



Local History: Alton Inns

Alton formerly had four inns - the White Hart/Hart, George, Swan and Pelican/Crown - all of which seem to have been opened in the late 1400s-early 1500s. The White Hart closed in the mid-1700s and the George in the mid-1800s. Below is a short history of each inn - a more detailed account can be found in the booklet *Alton's Inns*, obtainable from the Curtis Museum.

THE WHITE HART

The White Hart was a large medieval house that stood on the site of 21 and 21a High Street, Alton. It had been the manor house of the Manor of Truncheaunts but was no longer needed as such when the first known innholder, John Stynt, was there in 1502. By 1539, the building was said to be 'ruinous' and was refurbished. A Tudor doorway from that time can now be seen in the Curtis Museum.

An inventory of the early 1600s shows that the inn had chambers called New, Green, Great, Court, Taphouse and the 'Chamber over the Wine Sellar' as well as a New Parlour and Court Parlour, kitchen, bakehouse, taphouse, gatehouse and ostery.

In 1648, the White Hart was visited by John Taylor, the Water Poet, and the event recorded in his poem *Travels Through Stuart Britain*. One hundred years later, the 'Alton and Farnham Machine' would set out from here three times a week to go to London, making use of the new Turnpike Road.

By 1770, the old galleried inn had become a private dwelling, which was acquired by the Gray family from Newbury in 1802. One of these, Edward William Gray, formed the bank of Austen, Gray and Vincent with Jane Austen's brother, Henry Austen.

The old medieval building was sold to Henry Hall, the brewer, in 1845 and he demolished it, building himself a large house called The Manor House. This, in its turn, was demolished in 1968.

THE GEORGE

The George was built on the opposite bank of the River Wey to the White Hart by Thomas Butler, 7th Lord Ormond. He had married, as her third husband, Lora Berkley, the owner. The first mention of the building is in a rental of 1499, although the surviving lodging range (alongside the river) dates from 1500-1. As can be seen, it was a high class structure and even had external latrines hanging out over the river. Lord Ormond could certainly afford such a building as he was Chamberlain to the Queen of Henry VII and said to be the King's richest subject when he died.



Local History: Alton Inns

The ownership of the George eventually passed into the hands of the Knight family of Chawton. It was probably the largest inn in Alton, being assessed for 14 hearths in the Hearth Tax of 1665 - one more than the Swan and double that of the White Hart or Crown. An inventory of 1700 gives the names of some of the rooms - Club, Rose, Star, Crown, Shuffleboard, George and Hart - and, in 1762, the George was leased by the owner of the Swan, John Hawkins.

Jane Austen's mother, Cassandra, fell ill in 1808 while staying at an inn in Alton. It seems very likely that this would have been at the George. Like the Crown, it was owned by her son, Edward Austen/Knight, but was the more likely place for him to arrange accommodation for the ladies of his family. Edward held his manorial audit at the George the next year.

When the Hawkins' leases and property were advertised for sale in 1841, the George was said to have stabling for 13 horses. It was bought by Henry Hall from Ely and the inn became known as the George Commercial Inn. The arrival of the railway in Alton in 1852 seems to have signalled the end of this business. Firstly, the premises were divided and the western part (25 High Street) rebuilt by Henry Hall as a home for his son, Gerald. The eastern part (23 High Street) soon closed and became the premises of a cabinet maker and upholsterer.

THE SWAN

The original Swan was one third its present size when it was listed in a rental of 1499 as belonging to Thomas Cresswell (of Odiham). By the mid-1500s, the Cresswells had acquired the building on the western side as well although, originally, it seems to have been used as home for the innholder rather than an extension to the inn.

By the time of the inventory of the goods of Thomas Harrison, innholder, in 1674 there were 18 chambers, a parlour, kitchen, brewhouse, malthouse, old kitchen and wine and beer cellars. The Harrisons had added the property on the east to the inn complex.

The Hawkins family acquired the Swan and developed the business by having the Post Office here as well. They also expanded the brewery behind the main building which, presumably, supplied the various drinking establishments they bought in the area.

The Swan became the main stopping place for the coaches that went through the town between London and Portsmouth, Winchester and Southampton. Until recently, a large clock, known as an 'Act of Parliament Clock' or 'Coaching Clock', dating from the late 1700s could be seen hanging up as a reminder of the inn's coaching heritage. It was from the Swan that Collyer's Coach called on its way between Southampton and London and which Jane Austen used to send extra luggage to and from



Local History: Alton Inns

Chawton when staying with her brother, Henry, in London. Another connection with Jane Austen is that the inn was the venue for the Annual Meetings of the Alton Book Society, to which she subscribed.

Although Jane Austen lived too near to ever stay at the Swan, Cardinal John Henry Newman did come here. He wrote to his mother in 1834 describing his feelings at revisiting the area saying *'it was as fearful as if I was standing on the grave of someone I knew, and saw him recover life and rise again... I wished myself away from the pain of it... Meanwhile the coach went on, and I found myself at the Swan.'*

When the railway came to Alton, the innkeeper of the Swan, Robert Madgwick, advertised that the inn was 'within five minutes' walk of the railway station' and that he had an omnibus meet every train. The premises also hosted public meetings, auctions and dinners and, later, became home of a successful Bowling Club.

The Swan has kept up the tradition of providing accommodation for travellers into the 20th Century - in 1948, Henry Ford called at the Swan, having arrived in England on RMS Queen Mary. He was visiting the Ford plant at Dagenham and the actress, Merle Oberon, was with him, amongst others.

THE PELICAN/CROWN

This inn seems to have been built by the lord of the manor of Alton Eastbrook, Hyde Abbey, in the early 1500s. It was named the Pelican, probably because the bird was the symbol of the then Bishop of Winchester, Bishop Fox.

At the Dissolution, the manor came into the hands of the Crown and so the inn, very wisely, changed its name to the Crown.

As the premises were built on a corner, there was not much room and they were always leased together with Crown Close – later the site of the Assembly Rooms, Curtis Museum and Cottage Hospital.

At the Restoration, the new innholder was Jonathan Sly and he was assessed for seven hearths - the smallest number for Alton's inns. When Jonathan died, his wife, Joan, took over. She was a member of the Gates family, many of whom were leading Quakers, and was excommunicated and sent to Winchester Prison for about three weeks.



Local History: Alton Inns

One benefit of the position of the Crown was that Crown Close was used for the Alton Eastbrook fair which, until the mid-1700s, took place on St Lawrence's Day (10 August). This must have brought a lot of trade to the inn. The date of the fair was changed to Michaelmas to avoid harvest time.

During the French Wars, an outhouse at the Crown was used for French prisoners who were being escorted through the town. On one occasion, there was a breakout but they were captured and continued on their way.

Like the George and Swan, the Crown was acquired by the Hawkins family and then sold to Henry Hall. Together with the Swan, it was sold in 1903 to Courage & Co. Over the years there have been alterations and improvements, but the carved beams put up in the early 1500s can still be seen in one of the main rooms.