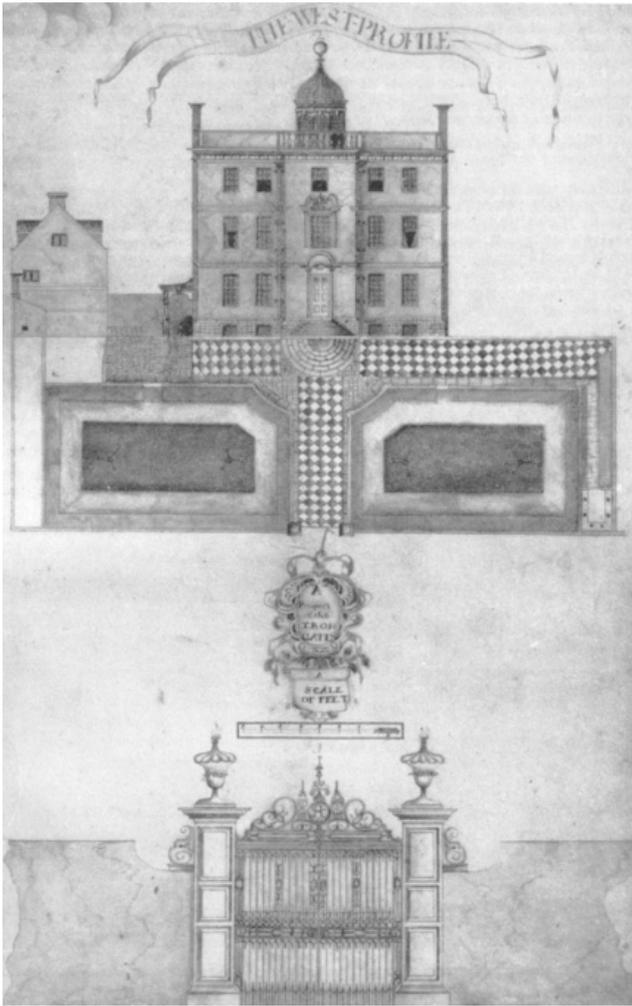


Weevil : Before the Royal Clarence Yard

By G.H.Williams



This article first appeared in Gosport Records No.12 Pages 9 to 16: December 1976

*Far to the right, at Weevil we
May view the Naval Brewery,
Where once a spacious mansion stood,
With pleasure ground and garden rood;
But government well liked the lands,
And bought them off the owner's hands;
Sunk the vast Basin, Buildings raised,
And brewed the beer by seamen praised.*

Henry Slight, 1820.

Weevil Lane runs from Mumby Road to Forton Lake, with part of St. George Barracks on its left; on its right the Royal Clarence Yard extends to the Harbour. It is often imagined that the name Weevil is derived from that of insects infesting the flour and biscuits in the Yard. Actually, if the insects ever went there, it is a pure coincidence that they went to a district already bearing their name. A chart partly reproduced in Gosport Records No. 7, page 8, and dating from the early or mid 17th century, long before the Yard was there, shows “Weevil Wel Spring” on the site. An account of Portsmouth and Gosport printed in about 1844 states that the land was formerly a farm belonging to a

person of the name “Weovill”.

The 17th century saw a succession of wars and a great expansion of naval activity in Portsmouth and its Harbour. Moreover during the Civil War Portsmouth was bombarded from Gosport; it was obviously necessary to prevent this from happening again. In 1678 a primitive rampart was built round Gosport, reaching the Harbour at one end in the area of the present rampart near Holy Trinity Church and at the other end in the area of the present Viking Marine. In connection with the construction of this rampart, the Board of Ordnance bought a plot of land near where Haslar Bridge now stands from a John Player (1).

John Player described himself in his will as a distiller, but he had other interests. He owned “messuages, tenements, maulhouses, Brewhouses and stables” in Gosport and lands in Privett. In 1673 he and William Noxon alias Oxford, a shipwright, contracted to supply the Navy with the timber from 470 oak trees at a price of about £1,200 (2). But it is interesting to note that he could not sign his name. He died in 1685 and was buried in Alverstoke churchyard (3). He left most of his property to his “kinsman” Henry Player, who was, or later became, a brewer.

At that time the ships in the Harbour and at Spithead were victualled from Portsmouth, not from Gosport as they are now. A major requirement was beer; the ration was 1 gallon per head per day (4). For supplying it a royal brewhouse had been erected in 1492 (5) and by 1525 there were five of these in Portsmouth (6). But by 1711, and probably by a much earlier date, no Government brewery remained in the area (7). In that year the Treasury asked for the opinion of the Navy Victualling Board on whether Portchester Castle should be converted into a brewery; after two of its members had visited Portsmouth to investigate, the Board replied that “Port Chester Castle will appear a very improper place for erecting a Brewhouse” (8). In the meantime the Navy bought its beer from contractors.



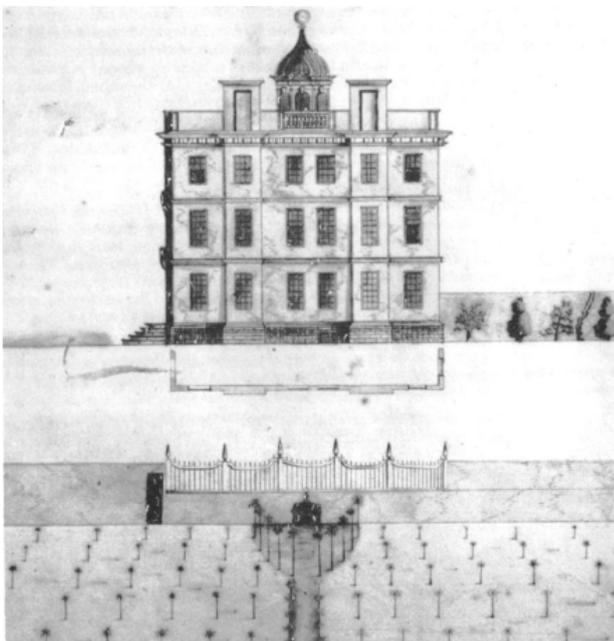
The above-mentioned Henry Player, generally known as Captain Player though the nature of his rank is not clear, built a brewery for the supply of beer to the Navy. He built it outside the Gosport rampart, on the edge of the Harbour in the area of the present Royal Clarence Yard. In the prevailing south-west wind the site had a sheltered position on the windward shore, making it convenient for harbour craft under sail. The brewery had a cooperage for making casks and a well, with wind pump, supplying water of good quality for brewing. A horse-driven mill and pump were also installed. For a time the brewery had almost a

monopoly in the supply of water to the Navy in the Harbour. Henry Player in addition owned some shipping, including “a great old Dutch man-of-war of very little value” (9).

In 1707-9 Henry Player, Thomas Ridge and James Dixon held a contract for the supply of beer to the Navy. But they were then blacklisted by the House of Commons on the ground that, with the connivance of the Victualling Agent, they had obtained “false & fraudulent Certificates or Receipts from the Pursers for beer not delivered by them on board her Majesty’s Ships”. In the subsequent investigation Ridge and Dixon produced figures, from which it was calculated that the Crown had lost at least £10,000 through their manipulations; but Henry Player had meanwhile died, and his widow, as executor, failed to produce any figures in respect of him (10). In 1734 her own executor had to refund £93 in respect of 30 tons of beer, delivered between 1708 and 1712, which deteriorated within the warranty period (11); quite a time lag!

In 1704 Henry Player built as his own residence a mansion, Weevil House, between his brewery and what is now Weevil Lane. It was a square house of three storeys and basement, built of brick on a Portland stone base. Over the main door, on the west side, his arms were carved in stone. At the middle of the top of each side was a stone balustrade. It was said of the east one, not only that it had a view of Gosport, Portsmouth, the Dockyard and Harbour and Portchester, but also that it “so advantagiously o’looks the whole Building and Gardens that you may see each servant performe his duty”. In the centre of the building was an elaborate cupola, presumably to light a central staircase. The servants’ quarters were in a separate block to the north.

The house was approached through elaborate iron gates hung on Portland stone pillars surmounted by large stone urns from which rose gilt flames. Two-coloured paving

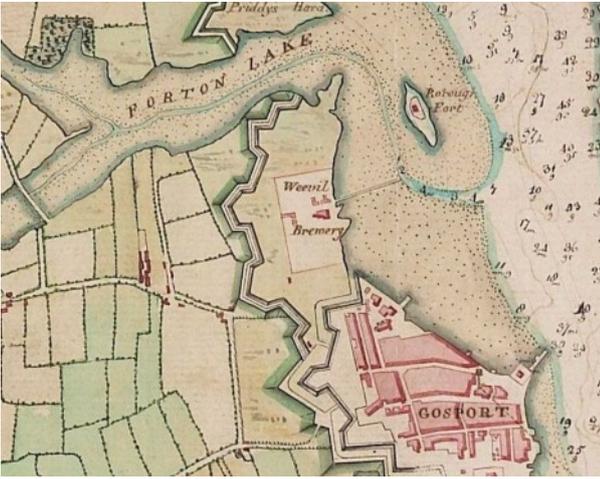


stones in a diagonal pattern led to the west door. The garden between the house and brewery contained “Plumbs, Pear’s, Grapes, Currants, Cherries, Peachy’s, Apricocks, Necteron’s Honeys, Yews, Filleroy’s, Lorestina’s, Dwarf Box, honeysuckles Crownations, Regaleses, Pinks, Polyantesses, Tulips, Junquills, Poyaneys, Annanessesses, Lilies White, Martagin and Irish”. To the north, beyond the servants’ quarters and a drive leading into the brewery, lay the orchard, “furnisht with all kinds of fruits”.

The list of plants would repay study by a botanical historian. One can just recognise Phillyrea and Laurustinus. “Crownation” is probably derived from Coronation, a 16th-century name for Carnation. “Annanessess” is probably a pineapple plant, but these were extremely rare at the time; a pineapple produced at a banquet in Richmond in 1716 was claimed to be the first ever raised in England (12).

The rural seclusion of the landward side of Weevil House was soon threatened. In 1708 there was a proposal to extend the Gosport ramparts northwards by 1,500 yards (13). Soon after this, compulsory purchase of land for the purpose was authorised under two Acts relating to the Portsmouth defences (14). In 1710 the Board of Ordnance purchased from Captain Player about 13 acres of land opposite his house on the landward side of Weevil Lane, and also purchased the land beyond his orchard on the Harbour side (15). But the proposed extension of the rampart was delayed until the late 1750s (16), and in the meantime, Henry Player being dead, the Board leased the land to the Player family trustees (17).

Captain Henry Player had a brother John, from whom were descended the family of Hobbs described in Gosport Records No. 8, pp. 5 & 6. Henry himself appears in our local history in various connections. Partly as a result of the building of the rampart, Gosport formed part of the Borough of Portsmouth from 1682 to 1688 (18). In 1683 a number of the inhabitants of Gosport, including Henry, signed a complaint to the Bishop of Winchester, Lord of the Manor, against the interference of the Portsmouth authorities (19). Henry was a churchwarden of Alverstoke in 1687 (20). In 1694 he took the lead in organising the building of Holy Trinity Church, and the first baptism in its register is that of his son William. He presented a silver flagon (engraved with his arms) to Alverstoke Church, and a silver gilt chalice and paten to the Dock Chapel (the predecessor of St. Anne’s); his wife presented a silver flagon to Holy Trinity: all these vessels are still in existence. In an allocation of pews in Alverstoke Church in 1705, Henry was allotted No. 34 in the men’s section and his wife No. 19 in the women’s section; the sexes were apparently segregated (21). In 1708 the Alverstoke Court Leet appointed as Reeve Henry Stubbington, who was Henry Player’s tenant or nominee. (Incidentally, when the Court Leet in 1713 appointed this Henry Stubbington as Constable, Mr. Player of Berry — whoever he may have been — “gave 5s. to wett ye Staff”.)



In view of his interest in Holy Trinity, an incident in 1694 is rather surprising (22). A water main was to be laid from a well in Forton to Gosport. 83 of the inhabitants consented in consideration of the payment, by the developer, of £10 towards the building of Holy Trinity. But Henry Player and five other freeholders consented in consideration of £1 being spent on a treat to them at the Ship-on-Wheels. (This was in Forton, and may be the first public house in the district now on record. In 1685 it belonged to a George Berry (23).

Henry Player invested extensively in land. In his will he refers not only to the Weevil estate itself but also to the following property, much of which he says that he had bought: dwelling-houses and coach-house in Gosport and Fortune; lands called the Sea Grounds; the Half-way House; five closes on either side of the lane leading to Berry; a coppice in Woodcott Ranke; a brewhouse and ground at Stokes Bay; the manor of Ryde and considerable property in the Isle of Wight; and property in Fareham and Waltham. The Sea Grounds appear to have been in the neighbourhood of the present Walpole Park (24) and the Half-way House in the position of the present White Hart (25).

Henry Player was buried on 29 March 1711 in Alverstoke Church in a vault "at the uper end of the Chancell" (26).

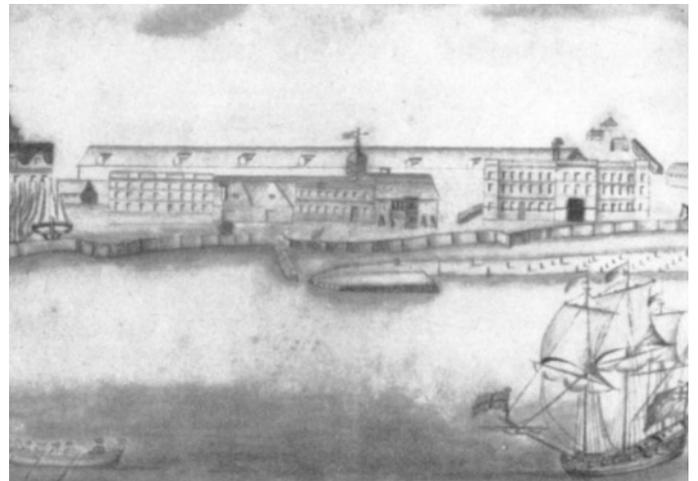
By his first wife Elizabeth Capt. Henry Player had five sons and one daughter, all baptised at Alverstoke in the period 1674-89 (in addition to a son who died in infancy). John, the eldest, died in his father's lifetime and his descendants moved away from Hampshire. Thomas was living in Gosport in 1705 when he buried a son in Alverstoke churchyard (27), but he later inherited the manor of Ryde and divided his attention between London, Ryde and Fareham; following his father's example, he built the first church in Ryde, appropriately named St. Thomas's (28). Henry (29), Charles and Giles appear to have died without issue; Charles had literally been cut off with a shilling in his father's will. Elizabeth married twice and had issue.

We are more concerned with Capt. Player's second wife Joanna and his two daughters by her, Anne and Joanna. (The above-mentioned son William probably died young.)

Henry Player left the Weevil estate and a good deal of his other property in the Gosport and Fareham areas to his wife Joanna, subject to the proviso that she should leave them to such of his children or their issue as she thought fit. She had by 1716 married a second husband by the name of Oakes. At the time of her death in 1732 she was again a widow and was living at Weevil House. She was buried at Alverstoke. She left the Weevil estate and various property in Gosport, Fortune and Fareham in trust for her two daughters; if Anne wished to live in Weevil House she was to have priority.

Weevil House is shown on a well-known picture (30) of Portsmouth and Gosport in the reign of Queen Anne (partly reproduced on the cover of my Earlier Fortifications of Gosport; the house is marked M). It is described on the picture as "Capn. Flyers House". This is clearly a mistake for "Capn. Player's House". Henry Slight's History of Portsmouth, 1838, refers to a "Captain Flyers" in a confused account of the early history of Weevil, but this seems to be merely a repetition of the mistake made on the picture.

Henry and Joanna's daughter Anne was born on 9 January 1695 and baptised at Alverstoke. By December 1710, though aged under 16, she was the wife of Colby Aspley. By 1712 he had taken Henry's place in the Player-Ridge-Dixon brewing consortium mentioned above (31). But he died, and in 1727 Anne married Thomas Holmes at Alverstoke. It seems that Thomas in turn managed the brewery for some time (32).



In Yarmouth Church, I.O.W., a curious marble statue has the head of Thomas's grandfather Admiral Sir Robert Holmes and is said to have the body of Louis XIV; the story is that Sir Robert captured the sculptor with the unfinished statue at sea and made him carve his head on it. Sir Robert had an illegitimate daughter, and left most of his property to a nephew on condition that he married her. Thomas Holmes was a son of this marriage. He was M.P. for Newtown, I.O.W., a very rotten borough, from 1734 to 1741, and for Yarmouth from 1747 to his death in 1764. In 1760 he was created Baron Holmes of Kilmallock, but his peerage, being Irish, did not prevent him from sitting in the House of Commons. In 1764 he rebuilt Yarmouth

Town Hall, as recorded in an inscription there (33).

Thomas and Anne Holmes were living at Weevil House when she died. She was buried in her father's vault on 29 September 1743 (34). She had no children, and left her half-share in the property in Gosport and Alverstoke, presumably including Weevil, to her sister Joanna.

Joanna, the younger daughter of Henry and Joanna Player, was baptised at Holy Trinity on 26 January 1698. By 1732 she had married Robert Maccarthy, known as Lord Muskerry. His father, the 4th Earl of Clancarty, forfeited his peerage and estates as the result of his adherence to James II; but the family continued to use their titles, and after the father's death in 1734 Robert and Joanna were known as Earl and Countess of Clancarty. Robert was addicted to drink: during a nocturnal debauchery in his early life the Duke of Wharton threw a bottle of claret at him and he lost the sight of one eye (35); in 1735 Lord Tyrawley wrote that he "is a brute beast, and has been drunk the 24 hours round, now this week and more". Nevertheless, he became Captain, RN, in 1722, held several commands afloat, and was Governor of Newfoundland in 1733-35 (36). In or soon after 1741 he emigrated to France, where he lived as a Jacobite exile till his death in 1769.



Weevil Brewery was extended in 1752-3 and 1756-7 (37). But it is not clear whether the Countess of Clancarty, or anyone else, lived in Weevil House after she had inherited her sister's half-share in it in 1743. The Earl lived in France, and she was living in Westminster when she died. She was buried in her father's vault on 24 January 1759. She had no children, and left most of her property, including Weevil House, to four friends, the Earls of Arran and Litchfield, Thomas Cholmondley and Charlotte Kempthorne.

In 1761 the Admiralty bought the Weevil estate for only £1,500 from Lord Holmes, John Eames and others (38). The estate had been held in trust for Anne Holmes and the Countess and there had been recent Chancery proceedings• it seems probable that Lord Holmes and John Eames were the final trustees, though further research (39) would be needed to establish this. There is a monument to John Eames in the south aisle of Alverstoke Church ; a barrister, he had become Recorder of Portsmouth in 1760 and later

became a Master in the Court of Chancery and an M.P.

It seems probable that the Admiralty soon demolished Weevil House. It appears in a map of 1758 (40), but not in a map of 1773 (41) or a guidebook of 1775 (42). There was no longer a rich brewer requiring a mansion alongside his brewery. The house may have been empty for some time and out of repair, and it was sandwiched between an expanding brewery on one side and a new rampart on the other.

The Admiralty continued to operate, and even expanded, the brewery, and George III visited it in 1773 and 1778 (43). A French spy in 1768 described it as a Royal Brewery where beer was made for the Services (44). In 1828 victualling was transferred from Portsmouth to the Weevil estate; this, with an extension to the north on land taken over from the Board of Ordnance, became the Royal Clarence Yard. Rum gradually replaced beer as a ration item, and the brewery closed before World War I. But the cooperage continued till the abolition of the rum ration in 1970; though its position had been changed since Henry Player established it in about 1700, the cooperage provided a remarkable example of industrial continuity.

Sources

The article uses the modern system of dating, with the year beginning 1 January, not 25 March. The illustrations are reproduced by courtesy of the Bodleian Library from MS Gough Misc. Antiq. 2, a survey of Weevil in 1716. The main sources are: this MS; Alverstoke and Holy Trinity parish registers; W. Berry, *Hampshire Pedigrees*, 1833, pp. 158, 159; *Dictionary of National Biography*; Vicary Gibbs, *Complete Peerage*; Burke's *Extinct Peerage*; *Vict. Co. History of Hants*. V, pp. 178, 181, 286, 288, 388; the wills of William Noxon alias Oxford and John Player proved Alverstoke Peculiar 1685 and 24 March 1685/6 respectively; and those of Henry Player, Joanna Oakes, Anne Holmes and Countess Clancarty proved PCC 17 August 1711, 6 March 1732/3 (and again 13 July 1733), 29 October 1743 and 6 April 1759 respectively.

Particular sources are as follows:-

(1) Public Record Office MPE 514. (2) PRO SP. 46/137 Part 9 fo. 799. (3) Sexton's register of sites of graves 1736-62 p.188. (4) Peter Kemp, *The British Sailor*, 1970, p. 37. (5) PRO E. 101/516/23 fo.5v. (6) *Vict. Co. History of Hants*. III, p. 174. (7) PRO ADM. 110/6 p. 11. (8) PRO ADM. 110/5 pp. 340, 448, 449; T1/147(50), 151(22). (9) MSS of House of Lords, VIII (New Series) p. 64. (10) PRO ADM. 110/6 pp. 11, 27, 283-285, 288. (11) PRO ADM. 110/11 p. 167. (12) *Dict. Nat. Biog.*, Sir Matthew Decker. (13) PRO WO. 55/1548(10). (14) 7 Anne cap. 26 & 8 Anne cap. 21. (15) Portsmouth District Library, S.B. Howlett, *WD Land at Gosport*, 1861, para. 11 & Plans D & F. (16) See the author's *Earlier Fortifications of Gosport*, 1974, pp. 40-42. (17) PRO MPE 386. (18) Gosport Records No. 5 pp. 18-21. (19) Brit. Library MS ADD. 33278 ff. 54, 55. (20) Vestry Minute Book 1683-1725. (21) Churchwarden's Accounts 1701-71. (22) MSS of House of Lords, III (NS)

p. 172. (23) Typescript by M. M. Palmer, Story of St. Mary's (RC Church), in the Society's Collection. (24) PRO MPE 514. (25) Hampshire Record Office 48 M 74/E/T 165, 166, 167. (26) Register of sites of graves 29 Sept. 1743. (27) *ibid.* p. 176 and burial register. (28) G.L. Privett, Story of Farebam, 1949, p. 99. (29) "Plear" in baptismal register, but mentioned in will of John 1685/6. (30) Brit. Library K Top XIV 42b; advertised in Evening Post, London, 1 Nov. 1711. (31) PRO ADM. 110/6 p. 11. (32) Henry Slight, History of Portsmouth, 1838. (33) Pennethorne Hughes, The Isle of Wight, 1967, pp. 49, 71. (34) Register of sites of graves. (35) Walker's Hibernian Magazine, Dublin, July 1796, p. 14. (36) J. Cbarnock, Biographia Navalis, IV, 1796, pp. 97, 98. (37) Henry Slight, *op. cit.* (38) Defence Land Agent. (39) In Chancery records or the deeds of the Royal Clarence Yard. (40) PRO MPH 283. (41) British Library K Top XIV 16, Archer. (42) (Lake Taswell) Portsmouth Guide, pub. R. Carr, Portsmouth. (43) W.G. Gates, Illustrated History of Portsmouth, 1960, pp. 450, 452. (44) Portsmouth Central Library, map partly reproduced at Portsmouth Paper 10 p. 4.