

# Four Oaks in 1824

by

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Corn Rent Map, 1824

## **Four Oaks in 1824**

In 1824 the place known as Four Oaks consisted of a number of dwellings near what is now the Four Oaks Gate to Sutton Park. There had been a settlement here for several centuries, long before the building of Four Oaks Hall by Lord Ffolliott at the end of the 17th century, but it had never amounted to more than a few farm houses and labourer's cottages. Being such a small settlement, it is hardly ever mentioned in its own right, mainly included as part of the Quarter of Hill and Little Sutton in manorial records, although Four Oaks Hall and all to the west of Four Oaks Road was part of Great Sutton Quarter. The Parish Register of burials in the 17th century names 13 different Four Oaks families, and there were probably more, as most entries do not specify where the deceased person lived. It seems reasonable to suppose that the pattern of houses scattered mainly on the eastern side of the irregular common space or green originated at the time of expansion and assarting in the 13th century, when so much of the rest of Sutton was being brought into cultivation.

Sutton Coldfield was a large manor as far back as 1086, of over 20 square miles, and in common with most of North Warwickshire and Staffordshire, it formed part of a royal forest. This did not prevent the people living here from following normal agricultural pursuits, and there were at least five field systems in Sutton, two of them based on the hamlets of Little Sutton and Hill Village. The site of Four Oaks, being just beyond the edge of the fields pertaining to Hill, was probably chosen for settlement in a time of expanding population and prosperity in the area. On the other side of Four Oaks lies Sutton Park, which may have extended no further north than Keepers Pool in the 12th century, but had been enlarged to its present boundary at Four Oaks by the 15th century.

Something about the people living at Four Oaks can be gleaned from 17th century records. When John Hulkes died in 1679, he bequeathed his house at Four Oaks to his daughter, Mary Lea. He was relatively wealthy, and had bought the house from William Baylies, who is shown in the Hearth Tax returns of 1674 as living in a house with three hearths in Hill Quarter. From this it appears that at least one of the houses in Four Oaks at that time was a substantial building suitable for a prosperous yeoman. However, eight other Four Oaks houses in the Hearth Tax return each had only one hearth, and five of these paid no tax because the occupants were in receipt of poor relief. One of these was William Thorley, who by his death in 1684 seems to have made some progress, describing himself as a husbandman, which is a step up from labourer. A husbandman lived partly by farming on his own behalf and partly by

selling his labour; Thorley had bought some land in the common fields of Hill and also had some corn growing on other land, and 23 sheep on the commons. His most valuable possession was one yoke of oxen, a reminder that horses had still not entirely replaced oxen as draught animals as late as 1684. His moveable goods were worth £34.

That may not sound much, but William Terry of Four Oaks had goods to the value of only £15 on his death in 1679. Although described as a labourer, he did some farming on his own account, as the inventory taken before his estate could be administered shows :

*An Inventory of William Terrey goods deceased prised by John Egles and Richard Roggersen sen on the 26th day of the 12th month as followeth 1679*

	<i>L s d</i>
<i>Item on pare of cobirnes on sheet a grate tongs and pot gails</i>	<i>0- 4- 0</i>
<i>Item tow Cettils on pott on scemer on potthuk</i>	<i>0- 5- 0</i>
<i>Item on brass candelstek</i>	<i>0- 0- 6</i>
<i>Item 3 dishes &amp; 2 sasers of powter</i>	<i>0- 2- 0</i>
<i>1 table &amp; frame 9 lett l bords or benches</i>	<i>0- 4- 6</i>
<i>1 Coberd &amp; 2 pels &amp; 1 spinning wheele 1 chire</i>	<i>0- 3- 0</i>
<i>1 bible</i>	<i>0- 2- 0</i>
<i>broken Cobards 1 kneding trough 1 falling table</i>	<i>0- 2- 6</i>
<i>2 ould Coffers 1 ould bedsteed</i>	<i>0- 3- 0</i>
<i>3 cows 1 hifer &amp; 2 calves</i>	<i>5- 3- 4</i>
<i>1 maire &amp; 1 Coult</i>	<i>2-10- 0</i>
<i>18 sheepe &amp; Lambs</i>	<i>2-14- 0</i>
<i>3 cart wheels 1 plow &amp; 1 harrow</i>	<i>0-12- 6</i>
<i>all the corn &amp; fother in ye barn</i>	<i>1- 0- 6</i>
<i>The said William Terreys waring Clothes</i>	<i>0- 5- 0</i>
<i>2 blankets &amp; on flokbed</i>	<i>0- 5- 0</i>
<i>od things forgotten</i>	<i>0- 1- 6</i>
<i>Item Rie growing on ye living</i>	<i>1- 0- 6</i>
<i>half an acer of ground at Hill huke</i>	<i>0- 4- 6</i>
<i>1 ston &amp; od of woole in Richard Tonks his hand</i>	<i>0- 9- 0</i>
<i>som is</i>	<i>15-12-04</i>

*The some totall that the said William Terrey is indebted which is to bee dedocked out of this above is      £4-13-06*

The Corn Rent Schedule of 1824 records 18 dwellings in Four Oaks, excluding Four Oaks Hall. Two of these were on the west side of Four Oaks Road, "William Beck's Cottage" belonging to Four Oaks Hall, and a corporation cottage (owned by the Warden and Society of Sutton Coldfield, i.e. the Corporation), occupied by John Swift, who paid

no rent as it was deemed to be part of his wages as a Park-keeper. The Corporation owned many cottages all over Sutton, many of them probably originating as squatter's shacks on bits of waste land, and the other four corporation cottages here were at the north end of Four Oaks, occupied either by labourers - Thomas Pickerel, John Trow and William Hall, or paupers such as the one described as "Late Nanny Fisher", occupying only 1 perch of ground and probably pulled down as unfit shortly afterwards.

William Bird lived in the big Georgian house now known as The Hollies, which belonged to the heirs of James Earp, for whom it may have been built; Bird also owned two cottages at the top of Belwell Lane, tenanted by George Hollins and George Thomas. Further down Belwell Lane, probably what is now No. 52, lived John Bird, one of the few owner/occupiers in Four Oaks, in what was probably a newly built house on his own bit of land. Opposite this were four cottages owned by William Farnell, tenanted by another four labourers, Robert Snape, James Thorley, Ralph Thorley and John Douse. On the island of land between Park Drive and Belwell Lane another absentee landlord, Thomas Clues, owned a cottage where Thomas Thomson, a tailor, lived. The remaining houses belonged to Solomon Smith, who had a thriving timber and building business - his own house, now "The Larches", another house occupied by Nathaniel Smith (probably his son), and one or more cottages occupied by his employees. This gives at least 13 cottages, two houses (John Bird and Nathaniel Smith), and two substantial houses, William Bird and Solomon Smith.

Almost all these houses fronted onto the irregular-shaped green. The west side of this green seems to have been defined by an earlier boundary of Sutton Park, preserving the regular curve of the ditch and bank boundary of possible 13th century origin, in contrast to the eastern side which shows a pattern of piecemeal development. It is at the south end of the green that the straight lines of the planner are to be seen, and where there is marked difference between the 1811 and 1824 maps. This change was owing to the owner of Four Oaks Hall, Sir E.C.Hartopp, who secured permission to change the route of Four Oaks Road to its present line, further away from Four Oaks Hall. A comparison of the maps shows the new Four Oaks Road at the south end of the green, curving to the west, and William Becks Cottage built squarely in the centre of the former road. Since the re-routing was done in 1823, this was clearly a new cottage, and another estate cottage, now known as "Gothic Cottage" was built on the opposite side of the road, shown on the Com Rent map but not included in the schedule.

Four Oaks Hall had been built at the beginning of the 18th century for Simon Luttrell on land inherited by his wife, one of the Pudsey heiresses of Langley Hall. He had later secured a bite out of Sutton Park by Act of Parliament to create a private park, and this was doubled in the 1820's by an exchange which resulted in land near town

gate being added to the park and the laying out of Park Road - by then the ownership of the hall had come to the Hartopp family. However, the village of Four Oaks seems to have been relatively unaffected by this nearby great house, since the estate never owned any of Four Oaks village proper.

To the south of Four Oaks lay Four Oaks Park and Ley Hill Common, and Sutton Park was to the west. The fields between Four Oaks and Mere Green belonged to the heirs of James Earp of The Hollies, while beyond Clarence Road (then known as Long Lane or Four Oaks Lane) were the fields pertaining to Hill village. To the north of Four Oaks was a farm called The Bear Styes or the Barr Styles, later Four Oaks Farm, and just north of this, on the edge of the common, there were two or three more cottages. Including these in the houses already considered at Four Oaks, the total number of dwellings is increased to 22. Further north still were the scattered cottages and smallholdings of Hill Hook, while there were no houses along Clarence Road in 1824. To the north-west of Four Oaks was the 180-acre expanse of Four Oaks Common.

The Enclosure Commission was charged with setting out roads and footpaths across the lands to be enclosed, and this had a dramatic effect on Four Oaks. Two new roads were set out through the village, Four Oaks Road/Walsall Road being specified as "One other road also of the width of thirty feet commencing nearly opposite the entrance gate at the north-east end of Four Oaks Park and extending in a northerly direction on the east side of cottage plecks occupied by Thomas Pickerill and continuing in the same line over the middle of Four Oaks Common and terminating on the north side thereof at the road leading therefrom to Little Aston". This was public road no. xxxiv, no. xxxv being Streetly Lane, forty feet wide and commencing "in the last mentioned road opposite a cottage in the occupation of Thomas Hall". Crown Lane/Four Oaks Common Road was the other public road laid out, no. xxxvi. These all followed well-established routes, merely defining what had before been open and preventing travellers from wandering over what was now to be private property. Several private roads were also specified, these were the present Blackberry Lane and Edge Hill Road, and access roads off Blackberry Lane and Four Oaks Common Road. Three public footpaths were specified, including access to Sutton Park at the beginning of Streetly Lane.

At Four Oaks, the remainder of the green was now to be enclosed, and normally this was done so that owners who had had frontages onto the green received allotments fronting onto the newly specified roads adjacent to their houses. Park Drive does not seem to have been set out by the Commissioner, although he defined it by specifying the boundaries of the neighbouring plots. One of the boundaries of plot 28, for

example, is given as the road leading from Bells Well Lane to Sutton Park, but no such boundary is shown on the Corn Rent map.

As to the allotment of the newly enclosed commons, 160 acres went to only five people. Sir E.C. Hartopp of Four Oaks Hall had 42 acres south Park View Road (31 of them by purchase), and the Rector received 42 acres in lieu of tithes north of Crown Lane. A farm was built on the Rector's new land, with Genders the tenant farmer renting 68 acres including all of Hartopp's fields and 26 acres of the Rector's. Thomas Rochford, the owner of Four Oaks Farm, received 18 acres between his land and Streetly Lane. The commons north of Four Oaks Common Road were purchased by Thomas Edge, H. Jacob, and the Rector, but Edge soon purchased the Rector's 6 acres and Jacob's 20 acres to add to his own 32, together with more at Hill Hook, and set up as a gentleman farmer at his new mansion, Edge Hill House in Edge Hill Road.

Of the Four Oaks owners, only Solomon Smith seems to have been enterprising in his efforts to increase his land. He received some plots by right of his existing property, plots 13, 22, 24, 27 and 28, the first of these being half an acre on Streetly Lane, the rest being just over an acre of the former village green, mainly between his existing land and the new Four Oaks Road. He increased his block of land at Streetly Lane by taking over the entitlements of Joseph Curzon, Willam Bird, Thomas Ashford and Daniel Aulton, and by purchasing a sale plot, no. 14, just over one acre, to give him a block of nine acres south of Crown Lane. Hartopp obtained two small pieces of green adjoining his estate, nos. 20 and 21, while the Corporation received plots 18 and 19, next to their existing property on the Green.

The remaining owners at Four Oaks in 1824 were also entitled to receive allotments. William Bird (corner Belwell Lane and Walsall Road) had been succeeded by Smith (plot 11) and John Cooper, who received a tiny piece of plot 29. Thomas Beeston, who received plot 39, a quarter of an acre on Four Oaks Common Road, had succeeded John Bird of Belwell Lane, while Edward Pullin had succeeded William Rathbone, who had a field off Belwell Lane, and received the neighbouring plot on Four Oaks Common Road, no. 38, of the same size. Plot 26, 10 perches in front of Holly Cottage in Park Drive, went to Mark Baker who had bought up William Farnell's property on the corner of Park Drive. Thomas Clues had been succeeded by Thomas Hastilow who added the 24-perch plot 29 to his existing 13 perches north of Park Drive, and received another tiny plot of 16 perches on Walsall Road, no. 35. Plot 37, an acre on the corner of Four Oaks Common Road and Walsall Road, went to James Earp, who also received a small plot, no. 25 in front of his house, The Hollies. Sarah Hipwood, who owned land and a timber yard on Four Oaks Road, received plot 23 in front of her land and a larger plot, no. 36 of half an acre on Walsall Road.

Thus all the Four Oaks owners or their successors received parts of the former green totalling 2 acres 3 roods and 24 perches, in 14 different lots; those who were entitled to an additional allotment received small plots near Four Oaks Common Road. The other small plots at Four Oaks Common Road went to the owners of neighbouring fields (Thomas Bradley and William Leonard, 32 and 43) or their successors (Mary Lealand receiving 41 and 42 for Tennant and Thacker), or were sale plots (33, 34 and 44). Those who lived in Four Oaks but did not own property received nothing to compensate them for their loss of privileges on the common, although they still enjoyed rights in Sutton Park.

### Four Oaks in 1851.

1851 is taken as the date for this study because it is the date when the Enclosure Award was issued in its final form; however, most of the detail is taken from the Parochial Valuation of 1856, being an even more detailed schedule and map than the enclosure documents. This 1856 record lists 39 dwellings, compared with the 22 identified in 1824. In this section, attention will be focussed on the houses, leaving the population as the subject of the next section.

One of the additional houses was the farm on Streetly Lane tenanted by Genders, but there were very few other additional houses on the former common at this date. Thomas Beeson or Beeston had built five cottages on his plot on Four Oaks Common Road, and there were three cottages in the fields south of Four Oaks Common Road, where there had been four in 1824. Two new houses had been built in Clarence Road, and one in Belwell Lane on fields which had previously been in cultivation. At Four Oaks Park the Lodge is listed, and the cottage formerly belonging to William Beck, and on the other side of the road "Gothic Cottage" also belonged to the Hartopp estate. John Swift still had the park lodge, owned by the Corporation.

At the north end of the village the corporation decided on the 9th June 1830 "that the cottage at Four Oaks occupied by Pickerill be rebuilt on a new site in front of the old one. That Mr. Solomon Smith do the carpenters work and superintend the whole provided he sends in his accounts to the present time within a week after he hath notice thereof. That John Pratt do the brickwork and that W. Brown do the glazing and each to make separate accounts". This new cottage, now no. 1 Walsall Road, was on part of the newly enclosed green, there being no reference to any building on the previous site in 1856, although it is still shown on the map. There were still two cottages on the east side of the corner of Belwell Lane and Walsall Road owned by the corporation, and the two cottages nearby in Belwell Lane were now owned by Cooper, although Nanny Fisher's cottage had gone. The house now no. 52 Belwell Lane still stood on its own..

On the triangle of land north of Park Drive Thomas Hastilow had built five new cottages to rent on his allotment, formerly part of the green, in place of the one that had been there in 1824. On the opposite side of Park Drive there were still four cottages, and next to them, in Four Oaks Road, the Georgian house now no.62, The Hollies. The rest of the houses in Four Oaks Road were still there, but in addition cottages for Samuel Smith's employees had been built on the former green near what is now no. 60, and Sarah Hipwood had a house on her newly allotted part of the green near the present no. 58.

Most of the additional housing was thus workmen's cottages for rent, ten of them built on newly enclosed plots as a speculation by Beeson and Hastilow. Some idea of the quality of the houses can be gained from the rateable value assessed for them in the 1856 schedule. Only Solomon Smith's house, The Larches, is valued at over £30; Four Oaks Farm is just over £20 and The Hollies just under £20, while the next highest are the Park Lodge at just over £10 and Park View Farm at £11/7/-. Four houses are valued between £6 and £10, while the majority, 16, are between £4 and £6. Of the remaining 15, the cottages of Solomon Smith's employees and the corporation cottage on the corner of Belwell Lane and Walsall Road are valued at less than £3. By this measure, the cottages at Four Oaks were much the same as those on the Canwell Estate which can still be seen in Slade Lane and Turfpits Lane, Roughley.

### The Population in 1851

Using the information contained in the Census Enumerator's book for 1851 to find out more about the population of Four Oaks has the drawback that it is not possible to be absolutely certain exactly where all the people listed lived. The enumeration district which included Four Oaks also took in Hill Hook, Ley Hill and Mere Green, but excluded the west side of Four Oaks Road, and the study which follows takes the enumerator's description of the address of families as either "Four Oaks" or "Four Oaks Common" at face value. The book includes 24 households given as "Four Oaks" and 17 as "Four Oaks Common", more than the number of houses identified in the 1856 valuation, but this may be explained partly by including some houses north of Four Oaks Common Road, and partly by houses being occupied by more than one household.

The enclosure of common land is sometimes quoted as a major cause of rural depopulation, but clearly at Four Oaks population had increased. Furthermore, the vast majority of the households were dependent on traditional employment, 56% being engaged in agriculture (mostly agricultural labourers), 15% in cottage industry such as wheelwright or tailor, 12% in service and 5% in building. There is little difference in the occupational pattern between Four Oaks and Four Oaks Common, except that the



ratio of craftsmen on the common is slightly higher. This pattern is similar to the rest of the north of Sutton; in 1861 in Little Sutton 67% were engaged in agriculture, 14% in crafts, while at Hill the figures were 54% and 17%. Other differences probably derive from the pioneering element of going to live on the common - 50% of the household heads in Four Oaks were born in Sutton, whereas 71% on the common were born elsewhere in the Midlands; 47% of the household heads on the common were under 40 years old, against 25% at Four Oaks. The average number of children in the households on the common was 3.1, but 2.1 at Four Oaks, and of these, 33% of children on the common were under 5 years old, against 17% of the Four Oaks children.

Single-parent families were not uncommon - eight of the heads of household were widows or widowers, often living in poverty. Fanny Starkey, who lived on the common, received help from the poor rate and worked as a charwoman, having 6 children aged between 3 and 13, most of them at school; her 88-year-old grandfather, John Starkey, lived with them, stated to be "past work - supported by friends". There were not many elderly people. Ann Leland was the next oldest at 87, a widow living alone, described as an annuitant, but next on the list is Mary Leland, a 52-year old widow, presumably her daughter-in-law. Mary Leland's household included her daughter's family with 2 children, so four generations were together, the only case of this in this survey. Mary Leland was an owner-occupier according to the 1856 valuation, living in a house off Four Oaks Common Road. The other octogenarians were Thomas and Mary Pickerell, Thomas giving his occupation as agricultural labourer at the age of 85. Thomas Pickerell is shown as the tenant of the cottage in the corner of Walsall Road and Streetly Lane on the 1811 survey, so no doubt witnessed all the changes at Four Oaks.

Most of the households conform to the simple pattern of a married couple with children, the man earning a wage from unskilled work. The youngest household head was 24, and there were only a few grown-up children still living at home, so by their early 20's young people would expect to have left home, and to set up their own home by 30 (only three of the household heads were under 30). Broadly speaking, although there were more people living in Four Oaks and its common in 1851 than in 1824, in most of their characteristics they were remarkably similar to their predecessors. Perhaps by 1881 there would be some more striking changes?

### Four Oaks in 1881

The enumerators books for the 1881 census at Four Oaks show a remarkably similar population profile to that of 1851 in all respects. Although a direct comparison is not possible owing to the difficulty in ascertaining the precise area covered, the 1881

census shows only a slight increase in number of households. The minor changes which had occurred, insufficient to affect the general picture, were highly significant, however.

There were now two public houses, the Four Oaks Inn in Belwell Lane and The Crown at Crown Lane. This development no doubt reflected the increased amount of passing trade with the growth of neighbouring towns, especially Walsall, and may also have owed something to the new appreciation of the attractions of Sutton Park, but it also hints at a changing society with perhaps a little more leisure and money to spend than before. Near the Crown several more houses had been built, including "Spring Cottage" and "Rose Cottage", not cottages in the sense of the poorest level of housing, but as a modest place in the country. A retired boat-builder lived in one of these, an example of the person of modest means who might be looking to live quietly at a country spot like Four Oaks. These new houses together with the other ten in the Four Oaks Common Road area formed the nucleus of a new centre of settlement which would continue to grow as an unpretentious area of small houses, workshops, and services. The other novelty, a straw in the wind, was the big house built in Walsall Road inhabited by a Walsall metal manufacturer, his wife, daughter and two servants.

The first large-scale Ordnance Survey maps of 1888 show these changes well, and also a few additional "villa residences" suitable for wealthy businessmen in Belwell Lane and Streetly Lane. The map also shows the railway (opened in 1884) and the race course at Four Oaks Park, as potent symbols of the Victorian age finally invading Four Oaks. A look at the 1891 census reinforces this - the household head's occupations read:- Painter; Auctioneer; Agricultural Labourer; Private Income; General Factor; Auctioneer; Gardener; Private Income; Bricklayer's labourer; Merchant Saddler; Merchant's Clerk; Gun Manufacturer; Private Income; General labourer.....The new influx of successful families from the neighbouring industrial towns to the desirable residential location of Four Oaks was supplanting the traditional cottagers.

This trend continued into the next century, with the Four Oaks Park Estate as a classic example, but on the former common it is perhaps best seen along Streetly Lane, whose prime residential sites overlooking the park were being developed at the turn of the century, greatly enriching the landowners there. It was the Enclosure which turned the Streetly Lane frontage into private property, and so facilitated its eventual residential development, but if the Rector, Solomon Smith, and Hartopp anticipated this when they obtained their allotments in 1830, they would perhaps have been disappointed to know that it would be 70 years before their ship came in.