

The Ballards of Bratton House

by Jean Morrison

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Grange Farm, at the west end of Lower Road, was formerly called Ballard's Farm. Ballards lived in Bratton as far back as we have church records (1542). They were farmers, and at least one of them was an archer, liable to be called up at times of emergency, such as the threatened invasion by the Spanish Armada.

The original farmhouse was quite small, a half-timbered building, traces of which can be seen in the north wall of the present house. In the mid-17th century it was part of the estate of William Bromwich, son of Sefton Bromwich whose brass plate is in the church. In 1669 it was bought by James Thynne of Longleat. At this time the tenant farmer was Henry Ballard, whose son William and grandson Philip inherited the tenancy.

Philip Ballard's account book still survives for the years 1704–1711, detailing sales of wheat, barley, beans, cheese, bacon etc. He was not only doing well out of the farm, he also inherited money from Philip King, thought to be his uncle. He spent lavishly on the furnishings of his house, but was still not content. He wanted to be Philip Ballard Esq, not just Philip Ballard, yeoman, and to live in a stately country house. In 1715 he began to build Bratton House, but he was never to live there. It was still not finished in 1723 when he died aged only 40, possibly from smallpox.

His estates were shared between his three surviving sons, confusingly called John, John Aldridge, and Jonathan. John inherited property at Imber, Jonathan property in West Ashton and Upton Scudamore, and John Aldridge inherited the Bratton property.

In 1739, John Aldridge decided to modernise the farmhouse. His neighbour Jeffery Whitaker noted in his diary:

'22 Oct 1739, Mr Ballard pulled down the front of his house to rebuild it.'

'26 Oct 1739, Mr Ballard uncovered the North side of his house to new Roof it.'

These were the last stages of the work that had begun in the previous spring. A small stone plaque on the front of the house still records the initials of John Aldridge Ballard and the date 1739. A year later he was dead of the smallpox.

On the other side of Lower Road, his brother Jonathan lived in a house called Winters. This house, which stands gable end to the road facing west, had been built by their grandfather William Ballard about 1690 as a retirement home when he handed over the farm to his son.

The name of the property is that of an earlier owner of the site, Edmund Winter, curate of Bratton at the beginning of the 17th century. The house is of brick with stone footings, stone quoins and stone copings to the gable ends. There are panels of dark brick between the front windows. The chimney at the north end is original but unfortunately the 1690s stone fireplace has recently been removed and a mock

inglenook constructed in its place. The stone mullioned windows still have their leaded panes and original latches. The roof was originally thatched, and there is an owl hole in the north gable end, allowing owls to go in and catch sparrows and mice, which nested in the thatch.

Jonathan also caught smallpox and died three days before his brother John Aldridge Ballard, on 17th November 1740. Both left widows with young children.

When Philip Ballard died in 1723, Bratton House was still unfinished. An inventory of everything in the house at the time lists 2700 feet of boards, 400 of oaken board and about 200 of elm board. There were also fire grates waiting to be installed, some odds and ends of furniture, and some barrels in the cellar. John Aldridge Ballard was not quite 12 when his father died, and the fate of Bratton House for the next few years is unknown. But at some time before his marriage in 1732 it was completed, and he lived there for a few years.

The cellars appear to be older than the rest of the house, so may be part of an earlier dwelling. The new house was of brick with stone dressings, but the brick is now rendered. It was three storeys high; the main front was seven windows wide, and the sides five windows, each front with a central door reached by semicircular stone steps. In 1826 the house was nearly doubled in size by an extension on the north side. By this time, it was occupied by Edward Frowd Seagram, who had married JA Ballard's granddaughter Mary.

When the two Ballard brothers died, their wives and children were also ill with the smallpox. Little Philip Ballard died but the others recovered. So much money had been spent on building Bratton House and altering other property that they were left in deep financial difficulty.

Jeffery Whitaker noted 'the workmen turn'd off, not paid nor not Effects to pay his Bonds'. So for many years the big new house was let to members of the Long family of Steeple Ashton. William Aldridge, John Aldridge's surviving son, had no sons, so the house was inherited by his daughter Mary, who married Edward F Seagram. It remained in the Seagram family until 1914 when William Heathcote Seagram died unmarried.

The old Church House stood nearby. This was later the Duke Inn and had a sign showing a man of the 18th century in military uniform with his cocked hat. [*Editor's note: the details in this paragraph are not entirely correct, as subsequent research has shown, see the end notes.*] The Duke was owned by the church and sold about 1890. They brewed the church ale in this inn: in the old days tea and coffee were not so common, and festivities of various sorts were held in front of the inn to raise funds for the church. When the Church House was sold, the occupants of Bratton House bought it, pulled it down and added the site to the garden, building a high wall to surround it. The Seagram who then lived in Bratton House was against all strong drink and was probably glad of the opportunity to get rid of the public house. The pub we now have was called the White Horse and had a bad reputation. It took over the old sign and cleaned up its reputation. The sign was repainted with the figure of the Duke of Wellington. There is in existence part of a mug belonging to the old inn showing a crowned head.

All along in front of Bratton House there were various service buildings [*not cottages, as Mrs Morrison once thought*]. Down the road in the wall can be seen what appear to be the stone foundations of these. It is likely they were timber and wattle-and-daub above. Nearby [*we now know, next to the former Church House*] were two cottages –one of which was occupied by a family called Stiles. The occupants of Bratton House bought up the cottages and incorporated their sites into the garden.

Further down the hill again was Flower's Farm, which when it was pulled down had a cemented front. Inside this farm was a very ancient timbered building that was part of this row.

[*The following story has also not stood the test of more detailed research, see the end notes.*] The cottage that belonged to the Stiles family was there until 1840, but Squire Seagram was anxious to get rid of it so he took his one and only chance. His son Octavius ran away with Amelia Stiles, a pretty village girl. They went to Canada where they were married and had two sons. Octavius Seagram died while the children were young. Amelia Seagram wrote pathetic letters home because she was left alone during a bad Canadian winter – although there were one or two immigrants from Bratton living nearby who did help as much as possible. The old Squire however would have nothing to do with supporting his Canadian grandsons [*he had in fact died before Octavius*]. He was annoyed that his son ran off with a village girl and he was so furious that he turned Amelia's parents out of the cottage, pulled it down and added the site to his garden. He also barred her parents from working in the village so they had to go away and live with a son in Westbury Leigh – utterly impoverished and ruined by Squire Seagram.

A footnote to this tragic tale is that Amelia Seagram remarried and the stepfather of the children looked after and brought them up reasonably well. At intervals he contacted Squire Seagram for help towards the boys. Then Amelia died in childbirth and he was left bringing up three children. The Squire never responded to his appeals and did not even answer his letters. One of the boys eventually became the founder of Seagram's distilleries in Canada and a multi-millionaire. He returned a couple of times to look at Bratton House. The Squire died without even acknowledging his grandsons but one of his daughters occasionally corresponded with them sending out a bible and a few texts.

The Seagrams are all buried in a large low grave in a sheltered corner of the churchyard. Inside the church near the organ there is a memorial stone to the family. At the foot is the name of Octavius Seagram, the fourth son, who died and was buried in Canada.

Please scroll to the update notes on the next page.

Editor's update notes, 2016:

Although the grave referred to calls Octavius the fourth son of Edward Frowd Seagram, he was actually the fifth, when the eldest son from Seagram's first marriage is counted. The popular version of the elopement story given above has greatly exaggerated the role of EF Seagram as uncaring father and grandfather. Though he was undoubtedly horrified by the alliance, he had in fact died more than two years before Octavius. The family did maintain some contact concerning the education of the boys, and one member left them money in a will. In addition, Octavius had an allowance under his parents' marriage settlement, and did quite well in Canada, buying property there.

With regard to the old Duke inn: this is a complicated story, which is told in Alison Maddock's article elsewhere on the website entitled 'The moving Duke – a Bratton inn-vestigation'. It was first sold to a local brewer in 1887 and then exchanged with the former White Horse inn (which had lost its licence and was actually owned by the Seagrams).

The cottage belonging to the Stiles family was bought and demolished around 1828, long before the elopement affair. It was probably one of two shown on a map of Bratton dating from c.1785 in the Longleat House Archives, lying east of the old Duke Inn and west of Bratton House, one behind the other, the Stiles cottage being the one furthest from the road.

(AJM)