

THE INNS OF ALRESFORD

by
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The late Mrs. Baker, who had lived for ninety years in Alresford, left this note on our inns amongst her papers:-

'George Inn' met a 'Volunteer' who told him he needed a 'Running Horse', which they found at the 'Horse and Groom' and were soon trotting round the 'Globe', where they saw a 'Stag', a 'Dolphin' and a 'Swan'. They rang the 'Bell' of the 'Dean Arms' where they were 'New Found Out' and galloped to the safety of a 'Cricketers Arms' where they stayed until 'Sun'-down, when tired and weary they retired to a 'Peaceful Home'.

Today only half of these inns remain, which only goes to prove that survival in the public house world requires more than just selling beer.

In common with most country market towns, Alresford had an outer ring of inns and a more important concentration of hostelries at its centre. The survivors of the outlying pubs are the 'Cricketers', 'The Running Horse' and 'The Globe', of which the most typical is the latter. In early times, travellers to or through Alresford on the old London road from Bighton would first hit the town at 'The Globe' at which those in search of a job or with merchandise to sell would get early notice of what goods were in short supply or where there was a chance of employment. At the same time, 'The Globe' gave early warning to the town - 'a quartermaster's turned up looking for billets for troops'; 'a packman's come with Flemish lace'; 'they've got the pox at Basingstoke'. All vital messages to a community where newspapers were scarce and radio unimaginable.

One landlord of the Globe who held a special place in the town's cricket history was Thomas Taylor. He was one of the Hambledon Club team who, on 18th June 1777, beat All England by an innings and 168 runs (the other Alresford man in the team was Richard Veck). Among the entertainments at the Globe was the Melon Feast; the fruit being judged for perfection before becoming the principal dish of the feast. The Hampshire Chronicle of 1825, reporting the contest, remarks that 'Mr. Banting's Green Flesh was much admired'.

The 'Cricketer's Arms' (originally 'The White Horse') was first sited at the junction of Sun Lane and Bramdean Lane and was thus the most isolated of our pubs which, in the past, was probably just as well for it was there that the cock-fighting fraternity gathered to 'cast a main with the gamecocks'. A glance at the map shows how well it was placed to catch the horse and foot traffic coming up from the south-east, which would be much heavier than it is today, so that The White Horse could usefully warn the town of what was coming to market from that direction.

Alresford really was a nursery of early cricket and the change of name to Cricketers Arms was obvious when the game started to be played on Tichborne Down. In addition to Taylor and Veck, both the Freemantle brothers had the honour to belong to the Hambledon Club and Crawte, though Alresford born, was 'stolen' by Mr. Amherst when he introduced cricket to Kent, and was one of their great originals.

The last survivor of the perimeter pubs is the 'Running Horse', which in 1611 was known as the 'Dog and Star', being in that year assigned to John Shackelford for 3000 years. If the family had held onto the tenure, it would still have a long time to run!

An advertisement in The Hampshire Chronicle of 1781 announces 'Bull-Baiting at the Dog and Star, with a prize of two and half guineas to the owner of the dog that pins the bull oftenest and fairest'. It was a hideous sport; a rope tied to the animal's horns confined its movements to a fifteen foot circle round a stake and ring, the bulldogs being set at the wretched beast to grip its muzzle and stay gripping even when the infuriated bull was swinging them through the air in its frenzy. Unlike the Globe or Cricketers, The Dog and Star was able to offer stabling for six horses and so had the requirements of a coaching service. In 1792, an advertisement appeared for 'the new coach The Prince of Wales from Holborn to Poole, calling at The Star in Alresford', but it does not appear to have survived into the 1820's.

The pattern is beginning to emerge of the pubs of Alresford playing a much greater part in the life of the town than just as purveyors of beer and spirits and the time has come to move into the centre where the most important inns were situated.

From the middle of the XVIIIth century, the most important inn in Alresford has been The Swan. Being superior to the rough sports of bull baiting and cock fighting, the Swan catered for the turtle and venison dinners of the Bailiff and Burgesses; for important public meetings; for the meets and hunt breakfasts of the Hampshire Hunt; the balls in the Assembly Room and, later, for the panoply of Justice in the form of fortnightly Sessions. While providing such services for the inhabitants of the Alresford district, it also had a duty towards the town's visitors as the principal coaching inn. By 1757, the coaches between London and Southampton used The Swan as a daily stage each way. London-bound travellers had breakfast while horses were changed in the extensive stabling at the back, the coach having driven into the yard through the entrance which is now blocked by the doorway and hall of the hotel. It cost 5s to travel 'outside' to London in those days, the coach arriving at The Bell Savage on Ludgate Hill at six in the evening. The Swan provided good overnight accommodation for the gentry and the Swan Tap was available for their grooms. This service continued even after the railway ousted the coaches, for it was the nearest available lodging to the railway station. In fact, in the 1850's, the proprietor Edward Rous, had foreseen what the railways would do to the coach traffic and - with the initiative which recommends 'if you can't beat them, join them' - had started advertising a coach from Alresford to catch the train at Farnham for London with a first class fare of 14s 6d.

Across the way from the Swan, as it is today, was the Market Inn or Bell. Its recognized function in the community of Alresford was to provide the market centre; a room where transactions could be settled; a 'farmer's ordinary' in the dining room and a yard in which important beasts and property could be auctioned. In the early XIXth century, the Bell was even licensed as a place of public worship for the Non-Conformists of the town. A splendid example of an inn being used for other useful purposes besides the retailing of wines and spirits. Here also the Glee Singers met

regularly. One begins to wonder where the people went who wanted to indulge in the simple recreation of drinking!

For that we must visit the Horse and Groom, which has served the people of Alresford for over 400 years. As long ago as 1550, there was an inn on the site which specialized in good liquor and good conversation, mainly on horsey matters; a subject which needs a glass in the hand and gave the house the name of the Horse and Jockey. In the XIXth century there was racing on both Abbotstone and Tichborne Down and it was in Bishops Sutton stables that Cloister was trained to win the Grand National in 1893. There would have been much knowledgeable talk over the bar both before and after that race. The landlord who changed the name from Jockey to Groom was Charles Butler, who let out a 'fly' for hire and it may well be that he thought the name more appropriate to his new venture. Butler's most lasting service to the district was the forming of the Hand-in-Hand society or 'Butler's Club' as it was called locally. This working man's insurance club was a boon at a time when any idea of National Social Security was undreamt of. It must have been a success as its annual feasts on Easter Monday, with a brass band parading round the town before the service in the parish church, were reported in the Hampshire Chronicle, whose photographer was careful to ensure that the famous jug, holding a pint over 13 gallons, had a prominent position in the picture of the event.

Our last surviving inn is 'The Peaceful Home', which is the most appropriately named of them all for it offered itself as a common lodging house to travellers and was in great demand amongst shepherds and drovers come into town for the Alresford Fairs. Originally 'The Bricklayers Arms' because an early landlord was John Bennett, the bricklayer and builder, it deserves our support today for it has recently become a Free House when all our other pubs are 'tied' to a Brewery.

These are our pubs as they stand today. There are another fifteen 'lost' inns of Alresford whose story will make a second article including the very real connection between our 'George' and the battle of Agincourt.

