

Wokingham Remembers

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SIMONDS

Hop along to discover brewing, beer & banks

Walking through any town or village in Berkshire between 1830 and 1960, you could not avoid the name of Simonds and their hop leaf logo: Simonds Banks and, especially, Simonds Beer were everywhere. The name is particularly associated with Reading, but as local historian DAVID FORD explains, the family were really from Wokingham Borough



THE Simonds family were the personal face of a huge business empire throughout the 19th and most of the 20th centuries.

Their huge Reading-based Seven Bridges brewery, with its high billowing chimneys, would have been well-known throughout the county. Even today, many remember it, under the later name of Courage. The site is now the Oracle Shopping Centre and it's hard to believe it was ever the hive of industry that turned out 200,000 barrels of beer every year.

The family origins begin in the 13th century, when Christian de Wudecride was living at Woodcraze Manor, where Wokingham Family Golf is on the southern edge of our town.

The family took their name from his son, Simon.

The main branch continued there and their lands were eventually inherited by the Palmers of Palmer School fame. However, it was the younger branches who really prospered.

With little inheritance coming their way, younger sons had to fight to make their way in the World, often with great success. One younger branch of the Simonds ended up in Earley, renting the mansion of Erleigh Court (in the Sidmouth Grange Close area).

The son of the house, William, managed to get himself a position at the Court of Elizabeth I. One can easily imagine him spending his life in London palaces, saving money to buy a small estate. He eventually settled at Hurst, which became the Simonds' spiritual home. His youngest grandson, Thomas, followed him to the Royal Court, helping Royal visitors as 'Page of the Presence' to

James I's queen.

Later, he was Keeper of the Manor Walke in Windsor Forest. He lived in a fine moated manor (now under Virginia Water), looking after the King's deer. His elder brother, William, remained in Hurst and Barkham.

His seventh son, John, moved into Wokingham, so may have turned to industry. Might he have been an early brewer?

John had a family of 14 children: a busy household. Instead of becoming a Royal servant, his youngest son, Thomas, married his fortune: the rich heiress of Thomas Webb of Arborfield. Was she related to the later Webb brewers of Wokingham?

Their sons, Thomas and William were the fathers of three men of great entrepreneurial spirit who established the Simonds' place in Berkshire history.

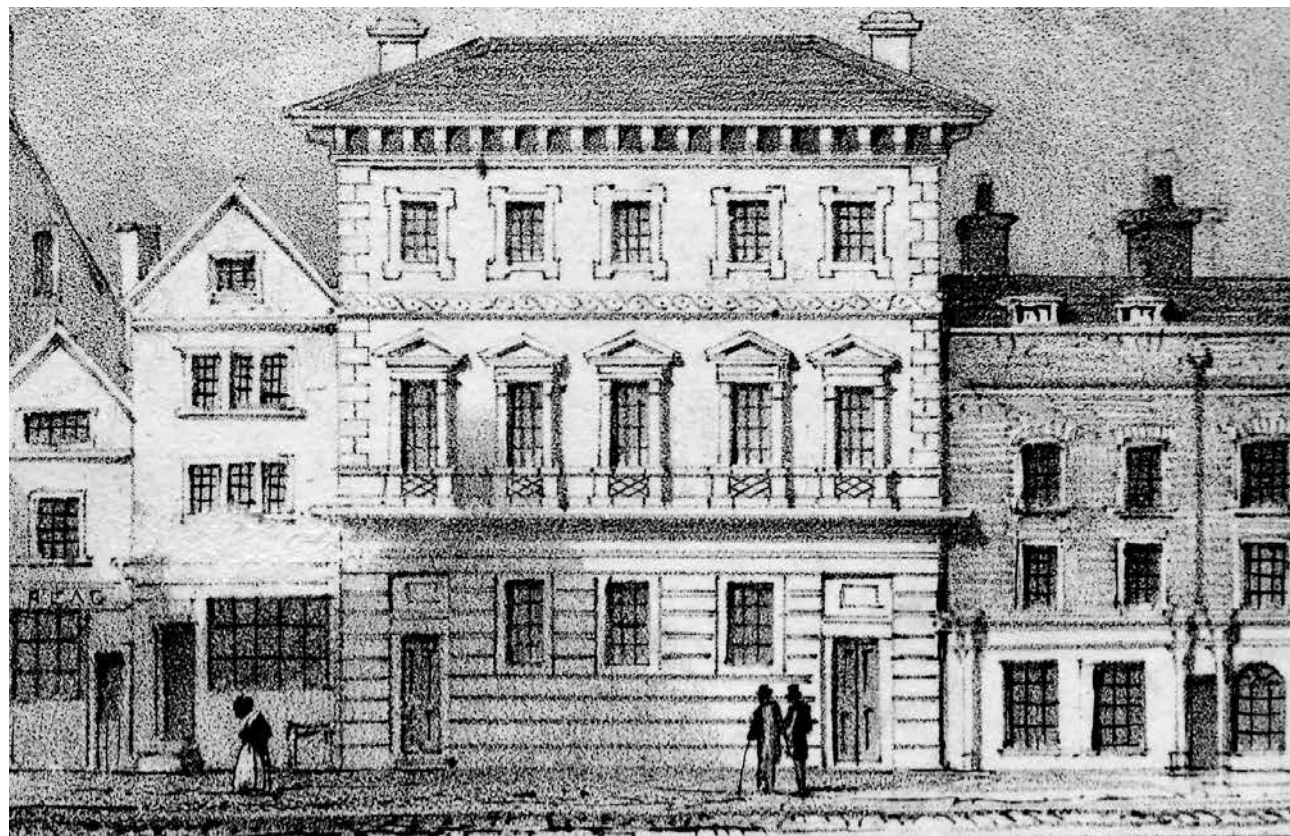
Thomas was the miller at Sindlesham Mill (now the Moat House Hotel).

William, as the younger brother, moved to Reading where he set up a malting business. His son, William Blackall Simonds,

turned this into Simonds' Brewery (later H & G Simonds & Co Ltd) in 1785.

The large amounts of cash he handled encouraged him to diversify into banking. In 1814, he established the Simonds' Bank in King Street, Reading with his cousins, John & Charles, sons of his Uncle Thomas. He handed over the brewery to his son, Blackall, and, when he died, was buried in the Simonds family plot in Hurst churchyard.

William's cousins carried on at the bank, naming it J & C Simonds & Co. Their first branch outside Reading was set up on Market Day in The Roebuck pub in Wokingham. In 1855 they opened proper



Above: an engraving of the old Simonds Bank in King Street, Reading. Below: Thomas Simonds business base was Sindlesham Mill. Top left: William Blackall, the founder of the Simons Brewery, which was symbolised by the famous hop leaf, pictured below left.

premises in the Market Place, when "Withers brought the money by railway and we commenced business in the new shop".

Their family estate was at Newland House in Sindlesham. John Simonds II enjoyed the life of a country gentleman there, whilst Charles II worked at the Reading bank. One story tells how John and the Garth Hunt chased a deer right into the centre of Reading! He decided to visit his brother and ensure profits were high.

The bank staff were quite shocked when he turned up in full hunting pink.

The bank prospered under later generations who were also well-known for their support of the Wokingham Agricultural Show. By the time it merged with Barclay's in 1913, there were 12 Simonds branches, including Crowthorne, Twyford and Wargrave.

Meanwhile, with the relaxation of licensing laws in 1830, Blackall Simonds was able to open up pubs all over the county.

Survivors in Wokingham include the



Emmbrook Inn, Old Leathern Bottle, Crispin and Victoria Arms. Then there were the Bulls in Arborfield, Barkham and Sonning, the George & Dragon (Swallowfield), Black Boy (Shinfield), Castle (Hurst), George (Loddon Bridge), Three Tuns (Earley) and many others.

The company became the biggest brewery in the county town. It thrived, again under the guidance of several generations of younger sons, brought into the business as the elder lines, living in Reading, Caversham and Bradfield, failed.

They even had to send to New York for two of the American branch to return home and repopulate the family.

Eric Simonds, the son of one of these men, bought up breweries across the south of England, bringing the number of pubs to over 1,400.

As a newlywed, he chose to move back to the rural idylls of Wokingham where the family had begun.

He and his wife set up home in Pensdell, on Murdoch Road, where Duncan Simonds, the head of the brewery when it merged with Courage, was born.

In early 1920, they moved to Mertonford, among what were then the fields of the Easthampstead Road. They were very happy there for 10 years, but then moved away.

After Eric's death in 1953, his wife returned to the area, living at 'Handpost' in Swallowfield for another 16 years.

Today, the brewery and the bank are no more, but Wokingham should be proud of its connections with a family who brought employment to thousands of Berkshire people for nearly 200 years.

■ Many thanks to the Simonds Family Archive for providing information & images for this article.

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