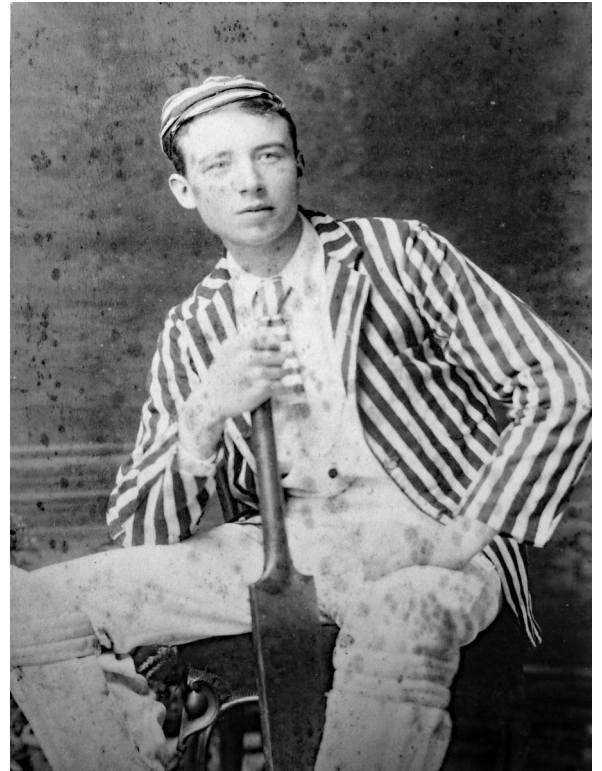
George Gage & The Crown Hotel

By Jenny Hursell

A collection of photos, documents and artefacts from the late 19th century has recently come to light relating to George Gage, a 19th century Southwold publican. Jenny Hursell explains the fascinating story behind them.

The Gages were a well-known family of hoteliers in Lowestoft and north Suffolk, Henry Gage being proprietor of The Crown Hotel which stood on the corner of the High Street and Crown Street in Lowestoft. He had a son, George, born in 1865 at Mutford who in the 1881 census is recorded as being 16, single and a butcher in Crown Street. On Monday 12th September 1881 auctioneers, Messrs Lenny & Smith, listed The Crown Hotel in Southwold High Street for sale at the same time as The Queens Head, Bramfield, and Henry Gage decided that The Crown, advertised as “A Freehold Commercial and Family Hotel with spacious stabling and offices, situate in the centre of town...and enjoying the advantages of Railway Communications”, would be an ideal addition to his property portfolio and, hopefully, provide an outlet and occupation for his lively son.

The Crown, not belonging to any Southwold brewery, had gone through a succession of owners and tenants in the previous half century and had, in fact, been unoccupied for two years in the 1850s. The Gages provided stability being proprietors for twenty four years from 1881 until 1905. However, George was only 16 years old when his father bought the hotel for him and unlikely to provide stability on his own. (A photograph of him in his cricket blazer shows him at about this age.) The previous but one innkeeper, Richard Sage, is recorded in White’s Suffolk as a victualler living at “The Crown family and commercial hotel



Teenage George in his cricket gear and, below, as a successful landlord.



and posting house” and it was that latter element which Henry knew would appeal to his horse-loving son. Richard Sage had managed The Crown with only his wife and two members of staff. Henry knew that a 16 year old, especially one of George’s nature, would need more assistance than that so he increased staff numbers and closely oversaw the running of his new acquisition until his death in 1889.

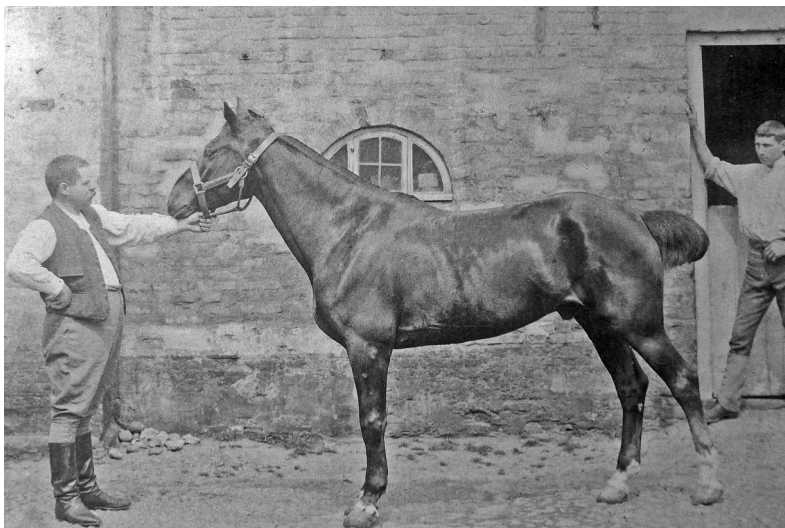
As his father had suspected, George’s interest in the hotel *per se* was minimal. His passion being horses, he threw his energies into expanding the facilities at the rear of The Crown from stabling for post horses to full-blown livery stables. In the kitchen, however, was a young girl, 17 year old Alice Maria

Wilson also originally from Lowestoft and perhaps spotted by Henry as a reliable worker. So it proved. She was efficient and confident and worked her way through the ranks of kitchen and hotel staff to ultimately become the hotel’s manager, albeit the name above the door was George’s. Alice’s family’s legend was that Alice was in charge of the catering for the celebratory party organised to mark Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee in 1887 although the following account from the Ipswich Journal of 24th June 1887 gives the credit to her father:



Alice Maria Wilson, from kitchen maid to hotel manager

The dinner partaken by upwards of 700 persons was held in the grounds kindly lent for the occasion by the Rev. J N F Ewen, and a staff of 35 carvers and 70 waiters attended most assiduously to the wants of the numerous party who seemed in every way delighted by the arrangements made for them, and



George developed the facilities at the rear of the Crown into full-blown livery stables

the liberality of the spread. Each carver’s table had two joints of twenty pounds each of roast and boiled beef, and the course of plum puddings met with an enthusiastic reception - quite hot and of excellent quality. The whole was supplied by Mr Wilson of The Crown Hotel.

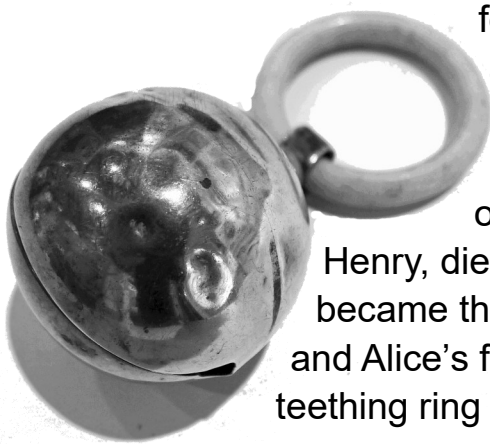
Perhaps Alice herself balked at being in sole charge of catering for so many people and overseeing so many extra staff or perhaps the

idea of a slip of a girl of 23 being responsible for such a prestigious event was too much for Victorian sensibilities and Henry Gage decided to send Alice's father over from Lowestoft. George's granddaughter, Nancy Nevard, maintained that suckling pigs were on the menu that day. As roast beef and plum pudding were also on the menu 10 years later for the Diamond Jubilee street party in 1897 it would seem that that was the traditional fare on such occasions, unless there was a different menu for the top table and the great and the good enjoyed suckling pig instead.

The success of the day perhaps cemented George and Alice's clearly slow-burning relationship because in January the



Baby Dorothy would live to be 100



following year, 7 years after they had met, they married in St Edmund's church and moved out of The Crown to set up home in Anchor Villa, apparently leasing it from the Elmy family. A little over a year after the marriage George's father, Henry, died in March 1889 at the age of 67 and George became the proprietor of The Crown in his own right. George and Alice's first daughter, Daisy, was born in 1890. Her teething ring and pink christening mug were kept as

mementoes of the little girl who died aged only a year and a day in 1891. A second daughter, Dorothy, was born on 6th February 1899 and she defied the era's high infant mortality rates, living until she was 100. George looks a proud father in the photo of him above, standing outside The Crown, infant daughter in his arms, nursemaid, Alice Keddie nearby with the pram.



Daisy's teething ring and christening mug, complete with spelling error.

Meanwhile, business was booming in the hotel and livery stables. Visitor numbers in Southwold had risen thanks to the increasing popularity of seaside breaks and the Southwold Railway which opened in 1879. George benefited from being on the cusp between the heyday of horses and their supersession by the motor car. By 1901 The Crown employed 10 members of staff



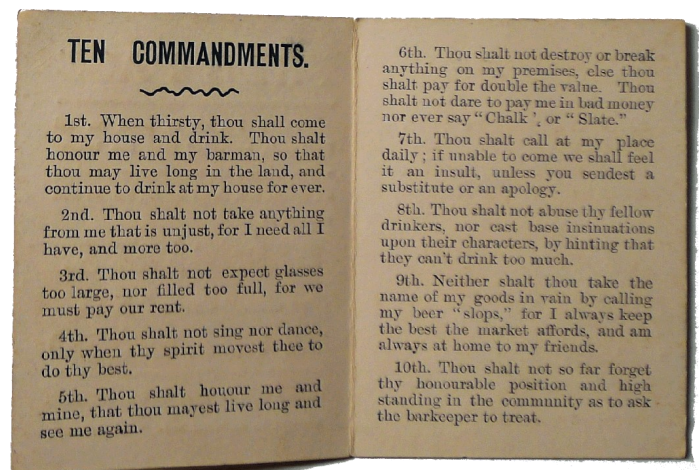
George in his Pony and Trap and the watch and case which he kept clipped to the footplate

other than George and Alice, including Alice's sister, Bertha, as barmaid, Maud Pallant as cook, Thomas Denny as 'Boots' and three ostlers in the stables. (Cutlery inscribed 'Crown Hotel Southwold-Gage' and napery stamped 'Gage 1895' are preserved in the collection. The hotel being well-staffed, George would have had few, if any, qualms about leaving Alice in charge and concentrating on the stables. He had his own horse and a pony and trap both pictured in photographs, the latter being painted by Henry C. Saul as well. In the pony and trap he used to drive to and from the station to meet passengers and their luggage from the train and take them back after their stay in The Crown. The pony and trap was fitted with a large Hunter timepiece in a leather case which clipped to the footplate ensuring that he

was never late for his visitors.

George may have spent his daytimes in the stables but most evenings would find him in the bar. An imposing man, broad and dapper, he was a popular landlord as generous gifts of engraved cigarette and vesta cases testify. He would appear to have fostered a jocular, boozy atmosphere in the bar. Three cards remain bearing the inscription FREE PASS one of which is pictured right.

The Visitors' Book is also indicative of the atmosphere George cultivated in the hotel and of the esteem in which he was held. It is full of effusive entries. Some of the entries are written in doggerel and accompanied by cartoon-like drawings:



We the undersigned hereby declare and make known to the world in general that we are highly satisfied and offer sincere thanks for his generous board and cheerful presence. The grub and attendances are well chosen and the most egotistic man or strictest epicure could not find fault in any way.

*I would like to fill these pages
All about The Crown and Gages.
As for living and the board
It is the best money can afford.
It is hardly elegant to behold
But it is the best in all Southwold.
Our stay at The Crown was over very soon,
From the 12th to the 14th of June.*

There is also a Christmas card to George, bearing a picture of a red chilli pepper and the message "With warmest Xmas wishes from One Hot-un to Another." The Christmas card he received from the Mayor and Mayoress, Mr and Mrs Edgar Pipe in 1904 is, unsurprisingly, more restrained, featuring the town crest whilst the cards George sent, rather like Royalty, featured himself striding across the High Street.



The signature of theatrical giant Gordon Craig is among those featured in the Crown visitors' book.

George's bonhomie was not limited solely to the bar. He was a member of the local branches of the Masons and the Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes as his extant membership of the former and an 1898 photograph of him with other members of the Buffs outside the former Centre Cliff Hotel testify.

Popular as he was, George was no businessman. Lacking the guidance of his father he compounded his over-generosity by failing to see which way the wind was blowing. Like many others at the time he thought that the motor car was a passing fad and that the horse would continue to be king. He decided to invest more money in the livery stables. It was a mistake. In 1905 he was declared bankrupt and left Southwold with Alice and Dorothy to set up home in Newmarket where, of course, his passion for horses could be satisfied to



Some of the gifts lavished on George by his cutomers.

the hilt. He and Alice took on The White Lion there but with Alice as the licensee. Sadly, George died only seven years later on 8th July 1912. He was 46. Alice soldiered on at The White Lion. On 18th February 1925 their daughter, Dorothy, then 26, married Percy Nevard, a man considerably older than she was. They initially lived in the pub with Alice where their only daughter, Nancy, was born on 1st January 1926. After a while Dorothy, Percy and Nancy bought a house on Crockfords Road, Newmarket. Nancy trained as a teacher at Matlock Training College and then returned to Newmarket to the primary school at nearby Cheveley where she subsequently became head.

Alice Gage lived to the age of 97, dying on 1st January 1961. Percy Nevard had also died by then so when Cheveley school was faced with closure Nancy took redundancy and she and her mother decided to return to Dorothy's roots, buying a property in Seaview Road, Reydon, and bringing all their mementoes of George and Alice's lives at The Crown back with them. They remained in Seaview Road for the rest of their lives. Alice's genes had clearly been inherited, Dorothy living to be over 100 and her daughter, Nancy, to 86. Dorothy and Nancy's remains were taken back to Newmarket where Percy Nevard is buried but George and Alice are buried in Southwold, in St Edmund's churchyard, alongside their first daughter, Daisy.

This article originally appeared in the Journal of the Southwold Museum and Historical Society 2018 and is reproduced by permission of the author, Jenny Hursell, and with thanks to Sonja Cooper for making her collection of documents and artefacts available.