

White Horse Hotel

Romsey



A BRIEF HISTORY

BY WILL SWALES



WELCOME



Kevin Charity, founder of The Coaching Inn Group.



Adam Charity, chief operations officer.

Welcome to a brief history of The White Horse Hotel, Romsey, Hampshire. This booklet is one among a series of published histories, which The Coaching Inn Group has been producing since 2016. At that time the company had become established on its specialist mission to acquire and revitalise hotels of heritage, many of them old coaching inns and some with histories dating to the 1500s or earlier.

My father, Kevin Charity, the company founder, and its chief executive until his retirement in 2024, wrote: "While contemplating the small changes and additions we wanted to make, it dawned on me that we will only be the custodians for a generation or two at most. I can't foretell who will follow but we can take the trouble to discover more about who were the hotel owners and keepers in the past."

Will Swales, a writer and historian with a background in the hospitality industry, was invited to research and write the series of booklets. His brief was to separate fact from fable, to discover what was true and what had been elaborated or invented during the story-telling process over the years. Will has engaged with other historians, local-history groups, and people with long personal memories of the hotels. He has also searched historic newspapers and local archives to garner new information from sometimes previously undiscovered records. We will always welcome contributions of new information that might be considered for inclusion in future revised editions.

It is hoped that these history booklets will be recognised as memorials to those who were involved in running the hotels in the past, and as heart-felt contributions to the heritage of the communities in which the hotels have played such pivotal roles throughout their existence, and in which they continue to serve today.

Adam Charity
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The image shows the interior of a historic inn. The ceiling is made of dark, heavy wooden beams. A service counter with a white top and wooden base is in the background. In the foreground, there are ornate wooden chairs with colorful, patterned cushions. Small round wooden tables hold coffee menus. The floor is covered with a patterned carpet. The overall atmosphere is rustic and historic.

**“...A RARE SURVIVING EXAMPLE OF A
PRESTIGIOUS LATE-MEDIEVAL OR TUDOR INN.”**

BUILT BETWEEN 1450 AND 1530



The altar and east window of Romsey Abbey Church. Image courtesy Dorling Kindersley / UIG / Bridgeman Images.

ROMSEY ABBEY

Romsey Abbey is said to have been established as a nunnery in 907 AD and then rebuilt in stone around 1000 AD. It closed in 1544 as part of Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries. Today, only the Abbey Church survives. It's a short walk from The White Horse, and it serves as the parish church of Romsey.

The White Horse Hotel in Market Place, Romsey, is a rare surviving example of a prestigious late-medieval or Tudor inn.

From its inception, it provided overnight accommodation for travelling aristocrats, landowners, gentry, clergy, and merchants, who regarded Romsey as an important resting place on the road between the royal and ecclesiastical centres of Winchester and Salisbury, having at its heart the 10th-century Romsey Abbey.

Stonework in the cellars of the hotel suggests that a substantial building existed on this site from the 1100s, and it might have been a hostelry connected to the abbey. According to expert opinion, the gallery-style part of today's building, running alongside the yard behind the archway, is a typical element of a purpose-built inn, and is dated as early as 1450.

And at the front, the main structural timbers visible internally behind what is now a Georgian façade, suggest that the building was erected no later than 1530, in the middle years of the reign of Henry VIII, when Romsey Abbey was a functioning nunnery.

SECRET PASSAGE?

Past notions that a recess in the cellars indicated a blocked underground passage to the abbey have been reasonably rejected by historians, on grounds that such a passage would be permanently flooded by the town's generally high water-table, or by some part of the network of streams running under the town's streets.

ELIZABETHAN GUEST'S DEATHBED

The earliest surviving written evidence of The White Horse Inn at Romsey is the will of John Uvedale, a wealthy man, who died at the inn on 1 March 1573, in the 15th year of the reign of Elizabeth I.

It seems that Uvedale had neither a wife nor any children living, and he had already made some preparation for the end of his life. A year earlier, he had granted his lands in Dorset to the queen, but he had retained his ownership of the income from the land's local taxes, called tithes. It isn't clear why he was at The White Horse Inn. Lying in his bed, he clearly knew he was close to death, and he realised that he had not made any arrangements for disposing of his remaining assets.

So, he asked innkeeper William Pratt to summon an attorney, John Ayliff, to write down his last wishes. It was apparent to Ayliff that John Uvedale's instructions were not entirely coherent and that he would die before the will could be written down, signed, and witnessed.

A verbal will, written after death and unsigned, required the highest-possible burden of proof. So, Ayliff took care to ensure that he received Uvedale's instructions in the presence of three witnesses, innkeeper William Pratt, his wife Ellen, and another woman. The instructions were afterwards written down by Ayliff as a detailed and colourful record of the exact conversation with Uvedale, including his directions to the lawyer to find legal documents in his coffer in the room.

Thus, it was recorded and later proved that John Uvedale left his tithe income from land in Dorset to his younger brother and left nothing to his older brother. The only other bequests were in recognition of services received at the end of Uvedale's life. He left to innkeeper William Pratt the lease of a tithe income in a place specified only by Uvedale's description of the shape and size of the lease document in his coffer. He left to one Abraham Pratt his better pair of old hose and his two woollen coats, and to John Ayliff he left his cloak.

MEDIEVAL GALLERY



Both the ground-level and first floor walkways of the medieval gallery have long ago been enclosed, as can be seen from the modern photograph above.

Originally, it probably looked like the example below, preserved at The George Inn, Winchcombe, Gloucestershire. Image courtesy Nick Turner/Alamy Stock Photo.



JOHN UVEDALE'S STORY

The brief version of the story of John Uvedale's will on this page is based on the extensive research and a significantly more-detailed article by Barbara Burbridge, of Romsey Local History Society.

GALLERY CHAMBERS



The Tudor rose motif.

William Pratt, keeper of The White Horse in 1573, was probably also the owner of the inn.

He was apparently a well-respected businessman in Romsey and became the town's mayor in 1578. He was followed as innkeeper of The White Horse by John Dixon, who died there in 1598, after which his widow, Lucilla, carried-on running the business. At the time of her death in 1610, in the reign of the Stuart king, James I, an inventory of her goods and chattels listed every item by its location in each of the inn's rooms. Three of the rooms were named the Gallery Chamber, the Gallery Middle Chamber, and the Gallery Little Chamber.



Interlocking straps.

HISTORIC WALL PAINTINGS

In the lounge today, between the coffee room and the reception, are preserved sections of The White Horse Inn's extremely rare, historic decorative wall paintings.

Two styles are typical of the mid-1500s to the early 1600s, and so could have been created at the time of innkeepers William and Ellen Pratt, or of John and Lucilla Dixon. One design depicts imitation panels framing large Tudor roses. It was made in a painting technique called grisaille, using shades of grey to give the impression of a sculptured plaster surface. Another design, much restored, has a pattern of interlocking straps within a painted frame.

A third design, thought to be later than the other two, and that could date from the time of host William Freeman (see Page 7), has a black pattern on a yellow-ochre background.



A black pattern on a yellow-ochre background.

MORE THAN 70 YEARS IN ONE FAMILY

The next known owner and keeper of The White Horse Inn was William Freeman, whose family kept the inn for more than 70 years.

The earliest mention of him is in October 1687, when the Romsey mayor, Walter Bell, accounted for money spent on wine at Mr Freeman's 'to celebrate the king's birthday.' William Freeman was himself elected the town mayor four times, his last term, in 1725-26, being cut short by his death.

He bequeathed The White Horse Inn to his son, William Freeman junior, who was aged about 45. He followed his father as a leading figure in the town, serving as mayor in 1730-1 and in 1745-6. It's probable that, like his father, William Freeman junior ran The White Horse Inn himself, although perhaps in his later years he might have let the business to a tenant. He would retain the ownership until his death, aged 80, in 1761.



The mid-18th-century staircase at The White Horse, probably installed when the building was elevated by one storey.

COACHING BONANZA BEGINS

Whoever was running The White Horse in the 1750s was blessed with a great opportunity for a business bonanza.

Huge private investments were being made throughout the country to build new toll roads, known as turnpikes. Better roads prompted a huge expansion in the provision of public stage-coach services, which were suddenly more reliable and more financially viable. Coaches were dependent upon roadside inns to provide changes of horses and refreshments for weary travellers. The inns needed to expand, and so it was probably around this time that the main block of The White Horse Inn was elevated by one storey and a new staircase installed, which is still in use today.

FIRST COACHES VISIT ROMSEY



A stage coach passing through a turnpike road toll-gate at night. Credit Historical Images Archive / Alamy Stock Photo.

For the principal inns of Romsey, the first opportunity to serve the coaching trade came in about 1756, after the completion of a turnpike road linking Salisbury and Romsey via Whiteparish.

Within a year, there was a new coach, or 'flying machine' as they were first known, running this road, and connecting to others to make a service between Salisbury and the naval dockyard at Gosport, via Romsey, Winchester, and Bishop Waltham. The Romsey inn to benefit is unknown but was probably either The White Horse, or its main rival, The Bell, in Bell Street.

LONDON-POOLE COACH

New tenant innkeepers appointed to run The White Horse in about 1763 were Edward and Mary Jeffery, who moved in after 10 years running the town's Bell Inn.

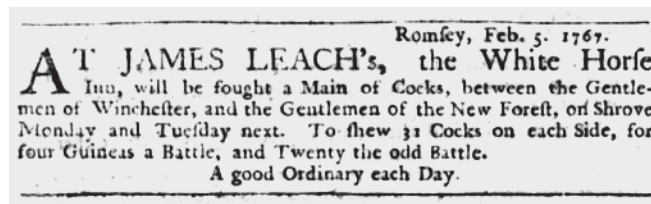
Their arrival at The White Horse closely coincided with the launch in October 1763 of a long-distance public coach service, running three days a week between central London and the port of Poole, in Dorset. The coaches in both directions met for an overnight stop at The White Horse Inn, which supplied dinner, bed and breakfast for the passengers, drivers, guards, and the horses.

In the following year, Edward Jeffery died, leaving his widow Mary to carry on the business, supported by James Leach, her son, apparently from a previous marriage. By October 1766, press advertisements for the coach service listed among the proprietors, Mary Jeffery and her other son, Joseph Leach, a Romsey barber and gentleman's wig-maker. Early in 1767, Mary Jeffery died, leaving James Leach in charge of the inn. He also took her place as a joint owner of the London-Poole coach service.

COCK-FIGHTING AND SINGING

Providing entertainment became part of the stock-in-trade of the best Georgian innkeepers, as James Leach ably demonstrated at The White Horse.

In 1767 he advertised music evenings open to all, with trophies for the best singers. At the same time, he was hosting cock-fighting contests, presumably held in a pit in the yard. Cock-fighting, with its rich prizes and associated high-stakes gambling, was extremely popular among the upper social classes of the period.



Salisbury and Winchester Journal, 9 February 1767.
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www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk

SIBLEY EDGES OUT HIS RIVAL

James Leach left the inn late in 1767 after which The White Horse entered a long period of instability in its ownership and management.

A recovery began in March 1777 when the inn was bought by Charles Sibley, who moved with his wife, Ann, from The Sun Inn, in Salisbury. By that time, all the lucrative coaching trade had been lost to the enterprising innkeeper of The Bell Inn, John Faithorne. He had secured some of the trade by taking partnerships in the coach-service providers, including in the London-Poole and Salisbury-Gosport services.

Charles Sibley knew what to do. In February 1780, he contrived to replace Faithorne as a partner in the London-Poole coach service, at which time it was announced in the press that its business in Romsey was removed from The Bell to The White Horse.

BROKEN-HEARTED SUICIDE

When a hired carriage from Winchester raced into the yard of The White Horse in October 1780, the driver frantically sought assistance for his agonised passenger.

The man in pain was Captain Thomas Brisbane, recently returned from the East Indies, who in June had eloped with, and secretly married Cordelia Martin, of Devon. Her wealthy father's displeasure was such that Brisbane, at his lodgings in Winchester, pressed his wife to share with him a draught of poison. On her refusing, he took the whole draught himself and, for reasons unknown, hired a carriage to take him to The White Horse at Romsey. He died soon after his arrival and the sad tale was widely reported in the press.



Distinctively shaped 'coaching clocks' were introduced by an Act of Parliament in 1797. This elegant example, now hanging in the council chamber at Romsey Town Hall, is known to have been removed from The White Horse Hotel.

FAITHORNE'S REVENGE

The coaching battle between the leading Romsey Inns, The Bell and The White Horse, erupted again in June 1782 when the London-Poole service run by Gilbert and Co. was still calling at The White Horse.

It appears that John Faithorne, of The Bell Inn, launched a rival service on the same route, trading as Faithorne and Co., and calling at The Bell. By October the same year, the two coach firms had merged and the new united London-Poole service, provided by Gilbert, Faithorne and Co., called in Romsey at The Bell.

White Horse innkeeper, Charles Sibley, might have lost the will to carry on the fight because two years later, in 1784, he died, leaving the inn to his widow, Ann. She not only carried on the business but also entered the fray to win more coaching trade.





One of Andrew Collyer's coaches with destinations painted on the side including Romsey (inset).
Unknown artist in the style of John Cordrey. Courtesy of the Jersey Heritage Collections.

NEW LONDON–ROMSEY COACH

Ann Sibley struck an innovative deal in February 1786 to establish a new daily coach service between The White Horse and the famous London coaching inn, The Belle-Savage Inn, Ludgate Hill.

The operator was Andrew Collyer, of Farnham, Surrey, who for several years had run a highly successful service between London and Southampton, which by-passed Romsey. Coaches in the new service left The White Horse at 4.30am and the Belle-Savage at 4am.

Anne Sibley retired in 1788 and sold The White Horse to her rival, John Faithorne, who had previously given up The Bell. But Faithorne was tired and there followed more than a decade of instability at The White Horse, with several changes in ownership and tenancy.

DEATH SENTENCE REPRIEVED

At Winchester Assize Court in 1795, it was reported that one Thomas Purchase (probably actually William Purchase, who was briefly owner of The White Horse) lost a large amount of cash, stolen from the inn cellar. William Dickman was found guilty of stealing 38 guineas in gold and up to £20 in notes and silver coins, for which he was sentenced to death. Shortly afterwards the sentence was commuted to transportation for life.

MUCH-TROUBLED ROYAL FAMILY CALLS IN



King George III and Queen Charlotte, circa 1794, with seven of their 13 children, the princesses Charlotte, Augusta, Elizabeth, Mary, Sophia, and Amelia, and their youngest son, Prince Augustus, Duke of Sussex. Section from a oil painting by Thomas Stothard. © National Trust.

It isn't known who was running The White Horse in 1801, but it was clearly a time when its reputation as the town's principal inn had been re-established.

A brief press report headed 'Romsey July 2' noted that 'their Majesties and the Princesses passed through the town' and that 'His Majesty stopped some time at The White Horse Inn, conversing with Colonel Erskine, of the 15th Light Dragoons, and his lady.'

George III and his family were on their way to the king's favourite summer holiday home at Gloucester Lodge, on the sea front at Weymouth. The chosen route between there and his main residence at Windsor Castle passed through Romsey, where the party required a break for refreshments and a change of horses. The royal procession comprised several coaches carrying the large family and members of the household, accompanied by mounted guards of the Light Dragoons, also known as the King's Hussars.

For the people of Romsey, the glorious pageant of the king and queen and their five youngest and unmarried daughters passing through the town was made even more exciting by the extraordinary personal circumstances of the royal family at the time. It was George III's first appearance after emerging from two or three months in confinement at Kew House, where he tried to recover from his second bout of highly distressing and acute mental illness.

More intriguing would have been the opportunity to glimpse any of the five princesses. Aged 32 to 18, they were a cause celebre, being famously constrained by their obsessive father from finding husbands. The king's desire to keep his youngest daughters with him was fuelled by his disappointment at the failed marriage of his sister, Caroline, and at losing close contact with his eldest daughter, Charlotte, after her 1797 marriage to a German prince. The princesses were said to protest at being kept as if in a nunnery. Nonetheless, there were scandals, and it was rumoured, accurately, that during the previous summer at Weymouth, Princess Sophia, then aged 22, had given birth to an illegitimate child, who was fostered as a supposed foundling.



WILLIAM PURCHASE AGAIN

The White Horse was bought in March 1802 by John Young, a well-known Romsey auctioneer.

Young had previously kept Romsey's Dolphin Inn in Corn Market. In July, he installed as tenant innkeeper at The White Horse, 37-year-old William Purchase, himself briefly a former owner of the inn, and who for the previous seven years had successfully kept The Bell Inn. He would remain at The White Horse for four years.

GIFTS FOR THE ROYAL FAMILY

Within two months of William Purchase taking charge at The White Horse, in September 1802 the inn was once again hosting the royal family.

This time they were travelling to Windsor on return from their summer holiday in Weymouth. The press reported that the royal party comprised the king and queen and four princesses, Augusta, Elizabeth, Mary, and Sophia. The youngest princess, Amelia, was often in poor health because of tuberculosis, and she returned from Weymouth in a separate party and by a separate route.

While horses were changed at The White Horse, each member of the royal family was presented with a basket of fruit by a senior servant on behalf of Lady Palmerston, the widowed mother of an up-and-coming national politician, Henry John Temple, the 3rd Viscount Palmerston, whose country seat of Broadlands was just outside Romsey.

“... the royal party comprised the king and queen and four princesses...”



AUCTIONEER JOHN YOUNG



The old stables are thought to date from the late 1700s, but were at least improved by John Young in 1807.

White Horse owner John Young took charge of running the inn himself from 1806, while continuing his auctioneering business at the same time.

It seems that the stables, which provided private hire of horses and of driven carriages, known as post-chaises, remained with the inn's former tenant, William Purchase, as a separate business for another year, until it too was taken over by John Young. At the same time, Young announced in the press that he had made improvements to the stables and to the house, 'with the addition of several rooms, newly furnished.' As a long-serving member of the town corporation, Young was elected mayor for the year in 1809.

‘BUSTLE AND ACTIVITY REIGNED’

Romsey's first local historian, medical doctor John Latham, wrote in around 1810 that The White Horse was the town's principal inn.

It was recorded that from about that time, the post boys, whose job was to collect and return horses left at other inns, wore smart blue liveries. It was the height of the coaching era. An unknown writer recalled scenes at the inn during this period:

‘...when coaches were continually setting down passengers at its doors, when tradesmen, loungers, and idlers stood by, and early schoolboys with shining faces and wondering looks stopped to gaze, when waiters, porters, and ostlers were to be seen running from room to room, when bells were ringing and voices screaming, when one continued scene of bustle and activity reigned within and around the house from early dawn to midnight.’



Typical scene of a coach setting off from an inn yard. From 'Coaching Days and Coaching Ways' illustrated by Herbert Railton and Hugh Thompson.



A GEORGIAN MAKEOVER

John Young stepped back from running The White Horse in April 1820, when he was in his mid-50s, and installed a tenant innkeeper, Joseph Phillips.

In the following year, Young sold the inn for £3,000 to two wealthy landowners, brothers Richard and John Cooe, both of Milford, near Salisbury. They had the wherewithal to invest in the property and so it was probably they who commissioned the grand makeover that created the Georgian-style façade we see today.

Another clue is a press notice that first appeared in May 1823 in which Joseph Phillips announced: ‘... no expense had been spared to render The White Horse equal to any house in the kingdom for comfort, it having gone through a complete repair and furnished in a modern style.’



The preserved Georgian façade of the hotel as it appears today.

TRAGIC SARAH BELL

Widow Mrs Sarah Bell took over as innkeeper of The White Horse in December 1826, assisted by her son, John, who had experience in the hospitality trade in London.

They suffered a minor loss in 1827 when two local boys, aged 13 and 14 were caught stealing some lead pipe attached to the brewhouse. By the Draconian measures of the time, they were sentenced to 12 months' imprisonment with hard labour. Sarah Bell's worst times began in March 1830 when her younger son, Charles, died aged 21. Her son, John, officially took over the tenancy of the inn in May 1831, but he died five months later aged 31. Soon afterwards, Sarah left The White Horse and moved to Southampton.

COACHES.	
FROM THE BELL.	
BATH & Bristol Mail,	through South-ton, Salisbury, &c. every evening at half past eleven
PORTSMOUTH	every morning at half past 2, through Fareham, Bishops Waltham, &c.
FROM THE WHITE HORSE.	
LONDON & Winchester,	Collyer's coach every morning (Sunday excepted) at half past 6
BATH, Light Post,	every morning (Sunday excepted) at half past 8 & half past nine
BRISTOL,	every morning at half past 9
SOUTHAMPTON,	every afternoon at 3, 4 & half past 4, (Sunday excepted)

Extract from the Romsey town entry in Pigot's Directory of Hampshire 1828.



“He was one of six burglars sentenced to death on the same day...”

ANOTHER DEATH SENTENCE

At Winchester Assize Court in 1833, Charles Light, aged 21, was convicted of breaking into The White Horse and stealing a large quantity of silver plate, mainly spoons, sugar bowls and butter boats. He was one of six burglars sentenced to death on the same day, although his punishment was soon afterwards commuted to transportation for life.

ERA OF THE REMARKABLE MRS SARAH COCKS BEGINS

MORE PAIN FOR SARAH BELL

In 1837, Sarah Bell, who six years earlier had given up running The White Horse in tragic circumstances, suffered more pain when she was detained in the Queen's Bench Prison for debtors in Southwark, London.

After the seven-year tenancy of one William Jennings, in March 1839 control of The White Horse was transferred to a partnership of Samuel and Robert Cocks.

Samuel, aged 55, had been the inn's ostler for at least the previous 14 years, while his relative, Robert, was aged 26, and came from the nearby village of Plaitford, where his parents ran the Shoe Inn. In announcing their new roles in the press, the two men took care to describe The White Horse as a hotel, the newly fashionable word denoting a superior form of hostelry.

When Robert Cocks married in January 1840, he and his wife, Sarah, took the tenancy, while Samuel Cocks continued to run the stables and posting business. Tragedy struck in April 1846 when Robert Cocks died, aged 33. Sarah had four children under the age of five and was pregnant with her fifth. She carried on running the hotel with help from her sister and mother, while Samuel Cocks took on the extra responsibility for the Tap Room bar which was effectively the staffroom for the post boys and coaching staff.



MEETING CHALLENGES HEAD-ON

Sarah Cocks faced an enormous new challenge in March 1847 when the London and South-Western Railway Company opened a new line running through Romsey.

It connected Southampton and Winchester with Salisbury and caused an almost instant collapse of Romsey's coaching trade. Many keepers of coaching inns quit when the railway arrived, but Sarah Cocks did the opposite. The following year, the executors of the recently deceased owners of The White Horse, Richard and John Cooe, put the freehold of the hotel up for sale, and Sarah Cocks seized the opportunity to buy it.

She raised the money by mortgaging all the brewery plant and equipment that she owned in the hotel and taking on a further loan secured on the property. She would continue to be the owner and keeper of The White Horse Hotel for the next 17 years, during which she earned widespread respect, especially for her catering skills. She continued to meet every challenge head-on and to fly in the face of adversity.

In one month, July 1849, her business partner, the widower Samuel Cocks, suffered the triple loss of his 22-year-old son George to tuberculosis, and two children of his son Samuel, aged nine and one, possibly to the same disease. In September the same year, Samuel senior's 27-year-old daughter, Hannah, died of tuberculosis. Samuel died in 1852, aged 67.

The posting business at The White Horse was carried on by his son William Cocks. However, in May 1856, William died aged 31, followed in September the same year by his widow, Georgiana, also aged 31. They left two orphans, aged four and three, who went to live with their maternal grandparents. So, Sarah Cocks took on the stables and the posting business. Then In 1858, her only son Robert Clayton Cocks junior died, aged 14, at his boarding school at Hurstpierpoint, near Brighton.



A plan of the hotel, brewery, stables and yard when it was purchased by Sarah Cocks in 1848. Hampshire Archives and Local Studies ref. 4M92-N105-9. The brewery was later converted into a garage and has now ceased to exist as a separate building.

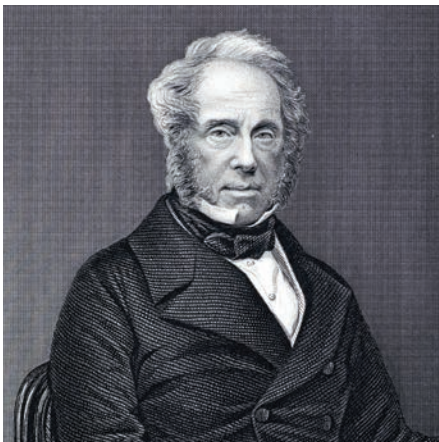
RIVAL CLOSED FOREVER

The loss of the coaching trade to the railways was too much for the arch-rival of The White Horse, The Bell Inn, which went into a decline and closed forever in 1859.

PRIME MINISTER PALMERSTON AT THE WHITE HORSE



The bronze statue of Lord Palmerston in Market Place, Romsey. Sculptor, Matthew Noble.



Lord Palmerston circa 1855-59.

Sarah Cocks' most distinguished guest at The White Horse during the 1850s and 60s was the leading politician Henry John Temple, 3rd Viscount Palmerston.

It was during a period when he lived mainly in London and at a country house in Hertfordshire, and when he was serving the country, first as Home Secretary, and then during two terms as Prime Minister. His interest in Romsey stemmed from his life-long association with his beloved family seat of Broadlands, just outside the town.

In his later years, and despite being at the height of his political career, he started visiting Broadlands more frequently, and attended at The White Horse Hotel to preside over meetings of Romsey Agricultural Society, and of the newly formed Romsey Association for the Encouragement of Agricultural Labourers.

Lord Palmerston frequently had to pull out of promised attendances at The White Horse because of pressing matters of state. But when he was present, his speeches on improving the lot of farm workers and on developing new methods of farming were regarded as nationally important and were reported extensively in the press throughout the country.

Palmerston died in October 1865, two days before his 81st birthday and while still in the office of Prime Minister. He had wanted to be buried at Romsey Abbey but so widely was he revered that, at the insistence of the Cabinet, he was granted the rare privilege of a state funeral and a burial at Westminster Abbey. In 1868, a statue to his memory was erected in Market Place, Romsey, within sight of The White Horse Hotel.



SLIDING INTO DEBT

In the last years of Lord Palmerston's visits to The White Horse, the redoubtable host Sarah Cocks started sliding into irretrievable debt.

Her mortgage lender took possession of the hotel and in September 1863 sold it to local builder Thomas Till. A year later, he sold it to Robert Bullen, formerly a sugar factory owner in Mauritius who had recently retired to a house in Romsey. Sarah Cocks stayed on as tenant hotelkeeper but remained mired in debt to her suppliers. She quit in October 1865, when she was aged 50. She moved to Southampton where life did not improve. Two years later she was discharged from bankruptcy.



Two of the daughters of Sarah Cocks photographed sometime between 1858 and 1864 when Margaret (above) was no more than 23 and Prudence (below) was no more than 19. Images by Romsey's pioneering photographer William Slater, copies kindly supplied by Chas Burnett.

KIND-HEARTED MR PRANGNELL

The new tenant hotelkeeper appointed in October 1865, was Charles Robert Prangnell, aged 38.

A former baker and grocer from Cowes on the Isle of Wight, he arrived with his wife, Charlotte, and three young children. Prangnell's catering was not up to the standard of his predecessor. A review of the Christmas market dinner he served at the Corn Exchange in 1868 noted it was 'so badly served and the wines were so wretched as to call forth very general complaint ... several of the company said it was worse than Mr Prangnell's [regular] market dinners.'

Despite his shortcomings, no-one could deny that Charles Prangnell was a kind-hearted man. In 1870 he delivered the first of a series of annual free Christmas dinners at The White Horse for the elderly poor of the parish, who he insisted on calling 'friends in adversity'. After 10 years in charge, Charles Prangnell quit the hotel in June 1875 and returned to his old trade of grocer, immediately opening a shop in Market Place.



“...he left the hotel to ‘my friend Ellen Trask, of The White Horse Hotel, Romsey, spinster.’”

FORTUNATE ELLEN TRASK

Charles Prangnell’s departure in 1875 coincided with a change in ownership of the hotel, which was bought by Vincent Newman.

Formerly of The London Hotel, Weymouth, Newman and his wife took personal charge of running The White Horse, although not everything was quite as it seemed. Four years later, in June 1879, Vincent Newman died, aged 44. His will, made just eight months earlier, revealed that he left the hotel to ‘my friend Ellen Trask, of The White Horse Hotel, Romsey, spinster.’ The unknown Ellen Trask was revealed as the person previously understood to be Mrs Ellen Newman.

The real Mrs Newman, Mary Ann, last-known to be living in Dorchester, was left £50 in the will, and Vincent’s two sons, aged 18 and 14, were left £100 each. The fortunate Ellen Trask, aged 31, reverted to her legally correct name, moved away, and leased The White Horse to Richard Talmy-Turner, an experienced publican and brewer who moved from Bognor in Sussex. In 1882, Ellen Trask sold the hotel to a London solicitor, Claude Ashley Anson Penley, who first leased and then sold it to Romsey brewer, William Bentley George. His tenant hotelkeeper in 1887 was Charles Bigford.



This hotel headquarters plaque of the Cyclists' Touring Club survives at The Coaching Inn Group's Golden Fleece Hotel, in Thirsk, Yorkshire. Bearing the initials CTC and the logo of a three-winged wheel, it is identical to one that was once fixed to the wall of The White Horse Hotel, Romsey.

CYCLISTS' TOURING CLUB

An advertisement for The White Horse Hotel in 1887 proclaimed that it had become a designated headquarters of the Cyclists' Touring Club.

This nationwide organisation had more than 10,000 members engaged in the newly fashionable pastime of touring by bicycle. The club produced handbooks of recommended hotels, each designated as headquarters, and in 1887 it introduced large cast-iron plaques, which the selected hotels erected on their front elevations.



PRINCE ARTHUR'S VISIT

The White Horse was the centre of great excitement in September 1895, at which time the tenant hotelkeeper was James Bignal.

It became known that Prince Arthur, Duke of Connaught, the third son of Queen Victoria, would be an overnight guest. The prince, then aged 45, was a career soldier and was the commander-in-chief at Aldershot Garrison, the senior district command in the British Army. His visit to The White Horse was at the end of a three-week-long military exercise involving more than 13,000 Aldershot troops and 1,000 horses, all engaged in mock battles.

The permanent camp for the exercise was at Baddesley Common, just outside Romsey, whereas the action took place about 12 miles to the west, in the New Forest north of Ringwood. At the conclusion of the battles, the troops marched back to Baddesley in grand procession, passing through the centre of Romsey with regimental bands playing and the bells of the abbey church ringing out. Afterwards the cheering crowds gathered around The White Horse, hoping to catch glimpses of Prince Arthur and his senior staff while they dined at the hotel.



Prince Arthur, Duke of Connaught, at the New Forest Manoeuvres. Illustration in *The Graphic*, 7 September 1895, from a photograph taken in the field by C Knight. © Mary Evans Picture Library.



At the New Forest Manoeuvres, an artillery horse has sunk into a bog. Illustration in *The Graphic*, 7 September 1895, drawing by John Charlton from a photograph by Major J Fortune Nott. © Mary Evans Picture Library.



FIRST MOTOR CARS APPEAR



An 8hp Daimler motor car, the model known to have been driven by John Scott-Montagu in the Automobile Club Easter Rally of 1899.

Another great spectacle occurred at The White Horse in April 1899, when the hotel was still in the tenure of James Signal.

It was Easter Monday and the fifth day of the London-based Automobile Club's six-day Easter Rally, touring mainly through Hampshire and the New Forest. Crowds in Romsey admired up to 20 of the country's first motor cars, which had been driven into the town and parked at the hotel while their wealthy owners took lunch before heading off for Winchester. Among the drivers was John Scott-Montagu, the future 2nd Baron Montagu of Beaulieu, whose championing of rights for motorists would decades later inspire the creation of the National Motor Museum at Beaulieu, 15 miles south of Romsey.

CYCLISTS KEEP COMING

A new owner took personal charge at The White Horse in January 1900, 45-year-old Richard Bowen, formerly of the town's Railway Hotel.

The growing popularity of motoring prompted him to start converting some of the old outbuildings into garages. However, there was still a demand for horses and carriages to be hired from the hotel yard, and parties of cyclists kept coming. In 1904, Richard Bowen and his wife, Elizabeth, welcomed an Easter tour of bicycle club members from Anerley, near Crystal Palace, south London. Two years later, the newly formed Romsey Wheelers' Club started holding its meetings at The White Horse.

In 1913, Richard Bowen, by then a long-standing Romsey town councillor, was elected mayor for the year. He held the position for six years because regular elections were postponed for the duration of the Great War of 1914-18.



The White Horse Hotel in the era of owner/hotelkeeper Richard Bowen. Note the Cyclists' Touring Club plaque at the first-floor windowsill level. Image courtesy Rod Briggs.



TRUST HOUSES ERA BEGINS

After the retirement of Richard Bowen, The White Horse Hotel was bought in 1920, by Trust Houses Ltd – the country's emerging first national hotel chain.

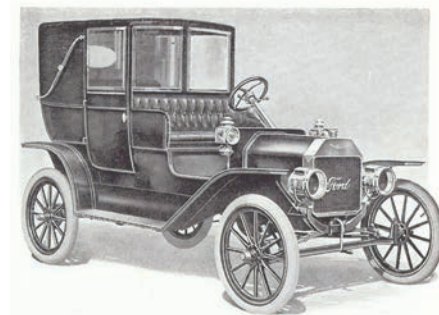
With a headquarters in Covent Garden, London, the company had grown from modest beginnings in Hertfordshire in 1903, when it was part of a new nationwide association created by a prominent politician and social reformer, Albert Grey, the 4th Earl Grey. Concerned about declining old coaching inns becoming haunts of excessive drinking, he established a model for county-based Public House Trust Companies, to be funded by local worthies, and charged to buy old inns and invest in them to ensure that traditions of good food and accommodation took precedence over alcohol sales.

Although by 1903, some 37 trusts had been established, only the Hertfordshire Trust went on to gain serious momentum. By 1910 it had absorbed nine neighbouring county trusts, changed its name, and continued to grow through individual site acquisitions. Other trusts failed to progress, but by December 1918, the Hertfordshire group had 110 hotels, mainly in the south and midlands, and it was re-formed into the newly named Trust Houses Ltd.

WHITE HORSE IN THE GUIDEBOOK

Trust Houses keenly promoted the heritage of its estate and in 1927 published the first edition of 'Tales of Old Inns', a guidebook to its most historic properties.

An entry for The White Horse described it as one of the least-altered old inns of Hampshire. It noted as attractions its exposed medieval timbers, the Tudor Rose wall painting, oak-panelled walls, and much historic furniture, including oak chests, sideboards, a spinning wheel, and two coaching clocks.



In 1916, Richard Bowen registered a new 20 hp Ford Model T Landaulet, for use as a taxi, based at The White Horse.



One of the images from the Trust Houses guidebook of 1927, 'Tales of Old Inns'. Note the utility-style coaching clock on the wall, which is clearly not the one that survives at Romsey Town Hall (see Page 10). Photo Winifred Ward.



SENSITIVE IMPROVEMENTS



The original Trust Houses logo featuring a hart or stag, borrowed from the county emblem of Hertfordshire and modified to appear 'rampant' or prancing.



The later Trusthouse Forte logo, more familiar in living memory.

Mass-production of motor cars in the 1930s brought increasing numbers of independently-minded tourists as visitors to revived old coaching inns.

Trust Houses expanded nationally, in some areas building new hotels, in apparent contradiction to the general economic depression of the period. By 1938, Trust Houses controlled 222 hotels nationwide, all run by directly employed managers and staff. The Trust Houses name had established a peerless reputation for affordable, reliable, high-quality hospitality. However, during the war of 1939-45, many of the company's hotels were requisitioned for use as offices for the military or for civil service departments evacuated from London, and some were destined never to reopen as hotels.

The White Horse Hotel escaped such a fate, continued trading throughout the conflict, and became an important part of the company's post-war recovery. During the 1960s, Trust Houses made extensive and sensitive improvements to the hotel, with some additions but also removing some old alterations to restore rooms as close as possible to their original medieval condition. More of the Tudor-period wall paintings were discovered and preserved.

FORTE HERITAGE HOTEL

In 1970, Trust Houses, then with fewer than 200 hotels and a catering division, merged with Forte Holdings to form Trust Houses Forte, later Trusthouse Forte, and then, after more acquisitions, Forte Group plc.

The White Horse was designated a Forte Heritage Hotel, but after a takeover of Forte Group in 1996, and a subsequent merger and demerger, the 48 Heritage Hotels were sold in 2001 to a Scottish company, MacDonald Hotels. That company sold The White Horse in late 2004 to a local company, Romsey Developments.



A SUCCESSION OF TROUBLES

Romsey Developments announced in 2005 its ambitious plans to upgrade the hotel, to be funded by developing the old stables and other parts of the large site for housing.

In the face of strong local opposition, the plans were delayed, while a management company brought in to run the hotel fell into difficulty, causing the hotel to be closed during 2006. The following year, some of the land was sold to a house builder. The stables and yard were saved, and together with the hotel were bought by two local brothers, who were new to the hotel trade. After a major refurbishment, they reopened the hotel in June 2008.

Three years later, the then owners and the effective controllers of the hotel became the subjects of investigations by the National Crime Agency (NCA) into alleged involvement in international money laundering. Enquiries continued for eight years until May 2019 when three defendants and associated companies, in preference to facing a trial, handed over the hotel to the NCA, as one of 11 properties worth about £6 million in total and allegedly obtained illegally. After a brief closure, the hotel reopened in November 2019 under a management company engaged by the NCA and pending a sale, which was delayed for two years because of the Covid pandemic of 2020/21.



The restaurant, recently renovated after the purchase by the Coaching Inn Group.

A NEW DAWN BREAKS

A new dawn broke for The White Horse Hotel in December 2021 when it was bought by the Coaching Inn Group, the country's leading hotelier dedicated to preserving and promoting heritage hotels, and a spiritual successor to the original Trust Houses. After an immediate investment to upgrade and adapt the property to meet the needs of today's customers, The White Horse was reopened in May 2022.



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The White Horse Hotel, Romsey, is part of The Coaching Inn Group Ltd. The group has a particular passion for lovely old historic inns and is fortunate enough now to have more than 30 of these iconic buildings in our collection, several of them former coaching inns. We have established a reputation for refurbishing, revitalising and breathing life back into these inns, creating elegant, comfortable and well-priced accommodation, tempting menus, relaxed and stylish bars and coffee lounges where friends, families and business people can relax and enjoy everything we have on offer.

Our vision for the future is based around our core value of 'Unlocking Potential'. From our properties to our people and everything in between, we take every opportunity to invest in developing all aspects of our business to give our guests the best possible experience.

As a company we are rapidly expanding and bringing new hotels into the Coaching Inn Group. You can see the latest additions to our group by visiting www.coachinginngroup.co.uk.

We hope you've enjoyed your visit to The White Horse Hotel, Romsey, and would love to invite you to try our other venues, nationwide. For full details, please visit www.coachinginngroup.co.uk.



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