

The Rookery and Somerstown

Two of Havant's former slum areas



Somerstown Cottages in Fairfield Road circa 1955.

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May 2015

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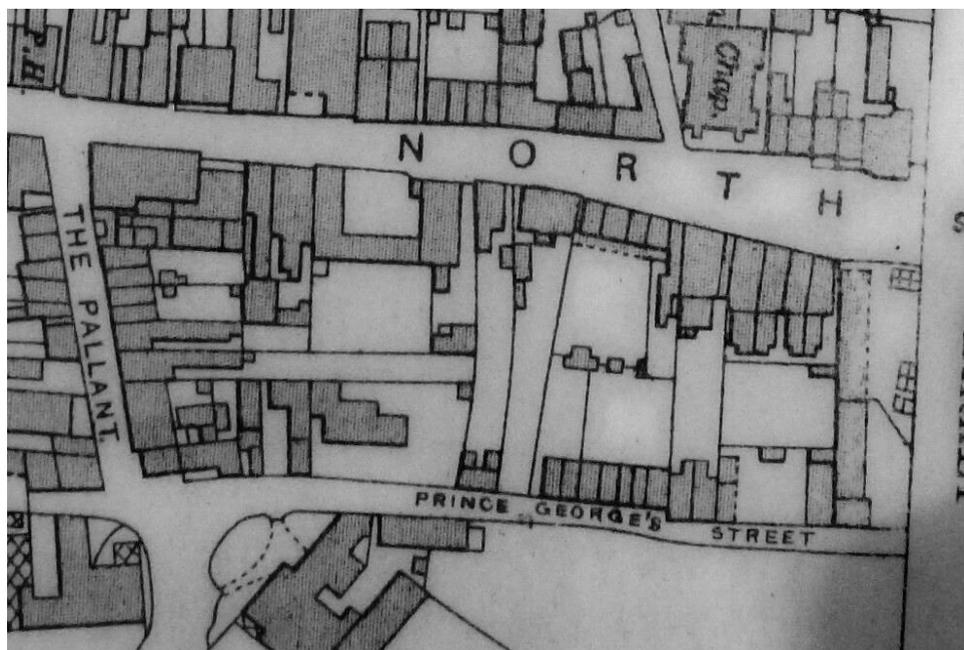
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THE ROOKERY



Location of the Rookery – Prince George Street.

The area of Havant known in the second half of the nineteenth century as the Rookery lay on the western side of Prince George Street, where the entrance to the Waitrose car park is today.

The name is of some interest for it was bestowed upon many slum districts because of their supposed resemblance to rooks' colonies, i.e. roughly and precariously built, densely overcrowded, noisy and fractious.

Not all Rookery names denoted slums, of course. In rural areas a house, field, or farm might simply be named after an actual rooks' colony in the

neighbourhood, and there is a local example at Lumley near Emsworth where a house called The Rookery existed until the mid-twentieth century, the name being preserved in a modern housing development on the site.

In urban areas rookeries were not just slums; they were specifically associated with crime, vice and depravity, and in them could be found the lowest, cheapest, type of common lodging house (where the sexes slept unsegregated) as well as thieves' dens and brothels.

The most notorious Rookeries were in London and some idea of their character may be found in a book published in 1850, *The Rookeries of London*, by Thomas Beames (text available online). Beames identified six principal Rookeries, the largest and most notorious being St Giles, just north-east of Charing Cross Road. Others were to be found at Jacob's Island in Bermondsey, made famous by Charles Dickens in *Oliver Twist*, Soho, Ratcliff Highway, Westminster and Saffron Hill near Holborn.

Just how common the name was outside London is uncertain, but there was a Rookery in Southampton, located just south of Hoglands Park, which was well known for its brothels. There is, however, some mystery as to how Havant's Rookery acquired its name. It is almost certainly not an old name as the earliest reference to it that has been found is in the Havant Board of Heath minutes for 1854 where it is recorded that a letter has been received '*asking for a lamp at the Rookery*'. It is therefore likely that the name was coined at about the time that Beames's book was published and when its dubious connotations were well known. But why did Havant's Rookery get its reputation?

The 1842 Tithe Map of Havant shows the area of the future Rookery contained four small plots, (Nos. 484–487), that totalled little more than half an acre, with three different owners and three different occupiers who can be identified in the 1841 census returns as a bricklayer, a gardener and a shoemaker. But as each of these plots consisted only of a single cottage with a garden the area at this time could not be remotely described as overcrowded.

Unfortunately, in both the 1851 and 1861 census returns, it is very difficult to identify precisely which properties belong to the Rookery for no distinction

is made between it and the Pallant and, to make matters worse, in 1851 the enumerator moved back and forth between the Pallant and North Street instead of dealing with each thoroughfare separately. It is clear however that this whole district was becoming ever more densely populated by such people as labourers, gardeners, and laundresses and their often large families.

It is only in 1871 that we get a proper snapshot of what the Rookery was like, because this time the census returns quite clearly identify what properties belong to it. As the Rookery now consists of seven properties it is likely that the four separate plots shown on the Tithe Map had been united, but when and by whom?

It is most likely that development took place after the arrival of the railway in 1847 with the most likely candidate for developer being the owner and occupier of Plot 487 on the Tithe Map, Thomas Holton. Although, in 1842, only a humble bricklayer Holton later became (like his elder brother Edward) a builder and the owner of several properties in Havant and Warblington. Holton died in 1866 and a copy of his will survives in Hampshire Record Office. The will is unfortunately a brief and not very informative document that fails to list individually all his various property holdings, but some idea of his prosperity may be gathered from the fact that one of his bequests was *'all my pictures and paintings'*. Was this wealth derived, in part, from the rents he gathered as landlord of the Rookery? Unfortunately this must remain speculation.

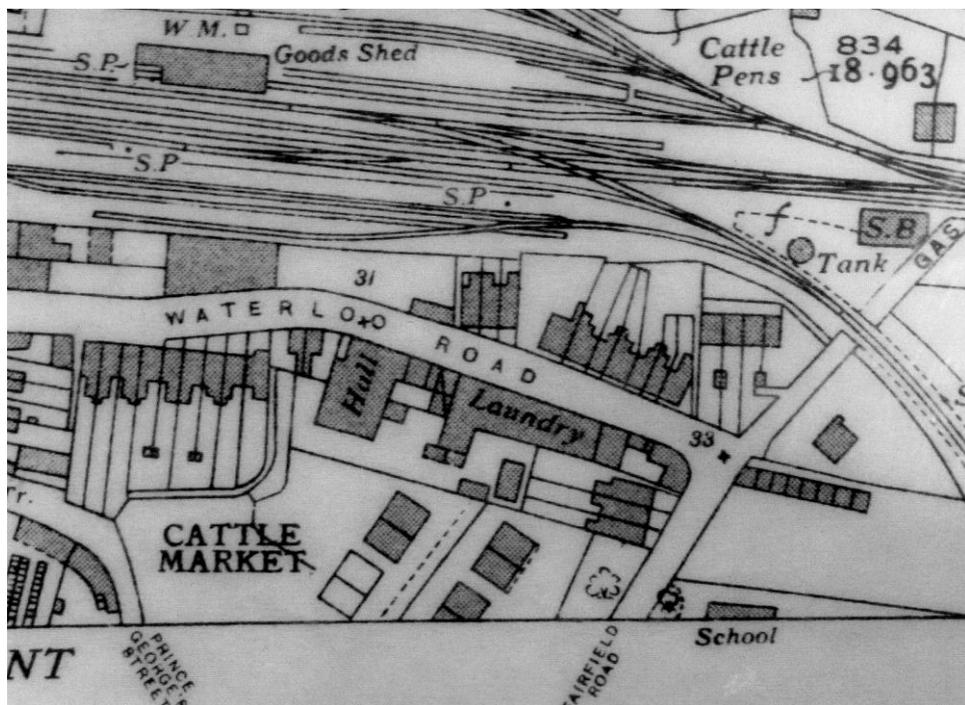
The 1871 census returns show that the Rookery's seven properties housed a total of thirty-one people whose occupations included laundress, carpenter, groom, railway porter and engine driver, although this was almost certainly not the driver of a railway locomotive but someone in charge of a stationary steam engine. Only one of the properties, containing ten occupants, might be described as overcrowded.

In view of the facts we have, this does not appear to have been an area benighted by grinding poverty or riddled with vice, and by the time of the 1881 census this is even less the case, for now the properties contain a mere

twenty people, whilst the very name Rookery has disappeared, to be replaced by the more respectable-sounding Prince George Street.

SOMERSTOWN

In the third quarter of the nineteenth century Somerstown was probably Havant's largest and most overcrowded slum. Like the Rookery, Somerstown is not an old local name but its first recorded use appears to be in the 1861 census returns. It is most likely that the name was bestowed upon the area owing to its supposed resemblance to a Somerstown elsewhere, and there are three possible candidates: the Somerstowns of Chichester, Portsmouth and London.



Somerstown Cottages (Bug Row) – the row of eight cottages in Fairfield Road at the top of Waterloo Road.

Chichester's Somerstown grew up between 1810 and 1840 as a planned development of brick and flint terraced cottages for artisan workers. The

origin of the name here is unknown although it may derive from its proximity to the much older Summersdale. Somerstown's poor drainage and sanitation made it by far the least healthy part of the city in the second half of the nineteenth century, but it was never a slum. Indeed, many of the original houses survive today as perfectly habitable dwellings. For this reason it is unlikely to have provided the inspiration for the name of Havant's Somerstown.

There is no mystery concerning the name of Portsmouth's Somerstown for it was developed in the 1820s on land owned by a Mr Somers. It was initially a fashionable district where, as late as 1851, there were *'genteel houses'* available to let. It was only by the 1860s, when it was described as *'a large and increasing district'* that it began its slide down the social scale, and only in the mid-1870s do we find references to *'the poor of Somerstown'*. Havant's Somerstown was well established by this date, so the Portsmouth Somerstown is also an unlikely model.

London's Somers Town – the area of NW1 between Euston and St Pancras stations – is, however, much more promising as a pattern for Havant's Somerstown. Again, we know the origin of its name as the development was commenced in the 1770s on land belonging to the Somers family, and again it was initially aimed at the well-to-do, but for some reason it stalled in the 1790s leaving many of the grand houses unfinished. Somers Town became a somewhat marginal area during the early nineteenth century, becoming particularly popular with French and Spanish political refugees. But it was not a slum; at least not until the arrival of the railway and the building of Euston station in 1837. Not only did this displace large numbers of people who decamped to Somers Town, it attracted yet more who came to work on the railway itself. So, from the late 1830s Somers Town became a classic Victorian slum and one, moreover, known particularly for its railway connections. It is this association with the railway, I think, that is the key, for it is almost certain that the creation of Havant's Somerstown was the direct result of the arrival of the railway in 1847 and the building of the original station and New Lane signal box very close by.

Certainly there was not much on the site of Havant's future Somerstown in 1842 when the Tithe Map shows that the area comprised just two small plots (Nos. 366 and 367) totalling just over three-quarters of an acre. One of the plots was an arable field and the other a cottage and garden occupied by one James Wilson who, according to the 1841 census returns, was an agricultural labourer residing there with his wife, two children and a lodger, a total of just five people. By 1851, however, although Wilson and his family were still there, seven more dwellings had been erected around them and in total these eight properties contained forty-two people including one household of seven and another of nine. By 1861, when the name Somerstown had been coined, there were nine properties containing forty-five inhabitants, hardly a dramatic increase, but by 1871 there were fourteen properties with no fewer than sixty-six occupants, five of these households having at least one member employed on the railway.

We have little idea of what conditions were like in Somerstown in the 1860s and 70s, but in the Board of Health minutes for June 1862 we get a record of a complaint made against one Somerstown resident, John Allen, for slaughtering horses in his yard there. Allen gives assurances that he will cease the practice, and so he did, but a few months later the Board received more complaints about him *'bringing horse flesh in an unfit state upon his premises at Somers Town'* and he was threatened with legal action if he should persist.

Not surprisingly, in April 1876, Havant's Medical Officer of Health, Dr Aldersley, reported to the Board that there was 'a good deal of sickness here' and plans were made for a street drain to be laid from Somerstown to link up with the main sewer in North Street.

As in the case of the Rookery there is no direct evidence for who may have been responsible for the Somerstown development. On the Tithe Map and Award both Plots 366 and 367 are recorded as belonging to Francis Woodcock and although there were at this time two Francis Woodcocks in Havant (almost certainly father and son) it is more likely that the landowner was Francis Woodcock senior, who in 1842 was 72 years of age; rather than the younger, a pork butcher living in East Street. Woodcock senior died in

1849 and although his furniture and effects were auctioned off, his lands were not and as there is no trace of a surviving will it is not clear what became of his various properties that were distributed widely throughout the parish. Presumably these properties would have passed to his heirs and it is probably significant that we find in the 1851 census returns two unmarried sisters, Mary and Matilda, both described as '*proprietors of houses*', living with Francis Woodcock junior. Perhaps it was they who inherited the Somerstown lands in 1849 and decided to exploit their new potential.

The 1860s and 70s were the period of Somerstown's worst overcrowding. The 1881 census returns show a reduction to nine properties and thirty-four inhabitants, almost half the number of a decade earlier, and by 1891 there were just seven properties with twenty-six inhabitants. It is most likely, therefore, that as with the Rookery the old dwellings were demolished at some time in the late 1870s and new, more substantial, ones built. These survived until the mid-twentieth century when the existing block of flats replaced them. Unlike the Rookery, which has fallen into oblivion, the old name has survived – or one of them has, for it must be remembered that Somerstown had the alternative and perhaps more commonly used name of Bug Row which I have found in a document as early as 1870. It was also the name that appeared in press reports as the address of Somerstown's most unfortunate resident, the young Percy Knight Searle who was brutally murdered in the nearby Pallant in 1889. As to the origins – beyond the obvious – of this particular name however we have no clues whatsoever.

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