

HISTORIC INNS OF ENGLAND

Maurice Walsh
37 Wales Street
West Brunswick
Tel. 386 1297

A guide to some famous houses there

After the visitor to England, diligently searching for historic places, has seen the Tower, the Abbey, Hampton Court, and divers crumbling ruins which were once fine castles, he would be wise to seek those places where, for centuries, the lives of the people have centred — the ancient inns. They have all seen English history.

When the first road was hewn through the countryside, the first inn was born to become woven closely with the lives of men of every degree, and with the development of the land. And when England began to stir with life, the inn welcomed in its yard and beneath its roof every rank of society from king to beggar, from judge to malefactor, all of whom lodged within.

Although numbers of ancient inns have bowed before the onslaught of time, many good ones have survived, and their stories will interest the enquiring traveller, who will be intrigued by the strange house-signs of many of them. The landlords of yesteryear who entitled them were truly hosts of furious fancies when they raised such signs as The Trip to Jerusalem, Our Mutual Friend, The Man in the Moon, The Quiet Woman, The Cat and Bagpipes, and You Might As Well.

Whether he be interested in history, architecture, literature or the macabre, the visitor will be rewarded on entering these centuries-old inns and, on departing, will probably agree with Dr Samuel Johnson, who wrote in the eighteenth century :
"There is nothing which has yet been contrived by man, by which so much happiness is produced as by a good tavern or inn".

INTERESTING LONDON INNS

It is well, perhaps, that our search for England's famous inns should begin in its capital and, in Fleet Street, we come upon two reminiscent of the great literary days. First is the 18th century YE OLD CHESHIRE CHEESE, Rendezvous of Dr. Samuel Johnson with James Boswell and divers cronies. It is likely that here the great lexicographer spent many hours in the preparation of the first English dictionary. In the same street, one hundred years later, Charles Dickens frequented his favorite London inn, YE OLDE COCK, and there met its patrons who he subsequently characterised in his famous novels ^{MEN LIKE} Mr Pickwick, Mr Wardle and Sam Weller.

On the riverside at Wapping, in the heart of dockland, is an historic public house, THE TOWN OF RAMSGATE. In the 17th century known as the RED COW, it harboured unwittingly the notorious Judge Jeffries, the most hated man in England. Seeking to flee the country as his patron King James II had done before him, Jeffries, disguised, sought a boat for the Continent, but was recognised by a former lawyer of his ^U court. Saved by town constables from a savage mob, he was arrested and carried to the Tower of London, where he was to die miserably years later.

Another ancient inn in that haunt of sailormen is THE PROSPECT OF WHITBY. In the 17th century Samuel Pepys was a regular patron and doubtless this inn shared much of the writing of his famous Diary with the Spread Eagle, a charming old-world coaching inn at Epsom, in Surrey.

Although not so ancient as those mentioned, a well-named inn, THE GRENADIER, WAS formerly the mess of the Grenadier Guards officers. Today it is a delightful old-world "news" public house - a West End "local".

South-eastwards from London, venturing into Kent, at Canterbury we find THE FOUNTAIN, WHICH claims the distinction of being England's oldest inn, circa 1029. It displays a testimonial written in 1120 by the French Ambassador, lauding the excellence of its service. Here, in the fourteenth century, Geoffrey Chaucer wrote much of The Canterbury Tales in an atmosphere which is truly England.

At Cranbrook, another Kentish town near the Sussex border, we come across an inn founded in the mid-16th century. A claim of unusual fame made by THE GEORGE ~~ISXTHATXKRX~~ is that for more than three hundred years the ancient hostelry served as a magistrates court. However, it is unlikely that malefactors were allowed to wet their whistles during the court proceedings.

Across the Sussex border at Rye, the traveller interested in chilling tales of dark deeds on the seashore under a scudding moon, will relish the atmosphere of THE HOPE ANCHOR, for this place was a smugglers' inn where there was no room for the King's excisemen. The bedrooms are named for the views from their windows - Western Watch, Starland, etc., and the stair cases are Pilgrims' Way and Shepherds' Way. Truly a spot to visit at the dark of the moon!

North into Surrey and at Burford Bridge we come upon a house which will interest both the visitor interested in literature, and the historian. Here at

THE INN John Keats wrote much of "Endymion", and the inn shares with THE GEORGE in Plymouth, Hampshire, romance and history with England's great naval hero. It was at THE INN that Horatio Nelson took a last farewell of his sweetheart, Emma Hamilton, and it was at THE GEORGE that he spent his last night in England before embarking on a journey which ended tragically in Trafalgar Bay.

Moving westward into Berkshire, at Old Windsor we find the strangely-named Bells of Ouzeley. A pleasant ancient Tudor style house on the Thames riverside, it is near Runymeade, where King John bit the dust many centuries ago, and England's memorial to the Royal Air Force. Although claiming little from history, THE GEORGE at Beaconsfield, in the neighboring county of Buckinghamshire, is a remarkable 16th inn which was built around an oak tree which possibly offered shade to its patrons when Henry VIII was throwing his considerable weight around. Landlords really had strange fancies in those days.

Also in Buckinghamshire the town of Aylesbury boasts a 500 years old inn named THE KING'S HEAD, which displays the remarkable ornate windows of the day. Beneath them once sat the farmers and villagers to discuss local news and with it rumours of a war to be fought in the north counties, the Red Rose of Lancashire versus the White Rose of York, which the latter won after thirty years of fighting.

Turning south towards the sea we find in Hampshire four houses which sheltered famous men. At the WHITE HART at Whitchurch, the man who was to write the popular hymn "Lead Kindly Light", and become Cardinal Newman, began his "Lyra Apostolica". THE WELLINGTON ARMS at Stratfield Turgis was a 17th century farmhouse, which became an inn after the Battle of Waterloo, and the Duke of Wellington's personal groom became its first landlord.

A Hampshire inn which claims to have sheltered Oliver Cromwell and his Roundheads in their pursuit of the Royalists in the 1640s, is THE SOUTHGATE, at Winchester. But its greater claim is that it was built by a young architect named Christopher Wren, who later built St. Paul's. It still retains the elegance imparted to it in those far-off days.

The fourth of the county's ancient houses is THE ROYAL ANCHOR, at Liphook, an old coaching inn which dates from the reign of Edward III in the 14th century. The inn claims closer acquaintance with Royalty than other English houses. Being on the road to Portsmouth's naval centre, on their way to the coast in their times Queen Anne, George III, William IV and the Queens of Spain and Portugal broke their journeys there. Lord Nelson was a frequent visitor there and, after Waterloo, Blucher and Wellington with their sovereigns sat down there to decide the ultimate fate of France's "little corporal".

A very old song mentioned Somerset, "where the cider apples grow", and it is here at Dunster that we come upon what is claimed to be the loveliest inn in England. With additions, THE LUTTRELL ARMS is the survival of the town house of the abbots at a nearby monastery, and the hall of the original 15th century building is part of the inn. The centuries since its founding are each represented in different rooms with beautiful oaken features of their times, which make this West Country house all that its admirers claim it to be.

Invading Devon, birthplace of Sir Francis Drake and redolent of ships upon the sea, it is not surprising that THE ROYAL has sheltered the seamen of Bideford and that under its roof Charles Kingsley wrote one of the greatest sea stories of all time. What boy of yesteryear did not thrill to the adventures of Devon men calling "Westward, Ho!".

KING ARTHUR'S CASTLE,

At Tintagel, in Cornwall, a strange inn looks out across the Atlantic. Here the traveller will be confronted with what appears to be a castle of the great King Arthur's day. The architect's experiment has preserved the quality of the original and it should claim the interest of the intelligent seeker of the unusual.

A superb example of the 17th century inn is at Broadway, in Worcester. THE LYGON ARMS affords the guest all the feeling of residing in a great mansion. The stone doorways, the staircase, the great fireplace and the carved oaken settles are a perfect reflection of the period when Oliver Cromwell occupied rooms there. Like Somerset's LUTTRELL ARMS this house will appeal to the traveller seeking a superb example of the ancient English inn.

William Shakespeare's home county Warwickshire has remembered him with THE SHAKESPEARE at Stratford-on-Avon. It is an interesting Tudor building of nine timbered gables and is part of what was once a great country house. The original house sign showing two portraits of the Bard is preserved upon the landing of the inn.

Better known in the Midlands as the "Crooked House", THE GLYNNE ARMS at Kingswinford, in Staffordshire, claims the doubtful honour of being the queerest public house in England. It stands over a coal mine and due to the subsidence of the mine shaft, the building has developed a list at one end. Inside clocks lean away from the walls, floors slope away from and towards the doors. On a long sloping table in the taproom, one end of which is much higher than the other, a bottle will roll up the slope! Unless he be sober a visitor to this strange house could be unnerved by this!

THE EAGLE at Cambridge may well be known as the museum of the coaching days. Long gone from the highway, the coach is remembered in stories such as Charles Dickens wrote. But at this inn a thoughtful landlord of those far-off days of the four-in-hand preserved and displayed the real stuff of that romantic era - harness, bridle, whips and guards' horns - all appearing to await collection by the coachmen and guards before sounding off on their long journey.

The strangely named FOX AND GOOSE at Fressingfield, in Suffolk, is another of the old inns which are gems of timbering much admired and envied by the architects of today. It originated as a shire hall in the 16th century and it is unusual in that it is owned by the parish church, the upkeep of which depends very much upon the profits earned by the old inn.

In the small town of Hitchin, in Hertfordshire, the traveller will come upon THE COOPER'S ARMS which, unlike many inns which originated as monastery hostels, was built as a brickmakers "guild hall", an institution much favoured by craftsmen centuries ago. It later became a meeting and prayer house where John Bunyan, author of "The Pilgrim's Progress", frequently preached to the villagers.

At Grantham, in Lincolnshire, is THE ANGEL, a 13th century inn which is famous for its architectural features, particularly some remarkable windows. Here one may engage a room where, in 1483, Richard III sat to sign the death warrant of the Duke of Buckingham. The luckless Duke was executed a year later in the courtyard of another inn, The Saracen's Head, at Salisbury. Like THE FOUNTAIN in Canterbury, the house has proof of longevity; in this case a patron's bill dated 1274.

The traveller who appreciates the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge will not fail to visit Westmoreland where the daffodils "nodded their heads in sprightly dance". Here at Grasmere he will find THE SWAN, which welcomed the Lakes poets and earned their esteem through the excellent services of its worthy host. This fine man fancied himself as a painter, but the swan which he painted as his house

sign appeared so amateurish, that Wordsworth, his close friend, wrote of it :

Object uncouth, and yet our boast, for it was painted by our host;
His own conceit the figure planned, 'twas colored all by his own hand.

When the popular landlord died, another of the Lakes poets, Coleridge, wrote the verses for his epitaph.

Nottingham has many claims to fame including Robin Hood who was born there. It also has an inn which has an unusual name and an unusual situation. The house is THE TRIP TO JERUSALEM, A NAME BEYOND EXPLANATION other than a fanciful thought of a former landlord. The site of the inn has been hollowed out from the rock upon which the castle stands. Claimed to have been founded in the 13th century, perhaps it welcomed the men of Sherwood forest, resting from their forays.

THE CROWN AND TREATY HOUSE, Uxbridge, Middlesex, ~~THE SARACEN'S HEAD~~, Southwell, Nottinghamshire, and THE GREYHOUND at Maidenhead, Berkshire, all had acquaintance with the luckless Charles I. At the first his representative met Cromwell's to discuss an armistice in the Civil War; at the second, hoping for better terms than from Cromwell, he offered his surrender to the Scots. Here the traveller may occupy the room where Charles spent his last night as king. At the Greyhound he was permitted to see his children for the first time since the war began. It proved a sad farewell for the hapless monarch was executed eighteen months afterwards.

If the visitor enjoys the macabre he should see a 12th century inn at Colnbrook, Buckinghamshire, where an extraordinary tale is told. Two hundred and fifty years ago at THE OSTRICH a prosperous traveller would be settled in an upstairs room above the kitchen in which a bolt held the hinged floor above. When the victim was asleep the bolt would be withdrawn and the poor fellow would plunge into a huge cauldron of water where he would drown. What nice hosts there were in those days!

One of England's greatest miscreants, Dick Turpin, had close association with THE CROWN, at Hempstead, Essex, and the old RED LION, in Whitechapel, London. Son of the landlord of the Crown, Turpin joined a teenage companion in a series of horse-stealings. Surprised by constables at the Red Lion when stealing a horse, Turpin shot one of them dead. He fled north to Yorkshire where he avoided capture for some years until, in 1739, he ^{was} taken for horse-stealing, and hanged. The present Red Lion is built on the site of the old inn from which the notorious Turpin fled.

The story of a shipwreck and the subsequent lonely existence for many years of its sole survivor is one of the world's great classics, and it was at THE ROSE AND CROWN, at Halifax, in Yorkshire, that Daniel Defoe sat down to begin his "Robinson Crusoe". At THE LION in Shrewsbury, in Shropshire, a county which produced another fine writer, Alfred Houman, ~~that~~ Thomas DeQuincy, on his first journey ^{to London} ~~to~~ began "The Opium Eater", the true story of a drug-taker - himself. History has named Defoe and DeQuincy a famous literary duo.

And so we leave the inns of kings and admirals, of authors and male-factors and come to one which shall be last on our journey through England. When, nearly three hundred years ago, the landlord of a quiet old inn, THE BELL, in a quiet old village in ^{STILTON} Huntingdonshire, tasted a delectable cheese in neighboring Leicestershire, he ordered some to be delivered to his inn for retailing to his customers. He shrewdly kept the source of the cheese to himself, and profited exceedingly as its popularity grew. Hence the world-famous cheese which is not, and has never been made at Stilton. It was thus named only for its association with the inn.

Our journey has been long, and so to bed.

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AN INN AT EVENTIDE

As descriptive prose, nothing written in the English language compares with this passage from Charles Dickens' "Barnaby Rudge" describing a winter's evening at the Maypole inn, which was in fact THE KING'S HEAD at Chigwell, in Essex, an inn of which the famous author was often a happy patron.

"Cheerily, though there were none abroad to see it, shone the Maypole light that evening. Blessings on the red - deep ruby, glowing red - old curtain of the window, blending into one rich stream of brightness, fire and candle, meat, drink, and company, and gleaming like a jovial eye upon the bleak waste out-of-doors. Within, what carpet like its crunching sand; what music merry as its crackling logs; what perfume like its kitchen's dainty breath; what weather genial as its hearty warmth! Blessings on the old house; how sturdily it stood. How did the vexed wind chafe and roar about its stalwart roof; how did it pant and strive with its wide chimneys, which still poured forth from their hospitable throats great clouds of smoke, and puffed defiance in its face; how, above all, did it drive and rattle at the casement, emulous to extinguish that cheerful glow, which would not be put down and seemed the brighter for the conflict. The profusion, too, the rich and lavish bounty of that goodly tavern! It was not enough that one fire roared and sparkled on its spacious hearth; in the tiles which paved and compassed it five hundred flickering fires burned brightly also. It was not enough that one red curtain shut the wild night out, and shed its cheerful influence on the room. In every saucepan lid and candlestick and vessel of copper, brass, or tin that hung upon the walls, were countless ruddy hangings, flashing and gleaming with every motion of the blaze and offering, let the eye wander where it might, interminable vistas of the same rich colour. The old oak wainscoting, the beams, the chairs, reflected it in a dull, deep glimmer. There were fires and red curtains in the very eyes of the drinkers, in their buttons, in their liquor and in the pipes they smoked".

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