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John Kennett looks at the history of an old village pub.



Pub
sign in
1993

Village pubs were established to serve drinks and hospitality to the local community and to travellers which is why the most successful pubs were, and still are, on main roads between important places. Thus it was that a pub, recently known as The Porcupine, was opened in 1688 on low lying ground in the hamlet of Mottingham alongside the road from London to Chislehurst and beyond. Mottingham was sparsely populated and there would have been more farm animals than people with the main areas of habitation being on the higher ground in what is now known as Mottingham Lane.

In 1726 the licensee is recorded as Joseph Everson and the pub is marked on Rocque's map of 1741-5. Ann Harris ran The Porcupine around 1841. From 1845 to 1848 it was in the hands of John Knight, formerly a local farmer, who in that time had a child baptised at St Nicholas' church at Chislehurst as there was then no church in Mottingham. Training for prize fighting occurred here and the famous pugilist Tom Cribb entertained the crowds in the early

1800s. Edward Davis is recorded as a 'Victualler' on the 1851 census and also living on the premises is ostler John Ellis who would be responsible for the stables attached to the premises.



Victorian Porcupine and horse trough in 1909; remains of first pub to left

Between 1858 and 1868 when David Golding was licensee. He also held the post of an 'Overseer of the parish' when the population was slowly increasing following the construction of the Dartford Loop Railway in 1866 with the present Mottingham Station then known as 'Eltham'. Alongside the solitary pub were erected short roads of terrace houses with the names Devonshire, Dorset and Portland. This was a boon as it brought more customers to the pub which had been rebuilt as a three storey wooden structure some years before the railway came. Parish Vestry meetings were held here on occasions from 1858 to 1878.



Porcupine forecourt, old stables, horse trough and pub sign across the road

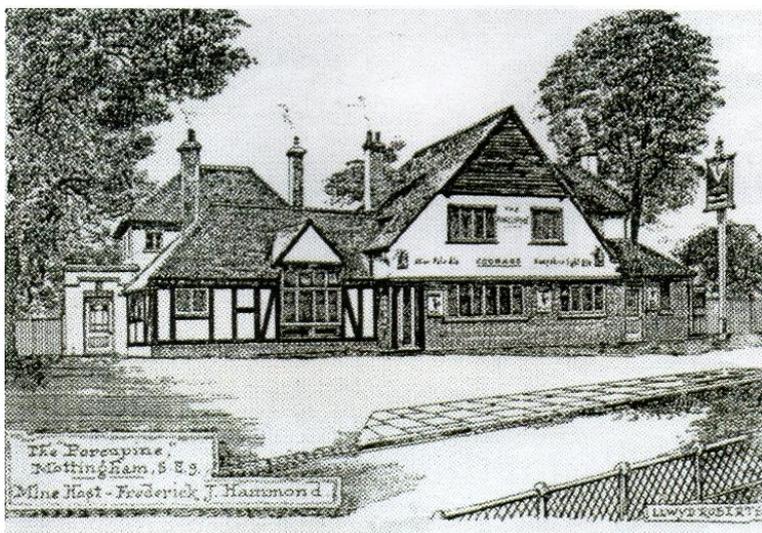
The 1871 census records the licensee as Charles Howard, and a Mary Knight. A memoir by a local resident talks of 'Two old cottages adjoining The Porcupine where Mrs Knight made rustic chairs' — perhaps she lived in the former pub premises. The memoir also records 'croquet being played by young people on the bowling green at this time', which shows how the pub catered for leisure pursuits for all ages.

John Cam is described as a 56 year old 'publican' on the 1881 census and the 50 year old ostler, William James, had the benefit of accommodation on the premises. Cam was at the Porcupine from 1874 to 1891. During his tenure the nearby Fairy Hall property (now site of Eltham College) was sold out of private hands to the Royal Naval School. It opened in 1889 with a Royal visit from the Duke of York, later to be King George V, preceded by a procession in open carriages through the village, which was increasing in size with the building of detached houses in West Park.

In 1900 another Royal procession passed the pub and through the village which was 'en fete' for the visit of the Prince and Princess of Wales to the Royal Naval School, where she presented prizes to the scholars. The licensee from then and for the next ten years was William Lomas who had previously spent 15 years at the Tiger's Head at Catford.

A useful amenity outside the pub was the wooden horse trough, which would be used by horses on their way south with the two steep hills towards Chislehurst to negotiate. The Royal Artillery drag hounds came this way and were seen refreshing themselves here. Remembering the trough one resident recorded, 'Through being too saucy we found ourselves sitting in it. Very cooling, I must say!'

In the early 1920s it was decided by Messrs Noakes, the London brewers and owners of the pub that it should be replaced by a more substantial property. New designs were accepted and the old pub demolished with the aid of a traction engine and a long chain. Despite London press speculation no historic items were unearthed or old oak timber exposed as the building was considered worn out and only about 100 years old.



The Porcupine after rebuilding, drawn by Llwyd Roberts

During rebuilding, the pub business continued in a small wooden former stable building on the forecourt, which had also been used as a barber's shop. In 1927 this became a church when services were held by the newly founded Roman Catholic parish of Our Lady Help of Christians. The hut measured 7 yards by 5 yards, was suitable for 35 worshippers but accommodated about 60 on most Sundays with 75 at Easter. Due to successful wins on sweep stakes, money was donated for a new church on the corner of Leysdown Road opened in 1933.



Old stables used as a pub during the rebuilding in 1922

On the forecourt of the Porcupine, from 1936 to 1940, stood the Kent County Council mobile library van where books were issued on a Tuesday afternoon between 2 and 6pm and from 6-7.30pm on Friday evenings. A permanent library opened at 65 Mottingham Road (now Albins Funerals) in 1940. In December 1936 the Mottingham & District Horticultural Society held a supper and smoking concert with roast beef for 60 guests followed by a two hour entertainment and a concert of traditional songs.

During the Second World War, between 1939 and 1945, some severe aerial attacks were sustained in the village and the situation was bad enough for the Women's Voluntary Service to postpone their meetings at The Porcupine. Two V1 'doodlebug' hits in 1944 occurred near the pub which caused some damage but not too drastic.

Between 1960 and 1970 the licensee was Alfred Torbert who with his wife Doris had previously run a house in Bermondsey. He was a member of the British Driving Association, drove in the Regents Park Parade and bred Anglo-Arab horses in the back yard of his pub!



At this time, 'improvements' were made to the nearby War Memorial which made it no more than a traffic roundabout at the junction of Mottingham Road and West Park and it was impossible for the annual Service of Remembrance in November to be held there as it had been since the early 1920s. Since that time successive licensees have allowed the service to be held on the pub forecourt with traffic stopped for the laying of wreaths at the memorial.



Remembrance Sunday 2003

In 2010 the owners decided to end a long tradition and rename The Porcupine as The Elm Tree which they describe as a public house and carvery.

