

The “Watering-Holes” of Toddington

“There is nothing which has yet been contrived by man, by which so much happiness is produced as by a good tavern or inn”.
Samuel Johnson, 21st March 1776

“Good ale, the true and proper drink of Englishmen. He is not deserving of the name of Englishman who speaketh against ale, that is good ale”.
George Borrow (1803 – 1881)

Introduction :

If, like myself, you find one of the great pleasures in life is to sup a pint of real ale, preferably on a hot summer’s day outside a quaint English tavern overlooking the village green or pond, you will understand my delight when I “discovered” Toddington over 40 years ago. Here was an Englishman’s dream; an unspoilt Bedfordshire village where could be found not just one but (allegedly) TWELVE different hostelries all within easy walking distance. A “pub crawl” around Toddington in those days was a marathon event which deserved a medal if you managed a visit to every tavern.

Sadly, since the 1960’s, times have changed and many of Toddington’s Pubs have now disappeared (including the “Nags Head”, demolished as recently as 2005 to make way for housing). The present count has fallen to 7 pubs and a social club, a still not inconsiderable number for any village.

I would therefore like to pay homage to these pubs and their lost predecessors by giving very brief details of their history in the following article. My sincere hope is that I can raise enough interest in this fascinating facet of Toddington’s history to encourage a local resident or historian to take up the challenge to write (and publish) a more comprehensive history of the village’s pubs, inns and taverns.

Toddington first came to prominence in the 13th century when Paulinus Peyvre, one time steward to Henry III, built his manor here. During this occupation a market grant was given to the village by a Royal warrant of 1218. The market proved a great success and the village thrived. Indeed, after the Thursday market was changed to Saturday (under Edward II), it became one of the largest in the county. Inns and Taverns sprung up around the village green and church in ever increasing numbers to provide food, drink and accommodation for the growing bands of traders and travellers. The market continued to prosper for many hundreds of years, but the loss of the railway (to Harlington) and increasing competition from the Luton and Dunstable markets brought a decline from the middle of the 19th century onwards. Despite this, Toddington still possessed eight inns and eleven beer retailers in 1864. However, due to this loss of trade, the majority of licensees now had to have other sources of income. This is shown in Cravens 1853 Directory when William Horley of the New Inn was also a shoemaker, William Shaw of the Sow and Pigs, a plumber and glazier and Daniel Sheppard of the Griffin, a farmer. A modest revival of fortunes for innkeepers did occur however with the advent of new and improved roads, while the building of the M1 in particular brought a short lived boom of visiting football supporter coaches during the 1970’s and 80’s. Today, with the many problems of increased prices and drink driving restrictions it would seem likely that the number of Pubs in Toddington will reduce still further in the future.

Below, in alphabetical order, are brief details on the 22 known hostelries that have existed in the past few hundred years (those still in business are underlined).

Angel; Situated next to the village pond in Luton Road, this large Pub was a former coaching inn whose stables were converted several years ago into a restaurant. One of the oldest surviving inn’s in Toddington, it can be clearly identified on Radulph Agas’s 1581 Toddington Town Map. Known tenants include Thomas Mastin (early 18th century) Thomas Chance (late 18th century), John Spufford (1801) and Thomas Spufford (1827 according to Pigot’s Directory). The Spufford family were in fact involved in running many of the villages’s pubs from the late 18th century onwards. Today the Pub now comes under the Greene King banner.

Bedford Arms; A 17th century timber-framed former farmhouse (Grade II Listed) at No. 64 High Street on the outskirts of Toddington and slightly away from the other pubs. Converted originally from three separate cottages which were built around 1580. Now a Charles Wells house.

Bell Inn; On Market Square, a roughcast building (Grade II Listed) overlooking the village green dating back to at least 1580. Stated by Blundell (1925) as being “a very old house, formerly conducted by William Brewer and Edmund Fletcher, and more recently by William Baker.” The name could derive either from the Church Bells, the Town Bell or the Market House Bell, all of which would have been within close ear shot in former days. Other theories include the fact that Sir Henry Johnson, a rich ship builder, resided at the manor in 1719 and that the name could refer to a ships bell, while we also know that in 1412 “William Rufford of Tudynton was belmaker” and that the bell foundry could well have been sited where the present inn now stands. A former coaching inn, the Bell adapted to changing conditions as can be seen from a 1914 advert from the licensee, Henry Burrige, which stated “accommodation for motorists and cyclists”. He also gave his sideline as selling pedigree fox terriers.

The “Watering-Holes” of Toddington (Continued)

The Cock and The Crown; Both are now lost but formerly were situated on the site of the Post Office (which was also previously a Bakery) on the opposite side of the road to St. George of England Church.

Dolphin; Site unknown but mentioned in 16th century records.

Greyhound; Now a private residence, it occupied the small red house situated at No. 28 in the High Street. Blundell tells us that it “had a brief existence and stood opposite the pond”. Grade II Listed.



“Griffin” Pub in 1903.

In 1904 it was destroyed by fire and rebuilt.

Griffin; Another ancient pub situated in Station Road next door to St. George of England, it was completely rebuilt in 1904 after a fire. In former times the Petty Sessions were held here, while in 1853 it served as the Inland Revenue Office. In the 18th century it was kept by a son of Thomas Horley (see the Sow and Pigs) and later tenants include Harry Osborn and D.Shepherd. The Griffin name probably derives from the armorial bearings of the Strafford family. N.B. There was also a Griffin Inn in the hamlet of Herne near to Toddington. In 1653 it was bought by Thomas Farrer in lieu of a debt of £1202.

Hare; Another Inn previously managed by the Spufford Family, it stood at what was formerly called Town’s End, now No.54 in the High Street. The photo, below left, from about 1900 shows the pub’s impressive sign which gives the brewery as Bennetts of Dunstable. Its name could possibly be a corruption of the nearby lost hamlet of Herne.



The “Hare” at Town’s End, circa 1900

Kings Head; Site unknown but mentioned in manorial records(?) in the early 1600’s.

Nags Head; Built in 1907, it was demolished in 2005 along with houses in the same block. It stood on Station Road on the site of an earlier inn.

New Inn; At least 180 years old, it became the Toddington Social Club in 1927. It is situated on the High Street alongside The Angel. Directly to the rear of this building stood the former Toddington Brewery.

Oddfellows Arms; It is said a Cavalier hid in the saloon bar chimney to escape Roundheads during the Civil War (1642-1646). There is also a reputed ghost, the Grey Lady. On Dunstable Place, opposite the Green, it dates back to around 1530 and is Grade II Listed.

Old Bedford Arms; Previously sited next door to the (new) Bedford Arms, which presumably replaced it.

Old Red Lion; A 15th century timber-framed building, No.25 Church Square on the left hand corner of Park Road, it was converted into a bakers and has now become a private residence. Grade II Listed.



“Old Red Lion”, 1925. Now a private residence.

Pheasant; Situated at “Parsons End”(now Park Road), Blundell states it “has recently been closed” (1920).

The “Watering-Holes” of Toddington (Continued)

Queens Head; Situated at 6 High Street where the tobacconists now stands. Again Blundell tells us it has a significant history, being owned by a “Dr.Astrey”, most probably Francis Astrey of Woodend (1677 – 1766), a lay preacher at St Mary Magdalene, Westoning whose black marble slab, with crest and motto can be found on the floor of the church. On Dr Astrey’s death, the pub passed to John Stockley, while later tenants include William Baker (1827), Edmund Wildman (c1839), and Joseph Bight. In 1922 it was sold to George Hart who converted the property into a newsagents.

Ram; Another ancient inn dating from the early 18th century (Richard Attwell was the tenant in 1711 and Mathew Bishop in 1731). It stood at the back of the smithy (on the green) and was converted into a butchers shop by John Cotching. The original timber building, although partly hidden behind a later front extension, can still be seen opposite the electricity sub-station.

Red Lion and Wagon and Horses; Close to the corner of Market Place at No. 22. Dating from around 1630, it was originally named the “Wagon and Horses”. In 1796 it was kept by Mrs Spufford and later Mr Key Hardy (Senior) and Mr Key Hardy (Junior). By 1873 Thomas Bavister was the tenant, with the owners being Sworders Brewery of Luton. At a later stage it was renamed the “Red Lion”, a name which probably derives from the crest of John of Gaunt (1340-1399) or alternatively from the red lion in the Duke of Bedford’s coat of arms. Grade II Listed.



“Sow and Pigs” in the background (“Bell” in foreground). Early 1900’s

and Pigs” for £740 on 31st July 1835. The inn is almost certainly named after the Gothic frieze of sow and pigs on the church opposite. In 1797 the Land Commissioners met there “for a survey of all commons, homesteads, ancient enclosures, etc”. In 1914 the licensee, Bertie MacVicar, advertised the pub as a “commercial and posting house”. A local racehorse owner, Bob Sievier, used the pub as his base during the early 1900’s and organised famous cricket matches in the village which attracted the likes of W.G.Grace, W. Brierly, E.Tyldesley and Archie Maclaren to the village. In more recent times the Sow and Pigs has gained a reputation as an excellent restaurant.

White Horse; Now privately owned, it stood next door to today’s “Zak’s Snax” shop at No.14 High Street, directly opposite the village pond. It was formerly tenanted by Joseph Osborne, before becoming a bake house under Mr Foxley and a shop under Mr Carr.

John Thurston

Acknowledgements:

The major sources of information used in compiling this article are as follows :

- 1) “Toddington : Its Annals and People” – Joseph Hight Blundell, The County Press, Newport, I.O.W., 1925.
- 2) “Thirst for Knowledge, 1) The Inns of Toddington” – Page Woodcock, Bedfordshire Magazine, Vol. 2 No. 10, Autumn 1949.
- 3) “Rural Inns and Historic Villages of Central Bedfordshire” – Mike Aufenast, Graphic Enterprises, Luton, October 1980.
- 4) “A Stroll Through Old Toddington” - John Viner, Toddington Historical Society, 1997.
- 5) Information given by John and Isabel Viner during a conducted tour of Toddington on 15th October 2000.

Further pictures of Toddington, which include many of the old hostleries, can be found in :

- 1) “Old Toddington” – Richard Hart, White Crescent Press, December 1984.
- 2) “Old Toddington Revisited” – Richard Hart, Farnon Books, 1992.
- 3) “Toddington Memories” – R.V.H. Seymour, Borough of Luton Museum and Art Gallery, 1977.

Sow & Pigs; A characteristic local yellow brick Victorian building standing at 19 Church Square. It replaced a late 17th century public house which was demolished in the mid 19th century. Blundell notes “in the early 18th century this was kept by Edward Carvell, passing from him to Mr.Thomas Horley, who married Carvell’s daughter; other tenants were Mrs.Dix, Benjamin Foxley (1827), W.Shaw and W.Faulkner”. Other licensees include William & Frederick Hogg who brought the “Sow