

## **The Wheatley's housekeeper's accounts, 1792-1817**

**The manor of Erith belonged to a family called Wheatley from 1734-1874.**

Not much is known about this family, apart from being able to list the successive lords of the manor with their dates and a few land transactions. The parish church has a Wheatley Chapel, containing memorials to various members of the family. However information of this sort adds up to little more than a bare skeleton, without the flesh and blood of real humanity.

There are, however, at Bexley Local Studies & Archive Centre a number of account books that were kept by the Housekeeper at the manor house nearly two hundred years ago. There are 16 of them and they cover the years 1792 to 1817. Some are records of general household expenses, some deal with particular areas of the housekeeper's responsibility, such as the requirements of her employer's younger children and some are her own personal accounts. They are not immediately informative and have to be studied carefully in order to extract what lies behind the lists of items and sums of money. A debt should be owed to Miss M.G. Moore, who worked for some time on these account books and drew from them most of the substance of what follows.

Let us look first of all at what we can learn from the account books about the housekeeper herself. She was evidently what would be called a gentlewoman, not a promoted servant (as was indeed to be expected). The position of housekeeper in a large and wealthy family was quite generally occupied by a person of gentle birth, sometimes a family relation. Thus, for example, she refers to her mother's coachman and she once bought some asparagus for her mother. Her taste in clothes was somewhat 'genteel'. She bought herself a quilted petticoat for fifteen shillings, a mantua [cloak] for £4.5.0, seven yards of purple linen for a gown, (£1.14.6) and no less than eight pairs of shoes for £2.14.0. In addition she bought two satin hats with feathers (£2.17.0) and had three turbans made up (13s.0), while other hats she mentions include a 'cap', a 'leghorn' and a 'chip hat'. She wore earrings and occasionally bought fans. She often had her hair cut and dressed and sometimes speaks of false hair. She bought beauty preparations,

including pomatum (2 pots, 1/6), rosewater (1 pint, 1/-) and 'Pomade Divine' (3/6)

She was not a great reader to judge by the few purchases of books recorded. She was fond of music, owned a piano, which she often had tuned, used to buy music and songs and even a "music book to copy in". Other interests were riding (she bought a riding dress for £6.10.0 and had one turned for 10/6), writing letters (to judge from the purchases of writing paper) and playing cards (at which she seems to have lost as a rule.)

As for her health, she seems to have had few medical expenses. She bought corks for cramp, had her ears syringed (1gn) and was ill occasionally without indicating what the trouble was. Her chief concern in this area was over her teeth. She often bought toothbrushes. She used to go to a dentist named Parkinson and he made up his own tooth powder. Twice she paid him 10/6 for extracting a tooth and on a third occasion the charge was 1gn. since he not only took a tooth out but also "bled the gums".

As mentioned she had a mother still alive. She also speaks of her son (or sons - she is not clear about the number) for whom she bought Irish linen for shirts on one occasion. In 1805 she mentions her "little granddaughter" when she bought her a leather doll (10/6) and she evidently had a sister. There is no mention of a husband and it may be that she was a widow. There is, therefore rather more than the mere outline of this interesting woman and it is unfortunate that we do not know her name. Turning to her responsibilities as housekeeper at the manor house, a few items from the lists of provisions from the summary for 1795 give some insight into her daily life.

		£. s.d.
Meat	6004 lb	166.17.0 (c.6 1/2d lb.)
Bread, flour, yeast	-	47.10.0
Cheese	215 lb	25.4.10
Soap - hard	510 lb	17.12.0
Soap - soft	140 lb	4.5.0
Wash balls	-	1.0.0
Starch and blue	-	2.16.0

Butter	528 lb	30.11.9 1/2
Fish	-	9.12.5
125 Chickens, 13 turkeys, 9 ducks, 22 pigeons, 77 rabbits.	-	24.1.2
Tea and Grocery	-	55.0.3
Medicines and Physicians	-	8.2.2 1/2
Candles	589 lb	22.18.4
With other items the total expenditure came to	-	£608.6.6

The most startling item is that of meat. 6004 lb. In a year that means over 16lb a day. It is not known how many mouths she had to feed but at least it seems plain that meat was the basic foodstuff of all, family and servants alike, rivalling even bread in sheer quantity consumed.

Vegetables and fruit must have been grown on the home farm, as one would expect. Occasional purchases of apples, oranges, figs, peaches, French plums, or quinces are recorded but lemons are a regular item in the accounts. Wine and spirits were not normally part of the housekeeper's province but from time to time she bought smallish quantities, e.g. a bottle of gin (Geneva) for 2/6, 6 bottles port for 12/0, or ½ gal brandy for 9/0.

Two special topics emerge from the accounts- her responsibility for the Wheatley children and the family's travels and journeys.

One of the account books is entitled 'Younger children's expenses'. From it we learn that she bought clothes for four children, Harry, George, Maria and Leonard, or had clothes made for them. She bought shirts for Harry at 8/6 each and paid ¼ each for having shirts made for George. Both boys had haircuts (at 1/- a time) and had pocket money, waistcoats, nightcaps, handkerchiefs, etc. Maria also needed haircuts and petticoats, stays, drawers, sashes, muslin dresses and mittens. Actually Maria's needs were of greater variety than her brothers' and made a longer list. She had beaver gloves, a dimity cloak and so on.

It is helpful to say something in passing about the ages of these children. Harry was born in about 1778; he disappears from the notebook by about 1796, when he would be 18 but he lived on to

become Maj.-Gen. Sir Henry Wheatley, baronet, and died in 1852 at the age of 74. George was born in 1781; he died in 1816, aged 35. Maria born in 1790, died at 22 in 1812. Leonard seems to have been born about 1795; we know nothing more about him. There were older children, one of whom, Lucy, the eldest, was born in 1769 and died in 1828 (aged 59). They were widely spaced; in 1796 for example, Lucy was 27, Harry 18, George 15, Maria 6 and Leonard an infant.

It is not known whether it was customary for the housekeeper in such an establishment as the Wheatley's to have so much responsibility for clothing her master's children. Perhaps Mrs. Wheatley may well have made the decisions and buying, leaving the housekeeper with simply the job of accounting for the expenditure. However, the impression remains that the housekeeper played a bigger part than that of mere accountant.

The new baby, Leonard, came into the housekeeper's care, or at any rate, into her accounts, in 1796. In May of that year he had a blue satin cushion (5/6) and in December an anodyne necklace. Such a necklace was believed to lessen fevers, particularly during teething. He had four bed gowns made in 1797 from six yards of dimity (12/-). When he cut his first tooth his nurse was given 5/-. Again one wonders if this gift to the nurse was a normal sign of appreciation, or of a spontaneous action. In 1798 Leonard had his first breeches and there is an entry: "Nanny 5/-, Sally 2/6."

Lucy, the eldest daughter, received her allowance through the housekeeper. She got £11.10.0 a quarter in 1792, rising to £13.2.6 in 1796. She tended to overspend. Maria started to have her own allowance in 1805 age 15 when she was given 10gns. a quarter. Another topic selected from the account books is travelling and holidays. The family undoubtedly had its own horses and carriages and the cost of these does not appear in the housekeepers accounts. She did sometimes pay for the hire of horses and vehicles. We find such entries as the following:

Chaise from Blackheath to Town	17. 6.
Hackney coach to Hammersmith	11/- Tpike 6d. 11. 6.
Chaise Horses fr. Town to Lesney	1. 2. 5.
Chariot, Kensington to Lesney	1. 2. 6.
Pair of horses, Charing X to Hammersmith	1. 1. 0.

There is no indication of the purpose of these journeys, nor of the people involved. Occasionally a name is included, as in:

Half price for place on stage for George	3. 0
Paid Lucy for chaise to Knightsbridge	1. 3. 6.

Sometimes there is an explanation of a journey implied, as when six visits were made to an oculist, each costing 1gn. for transport and 1gn. for this fee.

There were several references to Blackheath in these items of expenditure. Journeys were often broken there, no doubt at the "Great Man", a public house which was also the H.Q. of the New Cross Turnpike Trust. It must have been the Clapham Junction or London Bridge Station of the pre- railway era.

Turnpike roads were a feature of the times. Most of the main roads in Kent were turnpikes - i.e. roads that were repaired and maintained by bodies of trustees who charged tolls for the use of them. When the family went to Cheltenham in 1807, their travelling expenses (post horses and "expenses on the road" amounted to £48.16.5. and about £4 of this sum was for tolls on turnpikes.

Accustomed today to rapid transport it comes as a shock to realize how much time was needed for a journey of any distance. This is how the Wheatley's travelled on holiday in 1808.

They set out on September 19 and spent a night at Epsom	£1.18.0
Next morning they set off early and had breakfast at Dorking	8.0.
Then they went to Horsham and spent the night	2.4.0.
Next day (21st) they breakfasted at Henfield	8.0.
And spent the night at Brighton	3.16.6.
They seemed to have stayed in a rented home in East street, Brighton for two weeks, for which they paid:	20.0.0.
Then they had a week at Eastbourne with Mrs Betteridge for which they paid for her lodgings	4.4.6
While an item "horses at livery, New Inn" suggested that they parked their vehicles there, at a higher cost than their own	4.14.6.

accommodation	
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On October 12 they returned home, via Battle Abbey (12th), Hastings (13th), Lamberhurst (14th), Tunbridge Wells (15th), [the Dover Arms], and Knowle.

Such journeys did not only need a lot of time. The family had to organize the movements of servants - footman, groom and maids - and accommodation for them, besides meeting the various bills presented by their coachman for feeding, stabling and shoeing horses. It all seems very complicated today.