

BARNET MUSEUM
LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY



A History of
*Old Court House
Recreation Ground*

The story of a seemingly 'forgotten'
Barnet family, their land and properties,
and how parts of their estate
in Wood Street came into public
ownership in the early 1900s

By Jeff Gale

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INTRODUCTION

Having recently researched the back history of two of the local green spaces that I remember from my - probably mischievous! - childhood explorations many years ago (Greenhill Gardens followed by Highlands Gardens*) I now move slightly further north into the town centre of Chipping Barnet to delve into the background of a third - the Old Court House Recreation Ground.

The main access to this 7.7 acre 'park' is located between numbers 27 and 29 Wood Street - the latter now being the Coroner's Court for North London. Although well signposted, many passers-by might easily overlook the park as they hurry to or from the nearby bus stop, perhaps with shopping in or from the town centre foremost in their minds. Other entrances can be found in Manor Close, in Orchard Road (off Fitzjohn Avenue) and in Mays Lane, near the junction with Manor Road.

The main area of the park is situated on the sloping ground behind the Wood Street entrance, and as it descends towards Mays Lane visitors will find that it narrows with the footpath running beside a series of tennis courts. Maintained since 1965 by the London Borough of Barnet, other facilities provided include bowling and croquet greens, children's play areas, gardens and a small café - although some of the original amenities planned have disappeared over the time since it was opened to the public in July 1924 after the land had for years been in private ownership.

The internet reveals the following brief, but not entirely accurate, history of the park via Wikipedia:

'The park is named after a county court adjacent to the site which was held until the First World War. In the nineteenth century, the land was owned by the Rumball family and leased as pasture, a brewery and stables. In 1912 the brewery site was purchased by [the then] Barnet Urban District Council, and in 1923 the council purchased the Old Court House estate. The park was opened in 1926 [sic]'.
[sic]

So, who exactly were 'the Rumball family', what was the extent of the land they owned in Chipping Barnet, and what is the story behind the purchase of, first, a former brewery site once owned by them and, later, the Old Court House estate, by the UDC back in the early 20th century?

My initial research failed to discover more than the occasional reference to the Rumball family in published local histories and in the archives of Barnet Museum. The invaluable record of local land ownership available through the index, schedule and maps from the 1818 Barnet Enclosure Awards (Hertfordshire Record Society 2016) did however reveal that a Sampson Rumball was listed there as the owner of twenty four individual enclosures - variously described as being Houses/Tenements, Gardens/Old enclosures, or Allotments - with a total area covering 25 acres 0 roods 33 poles** at several locations around the town of Chipping Barnet. (See analysis in the Appendix below).

The maps reveal the largest group of these properties were located along the south side of Wood Street, some leading across parts of the then undeveloped land leading down towards Mays Lane.

Research now turned to the resources of the internet, with the name of Sampson Rumball proving the vital key to unlocking a wealth of information about the family available via Ancestry UK family trees, census and other records. These in turn would provide information about other family members that could be cross-referred, validated and extended by wider internet research.

As we shall see, looking back in Part 1, 'the Rumball family' appear to have been hiding (at least to me!) in plain sight locally for well over three hundred years!

In Parts 2 and 3, archived copies of the Barnet Press reveal first the history of how the Brewery site, and then the Old Court House Estate, were purchased by Barnet Urban District Council.

* See previous Museum Research Papers

** 40 poles = 1 rood, 4 roods = 1 acre : 2.471 acres = 1 hectare

PART I : THE RUMBALL FAMILY IN CHIPPING BARNET

Having identified Sampson Rumball from the 1818 Barnet Enclosure Awards he proved to be the key to unlocking details of the Rumball family across the decades. Using internet research, especially the resources of Ancestry UK, I can record the history of the family in Chipping Barnet from the time of the birth of his Grandfather, Daniel Rumball, in about 1675 through to the end of their direct presence in - and association with the town through ownership of land and property - following the death of Sarah Yorke Rumball, the wife of his son, Sampson Augustus Rumball, in 1889.

DANIEL RUMBALL : 1675-???? - OCCUPATION UNKNOWN

Identified from an Ancestry family tree. I have found no evidence to prove this link is 100% accurate, but various sources lead to him, and I am reasonably sure Daniel is indeed where we need to begin.

His wife was named Mary, and it seems that they married either in East or Chipping Barnet but on an undiscovered date. The potential link to East Barnet is partially derived from a 1622 reference in Manorial Court Records to 'a piece of waste in East Barnet of about 10 poles, laying in Church Way and abutting on Rumballs Meads'. ('Mead' is an alternative name for a meadow, especially one used for hay and/or a piece of low lying ground near a watercourse: could this perhaps indicate a location somewhere near St Mary's church and the Pymmes Brook?)

Daniel is said to have rung the church bell and wound the clock 'for less than two shillings a year'.

Whilst there might be more that further research into Daniel and Mary could unearth, it appears that they had at least one son named John Rumball in 1714, and it is with him that the family history now progresses with more certainty.

JOHN RUMBALL : c1714-1791 - A DRAPER

John appears to have been born in Chipping Barnet and certainly spent much of his life living in the town where he died in 1791.

In 1741 he was a churchwarden at the parish church of St John, and on 20th October 1743 he married Susannah Sampson (1721-1774) at St Mary's Monken Hadley, then her parish church - although she was born in Ratcliff, Middlesex (now part of Tower Hamlets).

By 1745 he is recorded in the Parish records for the Overseers of the Poor described as a draper and supplier of cloth and clothing to the inmates of the workhouse.

His name also appears in the Militia Lists for Chipping Barnet between 1758 and 1782 where he is initially shown as being a Clerk to the Justices who 'suffers from a nervous disorder' and later listings record that he was a draper.

John and Susannah had at least ten children, five daughters and five sons - the eldest son being Sampson Rumball (their eldest daughter was named Susannah, presumably to ensure that a link with the maiden name of their mother was perpetuated into the next generation).

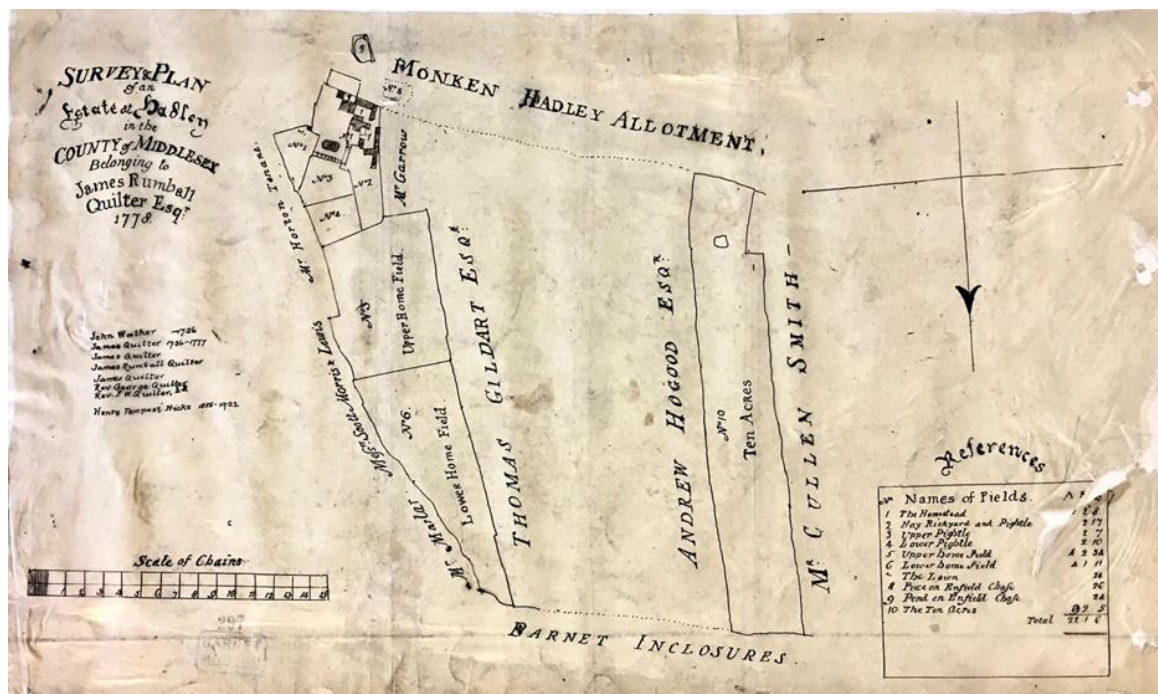
John was still a churchwarden in 1761 and the following year he was appointed as Surveyor of the Highways, a role he held until 1779. In 1774 he was narrowly defeated in a bid to become Vestry Clerk, a role he would later achieve and hold for ten years between 1777 and 1787.

John died on 28th November 1791 and was buried in St John's churchyard. His wife Susannah predeceased him and was living in Chipping Barnet when she died in 1774.

Given his lifetime of public service John Rumball would certainly have been well known locally).

Before moving on down the direct family line, mention of another of John's sons, James Rumball (1755-1818), is of interest, not least because it gives a link to another local family - the Quilters of Monken Hadley.

Trawling various sources for details of the Rumball family I discovered a land survey plan dated 1778 in the archives of Barnet Museum (see below) which shows details of a Monken Hadley estate belonging to James Rumball Quilter Esq - at first seemingly nothing more than a possible link to the Rumballs?



During further research I discovered that John's wife, Susannah Sampson, was related to the Quilters, being the maternal great granddaughter of James Quilter (1736-1777). He died living in Monken Hadley and was buried in Stepney on 26 September 1777. However, I believe it likely that he was then living in the house shown in the above plan, then known as Gladsmuir, having been built by the Quilter family in about 1736. (Known as Lemmons in the 1970's when it was owned by the author Kingsley Amis, but it has now assumed the name of Gladsmuir once again).

Under the terms of his will, James Quilter decreed that his great great grandson James Rumball (John and Susannah's son) should take the name of Quilter as his own, and assent for this was given via a private Act of Parliament in 1778:

'An Act to enable James Rumball, now called James Quilter, his First and other Sons, and their Heirs Male, to take and use the Surname, and bear the Coat Armour of Quilter, in pursuance of the Will of James Quilter, Esquire, deceased.'

Now calling himself James Rumball Quilter, the survey plan shows that he appears to have taken up residence at Gladsmuir in 1778.

[James Rumball Quilter's son, confusingly also named James Quilter (1784-1864), a solicitor, was one of several local Visitors (ie trustees) of the Jesus Hospital Charity who were instrumental in developing the charity's Estate in Bethnal Green during the mid-1800s. Several streets in the area are named after them in recognition of their contribution to the work. The Quilter family are also remembered on plaques in the church of St Mary the Virgin in Monken Hadley.]

SAMPSON RUMBALL : 1758-1833 - A SURGEON/DOCTOR

Sampson was baptised in Chipping Barnet on 13th February 1758. His name appears in a Register of Duties Paid for Apprentices' Indentures dated 5th February 1773 showing that he was apprenticed for a premium of £100 and for a period of seven years to Philip Bodham Roberts of Chipping Barnet, a surgeon - a profession that Sampson clearly followed as his name is listed as such in Chipping Barnet in the 1826 edition of Pigot's Commercial Directory of Nobility, Gentry and Clergy.

He followed his father into the Chipping Barnet Militia where he is listed as a surgeon and doctor in the years 1781 to 1783 - although he clearly found time between his medical and military duties to marry Isabella Egerton (1762-1832) at Saint Stephen's church in St Albans on 4th May 1781.

In 1782 he is recorded as being the apothecary for the Chipping Barnet workhouse.

Isabella's father was Stebbing Egerton (1725-1783). In his will dated 11th August 1783 - just two years after she had married - he left his house in Barnet and all its effects to Sampson Rumball, with the rest of his estate in the trust of his two executors until their deaths when it would revert to the Rumballs.

By 1806 Sampson had expanded his ownership of properties in and around Wood Street - a sizable portfolio as seen in the Appendix below.

At one time the Rumballs lived in a house next but one to the Bow House. 'a good convenient house, part of it an apothecaries' shop, let to Mr Rumball'. This was probably 31 Wood Street - now home to Barnet Museum!

Here I must acknowledge research previously undertaken by Pauline Brown, a long-time Friend of the museum, on which I have drawn heavily here. Her family trees available via Ancestry have been a mine of information on the life of the Rumballs, and (a late 'find'!) her paper 'The Hassells of Wood Street' (first published by the Museum as Bulletin 40 in 2003) show that they owned much of the Wood Street property acquired by Sampson Rumball around 1800.

Between 1787 and 1831 he was a volunteer with the Royal Humane Society, which was formed to attempt resuscitation of people who had apparently drowned, and later dealt with those attempting suicide, and the Universal British Directory of 1791 records him as a surgeon and man-midwife.

(Although midwives were usually women, apparently with the introduction of forceps into general use, men with their greater strength often took over the job).

In Holden's Directory of Commercial and Professional businesses published in 1808 he is recorded as a surgeon in Wood Street and is still a member of the Royal Humane Society.

Sampson and Isabella had five children, three sons and two daughters, their two eldest sons (who will both appear later) being Sampson Augustus Rumball (1785-1866) and Robert John Somerset Egerton Rumball (1792-1868) - each carrying forward a family trend of naming children to perpetuate a name derived from their parents - in this case a Christian and a maiden name.

Isabella died, aged 70, in Chipping Barnet on 12th September 1832. Sampson Rumball died in the town, aged 75, on 4th April 1833. In his will Sampson left his properties to his sons Sampson Augustus and Robert John Somerset Egerton Rumball.

Sampson Rumball would clearly have been well known on the local scene - as well as more widely - given his role as a surgeon/doctor in the town and with his wider associations with the Royal Humane Society and his early work as a man-midwife.

SAMPSON AUGUSTUS RUMBALL : 1785-1866 - A BARRISTER

Sampson, and his brother Robert (1792-1868), were both born in Chipping Barnet, and we are now able to locate information about them from Census records. In 1851 Sampson is recorded living with his wife Sarah and one servant at 27 Pembroke Square, Kensington, his occupation 'Barrister Out of Practice' (ie presumably retired). He had married Sarah Yorke Hutchins (1815-1889), daughter of Charles Hutchins, Gentleman, of Phillimore Place, in Kensington on 21st July 1837.

By 1861 Sampson and Sarah are recorded living in Wood Street, again with one servant. His occupation is recorded as 'Barrister (not in practice)'.

(In 1851 Robert is recorded living at 14 Adelaide Terrace, Kensington, widowed, his occupation shown as a Land and House Proprietor. He had married his wife Charlotte Cline Cuthbert in Shoreditch in 1815 and she died in Chipping Barnet in 1843. By 1861 Robert is recorded living at 36 Queen's Road, Paddington, now with 'no occupation' entered).

Looking back to 1833 (the year that he and his Brother Robert had inherited the properties in and around Wood Street from their father) Sampson was appointed a member of the Commission of Inquiry into Municipal Corporations for several northern cities and towns, a role he also undertook in 1835 in respect of the Cinque Ports. His work contributed to the passing of the Municipal Corporations Act in 1835 which democratised local government in Municipal areas which were often previously run in a closed manner by self-electing bodies, often with political objectives.

Their only child, a short lived daughter Charlotte (1841-1843) was born and was buried in the family vault at St John the Baptist churchyard. Although they retained their house and other property in Chipping Barnet, after her death Sampson and Sarah spent much of the time working and living at various London addresses until sometime in the 1850s when he seems to have finally settled into retirement with Sarah living back in Wood Street where we found them in 1861.

Sampson Augustus Rumball died in January 1866 and was buried in the parish church close to where they would have been living. Although now lost, a tablet at the west end of the churchyard declared 'Sacred to the memory of Sampson Augustus Rumball of Barnet, Esq., born 30th June 1785, died the 10th January 1866'.

In his will he named his wife Sarah Yorke Rumball as executor and his probate record reveals, perhaps surprisingly, that his effects were valued at 'less than £1,500'.

As with his forebears, Sampson Augustus Rumball would almost certainly have been well known in Chipping Barnet. He was also a player nationally given his role enquiring into the working of Municipal Government which led to an Act of Parliament that effected changes which last today.

After his death in 1866 Sarah clearly inherited the title to many of her husband's properties in and around Chipping Barnet. She would survive him by twenty three years and, as we shall see below, she died in 1889 living at Hatherley House adjacent to Tudor Hall (now No 25 Wood Street). She was clearly left a wealthy lady. The 1881 Census records her as being a 'Landed Proprietor'.

Their only child, Charlotte, had died in 1843, and it appears that although under the terms of his will Sampson Augustus had provided well for Sarah during her lifetime, on her death her estate would pass to his distant relatives, Jane Marsh and her children Frederick and Alice Mary Marsh.

(Ancestry records show that by 1912 Frederick and Alice had sold their interests in many of the Wood Street properties to another local family, Alfred George and George Daniel Malins. More detail about the Malins brothers is recorded below and Alfred George will feature in Part 2).

The above timeline provides an indication that 'the Rumball family' certainly had a visible presence in, and even beyond, the town for over two hundred and twenty years and I hope this research serves to ensure that their memory is not forgotten. Sarah was thirty years younger than Sampson and outlived him by twenty three years until 1889. I somehow feel that she would have remained a visible presence for the Rumball's living prominently in Wood Street until the end of her life.

Her death brought the end of the direct Rumball family connection with Chipping Barnet and would precipitate the sale of many properties in and around Wood Street many of which have formed part of the Wood Street Conservation Area since 2007.

ALFRED GEORGE MALINS (1853-1925) & GEORGE DANIEL MALINS (1855-1919)

As mentioned above, under the will of Sampson Augustus Rumball, much of the land he had acquired passed to the Marsh family after the death of his wife Sarah. Ownership initially went to Jane Marsh, passing then to her children Frederick and Alice and, following their sale, we now meet new owners of at least part of the former Rumball family estate in Wood Street - Alfred George and George Daniel Malins.

Whilst the Ancestry records that I draw from here relate specifically to ownership of the Bow House (now 35 Wood Street), it certainly appears that the brothers also acquired more of the many Wood Street properties that Sampson Rumball owned in 1818, not least because the 1911 Census shows that by then George Daniel was living at the Whalebones - the site of one of Rumball's properties identified from the Enclosure Award documents.

Earlier Census records and various directories show that the Malins were originally 'Oil and Grease Dealers' (possibly involved in the tallow/candle industry of the Victorian age?) located in and around the east-end of London, and I muse that by the turn of the 20th century and in early middle age they may have made enough money to relocate to the Northern Heights of Chipping Barnet, becoming in effect nouveau-rich landowners in Wood Street - certainly even then the upmarket part of the town. (I hasten to add for clarity this is but conjecture on my part...!)

Returning to Ancestry records, it appears that Frederick Marsh sold his part share in at least the Bow House to the Malins soon after 1889, and that they acquired full ownership of Bow House - and I believe, probably further properties - from Sarah Marsh by 1912.

Determining exactly how much of the former Rumball properties the Malins may have come to own is beyond the reach of this research, but as the name of Alfred George Malins will soon appear again, I end this excursion into the realms of personal fantasy by noting that he received an effusive obituary in the Barnet Press on 25th July 1925 and noted that he had served the Town with distinction holding several local public roles.

Of note is that between 1909 and 1914 he was a member of the Barnet Urban District Council, serving as Chairman in 1911-14. From 1917 to 1925 he filled a seat on Hertfordshire County Council, and shortly before his death he was appointed as a Justice of the Peace for the County.

Alfred's probate records that he died in 1925 living at The Quinta in Arkley leaving an estate valued at over £22,035. George's probate records that he died in 1919 living at Whalebones in Wood Street leaving an estate valued at over £20,921. (Very roughly those sums equate to well over £800,000 today).

(The brothers had clearly worked hard amassing considerable wealth during their lives, not least perhaps from property ownership in the Wood Street area....)

PART 2 : THE OLD BARNET BREWERY SITE BECOMES NEW COUNCIL OFFICES

The Rumball's links with the town ended following the death of Sarah Yorke Rumball on 17th February 1889, and her obituary in the Barnet Press on Saturday 23rd February 1889 indicates that extensive changes of ownership in respect of many properties resulting from acquisitions by the Rumball family over the years in Wood Street and in London were about to begin....

DEATH OF AN OLD INHABITANT.—We have to record the death of Mrs Sarah Yorke Rumball, of Wood-street, Barnet, which occurred on Sunday last, the 17th inst., one week prior to her completing her 74th year (to-morrow). The deceased lady had been of late years mostly confined to her house through bodily infirmities, ending some five years ago in total blindness. She was the last survivor of the branch of the Rumball family resident in Barnet for over two centuries, she being the widow of Mr Sampson Augustus Rumball, barrister-at-law, who was born in 1785. He and a brother (Mr Robert John Pascall Somerset Egerton Rumball) were the sons of Mr Sampson Rumball, who in the last century practised as a surgeon at the house now occupied by Mr Boyes, and who, with other earlier members of the family, had been located in Barnet for a lengthened period. By the death of the deceased, apart from the dispositions of her personal property, certain changes take place in the partial ownership of a considerable amount of house property in Wood-street and other parts of the town and in London. The earlier members of the family are mostly buried beneath the nave of the older part of the church, and the remains of the deceased were yesterday interred with those of her late husband in the vault in the parish churchyard, constructed in 1866 for their reception. The service was performed by the Rev. D. W. Barrett, rector, Mr Poole kindly presiding at the organ. The coffin was preceded by Dr. Thyne and W. O. Boyes, Esq. (deceased's medical attendant and solicitor), and was followed by T. Lendon Merriman, Esq., and Mrs Merriman, Harvey Merriman, Esq., Septimus Merriman, Esq., General Merriman, Aubrey Rumball, Esq., Mrs Boyes, Mrs Fletcher, Miss George.

Probate records show that her personal estate was valued at £5495. 16s. 2d, and from an Ancestry family tree I note that a sales catalogue detailing the contents of each room of her home, Hatherley House, on 28 March 1889 ran to twelve pages with the sale realising £129 1s. 3d.

Precise details regarding the disposal of the properties that would have formed the bulk of her considerable estate by her beneficiaries are unclear but, as we shall see, it appears to have been managed at least initially by 'the Rumball's trustees' and certainly took place over several years following her death. Aubrey Rumball, son of her late husband's cousin, a member of a branch of the family who had established a business as land agents in St Albans, also appears to have been involved.

During this time parts of the estate would come into the ownership of the Malins family (including the Bow House and probably Whalebones) and it also clearly attracted the interest of the Barnet Urban District Council who - not without a degree of public disquiet - set out in August 1911 to purchase the site owned by the Rumball family occupied under lease by the former premises of the Old Barnet Brewery Co Ltd located at what has today become 29 Wood Street. Later they would also set out to purchase No 27 which formed part of the Old Court House Estate - see Part 3.

THE OLD BREWERY

Before we review the purchase of the site by the Urban District Council it is worth exploring the back story of the Brewery from 1649 until 1912 when the last company trading there - the Old Barnet Brewery Ltd - went into liquidation.

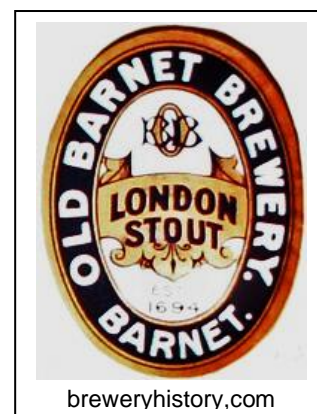
This c1880 picture from the archives of Barnet Museum shows that at the turn of the 20th century this area of Wood Street was occupied by the Old Barnet Brewery Ltd (at number 29) and two Georgian houses. 31 is the current home of Barnet Museum. 33 was then in use as Barnet College although it would become the original home of the museum in March 1939 until it was destroyed by a German bomb on 18th October 1940. Considerable damage was also caused to neighbouring properties by the explosion, including to 31 and 35 - The Bow House. (The museum would reopen at 31 in April 1950. 33 was only finally rebuilt for use as offices in the 1980s).



This second picture, probably contemporary with the first, is also important as it shows that the site of the brewery extended further towards Barnet Hill than might be assumed from the picture above.



Possibly in existence since the late 1500s, the history of the brewery site and ownership of it by the Rumball family forms an important part in the history of how Chipping Barnet would finally see their new Council Offices opening in 1915. Brewing was certainly taking place there by 1694 as can just be discerned from this beer label from the early 1900s when, after numerous changes of ownership, it was finally being operated by the Old Barnet Brewery Company (1906-1912).



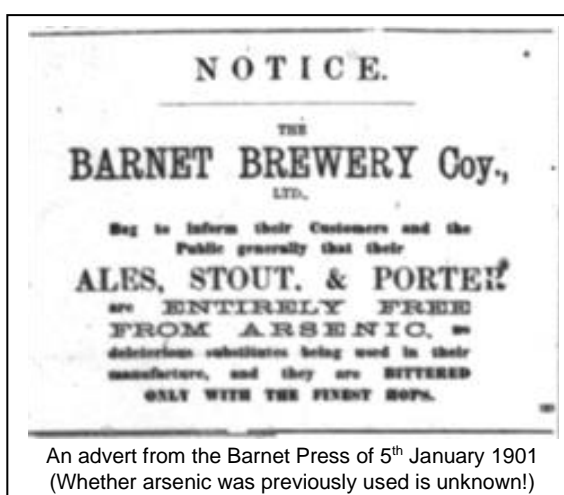
An early link to ownership of the site by the Rumball family is recorded in Richard Selby's excellent 'crawl' through the history of Barnet's licenced premises in 'Barnet's Pubs - Another Round' (2008):

'In 1795 the Hon. Thomas Brand issued a twenty one year lease on the site having then been converted back to two tenements, and in 1805 it was sold by Thomas Willson to Sampson Rumbold [*sic**], a surgeon'.

'Another Round' then tells that between 1805 and 1822 it was operated as a laundry but was then converted back to a brewery by a farmer named John Buckthorpe and was operated by him until his retirement in 1866. He was followed by the company of Henry Earle & Co from 1870 to 1886 - during which time they signed a further twenty one year lease, this time with the Rumbold* family. In 1887 the Barnet Brewery Co Ltd was registered but by 1906 had run into financial difficulties after which a new company, the Old Barnet Brewery Ltd, was registered. It operated for a further few years, until a liquidator was appointed in 1909. The final dissolution of the company was announced in the London Gazette on 12th February 1912.

Information regarding the history of Barnet Brewery was published by the museum in their Autumn 2012 Newsletter and is also well worth reading. It notes that in 1876 a lease for the brewery site and adjacent land & property, signed by Sarah Yorke Rumball and another, stipulated that if sold the land should not be used for any school other than a ladies' school, or for a lunatic asylum.

(Since 1812 other members of the Rumball family had established progressive asylums in St Albans and Harpenden. Their unorthodox treatments were frowned upon by the medical establishment of the day).



PURCHASE OF THE BREWERY SITE BY THE URBAN DISTRICT COUNCIL

The first public indication that the Council had decided to purchase the site for the construction of their new offices was reported in the Barnet Press of 5th August 1911. The proposal was to say the least controversial locally, and as we shall see it generated a lot of animosity amongst those who sought to represent the interests of the townsfolk - the Ratepayers' Association and the Workmen's Association. Both would raise concerns regarding the need for new offices and the increased cost to both private and commercial ratepayers when set alongside other existing council spending, including repaving the High Street and enlarging and improving the sewage works - which both supported.

At that time the council offices were based in a narrow terraced building located at No 40 High Street, next door to the imposing bank premises of the London and County Bank on the corner of Park Road (later the Westminster Bank and now a Domino's Pizza outlet). The council occupied the three storey building under the terms of a soon to expire repairing lease, but the top two floors were sub-let by the council to their Surveyor and his wife who were living there. Said to be unbearably hot for use in summer and cold in winter, the location was also claimed to become extremely noisy due to the increase in passing traffic - to which the arrival of the tramway at the top of Barnet Hill on 1st April 1907 would have undoubtedly added both noise and increased footfall.

The press reported the item at the council meeting under the heading 'NEW OFFICES FOR THE COUNCIL' and it appears to have consisted only of a statement by the chairman, E H Neal JP - with little or no discussion of the plans, which were at an advanced stage having clearly been considered in some depth by officials before the meeting.

Councillor Neal summarised current planned and committed expenditure and suggested in overview that, in his opinion, the council's financial position over the next few years was in good health. Negotiations had already taken place with the vendors of the brewery site, and the council had agreed to purchase the site for £1,000, subject to the consent of the Local Board. He was at pains to stress that it had been 'desirable, of course, to deal with such a matter at the outset as privately as possible'. The Clerk confirmed that he had received a draft contract from the vendors, and 'It was left with the Clerk to see that the terms of the offer were duly embodied in the contract'.

It is easy to see how members of the public could infer from this that matters which may well in due course lead to an increase in their rates had progressed behind the scenes without public scrutiny. The press leader in the same edition of the paper reflected this in no uncertain terms. 'An orgy of spending seems to have set in.... only gradually, and as it were grudgingly, that the public are admitted to the confidence of the council... when a corner of the curtain is lifted, and peep behind the scenes vouchsafed to the ratepayers, the play is usually too far advanced to be stopped without expense....' etc etc. They further expressed the view that no case had been made to justify the need for new offices as there had been no suggestion that the work of the council had been 'done ill by reason of accommodation', and it also included a hint of a suggestion that the plans may be being driven by a form of vanity, with the councillors seeking to unnecessarily acquire larger premises.

The following week a special meeting was convened at which the Clerk presented a draft agreement for the purchase - the solicitors for the vendors advising that they had insisted upon the council paying their legal costs. This was rightly rejected, and the Clerk instructed to reply saying each party should pay their own legal fees. Another week passed and the press now published a letter from 'An Old Inhabitant' severely criticising the purchase: 'Cr Neal tells us it will cost the ratepayers nothing. "Same old story, same old -----" I enclose my card, and remain yours truly....' Another scathing leader also appeared: 'thin end of the wedge... the buildings may cost £2,000 to £4,000... and for what?... "a lordly pleasure house"....'

On 26th August the press printed an item following receipt of a letter from Cr Neal's solicitor regarding comments included in the above letter and leader which Cr Neal felt 'put into his mouth statements which he never made, and from those unfounded statements false deductions are made which are calculated to prejudice him in the estimation of the ratepayers'.

Apologies (of a sort) were duly printed, 'no personal animus' was intended, with a third of the item going to great lengths to confer upon Cr Neal the view that 'we recognise... that he is one of the best and most fair-minded of our councillors, outspoken, fearless and consistent; one who, while he sometimes deals hard blows in municipal fights, never resents blows given in return if they are not below the belt'.

As they might have said at the time, 'the gloves were clearly off', and the underlying issues regarding the proposed purchase of the brewery site would duly resurface in the press on 2nd September when a report of a special meeting of the Ratepayers' Association was published - along with a leader supporting the views on the development expressed by them at their meeting. Several members of the council were in attendance to also hear doubts raised regarding the purchase of land currently held on lease by the council at the sewage farm which they felt had been overvalued given their location.

Regarding the brewery, the Association doubted the need for the new offices, felt they could challenge the financial arguments put forward by the council for the initial purchase, were concerned over the unstated longer term costs, observed that no member of the council had ventured any query or challenge to the proposal, and considered that the council were progressing the matter too fast and without taking on board the opinions of the public as ratepayers. A letter from a member who was unable to attend offered the opinion that 'The ratepayers are threatened with an unnecessary burden; let them in a body reject it'.

Of note is that the Chairman asked one of the councillors in attendance directly 'Who are the vendors? Is any member of the council interested?' In his reply the councillor mentioned the name of 'the Rumball's Trustees' and referred to one member of the council 'having a very small interest in the site' - however the reporter misheard the name he gave and incorrectly included it in his published report!

(This led to a strong letter of denial from the councillor who was incorrectly named being published the following week, together with a further letter from the councillor who had been misquoted in which he confirmed that the person he had named was Councillor A G Malins).

The views expressed in the Leader re the brewery purchase can be summarised by the quotes: 'Is not the scheme condemned by the silence of the Councillors?' and 'Is it possible that the Barnet Urban Council contemplate erecting a Town hall under the name of offices?'

One week later the press report of the next council meeting included the receipt and consideration of a letter from the Ratepayers' Association seeking more information regarding the plans. Cr Neal from the chair indicated that he had sought an invitation to attend their last meeting, but as none had been forthcoming 'he would leave it to ratepayers to draw their own conclusions upon the fact'. Continuing, he sought to counter the view they had expressed saying that extra space to better accommodate the council's business was not required, and his response to the comment recorded by a council member who suggested that his attendance could have been secured by him paying a shilling for membership of the association was 'That is not the point. Why would they not invite me?'

The chair having opened the discussion by moving that 'the letter should lie on the table', discussion of it ended with that proposal being seconded as 'there was no answer to it', and it was approved nem. con. The Clerk then read his correspondence between the vendors regarding the suggestion that the council should pay the latter's legal fees and after agreeing that this should be rejected the meeting - somewhat tellingly - went 'into committee' to consider the matter further in private.

The standoff rumbled on for another month, and on 7th October the press began their report of the latest council meeting under the heading 'Chairman in fighting mood'. Cr Neal had opened by railing against coverage by the paper of how the council were covering the issues of repaving the High Street and buying land to develop the sewage farm - to which the Editor inserted a rebuttal inviting the public to read their earlier coverage again and 'judge between the chairman and ourselves'.

Lengthy coverage of a vast number of other agenda items followed before the topic of the purchase of the brewery site was finally addressed again.

The key point regarding the proposed purchase was that the council had now received a reply from the Local Government Board in response to their letter seeking approval to borrow the £1,000 purchase price intimating that before deciding they would direct an inquiry would be held. Discussion then moved on to the continuing pressure from the Ratepayers', and now also the Workmen's, Associations requests for a meeting with the council to discuss the purchase.

Cr Neal opened from the chair proposing that the deputation should be deferred for the present as he considered that 'the matter had now reached a situation when it became necessary to speak out, and in strong terms' regarding their concerns and objections. He followed with a lengthy dismissal of their views, saying that he felt that the Associations were seeking to usurp the power of duly elected councillors, that the council 'could not, and would not, renew the lease of the present premises [at 40 High Street], so it was perfectly obvious - it did not matter what site was bought - the question of offices has to be dealt with'.

It was, he said, 'all very well to have to put up with these things, but there came a time when one got 'fed up', and he had got 'fed up', and unless there was a stop he intended considering the question, not of waiting till the end of his term to retire, but of retiring forthwith'.

At the end of his long and tetchy rebuttal, another councillor said that if Cr Neal opted to move that the deputations should be refused [rather than deferred] he would second the proposition, and Cr Neal responded by saying 'very well, I will'. Further lengthy discussion of this ensued before finally the two proposals were tabled, with deferring receiving the vote whilst rejecting it received no seconder. The proposer of the latter ended by suggesting that his colleagues were 'Pandering to a lot of snobs'!

A further council meeting was reported on 21st October, and once again Cr Neal was in fighting mood saying that any representations made by the Associations at the inquiry (now scheduled to be held at the council offices at 11.15 am on 25th October) should heed the terms in the notice calling it to the effect that those participating would be 'giving evidence' - and that 'mere talk' was not evidence. He added that anyone giving evidence was liable to be cross-examined, and he thought that those who might attend to oppose would find their cross-examination was 'very severe'. To the suggestion that he should not seek to frighten them Cr Neal replied that he 'did not wish to frighten people: just to warn them'.

He then sought to argue against the views expressed in a letter published in the Press on 2nd September (from 'AN OLD INHABITANT' - but now identified as J W Pearson - who had since been elected as a councillor and was in attendance) suggesting that as well as the £1,000 purchase price for the brewery site the cost of construction would probably add a further £4-5,000 that had not been mentioned in the purchase proposals. He suggested that those costs were simply not yet known, could be a thousand pence as well as a thousand pounds - or even whether 'some public spirited man was coming forward to give a building'.

Cr Pearson countered with 'May I ask if it is possible to build public offices for less a sum than four or five thousand pounds?' to which Cr Neal replied 'I am not prepared to answer a question of a hypothetical nature. We may put up a building like the Isolation Hospital, to cost £500'.

Cr Pearson: 'I simply asked a question'. Cr Neal: 'You have no right to ask such a question'. Cr Pearson: 'I have a perfect right'. The report ended by recording that another councillor had here interjected with 'Certainly you do have. What next I wonder!'

Two reports in the edition of the Press dated 28th October 1911 provide important information to this research - they recorded a special meeting of the council called the Saturday before the inquiry was held the following Wednesday, and a detailed report of the inquiry itself.

The special council meeting had been convened to consider a petition 'signed by numerous ratepayers' calling for the council to call a public meeting to enable discussion of the brewery site purchase before the inquiry was held. The petition was read out by the Clerk, and Cr Neal from the chair immediately moved, and was seconded, to the effect that a reply should issue saying that the council saw no grounds for altering their decision in the matter, and must decline, therefore, to call a public meeting. Some members, including Cr Pearson, spoke in favour of a public meeting, but the chair robustly argued against it in the ensuing discussions. One member offered the comment that he felt the council were regarding the ratepayers as natural enemies, adding that if we treated them properly we would find them natural friends.

The chair disagreed, adding 'You know perfectly well there are certain circumstances which make the present occasion a unique one. That is what it comes to. We are not going to be bullied into a false position just because a few want to make a noise and scowl at us'. On went the debate, until Cr Pearson finally referred to an issue which may well have been at least one of the hidden issues behind the council's seeming reluctance to release full details of their plans.

'Is there any reason why you should hide this new idea of putting the public lavatory on the site?'

(It seems that the call for the provision of a public lavatory for the town had been under consideration for some time, and the council were now quietly moving away from the previous proposal, virtually agreed, for it to be built on land owned by and adjacent to the church).

The cut and thrust of the discussion continued until it was finally agreed by all - except Cr Pearson - to reply saying that the council were strongly of the opinion that no useful purpose would be served by the holding of a public meeting.

The report of the Local Government Board inquiry appeared alongside this filling no less than three full columns of the print. It is perhaps notable that Cr Pearson did not attend. Soon after it began a member of the Ratepayers' Association sought to raise a point of order but was quickly silenced by the Inspector after a short exchange with the words 'Sit down, please'.

Suffice it to record here that the Clerk for the council (he was also their solicitor) robustly presented the case for approving the loan to purchase answering all questions raised by the Inspector as he went. Of note is that soon after he opened his evidence in respect of the unsuitability of the current offices (in which the inquiry was taking place) the Inspector commented that 'The place is more like a private house than an office', and the Clerk replied 'It was intended as such originally'.

Cr Neal was then questioned as the first witness, answering issues including the need for new offices, assuring that the proposed site was perfectly suitable for their needs, tabling a financial breakdown showing all details relevant to the enquiry, and answering a query interjected by a member of the Ratepayers' Association regarding the cost of the public lavatory to the effect that it would be cheaper to build it on the brewery site than to build it on church land which would then need to be leased at £20 per year.

Previously unstated, the provision of a lavatory had clearly become a major consideration for the council, but an equally controversial issue for the Ratepayers' Association, and another council witness confirmed that although the Chancel Estate had initially agreed to their wish to build it adjacent to the church, now that the brewery site had become an option the Estate now considered that it was 'no object of theirs to sacrifice the aspect of the church by a public convenience'.

Further detailed evidence was then taken exploring the need for new offices versus the unsatisfactory facilities at the current location. (the press report had earlier noted that during the inquiry when a telephone had rung in the anteroom the Inspector had been asked whether someone should answer. He asked whether there was a connecting door, to which one of the councillors attending - perhaps opportunely - commented that if it was shut they would all be suffocated!). On and on went the debate, at times descending into animosity, at times into humour, with one suggestion being that if the council moved to the brewery site the current problem of noise would be replaced by the ringing of the church bells!

A full reading of the article from which I drew this summary would make interesting study - and would probably do better justice to the full breadth of the debate than I have attempted here - but suffice it to say the inquiry closed and the Inspector departed to consider the arguments further.

A week later the Press leader of 4th November was yet again critical of the council. It began with a quotation from Marcus Aurelius, 'If you will be true to the best of yourself, living up to your nature, standing bodily by the truth of your word, and satisfied therewith, then you will be a happy man'.

After observing that the evidence given under 'severe cross-examination' by the Ratepayers should hold no terror, as long as they told 'an unvarnished and truthful tale', they added the comment 'how many timid persons were deterred by the threat we shall never know'. They followed this by clearly stating that 'Some of us present... were simply staggered by statements made by or on behalf of the council, statements which, made with good faith, were yet absolutely untrue'.

By way of an example, they then referred to the answer given by 'a most respected townsman' to the Inspector to the effect that the present offices were unsuitable having been built as a private residence - whereas 'in fact, they were specially built for the London and County Bank (since removed to next door)'.

Regardless of any continuation of the local disagreements that we have seen across the four months since the council announced their intention to acquire the brewery site, on 23rd December 1911 - hidden away in a list of 'General' items reported from the latest council meeting - news was given that a letter had been received from the Local Government Board sanctioning the borrowing of £1,000 for a period not exceeding 60 years for the purchase of Old Barnet Brewery as a site for new council offices.

FOOTNOTE

It certainly seems that issues relating to how and where the proposed new public lavatories might be located may have been at least one reason why the council, especially Cr Neal from the chair, were so adamant that they would or could not share the full details behind their decision to purchase the brewery site. Whether there were more, possibly deeper, reasons for it remain unclear.

What is certain is that animosity arose between the council, local organisations representing the ratepayers - and especially the Barnet Press, with Cr Neal often bearing the brunt of expressions of concern (albeit because of the position he held rather than being attacks on him personally).

At the Council meeting held in late December Cr Neal - having stepped away from the chair in favour of Cr Malins - proposed that Standing Orders of the Council should be amended to provide that no person(s) or deputation(s) should 'be received or heard at any meeting, or have audience of the Council, save on express permission given by resolution of the Council'.

Arguing his reasons, he referred to the previous meeting where he had come under criticism from some councillors (relating to a separate issue concerning tenders for minor supplies) and had taken a firm line in response to a non-member present who had been allowed to speak only with their support. He considered that now the public were admitted to Council meetings 'some curb should be put on the question of people being allowed to speak or deputations being received'.

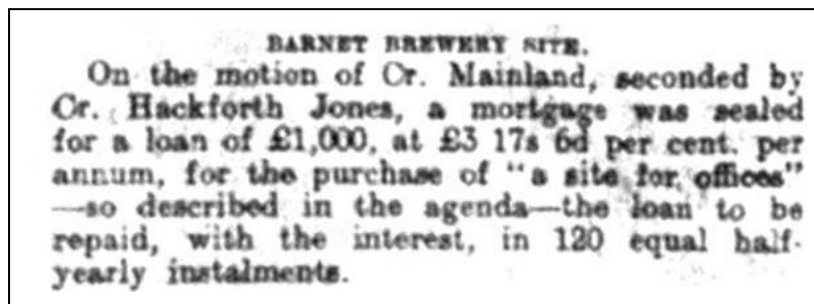
Debate continued with some councillors in favour, some strongly opposed, and ultimately Cr Neal spoke again saying 'I am astounded: you can't have grasped the meaning of the motion. If members don't quite understand it, I don't mind it being adjourned until they do understand it. Or let it go to committee. If you refuse it tonight, then I go tonight'.

After further debate during which one councillor protested strongly about his threat to resign if the motion was not carried, votes were taken, first regarding referring the proposal to committee - which failed when the Chair declined to enter a casting vote, and then a vote for the original motion from Cr Neal - which was defeated by six votes to three.

'Well Gentlemen, I resign from the Council' said Cr Neal. His elected successor was Cr A G Malins.

THE DESIGN AND BUILDING OF THE NEW COUNCIL OFFICES

On 24th February 1912 the Press report of the latest Council meeting confirmed that the loan for the purchase of the brewery site had been completed:



However, it would not be until 1913 that a competition was held for the design of the new building which, perhaps in deference to some of the earlier wrangling over whether it was actually needed and/or might be seen as a vanity project for the councillors, was never called the Town Hall.

The winning entry was submitted by Henry Arthur Cheers, designer of several public buildings, but it was the Council's surveyor, William Bartlett Chancellor, who would produce the plans for the final design in 1914 and oversee the construction through to completion in December 1915. Built in the English Baroque style, it continued to be the headquarters of the Council until the London Borough of Barnet was formed in 1965. Later used as the local rates office, it became the Barnet Register Office until 2008, and since undergoing a programme of refurbishment in 2009 it has remained in use as the home of the North London Coroner's Court.

The building was listed Grade II by Historic England in September 2006 and, although easily missed even by avid followers of the TV series, it featured in an episode of 'Midsomer Murders' entitled 'A Worm in the Bud' in 2002. During filming the long outdated and now almost indistinct 'Barnet U D Council Offices' wording chiselled into the masonry above the entrance door were covered and the building renamed simply as Midsomer's 'Court House'.

Perhaps also seldom noticed by those entering the building today are the large wooden panels in the entrance hallway bearing the names of the men and women who chaired the Barnet Urban District Council (and its predecessor the Local Board from 1863 to 1894) until 1965.

Scanning the pages of the Barnet Press to locate reported details of the completion and commissioning of the new offices proved salutary. By December 1915 WWI had raged for over a year. As well as the usual run-of-the-mill coverage of local events, the press was also now recording reports of how the conflict was impacting the town, including news of local casualties at the front which in some editions would see a list of the fallen covering up to three full columns of print.

In the event the council, quite rightly, decided that there should be no grand opening ceremony. They held their first meeting there on Tuesday 7th December 1915, when the chairman, Cr A J Wills JP, opened by paying credit to the Surveyor, Mr W B Chancellor, for his work in bringing the project to conclusion within estimate. He announced that the building would nevertheless be open to the public the following Saturday when councillors would be attending to show ratepayers around.

Somewhat ironically he also announced that the public conveniences, the long awaited new addition to the town's facilities that had contributed to controversy over the council acquiring the Old Barnet Brewery premises back in 1911, had not yet reached completion due to the impossibility of getting the railings necessary to screen the entrances. However, an alternative plan was underway to see them completed in a further few weeks.

(Long closed, for many years the entrances to the underground facilities were located to the right of the building, adjacent to Barnet Museum)



The former council offices in 2015
(CC BY-SA 4.0/Wikipedia/Philafrenzy)

I was now faced with a question that I have been unable to answer satisfactorily. The new Council offices clearly only occupy part of the site of the former brewery - the main building with the tower and chimney in the second picture on page 8 - so what did the council do on the site of the smaller building (perhaps a storage warehouse?) to the left of the entrance from which a horse and cart, perhaps a delivery dray, can be seen emerging?

The museum's photographic archive holds this fairly recent panoramic view showing the properties along the south side of Wood Street running from Hatherley House on the left to the Coroner's Court on the right, in a view taken from just outside the church of St John the Baptist.



The building (arrowed), 27 Wood Street, is the Old Court House (on which we focus in Part 3) and it seems probable that the lower height extensions evident to the right of the original main building were constructed at least in part on that section of the former brewery premises. Quite when or by whom is uncertain.

Reference to the Open University's 'Prison History' website provides a steer to information regarding how County Court sessions were held in Chipping Barnet based on reference to Kelly's Directories of Hertfordshire between 1890 and 1914. (www.prisonhistory.org)

In summary, during that period Petty Sessions for parts of Hertfordshire and Middlesex were held on Mondays at a county court in the former Town Hall [*sic*] (then located at 29 Union Street) - but the Magistrates' Clerk's office was located at 27 Wood Street - where, together with the orderly rooms at the Militia Barracks, courts were also occasionally held. (Special sessions for the parishes of South Mimms & Hadley were also held once a month at the Hart's Horn inn on the corner of High Street and Union Street).

By 1916 - just a year after the new council offices had opened at 29 Wood Street - a new purpose built County Court was opened located at 10 High Street, at the junction with Normandy Avenue, which I presume would also have now housed the Magistrates' Clerk's office. This may well have already led to the former Clerk's office in Wood Street becoming redundant for that purpose - presumably leading to it then or soon after becoming known as the 'Old Court House'.

A report in the Barnet Press dated 8th July 1911 records a charity event organised by The League of Pity that was held on the lawn of Dr William Osborn Boyes (a member of a local firm of solicitors - who also served as Registrar of and Clerk to Barnet County Court), and from the pictures included, together with reference to Census and Directory records on Ancestry, this can be identified as being 27 Wood Street.

Occupancy does not necessarily equate to ownership of course. It could be that by 1911 the property was still leased from the Rumballs' Trustees, or even from a new owner. We shall explore this further below - when we discover how the council set out to acquire the Old Court House (for even more office space!) together with its associated extensive garden and lands to the south of Wood Street for the benefit of the public in 1922.

PART 3 : THE CREATION OF THE OLD COURT HOUSE RECREATION GROUND

As observed above, the establishment of a new County Court House at the junction of the High Street and Normandy Avenue in 1916 would probably have led to the former home of the Magistrates' Clerk at No 27 Wood Street coming into other use(s), when I assume the name 'Old Court House' was adopted. The name continues today.

The grand new Council Offices located at No 29 Wood Street were completed and had come into use by 1915 in response to the council's successful, if sometime contentious, argument that they urgently needed to secure more and improved office space in which to conduct their work than in the cramped conditions of their previously leased property located at No 40 High Street.

The size of the town and its population would of course have continued to expand, no doubt with a need for the Council staff to grow with it to service the needs of the public and, as we shall see, by late 1922 a move was afoot not just to acquire more office space but also to secure land in order to create a new recreation ground for the public.

The Old Court House estate, its house, its garden, and other adjacent land owned by the estate were seen as the obvious solution...

As when the council's proposal to purchase the Old Brewery was first announced to the public via the Barnet Press back in August 1911, the same course was followed in 1922 and it would immediately have become clear to readers that a lot of planning and negotiations had been taking place behind the scenes already.

The press item appeared on 7th October 1922 and is reproduced here in full. In brief:

The house would provide for the probable future requirements for extended office space, although some rooms could also be let out to produce a 'satisfactory income'.

The garden and other extensive grounds to the rear running south to reach Mays Lane were 'especially commended' as providing potential for recreational use although, as with the house, their potential for 'revenue generating' was also included in the outline case for the purchase.

An option to purchase had already been negotiated with the (unidentified) owners, and a public inquiry into the planned £4,000 acquisition had already been set for 19th October.

THE OLD COURT HOUSE.
Proposed Purchase by Barnet Council.
Land for Recreative Purposes.

The Barnet Urban District Council have recently been in negotiation for the purchase of Old Court House, No. 27, Wood-street, adjoining the existing Council Offices, together with land at the rear running down to Mays-lane, with a frontage there of about 70ft.

The Council considered that in view of probable future requirements for extension of the existing offices the land referred to might be used for this and public recreative purposes, while No. 27, Wood-street, could be adapted for letting and meetings. An option of purchase having been secured, the Council have agreed to enter into a provisional agreement with the owners for the purchase of the whole property at a sum of £4,000, subject to approval of the Ministry of Health, who will hold a public inquiry into the Council's application for a loan of £4,100, on Thursday, 19th October, at 11.15 a.m., at the Council Offices. This is the present position of the negotiations, and the provisional proposals are that part of No. 27, Wood-street, should be used for administrative purposes, while the remainder should be available for letting and the production of a satisfactory income; the ground at the rear to be used for recreative and other revenue-producing purposes, as the Council may decide. The use of the land for purposes of recreation is especially commended by the Council, in view of the unusually restricted spaces available for children attending the schools in the neighbourhood.

Details of the lengthy public inquiry held in the Council Offices appeared in the press edition of 21st October. The Council were represented by their Clerk and Solicitor, Mr H W Poole, supported by the Chairman, Mr J L Thomas JP and six other councillors, the Engineer and Surveyor, the Sanitary and Housing Inspector and the Medical Officer.

Others present included Canon W Manning, Rector of Barnet, Mr H W Milnes (representing the interests of the several allotment holders on the site), and several adjacent property owners - including Mr Harry Krauss Nield, an architect living at 33 Wood Street, who argued that the ongoing costs to the town were not fully recognised. Mr Poole read out a letter signed by three councillors protesting that the inquiry was being held at a time 'which rendered it impossible for them and the general public to attend' - although the letter also intimated that the signatories were in support of the scheme.

In summary, the case for the scheme as presented by Mr Poole opened with a statement to the effect that the general public had been taken into the confidence of the Council regarding the plans via the press notice on 7th October, a refundable deposit of £400 had been lodged with the vendors; the current council offices were fully occupied (he had no office there, but it was proposed that he would rent space in No 27 for himself and his staff bringing revenue to the council); the provision of a recreation ground was needed for the benefit of schoolchildren currently without such a safe and suitable provision (the current space, Ravenscroft Park*, 'had a series of by-laws... with no fewer than 31 of them beginning 'A person shall not... do this that and the other', although he was not sure if one said that 'A person shall not sneeze'. He added that as well as playing fields for the children, there would also be tennis courts and bowling greens which would be let at satisfactory rents.

* Brief details about Ravenscroft Park are included at the foot of the Appendix below.

The existing allotment holders had been served notice to quit, but the Council would 'allow them to retain their holdings' - although no detail was given as to what the arrangements would be for this, an issue that will be the cause of controversy later.

The 70-foot frontage of the land onto Mays Lane was said to be an excellent site for the erection of much needed cottages, and there was an 'increasingly large demand for rooms for public meetings, dancing, classes etc' but 'the present offices could not be extended if future requirements rendered more accommodation necessary'.

Concluding his presentation of the Council's case justifying the purchase Mr Poole submitted the view that it was only fair to anticipate the forthcoming report of a Royal Commission on Greater London. If centralisation was recommended a larger accommodation would be needed 'in the new centre, and there would not be a dissentient voice when he said that the ancient town of Chipping Barnet should be the made the centre of any amalgamation that might take place in this neighbourhood. The present scheme of the Council would become a paying proposition'.

The report then listed four points raised in opposition to the scheme in a letter from the Chairman of the Barnet Tradesmen's Association which was read to the Inquiry. In a resolution 'relentlessly opposing' the scheme they argued that existing available ground at the rear of the existing Council Offices was capable of accommodating all necessary extension for the next 50 years; that in view of the present heavy pressure of Government taxation upon the community in general, the district could not afford to embark on an uncertain or extravagant venture; that the ground was swampy and unsuitable for recreation or playing fields; that if the pond in Ravenscroft Park was filled in it would provide space for tennis courts and bowling greens could be laid out on the adjacent grassed areas without the expenditure of further capital on the purchase of land.

The letter claimed that the traders were already the most heavily taxed section of the community and claimed the foremost place in opposing the scheme, adding that the decision to purchase had not been reached in open Council. They also protested that adequate notice of the scheme had not been given to ratepayers in general.

In response the Inspector commented that the Inquiry 'was properly advertised, and if these people want to oppose the scheme it is their duty to come here to do so'.

The Engineer and Surveyor then outlined the proposed layout of the grounds in some detail, and the Inspector confirmed the District Valuer had valued the property as very closely corresponding with the proposed purchase price, namely £1,800 for the house and £2,200 for the grounds.

Canon Manning confirmed that he and all local education authorities supported the plans, and his wife (a Councillor) commented that they would also provide a link between the town and the Underhill district 'between which there is now an unfortunate distinction'. She also supported the need for a hall for meetings, entertainments etc.

The availability of Hadley Green and Common as existing areas for recreation was raised - but dismissed in discussion as not being suitable for 'properly organised games'. A letter was read from the Barnet and District Football League confirming that they, together with other local sports organisations, offered their support.

One councillor said he considered that the purchase price was £500 too much and that 'he objected to local authorities being charged more than private purchasers'. Another, 'speaking as a representative of the ratepayers' agreed, saying that the property had previously been offered to a private buyer for £3,500. Speaking on behalf of the allotment holders, Mr Milne said they would offer no objection if sufficient guarantees were given that they would be able to buy or rent their current plots. (As we shall see, these issues will resurface later).

A statement of the estimated cost of and income from the scheme was then tabled and discussed. After legal costs of £100, with a similar amount required for repairs to the house, the total was assessed as being £4,800 including the preparation and adaptation of the grounds, which it was said would overall add an annual deficit of £295 18s 11d - with a penny rate producing £338.

Mr Nield said he considered that repairs to the house would cost considerably more than £100. Mr Davis, representing property owners in Manor Road, said they would object if it was proposed to erect any cottages in their vicinity and that he considered the Council were buying land they did not need. Responding, the Inspector stated that if the Council took the land for recreational purposes they would not be allowed to use it for building purposes without the sanction of the Ministry.

As the Inquiry came to an end Cr Eames voiced his strong opposition to the scheme on behalf of ratepayers, who he said were overwhelmingly against it, and the Inspector then proceeded to visit the property as well as Ravenscroft Park, Hadley Green and the public halls.

A week later the Barnet Press leader was broadly supportive of the scheme, although they commented that future developments would determine whether the proposed purchase was a good bargain or not. They thought that at present a public hall was required more than extended Council offices, but also felt the Council could not be criticised for taking the long view, and even mused that building a new Town Hall might be at the back of their minds. They did not object to the need for better recreational facilities but did express anxiety regarding the costs - which they felt 'were inordinately heavy, even in these days of inflated values'.

Commenting that there appeared to be no serious oppositions expressed at the Inquiry, they did however express surprise that the Council were showing no hesitancy in spending possibly £4-5,000 when a few months ago they had said they could not afford the modest contribution of £200 a year towards establishing a serviceable public library for the town - adding that 'perhaps they will devote the profits from the new tennis courts and Council offices to this very desirable purpose'.

Interpretation of all this may vary, but my own thoughts are that the Council hardly presented a robust justification for the scheme at the Inquiry, the points raised in opposition were in the main valid - but weakened by virtue of the low number of general ratepayers that were able to attend in person - and it seems to me that the Inspector showed a degree of bias towards the case for, and away from the arguments against, in his remarks during the discussions.

Unsurprisingly on 9th December 1922 the press report of the latest Council meeting revealed that the Ministry had that day given sanction for them to borrow £4,100 for the purchase, broken down as land for public offices £645, public office buildings £1,200, recreation grounds £2,255 and legal costs at £100. Of note is that the sanction was granted 'on the understanding that the part of the estate now utilised as allotments should be sold to the allotment holders, and the proceeds applied immediately to the reduction of the loan'. Under another agenda item a proposal to undertake local works such as road widening to help alleviate local unemployment was discussed and agreed, subject to grants in aid being obtained.

1922 rolled into 1923 and on 13th January the press reported on the next Council meeting at which it was confirmed that the Unemployment Grants Committee had intimated that local authorities would be assisted in carrying out works of public utility supported by grants of up to 60%, with preference given to work that could be started immediately and completed during the winter months. The Surveyor reported that all current works had been completed, and he then tabled a report ordered by the General Purposes Committee in respect of works needed for the utilisation of the Old Court House land.

A visit of inspection had been made through the kindness of Mr Tucker, the current occupier, and a scheme of works drawn up which the Council approved. The Surveyor was then tasked to prepare a general layout of the grounds to enable work on the estate to be started that would 'keep the unemployed occupied throughout the remainder of the winter'. Quotations for the loan of £4,100 were also considered and it was resolved to accept one at 4 ¾ per cent.

They also received and considered a letter from Mr E P Jones on behalf of the allotment holders asking the Council to reconsider the price to be charged for the purchase of their plots having regard to the amount allocated for the land by the Ministry. Questions were also raised regarding the height of fencing and a right of way - but the Council resolved to reply that they 'regretted that they were unable to make any abatement in price, and if the sum proposed was not agreed, no useful purpose would be served in considering the other matters'.

Further information regarding discussion of the allotments was recorded in the press dated 10th February. A further letter had been received from Mr Jones requesting they receive a deputation of allotment holders, and the Clerk, as instructed, had replied to the effect that the Council were now anxious to proceed with the works on the estate, still adhered to the price asked, and would be glad if the allotment holders would agree to their proposals by 14th February, otherwise the offer would be withdrawn. (It appears that this letter was not received).

Another letter from Mr Jones was handed to the Chairman during the meeting indicating that as he had not received a reply to his earlier requests a deputation of 14 of the 24 allotment holders were now waiting in the offices and asked permission to lay their case before the Council.

Invited into the meeting they were informed of the Council's position and Mr Jones confirmed that the Clerk's letter had not been received. He complained that 'the allotment holders were being asked to buy a pig in a poke' and said 'they could not give their decision as to purchasing the land before they knew the conditions of tenure and secured right of access to the land'.

Another member of the deputation claimed the price being asked for the plots was too high knowing the price the Council had paid for the land and gave what appears to have been a valid argument using relevant figures to demonstrate his case. The position was, he said, either the Council wanted to put a prohibitive price on the land to drive the allotment holders out - or else they had loaded the land with an undue amount of the development charges of their scheme.

The Chairman, while pointing out that the Council were custodians of the public purse, promised that all the points raised would be considered by the Council.

Sanction from the Ministry to purchase the estate had of course been made on the understanding that the part already in use as allotments should be sold to the holders (the proceeds applied immediately to the reduction of the loan), and although I discovered no further details of how the negotiations concluded, it appears that the Council were wrong-footed and, as we shall see later, when the Recreation Ground finally opened the allotments were still in situ.

Another issue raised during the inquiry was in respect of the purchase price.

One councillor had said he felt that £4,000 was £500 too high, and this was supported by another who claimed that it had earlier been offered to a private purchaser for £3,500.

Although not addressed directly during the Inquiry back in October 1922 the second of these points would resurface in a Council meeting reported in the press on 10th March - see below.

Clearly the concern had not gone away, and appears that it had now also become a subject of wider concern in the Town...

Whilst the adage 'There is no smoke without fire' might well have applied, one councillor felt both moved and justified in raising the issue again at the meeting, and another waded in to challenge the Chairman's responses, which were to the effect that there was no written evidence to support such a statement.

Note however that the claim (or rumour) going about was not only that the vendor had increased the price at which the estate had previously been offered to a private buyer when the Council were prepared to pay a higher price, but that the (unnamed) vendor was a person who stood as a representative of part of the district on a public authority.

Innocent unless proven guilty I suppose...



The process of purchase, design and remodelling the estate dragged on throughout 1923 and on into the following year and it was not until July 1924 that the new Recreation Ground was opened.

The Press report of the event reveals that it was a particularly grand affair which took place on Saturday 5th July blessed with delightful weather. The Barnet Town Silver Prize Band played in Wood Street for half an hour before the ceremony began - albeit with their performance needing to compete with the church bells for a wedding taking place across the road. The ceremony was to be performed by Alderman E B Barnard OBE, Chairman of Herts County Council, who on his arrival was greeted by Council Chairman, Councillor J K Mackay JP.

Together, preceded by the band - still in full flow - and followed by representatives of the great and the good of the Town, they processed into the 'delightful lawns' of the Old Court House where an 'extemporised platform' had been erected surrounded by the large crowd that had already gathered.

Alderman Barnard was welcomed by Cr Mackay and together they lauded the development of the new grounds and the wisdom of the Council in providing it for the benefit of the public - despite the challenges and criticisms they had met along the way.

Cr Tinsley, ex-Chairman of the Council, then thanked the public for attending, apologising for the lack of chairs (the Council only had 100 but 1,000 were required) and for the fact that there was only one goldfish in the pond (although it was an extra-large one!). He also apologised for the unfinished state of the grounds 'despite the arduous work of the Council's staff' (which, I observe, had already taken over 18 months, and had received the help of the local unemployed in early 1922).

Expressing apologies for the loss of the middle part of the grounds - to the allotment holders, which he wished to emphasise 'was for financial reasons only - for reasons of expense to the ratepayers - that the Council had decided to sell that part of the grounds for allotments'. He added that he had opposed the sale with all his might but recognised that majorities must prevail.

Old wounds unhealed perhaps - but the allotments have nevertheless long disappeared....

Except for one further light-hearted press item that I simply could not ignore (it appeared on 5th July - the same day as the grand opening and is copied below) - I conclude this reflection on the report of the opening ceremony by detailing the many facilities that were already available, together with another the Council hoped to create.

After the formalities were completed 'the company then dispersed about the grounds, the beauty of which was the subject of much appreciative comment' to see the gardens, the bandstand, the shallow pond ('intended for small boys to sail their boats - not for washing dogs'), the bowling, putting greens and clock golf, and the tennis courts where games were in full swing, and the children's sand pit (one of the most popular with the youngsters attending, with some 100+ playing in the space intended for 50). Regrettably absent and duly regretted were cricket and football pitches (which it had 'not proved possible' to deliver).

Regret was also expressed that a further amenity was also lacking - the previously unmentioned but nevertheless hoped for - swimming bath. However, the Council had the ground, and hoped that it would be possible to find work for the unemployed to construct one next winter....

It appears that the ground for a pool may have been pegged out, but as far as I can ascertain it was never built. If it was, that and many of the other original attractions, have disappeared across the years. Visitors today can however pay a visit to the Old Court House Café for some refreshment.

POSTSCRIPT

Although I found little press coverage of how the preparations for the opening of the new recreation grounds were progressing through most of the previous year, this item caught my eye as I had myself included a mention of the 'zoo' in an article published in the museum's 2022 Journal - An A-Z of Barnet's past.

The press article certainly provides more detail regarding the livestock operations taking place at the 'animal depot'!

Penned in a rather light-hearted style and published on 5th July to appear on the day of the opening, I have included it here as the suggestion that the Council might consider hiring some of the animals to take part in 'the grand procession of Councillors' at the 'State' opening may perhaps infer that the press and their readers considered the planning for it was somewhat grandiose!

A BARNET MENAGERIE.

Elephants and Llamas Housed in the High-street.

-How many people are aware that Barnet possesses its own Zoo?

At the present time seven Indian elephants, four llamas, several monkeys, numerous water-fowl, a flamingo, 20 Irish ponies, a bear, and other animals and birds are resting in the town. This menagerie is really only a depot recently established at the rear of No. 11, High-street (next to the Barnet Court House), by Messrs. Chapman, one of the largest firms of animal dealers in the world. The elephants, llamas, and ponies are waiting to go to the Wembley Exhibition, where they are to take part in the Pageant of Empire this month. They will leave Barnet on July 21st—not via London, as stated in the London Press, but the elephants, and, if sufficiently "broken in," the llamas, will be walked from Barnet to the Exhibition, leaving the depot about 2.30 in the morning. The task of "breaking-in" the llamas is being undertaken daily at the depot by the manager and his coloured staff.

Messrs. Chapman's collection of elephants is said to be the biggest in the country. The animals vary in size from babies of four feet high to elephantine giants of eight or nine feet. The manager told a "Barnet Press" reporter that the seven elephants alone eat 21 trusses of hay, 21lb. of oats, and seven trusses of clover a day.

At the present time tailors are busy making trappings for the elephants to wear in the pageant. It has been suggested that the Barnet Council should endeavour to hire the animals to take part in what Cr. Eames describes as "the grand procession of Councillors," at the "State" opening of the Old Court House park on Saturday!

Messrs. Chapman, who deal in every form of wild life, have established a permanent depot in Barnet. The manager stated that he has a daily call for wild animals and birds, and his collection, consequently, is constantly changing.

APPENDIX

THE 1818 ENCLOSURE AWARDS : ANALYSIS OF THE HOLDINGS OF SAMPSON RUMBALL

The Rumball family clearly had a presence in and were owners of various properties around the town of Chipping Barnet from the beginning of the 18th century. It appears that being a major beneficiary of the will of his father-in-law, Stebbing Egerton, Sampson Rumball was able to extend the land and property he then owned around the turn of the 19th century.

In the table below I have analysed the extensive range of the holdings recorded against his name in the Enclosure Awards of 1818:

MAP NUMBER	PLOT NUMBER	LOCATION	ACRE/ROOD/POLE	DESCRIPTION
2	152	IN HIGH STREET	0/00/03	HOUSE
2	203-211	IN WOOD STREET	7/0/38	HOUSES, TENEMENTS, GARDENS & OLD ENCLOSURES
3	212	BETWEEN WOOD STREET & MAYS LANE	5/00/34	OLD ENCLOSURE
1	350-351	IN BOTTLENECK	0/00/18	ALLOTMENTS
1	742-746	IN CHESTERFIELD ROAD	01/01/15	ditto
1	805-806	IN BELLS HILL	0/02/14	ditto
1	832-833	AT/NEAR WHALEBONES	10/01/39	TWO LARGE ALLOTMENTS
2	916-917	IN WOOD STREET	0/00/32	ALLOTMENTS
TOTAL PLOTS	24	TOTAL AREA OF ALL LANDS HELD	25/0/33	
[40 POLES = 1 ROOD : 4 ROODS = 1 ACRE]				

In summary, the total area of land and property held by Sampson Rumball in 1818 was over 25 acres. Fourteen of the twenty four plots identified were located along the south side of Wood Street (twelve roughly between Tudor Hall and Manor Road, with two further plots being the current site of Whalebones). Three would have been found in and around the High Street, with the remaining seven being in what are now known as Chesterfield Road and Bells Hill.

The Wood Street properties form the main focus of this research, and of particular interest here are the properties located west of Tudor Hall beginning with Hatherley House. Although many will have seen minor external changes across the years*, and most will have been altered internally to accommodate the typically business occupancy we see today, undoubtedly the facades of most would still be recognised by the Rumball family if they were able to revisit the town today.

As we explore in the main document, exceptions to this rather general assumption would be the demolition of the Old Barnet Brewery premises in the early 20th century to enable the construction of the old Town Hall (now re-purposed as the North London Coroner's Court) and the opening of Old Court House Recreation Ground in 1924.

Fortunately, they form part of what became the Wood Street Conservation Area in 2007 which should prevent much if any further major changes being made to this historic part of the town...

*An exception is No 33 Wood Street which was destroyed by a WW2 bomb on 18th November 1940 - when it served as the original home of Barnet Museum.

After the war the museum reopened at its current home in No 31.

No 33 was only rebuilt - with a façade in keeping with its Georgian neighbour - in the 1980s.

Note: Mentioned in the main text, Ravenscroft Park (originally known as Barnet Recreation Ground and now known as Ravenscroft Gardens) in Wood Street was created by the (then) Barnet Local Board and opened in 1882 when that area of the former Barnet Common was being developed for housing. The 3.1 acre garden was originally laid out with two ponds, both sadly lost by the 1990s.

(The 1818 Enclosure Awards schedule lists the area as Plot 906, described as 'Ponds and Fair').