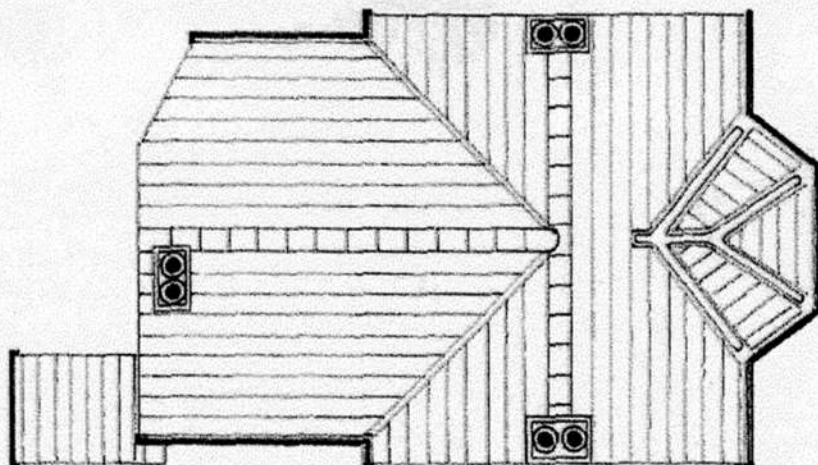


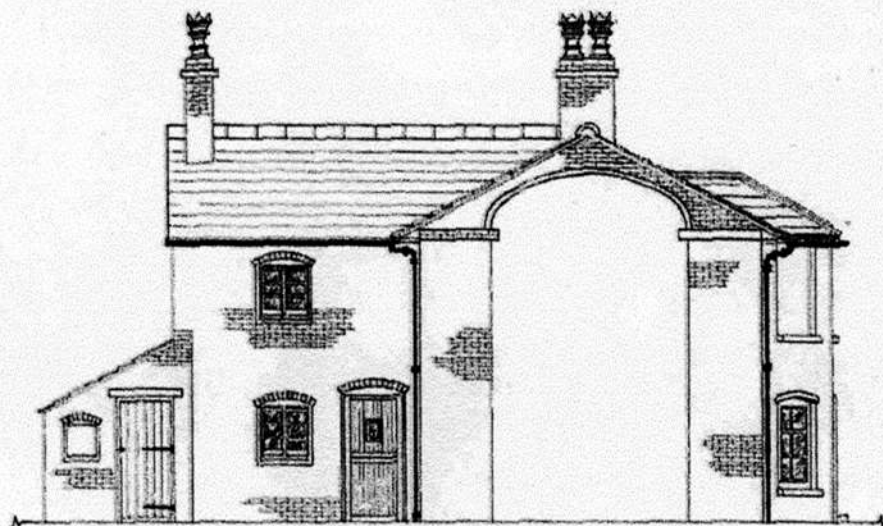
Plan View



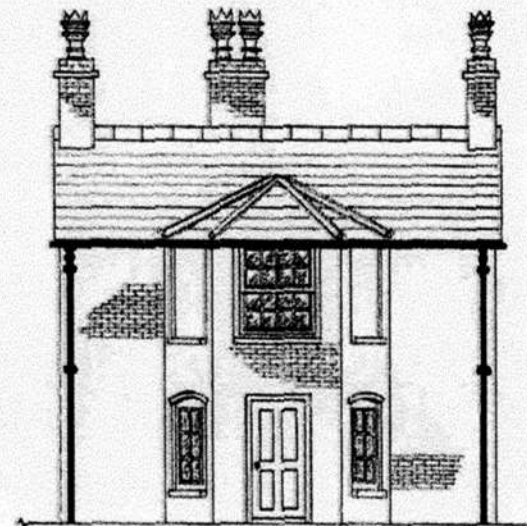
COLLET'S BROOK FARM BUILDING Sutton Coldfield

Built sometime between 1792 and 1807
Drawn by Roy Billingham, March 2004

Scale: 0 5 10 20 30 Feet



South-West Side Elevation



Front Elevation

The Last Surviving Tollhouse in Birmingham?

by Roy Billingham

This article is based on research carried out by the author as a student on the 2000-2001 "Building History" course of the University of Birmingham held in Sutton Coldfield. It adds to our knowledge of the architectural history of the city, and Sutton Coldfield in particular, by confirming that Collet's Brook Farm had once belonged to the Birmingham to Watford Gap Turnpike Trust and thus removes any doubts about its original purpose.

Collet's Brook Farm is a shabby insignificant building, overgrown by trees, and located on the western side of the A453 Tamworth Road in Sutton Coldfield adjacent to its junction with Fox Hill Road (**National Grid Ref: SP 145 989**); it is close to the City boundary at Collet's Brook, said to be named after a local family: Bishop Vesey's grandfather, John G. Harman, married an heiress called Collet.

In their 1990 report¹ recommending listing in the Grade A category, the Birmingham City Council's Conservation Areas Advisory and Planning Committees stated that "*Collet's Brook Farm (is) a surviving two-storey tollhouse of the Tamworth Road Turnpike, probably dating from 1807 and also unique in the City*". In my opinion this statement was questionable, since insufficient evidence, as far as I am aware, had then been produced to verify that the building was ever a tollhouse.

What evidence is there that Collet's Brook Farm was ever a tollhouse? The bayed frontage has the typical look of a tollhouse and its situation close to the edge of the roadside and very near to the old county boundary at Collet's Brook would certainly lead one to suspect that its original purpose was as a residence for a tollkeeper.

In his "*History of Sutton Coldfield*"², W. K. Riland Bedford states, "*The Corporation... .. in 1792 paved the streets (with cobblestones) at the expence of £350, but the high roads from Watford Gap to Chester-road, and from Canwell to Sutton were placed under trustees, and toll-gates were erected at the north end of Sutton, at Ashfurlong, and at Collet's Brook;*" If such a private trust was established, it would have pre-dated the first Turnpike Act for this road by 15 years. Unfortunately, Riland Bedford's history contains no references to substantiate these events and the Minutes of the Warden and Society of Sutton Coldfield also make no references, although there are minutes relating to the felling of timber in 1792 at Stretly Hurst (sic), in Sutton Park, to the value of £350. However, Riland Bedford is likely to have been sure of these facts because his father, William Riland Bedford, was one of the trustees of the Chester Road to Watford Gap Trust and its successor the Birmingham and Watford Gap Turnpike Trust.

It can be seen from the contemporary maps contained in the estate sales of the Anchorage³ and Ashfurlong⁴ Estates that tollhouses existed at the junction of the Lichfield Road Turnpike and the Tamworth Road Turnpike as well as at the junction

of the Tamworth Road Turnpike and Whitehouse Common Road opposite to Vesey's White House Farm. Also, a tollhouse existed at Watford Gap^s at the junction of the Lichfield Road Turnpike and Blake Street. So, it is not unreasonable to assume that a tollhouse existed at Collet's Brook.

Another consideration is that the location of Collet's Brook was remote and was also in a dangerous area of Sutton Coldfield at this period. Travellers on the turnpikes were vulnerable to highwaymen and footpads, particularly at night-time, and the roads around Sutton Coldfield were particularly prone to this kind of criminal activity ⁶. In the 16th century Bishop Vesey house in Weeford Road and the Vesey Cottage on High Heath, both within a mile of Collet's Brook, were built for householders who would police the activities of potential highwaymen. To appoint a tollkeeper to this location, it would be necessary for the Turnpike Trust to erect secure accommodation for their employee and his family. Collet's Brook Farm house is enclosed within a small parcel of land with outhouses, and this was a requirement of the 1807 Turnpike Act of Parliament⁷. This Act states in paragraph XI that the Turnpike Trustees "... .. shall in Manner herein directed for the purchasing of Land for the turning or widening of the said Roads, take in and inclose from the said Roads, or any Part thereof, convenient Garden Spots for each of the said Toll Houses not exceeding One Quarter of an Acre."

From the architectural viewpoint the Grade II (Statutory List)⁸ listed red brick building is a T-shaped, two-storey house with a three sided bay frontage and central main entrance. The rear end wall is partly bevelled in order to align with Fox Hill Road that suggests that the road predates the building. The brickwork is stretcher bond, the bricks being three inches thick rather than the two and a quarter inches commonly used in this area until 1800.

Above the front entrance is a balanced sash window with sixteen small panes, while either side of the entrance is a rendered bricked-in window space. Quite often tollhouses had these bricked-in window spaces on the upper storey possibly as a convenient point to display the tolls to the turnpike travellers. On each side of the front entrance is a fixed window with a single vertical and horizontal glazing bars. Each floor of the west side of the rear building has, under a brick arch, a square two-light opening with one side hung casement, twin horizontal glazing bars with small panes. The side entrance is a stable-type door.

The gabled roofs are of slate but the west face of the rear roof has at some stage had the slates replaced with pantiles. The half hipped roof over the front bay has leaded hips. On each gable end is a twin-flue chimney stack, although the one on the rear roof extension is positioned to one side of the ridge.

What evidence do we have as to the age of the building? The Sutton Coldfield Parochial Valuation of 1856⁹ indicates that the building was then owned by Solomon Smith of nearby Fox Hill House and occupied by Joseph Brookhouse. The plot was described as "...a site of house and garden of area 1 rod, 12 perches. " The buildings on the plot comprised:

House, 2 storeys	19'-3" X 24'
House, back part	13'-0" x 21"
Cowhouse	15'-0" X 16'



Collets Brook Tollhouse from the South



Collets Brook tollhouse from the East

Pigsty	5'-6" X 15'
Pigsty	4'-0" x 7'

Collet's Brook Farm appears on the 1851 Enclosure Map for Sutton Coldfield¹⁰. At this time the triangular piece of land known as Powell's Field, immediately behind the house and bounded by Tamworth Road, Fox Hill Road and Fox Hill Estate, was enclosed in three lots (**343, 344, 345**) and sold to John Sutherland Valentine who owned Fox Hill House. The Enclosure Act of 1824 empowered the Commissioner, who was appointed to sell plots, to defray expenses. Lots 343-5 were sold c. 1828, and Valentine proceeded to build Fox Hill House on a virgin site, probably by 1830. Most of the award of the Commissioner was complete by 1830, and most of the enclosed land was legally private property by then, although the final Award did not appear until 1851 along with the official map.

The Sutton Coldfield Rates Book of 3rd March 1839¹¹ lists Collet's Brook farm as a beer house and garden occupied by James Alsop and owned by Mr. W Walker. The site then measured 1 rod, 32 perches with a rateable value of £8. 6s. Od.

Warwickshire County Records Office has a series of plans¹² surveyed by Henry Jacob, a Birmingham surveyor. One of these, *Plan C — Collet's Brook Detail, View of Highways, 1832*, clearly shows the 'T'-shaped dwelling at Collet's Brook. It also shows that the Turnpike Road narrowed to cross a hump-backed bridge across the brook. Today's Tamworth Road is obviously higher at this point than it was in the 19th century because the frontage of the building is now below the road level.

The farm also appears on the 1824 Com Rent Map¹³, but the triangular piece of land behind it, previously referred to, is at this time commons. This has led some local historians to question whether the building could ever have been a tollhouse because road users would have avoided the tollgate by using the common land. However, the 1807 Turnpike Act gave the Trustees power to fence and ditch such parts of open grounds, as necessary, to prevent the avoidance of tolls.

1824 was the earliest proof of the existence of Collet's Brook Farm, but what was needed for this project was some evidence of its association with the Turnpike Trust. This was eventually found at Warwick County Records Office in the form of a legal document of conveyance¹⁴, dated September 1831, which agreed to the Trustees of the Birmingham to Watford Gap Turnpike Trust releasing to John Sutherland Valentine for the sum of seventy pounds "... *ALL that Cottage or tenement situate and being at or near a place called Collet 's Brook in the Parish of Sutton Coldfield in the County of Warwick and fronting the Turnpike Road from Sutton to Tamworth together with the parcel of land adjoining the said Cottage and used Garden to the same*". It then went on to state that the cottage and premises were then and had been for sometime past in the occupation of the tenant of John Sutherland Valentine. The document was signed by the Rev. William Riland Bedford, Richard Fowler and George Mills, three of the Trustees of the Birmingham and Watford Gap Road.

This conveyance confirms the original ownership of the cottage and that it must have been built as a tollhouse, almost certainly by the earlier Chester Road to Watford Gap Turnpike Trust. This means that the house might have been built as late as 1807 (the date of the first Turnpike Act for this road) but more likely at sometime after 1792

when the earlier Turnpike Trust was set up by the Warden and Society to remove the financial burden of the roads' maintenance from the Town's rates. It is also likely that the Corporation gave the land for the building to the Trustees which would explain why there is no record of a sale of this common land, nor is there a plot number on the 1824 Com Rent Map.

It is clear from this conveyance that for some years prior to 1831 Collet's Brook Farm had been rented by John Sutherland Valentine as a residence for one of his tenants, but for how long before 1831 had the building ceased to be a tollhouse?

To arrive at the likely answer, it is worth studying the 1807 Turnpike Act¹⁵ which states: "*...And be it further enacted, That only One Toll Gate shall be erected across the said Road leading from Birmingham to Lichfield or across or upon that Branch of the said Road leading from Sutton Coldfield to or towards Tamworth:*"

Since, according to Riland Bedford, there were already two tollgates on the Tamworth Turnpike, Ashfurlong (Whitehouse) and Collet's Brook Farm, it follows from the Act that one of them would become redundant on its enactment and that was to be Collet's Brook Farm. A letter¹⁶ dated 6th December 1870 states that the existing toll gates on the Birmingham to Sutton Coldfield Turnpike were Cuckoo Gate (Aston Cross), Sutton (Main Road), and Whitehouse (Bassett's Pole Branch), so both Collet's Brook Farm and Watford Gap tollgates had been removed, probably in 1807.

One can speculate on the reasons why the Turnpike Trust delayed the sale of the tollhouse at Collet's Brook Farm for so long. The finances of the Turnpike Trust were always in a parlous condition so perhaps a regular rental from the property, whose value would no doubt have increased with the passage of time, was initially an attractive proposition. However, their finances did not improve and to realise the asset value of the property was probably a necessary action to repay some of their debts.

Riland Bedford states that pre-1792 the condition of the roads between Sutton and Birmingham and Sutton and Lichfield "*... .. were crooked, narrow in some places, and mere tracks across moorland in others.*"¹⁷ The condition of the Chester Road to Watford Gap and the Sutton Coldfield to Bassett's Pole roads did not improve after 1792 because the introduction to the 1807 Turnpike Act¹⁸ highlights the parlous state of the roads which were described as "*... in so ruinous a Condition as to be unsafe for the Passage of Cattle and Carriages*". More to the point, it states that the existing Trust had insufficient powers to improve conditions of the road. But the scheme for a Turnpike road between Sutton and Birmingham, which had been proposed as early as the beginning of George III's reign, did not meet everyone's approval in Sutton Coldfield. A paper was published¹⁹ at about that time outlining objections to the proposal that centred on the likely hike in tolls and consequent increase in the cost of transportation of goods, as well as the likelihood of discouraging trade from Lichfield, Derbyshire, York and all the North. One concern that the paper voiced was the threat of the Prohibition of High Weights to the local farmers who "*... .. fetch their Muck from Birmingham, buy it by the Load, and if they are once restrained from large Weights, there is an End of that Traffick, and an End of all workmanlike Cultivation; for their Land will not do its best without it, and it will never answer to go thither for a small Load.*" Their arguments were to be of no avail and the road from

Birmingham to Sutton Coldfield was eventually turnpiked, although the Turnpike Act of 1807 stipulated that manure was to be exempted from tolls, which included the empty carriages going to collect a load of manure or returning empty having delivered a load of manure.

A further Act of Parliament was passed on 22nd March 1826²⁰ which enabled the Turnpike Trust, once their existing debts had been repaid, to take out further loans to pay for the necessary repair of the roads. It is quite obvious that the Trust was already heavily in debt and its financial viability must have been in serious doubt. The Minutes of a meeting of the Finance Committee of the Turnpike Trust held on 10th March 1847²¹ refers to plans for the curtailment of overheads to counter the fall in revenue from tolls and the anticipated effects of the opening of the Birmingham and Lichfield Railway. There were proposals to cut the wages of the permanent staff and to restrict the prices of service providers. By this time the Trust had sizeable debts that were proving difficult to pay off.

About 1870 Parliament passed a law closing down all Turnpike Trusts, but this was extended to 1st November 1871 for Sutton Coldfield. The closure of the Turnpikes was unpopular with Trustees since the burden of cost for road maintenance would then come on to the local rates.

Despite a shortage of archival documentation concerning the Turnpike Trust, its properties and Minutes of their meetings, I feel confident in stating that we now have sufficient evidence to enable us to state with certainty that Collet's Brook Farm building was originally built as a tollhouse by the Chester Road to Watford Gap Trustees, from as early as 1792, and that it probably ceased to function as a tollhouse by 1807, and certainly by 1826, because of the limitations imposed by the Acts of Parliament of 1807 and 1826. This means that the building is the last surviving example of a tollhouse within Birmingham. It is perhaps ironic that Collet's Brook Farm now finds itself within 250 yards of the new M6 Toll Motorway.

References

- 1) Birmingham City Council Department of Planning & Architecture, 1990, *Buildings of Architectural or Historic Interest in Sutton Coldfield* — Sutton Coldfield Reference Library (QSH 56.1)
- 2) Riland Bedford, W.K., *The History of Sutton Coldfield*, 1891, London, p.49 S.C. Ref. Lib. (SH 97)
- 3) *Sutton Coldfield Sales Catalogues 1790-1892*, Map of Anchorage Estate, 1870, - S.C. Ref. Lib. (QSH 58.9)
- 4) *Ibid.*, Map of Asfurlong Estate, 1873
- 5) Plan C — Collet's Brook Detail, View of Highways, 1832, Henry Jacob Surveyor — Warwickshire County Records (QS 32/9)
- 6) Upton, Chris, *A History of Birmingham*, Phillimore, 1993, p. 87
- 7) Act of Parliament, 25th July 1807, 47 Geo III, Sess. 2, para. XI — An Act for making and maintaining a Road from *Birmingham*, in the County of *Warwick*, to join the *Lichfield* Turnpike Road, in the Parish of *Shenstone*, in the County

- of *Stafford*, and for making a Branch of Road to communicate therewith. – S.C. Ref. Lib. (QSH 47.12)
- 8) Birmingham City Council Department of Planning and Architecture, 4th Edition, 9th August 2000, *Statutory List of Buildings of Special Architectural or Historic Interest*.
 - 9) The 1856 Parochial Valuation List for Sutton Coldfield — S.C. Ref. Lib.
 - 10) The 1851 Enclosure Map for Sutton Coldfield - S.C. Ref. Lib.
 - 11) The Aston Union, Greater Sutton Coldfield & Maney Rates Book, 3rd March 1839 - S.C. Ref. Lib.
 - 12) Plan C — Collet's Brook Detail, View of Highways, 1832, Henry Jacob, Surveyor — Warks. Co. Recs. (QS 32/9)
 - 13) The 1824 Corn Rent Map for Sutton Coldfield - S.C. Ref. Lib.
 - 14) 1831 Conveyance of House to J.S. Valentine — Warks. Co. Recs. (QS 9/21 xxvii — Skin 36)
 - 15) Act of Parliament, 1807, 47 Geo III, Sess. 2, para. WII - S.C. Ref. Lib. (QSH 47.12)
 - 16) Birmingham City Archives, Fentiman Source Book, Part I, Jewel Baillie Collection, Bundle No. 315, 1826-1871 — Birmingham to Sutton Coldfield Turnpike Road, - Richard Fowler's notes on meetings of management committee, finances, etc.
 - 17) Riland Bedford, W.K., *The Rilands of Sutton*, 1889, London, pp. 40-42 - S.C. Ref. Lib. (SH 78. 1RIL)
 - 18) Act of Parliament, 1807, 47 Geo III, Sess. 2, Introduction — S.C. Ref. Lib (QSH 47.12)
 - 19) Birmingham City Archives, Sidwell Papers, Vol. I, 1784-1885, p. 29 . Opponents of Turnpike Roads undated (424509), also Ref. 17 above.
 - 20) Act of Parliament, March 22nd 1826, 7 Geo. IV, sess.1826 - An Act for repairing the Road from Birmingham to Watford Gap in the Parish of Sutton Coldfield in the County of Warwick, and other Roads communicating therewith - S.C. Ref. Lib. (QSH 47.12)
 - 21) Birmingham City Archives, Fentiman Source Book, Part I, Jewel Baillie Collection, Bundle No. 315, 1826-1871.

Acknowledgement: I would like to thank Roger Lea, the Chairman of the Sutton Coldfield Local History Research Group, for his patience in correcting errors and his suggestions for including additional supportive local history information. I would also like to extend my appreciation to Marian Baxter of the Sutton Coldfield Library Reference Department for her help in the early days of this project.

April 2004.