

# Wargrave Local History Society

## Latest News - January 2026

### The Bull at Wargrave - Jayne Worrall

The subject of Wargrave Local History Society's January meeting was The Bull Hotel at Wargrave, when the present landlady, Jayne Worrall recounted its history, in what she called 'an informal chat' about her 'three lives' at the Bull. The Bull is around 600 years old, having started as a 15th century coaching inn - somewhere where travellers could obtain refreshment, and the horses could also take a rest.

It subsequently became a Brakspear's house. Jayne explained that Robert Brakspear had started as landlord at the Cross Keys, at Witney, in Oxfordshire, in 1769. Here he brewed his own beer, also selling it to other publicans in the town. Ten years later, he moved to Henley, where in due course he became sole owner of the brewery then in Bell Street, but later in New Street. He bought The Bull at Wargrave in 1779 - the £850 that he paid was a substantial sum in those days.



Jayne then told of some of her own background. She had spent 8 years working as an air hostess for BOAC. In those days it was a glamorous job, like being a model, but when the airline changed to become British Airways, it was very different. She had, however, met Graham, who worked as a company representative for Courage's brewery. He wanted to have a public house to run, but at that time she felt 'no way'!

The process of applying to become the landlord of a public house was rather like going to an estate agent to register as someone interested in buying a house. The agent would then send by post details of properties that might be of interest, and then a visit could be arranged. The first one that Jayne applied to take over was The Fox, at Bix. She was not successful - but a short time after Brakspears telephoned to say that they had The Bull at Wargrave if she would like it. Her response was "Where is Wargrave?"!



The Bull was then very different to how it is now. The previous landlord was Richard Wilson, who had a terrible stutter. When he and Jayne sat down in the bar to discuss the hand-over, he told her that he had been going to be a newsreader ... but was too short! Richard was very helpful, and Jayne has tried to give the same treatment to her successors when-ever she has left a pub. She took over on January 8th 1980 - a date her brother remembers well, as a window had to be removed to get some of the furniture in. The main entrance was not the present one, whilst inside, none of the beams of the building's timber frame could be seen. The ladies' toilet was down the garden, and in the winter a kettle of hot water would be needed to melt the ice there.

One occasion that came to mind from that time was on a Monday night, when she and Graham had been out for the evening. One of the guests had also been out, and came back “somewhat worse for wear”, and wanted to have a drink. This he would have to take up to the bedroom - and there were no en-suite facilities in those days. After a while, he was heard to fall down as he made his way to the toilet -- but Jayne did not hear him come out again. After about 15 - 20 minutes, she went to investigate, looking to see if any feet were visible under the door, but none could be seen. The guest had come out of the toilet, but then turned the wrong way - and ended up on Jayne’s bed!

Graham and Jayne stayed at The Bull for about 4 or 5 years, when Graham became the landlord of The Rising Sun, at Witheridge Hill. The landlord of another pub nearby was found to be crooked, and so that pub was taken away from them - and Jayne had the task of supervising that as well as their own pub. It was during their time at The Rising Sun that the landlord of another local pub asked if she provided meals, as he had Rod Stewart standing there “Really” she replied -- but then “Hello Rod” when he came in. He was charming and delightful - and asked if she would mind if he brought in some caviar to have as a starter, and that was agreed. At the time Jayne and Graham had a cat called Basil - which was then seen sitting on Rod Stewart’s knee being spooned caviar. The next day, the cat did not want its usual food, and went off for 3 days! The actor George Cole was another celebrity who patronised The Rising Sun.



*A late 19th century view of Church Street, (above) with The Bull on the left.*



Jayne returned to The Bull in 1998. Some work was put in hand to bring back some of its character, and in the dining room she had a photograph of her, Graham and Stan Callender, a copy of the Henley Standard, and some money put into a time capsule placed behind the timber beams. The fire place was tiny, but because of the age of the building she knew that there must have been a larger one. It took just 3 hours for Stan to get the old fire place pulled out.

There are some stories that associate ghosts with The Bull. Experts have been more than once, and can sense where the ‘presence’ is. They appear to be friendly - although few customers say they have heard anything. One apparition is said to date from the 1820s, and concerns the wife of the landlord at the time. He found that she had had an affair, so told her to leave, and would not allow her to see their baby. The account relates that she died of a broken heart, and can be heard crying in one of the bedrooms. Jayne recalled another occurrence, when she was in the pub with a resident guest stood in front of her, and there was nobody else there. The guest suddenly spun round, as they had felt somebody tap them on the shoulder. She said that she ‘keeps an open mind’ about such experiences.

After her time at The Rising Sun, Jayne left the hospitality trade, and moved to the world of IT. She went to Select Appointments in Maidenhead, and was asked if she would like an office job in Taplow - and was asked if word perfect. Yes, she could type - that would be no trouble at all. On taking up the post, she was confronted with a computer screen ‘Word Perfect’ was a word processing program! She could not bluff her way out of that, but as it happened, she that she “took to it like a duck to water”.

*An early 20th century view The Bull (left)*

In 2008, Jayne left Wargrave, as the increase in the cost of the tenancy being asked for by the brewery was more than she felt she could meet. She moved to run a similar business - noting that the agreement for the tenant who took her place at The Bull was for a significantly lower sum.

Jayne returned to The Bull in 2012. It was somewhat different. The 'characters' who frequented the pub when first she came to Wargrave were no longer there. Many had been born and lived all their life in the village, but with the growth in the village population that was no longer the case. One she remembered from her early days was a 'very wealthy gentleman' who would pay for his glass of bitter with coins from a tin he carried in a Mother's Pride (bread) bag. Visitors seeing this would comment about the "poor old boy", looking as if he could hardly afford his drink. At that time, the village High Street was 'alive', with a variety of shops including a post office, Weatherlake's small supermarket, Tony Shaw the fishmonger and Mrs Gemsa's electrical and household items shop. Jayne's father was looking in that shop window one day, and noticed two identical electrical adapters, but with different value price tickets on them. Intrigued, he went in and asked what was the difference between the two items - to which Pat replied "25 pence".

The Bull standing right by the crossroads in the middle of the village meant it was a busy place. In the years before traffic lights were installed there (and for a while after) there was a large mirror fixed to the corner of the building. Despite the lack of traffic controls, there were never any accidents there (although probably once or twice a week heavy lorries might knock the mirror off). One incident, though, from the 1960s concerned a mini being carried by a car transporter, when it shot off the back and through The Bull's bay window.



One of the things that changed during Jayne's period in Devon was the removal of the neon sign above the bay window, to be replaced by the present gold lettering - she would like to see the neon sign reinstated. Another item that could not be found on her return was a four-poster bed - on enquiring it was found to have been removed by the landlord who had replaced her - who had chopped it up for firewood.

Jayne has made a number of changes to The Bull during her time as the landlady. These have included opening up the fireplaces - one (below, left) having an open fire in winter time, with the other being used as a log store (it is too close to diners for it to be used lit), and the false wall coverings were removed to expose the ancient timber frame. In earlier times, the pub bar area had only a patio area and a stable block beyond. This area was converted into an additional dining area, which provides larger tables away from the bar area itself, for family groups (*below right*).



The stable block now has the ladies' and gentlemen's toilets, whilst the garden area (*below, left*) beyond the patio has outdoor seating for use on a summery day. Inside the pub there are also changes upstairs, where there are 5 guest bedrooms. The later panelling (apparently 'the fashion' when it was installed) was also removed in those, so that the timber frame was exposed there, (*below, right*) and they now have en-suite facilities.



The Bull is what is known as a 'tied house'. The building belongs to Brakspears (now a pub company not a brewery), whilst the business there belongs to Jayne. The contract between the two stipulates that drinks should be bought through the owning company, that now also applying to soft drinks, whereas at a 'free house' the landlord can shop around for the best price for their supplies. Jayne recalled the negotiations some years ago with Michael Chalcraft, Brakspears' managing director. He asked how a 4-fold increase sounded - she replied 'not keen', so Michael asked what figure she had in mind. "Done" said Michael, and the agreement signed.

Being a pub landlady is not a 'job', but 'a way of life'. On a Sunday, The Bull might serve as many as 100 roast lunches. There are 5 full-time staff - and several part-timers, Jayne liking to employ local people. She said she was very lucky that the young people who had worked for her were fantastic - and when a new group replaced them, they were fantastic as well. Government changes which were said not to affect workers though, did, as businesses could not afford to take on more staff, or give a rise to existing staff.



*A recent night-time view of The Bull (above)*



*A group of diners from Australia enjoying their meal by the traditional open fire (above)*

Jayne (*below*) ended with an account of an unusual incident a few years ago. Late one night there had been a car accident nearby, resulting in damage to a gas main. When the police called to ask Jayne - in her 'jim jams', if she could provide shelter for the people affected, she said they achieved a 'first' - the bar was full of people at 4 am - drinking tea!



For more information about the society, visit our website at <https://www.wargravehistory.org.uk>