

A LAD FROM SCHOLES MEETS QUEEN VICTORIA .

During the lockdown I spent some of my walks in Wigan Cemetery (no trouble with social distancing), on one walk I spotted the grave of Robert Richards - the inscription read Mayor of Wigan .I couldn't resist finding out more, and his is a fascinating story - taking him from Scholes to Buckingham Palace. Robert's early life had not been easy. He was born in Wallgate in 1831 ,the family moved to Scholes presumably be to near to his maternal Grandparents , his Grandfather was licensee of ' The Harp' , this public house was to play a major part in his later life . He was educated at St. Catherine School sadly his mother died when Robert was just 7 years old. The following is brief look at his story it also lead me to look at the other licensed premises in Wigan and in Scholes in particular . readers will remember many of the public houses mentioned.

In 1890s there were over 60 Public houses in the Scholes area alone not mention Umpteen others across the borough, my Father was born in such an establishment "The Kings Arms." However story this centred on one particular pub on the Scholes thoroughfare itself "The Harp" and its Landlord Robert Richards.who was to serve as Wigan Mayor for 2 consecutive terms. Whilst a Conservative himself, I doubt if he thought he would be mentioned in the same breath as Sir Randolph Churchill, Sir Winston Churchill's father . Sir Randolph had made a speech (House of Commons 1892)on the dangers of alcohol calling everything concerned with the trade as devilish ,strange, when both he and his son enjoyed a tippie or three ! Robert Richards was the licensee of The Harp at the time of his Mayorship , because he was involved in the licensing trade, he was the first man from that trade to become Mayor, his appointment however wasn't welcomed by everyone particularly the temperance movement , and many mainly from the nonconformist churches objected.

Robert himself was a prominent member of nearby St. Catherine's Church but this did nothing to stop the criticism .The significance of Robert's position did not go unnoticed outside borough either, Incidentally the office of Mayor Wigan goes back to 1240, our town has indeed a long and rich history. Rev.C F Alked a nonconformist Minister delivered a sermon in Preston on 31st October 1897 primarily against the appointment of the Lord Mayor of Liverpool who like Robert Richards was involved in the licensing trade. he said in his sermon particularly regarding Liverpool where protests were being voiced in response to the similar situation of a "brewer and publican" being proposed to fulfil the post of next Lord Mayor of Liverpool. During the sermon he urged the churches of Liverpool to boycott their proposed Lord Mayor saying that "the city would never disgrace themselves by allowing a liquor seller to preside over their meetings"The Reverend Gentleman continued his sermon, referring to the quote by Sir Randolph Churchill which had called the liquor business a devilish and destructive trade, he continued by saying that decent

people could not help but be ashamed that a man engaged in such a trade had been engineered into the mayoral chair, as a consequence of which Liverpool would become contemptible in the eyes of the great cities of England. He proceeded this by a tirade against our town -“ The second city of the empire had fallen to the level of WIGAN, and like that drink cursed town had found its chief magistrate is a publican”. I ought to explain at that time anyone elected Mayor automatically became a magistrate. Robert Richards first term in office 1897 was to be very eventful this was the year of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee .On 23rd June 1897 he attended Buckingham Palace and was formally presented to her. Six days after meeting Queen Victoria he was presented to and dined with, the Duke of York.

The following March 1898 during his second term of office, had the honour of being presented to the Prince of Wales (later to become King Edward VII) this was during the Prince's visit to stay at Garswood Hall the home of the Prince's friend Lord Gerard, not bad going for a lad brought up in Scholes !

In 1897 Robert also played a part in one of the biggest retailers in the country he and the then Chief of Police Captain Bell gave a character reference in connection Michael Marks application for naturalisation as result of their intervention it was granted on the 5th of May 1897 .

I thought it would interesting to take look at licensed premises in Scholes at a different time ,fast forward 53 years to 1950. From Scholes traffic lights to Greenough St. traffic lights a distance of only a few yards, in that short distance there were 12 public houses- The Bluebell. The Kings Arms .The Crown and Sceptre. the Black Swan. The White Swan. The Windmill. The Fleece. The Angel. The Shamrock. The Conservative Club. The Harp(now rebuilt) . The Rose and Crown always known as the Dust Hole , the reason it had such a nickname it was frequented by miners coming home from the work in the days before pit head baths and consequently would shed some coal dust . The taproom (public bar) in Wigan usually known as 'The Vault 'a woman would never, and I mean never be seen in the vault ,it would have been considered sacrilege while single man would never enter in the 'snug'. Most pubs had a 'singing room ' complete with a piano and would hold a Mugs Concert every Saturday, a forerunner of karaoke .In Wigan County Borough music was not allowed on Sundays while it was permitted in Urban District areas this lead to a ridicules farce of pubs yards apart having to obey different rules ; an example The Crispin on Birkett Bank would have been in trouble if they allowed a note to be played on 'The Sabbath',less than 25 yards away in Higher Ince the pubs would be rocking! Another strange thing younger readers may find unbelievable, in all the rooms it was waiter service only, on the back of the seating, dotted round the room there were bells ; when you rang the bell, in would pop a waitress or waiter- tray in hand to take your order and delivered back to you in short order. Drinks were a penny extra in the room to help pay the cost of the waiter service .

An other anomaly, some pubs were ' Ale Houses' meaning they could only sell beer and porter(stout) ' The Dust Hole' was in that category, several landlords applied for a full license, on

one occasion the application was refused, reason given by The Justices was - The premises only had outside toilets !

I'll finish my story with that refrain heard (not always welcomed) thousands of times in Wigan Pubs not least from Mrs.Brown in The Park Hotel -

"Time Ladies and Gentlemen Please "

Sources Wigan Archive Service.