

## **The Fairford Old Club**

In the Wilts and Gloucestershire Standard of 6 June 1868 the following piece appeared:

“FAIRFORD OLD CLUB – The 118th anniversary of this friendly society was celebrated on Whit Monday last, at the White Hart, as usual. The members assembled together soon after ten o'clock, and after answering to their names formed a procession to attend divine service at the parish church, headed by the Purton Brass Band, who gave every satisfaction by their performances during the day.”

The Fairford Old Club was established in 1750 and was one of the earliest and longest-lived friendly societies in Gloucestershire. Friendly societies (also known as benefit societies) were formed by local communities to provide financial support to its members in times of need. They received money from subscriptions and donations and disbursed money to individuals when needed, for example during times of financial hardship, death or sickness. In this way many of the poorer residents were assisted, especially as a substantial portion of the society's funds came from charitable donations by the more wealthy residents, some of whom were made honorary members. The friendly societies were eventually superseded by insurance companies but a few friendly societies still exist today although their function is now more ceremonial or social rather than offering practical support.

The Fairford Old Club assembled once a year, apparently always in the White Hart, to report on business, attend church service, and have a good lunch. The club was led by a 'Father' and had a small number of trustees, a treasurer and a secretary. In 1868 the 'Father' was Charles Herbert, a seedsman; the trustees were Fairford's vicar the Reverend Francis William Rice, Dr. James Cornwall, and farmer Alexander Iles; the treasurer was district auditor George Symmons White; and the secretary was shoemaker Robert Cowley. The club officials were assisted by a committee chosen from other members of the club.

Newspaper reports of various annual meetings of the club mention “sumptuous and substantial dinners” after which followed toasts and speeches and several reports reveal that the social phase of the meeting extended well into the evening. The parade through the town to and from the church was accompanied by a brass band although it seems that the bands usually had to be hired from outside Fairford but at the 1860 meeting the Fairford Juvenile Drum and Fife Band supplied the music. The parade drew large crowds of Fairford residents and visitors who came to the town just to watch the procession.

It is apparent that the Fairford Old Club was not just supporting Fairford residents as the report at the annual meeting in 1872 shows. Fairford residents only accounted for £41 7 shillings and 2 pence of the total disbursement of £123 6 shillings; the rest of the money was disbursed to various people in Meysey Hampton, Marston Meysey, Kempsford, Blunsdon, Quenington, Chaxhill, Worting in Hampshire and London. Presumably some of these people were former residents of Fairford who had since moved away but still maintained their membership of the club.

The Fairford Old Club is mentioned in at least four wills made by Fairford residents. John Lerner, cordwainer (1762); John Tackley, yeoman (1773), and Charles King (1810) each bequeathed to family members the £5 that they would receive from the club at their death. However, William Carter, mealman, directed that whatever he was entitled to at his death in 1794 should be added to the common stock of the club.

The very nature of these friendly societies, being funded as they were by subscriptions and charitable donations and the unpredictability of how much of their funds would be needed each year is reflected in the financial accounts of the Fairford Old Club. In 1862 the club had 147 members with ready funds of just £165. By 1865 the club had lost two of its members but its funds had increased to £214. The financial situation improved and in 1867 it disbursed £123 10 shillings for sickness and funerals and had £475 in credit and a year later had capital of £550. However the membership of the club declined after about 1850 as more and more people were using the more reliable large insurance companies. This is reflected in the number of people attending the Fairford Old Club's annual dinner: 170 in 1850; about 60 in 1870; and just 57 in 1872. The report for 1871 shows that there 90 members and 15 honorary members and that the club had a capital of £646 5 shillings; £500 of which was held in stocks, £106 in the Post Office Savings Bank and £40 5 shillings received at the annual meeting. In the same year £92 5 shillings was disbursed.

The fluctuations in the funding and expenditure of the club continued right up until its closure when it was dissolved by statutory instrument on 20 January 1879 at which point it had 56 members and just £310 to its credit but for almost 130 years the Fairford Old Club had provided some measure of support to many of the residents of the town and beyond.