

## **The Royal Oak Hotel**

**At the corner of Alers Road and Mount Road in Bexleyheath stands an old weather-boarded public house.**

It is called "The Royal Oak" but there are also the words "Polly Clean Stairs" on the sign and the locals always call the place by this name. It is said that years ago there was a woman at the hotel who was very house proud and was consequently given this nickname. Like many such local legends, this one has no historical evidence to support it and there is no way of knowing whether it is true or is an imaginative explanation thought up and popularised by its obvious plausibility. After all, the "Elephant & Castle" and the "Cat & Fiddle", familiar improbable names of inns, are said to be corruptions of the "Infanta of Castile" and "Le Chat Fidele", devised to explain those strange titles.

But the "Polly Cleanstairs" is not the official name of this pub and does seem to be a relatively recent alternative name for it. Unless some other convincing explanation arises we must assume that the local legend is the correct one. Yet it is a pity that we know nothing about the lady in question, who must have been quite a character.

The history of the hotel itself is somewhat obscure. The only dependable information comes from the rate books but these give a mere skeleton of the story. In 1827 two assessments were made, in April and October. By comparing the entries for Upton in these two assessments we can see that during the summer of 1827 James Russell, a local property owner, built several houses, which he had let to tenants by October. George Crafter occupied one of these new houses. It was not described in that assessment, or in succeeding ones. But in 1837 a new type of rate book was used and in it George Crafter's premises were described as a beer house and garden. In 1838 a new valuation of the parish was made and in it the property was listed as a house, beer shop, stable and garden. In 1839 the rate book simply called it a house.

At the beginning of 1843 George Crafter was succeeded by Robert Elms, who remained as occupier for 22 years, until his death in 1865, when the property was transferred to his widow. She was there for another 29 years, so that between them the Elms had the inn for 51 years. During their long tenancy there was ample time for the wife to

establish herself as a local character. She could have been the house proud original of the legend, for her name was Mary Ann, of which Polly was a frequent familiar form

In that half century the rateable value remained constant enough for us to guess that few alterations were made to the building. James Russell ceased to be owner in about 1853, for from 1854 the owner's name is given in the rate books as Fox, becoming Fox and Son 1862. The description was 'house', 'house etc.' or 'house and garden' until 1855, when the term 'beer shop' was used and it continued to be used for the next four years. In 1860 we suddenly find it called 'The Old Fox Inn' but there must have been some uncertainty about this, for in the following four assessments the name is sometimes given as 'The Inn' (with a blank in the middle). Perhaps the proximity of the Fox and Hounds at Crook Log was felt to be confusing. At any rate in 1863 the name 'The Royal Oak' first appears and remained thereafter.