NO ROOM AT THE INN?
by Felicity Hebditch

The Hertfordshire Session Rolls contain the following traveller's tale:

The Information of Nicholas Brookes, fishmonger, "living in St George's parish in Southwark, in Axe Yard, near the King's Bench". Jan 6th, 1664-5.

The informant says that on Friday, Dec. 30th, he came from his house in Southwarcke and came to St Albans and lodged at the Flower de Luce in St Albans that night and on the next day he went to Reddbourne, then to Market Street, and that Saturday night and on Sunday he did lie at the Redd Lyon at Luton, and the next day being Monday at 12 o'clock he came from Luton towards Wheathamsteede, and was at Wheathamsteede "befor fouer of the clocke" and there went to the smith's "to buy horsenaile stubbs". And the informant says that then he went to Tho. Wethered's house in Wheathamsteede to ask for lodging, but that Tho. Wethered and his wife did both deny him lodging, saying that they had "but one bedd and that was taken upp". This was about four o'clock of the afternoon, and the informant says that he then went to the Bull and demanded lodging, but Roger Austin, hoste of the Bull, denied him lodging.

The informant says he then gave a quarter of a pound of 'tobackee' and two flaggons of beer to John Skale for guiding him to Robert Parker's at the 'Tin Pott' House in Wheathamsteede, where he had both lodging and good entertainment for himself and horses, and was well used and was lodged there about five of the clock of the same day. "He further says that he being an usuall traveler and having been lately robbed between Watford and Edgeworth on St Thomas' Day last by 9 horsemen, was now unwilling to seek lodging, and being denied, he doth require that Tho. Wethered aforesaid and Roger Austin may be bound over to answer the same."

What is it all about? What accommodation would there be for travellers at this time? Why was he informing on Thomas Wethered and the 'hoste' of the Bull? If someone had taken Wethered's one bed, surely that was that?

Travellers

Travellers seeking accommodation traditionally had relied on hospitality from the clergy and landowners, especially the monasteries up until the Dissolution. The "utilitarian value of monastic hospitality"[1] was missed.

Thomas Wilson at the end of the sixteenth century describes yeomen as providers of "good . . . hospitality".[2] Evelyn, Pepys and Celia Fiennes, being well connected, often

stayed with the aristocracy and relatives as well as finding their own accommodation on their travels. On the occasions when Celia Fiennes could not find accommodation, the squirarchy came to the rescue — "it being to farre to reache Rotherham we made use of the hospitallity of a Clergyman one Mr Ferrer which was a very genteel man and gave us a civil entertainment and good beds". Although hospitality was said to be disappearing in Charles I's reign with "Pride, puritans, coaches and Covetousness";[3] and the gentrification of the landowning classes, (the theme for Sheridan's play *The Rivals,* where the house is mistaken for an inn), it was still thriving in the eighteenth century — in 1735 the Duke of Newcastle was forbidding the practice of "entertaining all comers and goers with their servants and horses, another boundless expense".[4]

Inns

Inns had been in existence from the 12th century, often to provide for pilgrims in towns such as St Albans and Glastonbury. Many of these were under the aegis of the Church. Early inns had religious names to give a sense of respectability — the Bull in Wheathampstead was originally called the Angel.[5] Increase in trade in the sixteenth century meant that traders *had* to have somewhere to stay on their journeys. They needed a back-up system to provide food and accommodation and also somewhere to discuss deals and leave goods and arrange delivery. "According to a census of 1577 there were at least 1,600 (inns) in the one half of the English counties for which the record has survived. Many provided not only sleeping accommodation but also storage for goods, and even . . . private rooms for business."[6]

Hertfordshire, a busy 'thoroughfare' county, had 152 inns, with 27 in St Albans. Even then inns could be large; in 1517 a Norwich inn-keeper called Cooper was "worth £200 in goods, for he had no less than thirty-six good beds".[7]

With the development of regular carriers and then coach services from the 1630s even more accommodation was needed. John Taylor's *Carriers' Cosmography,* listing the highly developed network of carriers, the lorry drivers of the day, shows the size of the need. Coaching was growing, with improvements in springing; in 1636 there were 6,000 private or public-hire coaches in London.[8] Because travel was slow, more stops were needed. Until turnpikes improved the roads, the average day's journey was 25-30 miles: coaches tended to travel only during the hours of daylight. "Night journeys were not undertaken until towards the end of the eighteenth century; Stuart travellers preferred to sleep in the security of a hired bed, even though, as one disgruntled critic of the whole system remarked, it sometimes meant being 'brought into their Inns by Torchlight, when it is too late to sit up to get a Supper; and next morning they are forced into the coach so early, that they can get no breakfast'."[9] Travellers got lost as maps and finger posts were only just beginning to appear (even the Great North Road near Baldock was confusing).[10]

By the time Celia Fiennes travelled, between 1682 and 1712, the number of inns was nearly double what it had been in the Tudor period: "We were at the chief Inn the Sunne tho' there are many good Inns . . ." Stables were often built to take 100 horses.

Inns, Taverns and Alehouses

How do we define an inn? The term is used loosely very often though really an inn

was the *elite* of the victualling trade; below it came the tavern, and the alehouse was for the 'poorer sort'. Research on drinking-houses in Canterbury between 1560 and 1640 divided them into inns having an average of 15 rooms, taverns with 10, and alehouses with 5 (excluding outhouses).[11] Harrison, the seventeenth century writer, describes the "great and sumptuous inns (with) a variety of vittels (where) if his chamber be once appointed he (the traveller) may carie the kaie with him, as of his owne house so long as he lodgeth there".

Inns would cater for the well-heeled; alehouses existed to provide ale and other refreshments. They were definitely downmarket. Running an alehouse was seen as employment for those who would otherwise be on relief. Because of fears over drinking and law and order, they were subject to the licensing laws which imposed standards of behaviour and quality of beer. In 1495 the Beggars' Act authorised two judges to suppress ale-selling where necessary and to bind alehouse keepers to good behaviour. Again an act was passed in 1552 requiring landlords of alehouses and taverns to be licensed: there was resistance to this control and the act could not be enforced as it did not make clear whether licences were in perpetuity or were renewable yearly. Regulations tended to vary considerably between different parts of the country. Attempts at enforcing licensing were a feature of the 17th century, especially as the government could make money by making licensees pay for their licences.[12]

Provision of Accommodation

What were the regulations about providing accommodation? Common law required that strangers should be taken in when they asked for lodging. The same code of behaviour is fundamental to many societies; it is implied even in ancient Greek literature where the word for "stranger" also meant "guest", and in folk tales throughout Europe unknown strangers give or withold magical gifts for hospitality.[13]

Richard Burn, writing in 1770, states the law for Justices of the Peace: "If any who keeps a common inn refuse either to receive a traveller as a guest into his house, or to find him victuals or lodging, upon his tendring him a reasonable price for the same, he is not only to render damages for the injury, in an action on the case at the suit of the party grieved, but may also be indicted and fined at the suit of the king."[14]

Burn tries to show that the same regulations covered all types of accommodation: "Every inn is not an alehouse, nor is every alehouse an inn; but if an inn uses common selling of ale, it is then also an alehouse; and if an alehouse lodges and entertains travellers, it is also an inn." However, Peter Clark alleges that inns were above the licensing laws that covered alehouses but were nevertheless subject to common law: "Ancient inns could only be prosecuted under common law . . . Though there was an attempt under James I to license inns, this provided abortive."[15] This act (Jac I c.9) stated that "The Ancient and principall True use of Inns and Victualling Houses" was for "the Receipte, Relief and Lodginge of Wayfaring people travellinge from place to place",[16] and Burn again quotes it as the law in 1770 — "If any ale-house keeper or inn-keeper refused to lodge a traveller, a Justice of the Peace might compel him to it; or the Constable might present it as an offence at the next sessions; or the party refused might have an action on the case." James' Act required that innkeepers and alehouse keepers should "keep one or

more spare Beds for lodging of strangers", an impracticable measure for poverty-stricken alehouses, and it even states that the traveller "If refused, could, through the medium of a constable, force admittance"(!)

Accommodation legislation was finally tidied up with the Innkeepers' Liability Act of 1863 which laid down that "A hotel is compelled to accept every traveller if accommodation is available and the traveller is able and willing to pay, and is not obviously objectionable."[17]

Vagrants and Suspicious Persons

Attitudes to strangers were contradictory in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Travellers could be a benefit to trade but poor vagrants might become a liability. Inns should provide the gentry with hospitality but alehouses might be full of criminals and gypsies.

Even as late as 1700 the St Albans Corporation "ordered that the constables should constantly every night search the houses of all such persons within the Borough as were suspected to harbour and lodge vagrants and rogues and other old and disorderly persons, and to take up such as they found, that they might be punished according to the law, and that all such as harboured them were to be suppressed from selling beer and wine".[18]

Hertford's regulations for alehouses similarly laid down that "If any vagabonds or suspicious persons come to their houses they shall acquaint the officers with it . . ."[19] (It adds that "if so any goods be offered in their house to be sold by any" which has a whiff of keeping all trade firmly buttoned up by the freemen of Hertford against outsiders.) Landlords would have to tread very warily to provide hospitality without hurting local interests. They could easily lose their licence which depended on local administration.

Taverns and inns were cut back radically under the Commonwealth. Puritans tended to disapprove not only of drunkenness but of the games, fairs and theatrical performances that took place in taverns. Informing (laying a formal complaint to the Constables or the Justices) against the conduct of taverns was one way of getting them closed. Puritan ministers and MPs battled against them, though local JPs, made up from the ranks of landowners, (and therefore also more likely to be from the opposing ranks of the Royalists) tended to be more merciful;[20] it was in their interest in keeping the peace to have the support of the local people. They felt it unreasonable to make beer unobtainable when there was no cheap alternative drink. (Tea was only now beginning to be drunk, at astronomical prices.) St Albans Corporation was reducing the number of brewers on the grounds that brewing used too much wood as fuel.[21]

Fear of plague would have been another problem for our poor fish monger from London. In bad outbreaks the roads were patrolled — Evelyn describes how in 1625 when "there dy'd in Lond: 5000 a Weeke . . . I well remember the strict Watches, and examination of the Ways as we pass'd". Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* explains how this worked — "There was no getting at the lord mayor's Door without exceeding difficulty; there was much pressing and crouding there to get passes and Certificates of Health, for such as travelled abroad; for, without these, there was no being admitted to pass thro' the Towns upon the Road, or to lodge in an Inn . . ."[22]

In the following year, 1665, 70% of all deaths were from plague.[23] Londoners would be particularly suspect and the Grand Inquest of Hertfordshire was complaining of those who "dayly come down from the cytie of London in great numbers with their families".[24] In 1667 Wheathampstead was claiming that it could not give relief for the towns "infected with the late contagion of pestilence" as the parish was itself "not free from that contagion".[25] Innkeepers locked their doors throughout England.

The Case of the Fishmonger from Southwark

The assertion by Thomas Wethered that his one bed was "taken up", was not sufficient excuse not to take a client. One bed per customer was a luxury at this time. Many guests shared a bed with a complete stranger. (Women on their own were a rarity. Celia Fiennes had a servant or two with her.) Even a hundred years later, many were sharing rooms or even beds: the St Albans Quarter Session Rolls 1784-1820 have many cases of theft from guests robbed by those who shared a room or a bed with them. "Examination and Complaint of Daniel Rose who on oath saith:— That on Wednesday night last a pair of leather breeches were feloniously stolen and taken from the top of the bed in which he slept at the Green Man in the Borough aforesaid and that he doth suspect that one James Wilson, a traveller, who then lodged in the house and slept in the same bed with him did steal and take away the said breeches his property . . ."[26]

Peter Clark describes how poorer alehouses sometimes gave accommodation to travellers by letting them sleep in the kitchen, on or under the table and even in sheds and outhouses.

The poor fishmonger, who had already been robbed by highwaymen two weeks before (St Thomas' Day is December 21st), must have been growing more nervous as dark came on — highway robbery was common in the chaotic conditions of the Civil War and its aftermath, with unemployed impoverished former soldiers. Evelyn describes being robbed by "lusty foote padders", one of whom was a "souldier in Ireland" (11th June, 1652).

The roads leading to London were the haunt of robbers as people carried their takings in gold before the advent of banking. Some inns in fact provided a sort of banking for travelling merchants[27] but there are many stories of complicity between robbers and innkeepers, where the latter would tip off the highwayman when a stranger arrived with a heavy trunk.[28]

When Nicholas Brookes informed against the Wheathampstead inns, he must have been angry that he was left out in the street in the dusk, a tempting bait for robbers but not for landlords. Tradesmen couldn't survive without inns and he expected service. From the landlord's point of view, things were more tricky. He needed to judge whether a traveller looked like a "vagabond" — though this man with his packhorses loaded with fish was hardly in this category. What clinched his decision in this year of plague must have been "the sight of a Londoner's flat-cap . . . more dreadfull . . . than the discharging of a caliver".[29]

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2. Thomas Wilson, *The State of England*, c.1600.
3. Donald Lupton quoted in Peter Clarke, *The English Alehouse*, p.134.

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5. Deeds of the Bull in Hertfordshire County Record Office.
6. Joyce Youings, *Sixteenth Century England,* p.350 — no reference given but J.F. Pound, 'The Social and Trade Structure of Norwich 1525-75, in *Past and Present,* 1966, is listed.
7. Joyce Youings, *Sixteenth Century England,* p.126.
8. E. Kerridge, *The Agricultural Revolution,* (1967), p.179.
9. "A copy of a Printed Letter from J.C. to a Postmaster in the Country, with directions for the management of his design for putting down stage coaches, 1672" in Christina Hole, *The English Housewife in the 17th Century,* (1953), p.175.
10. Ralph Thoresby's, *Diary,* (ed. 1831), vol. 1., p.69.
11. Peter Clarke, *The English Alehouse,* (1983), p.64.
12. Peter Clarke devotes a chapter to the licensing laws in *The English Alehouse.*
13. English law is made up of Statute Law and Common Law: Statute Law is what is laid down in Acts of Parliament, Common Law is what "has grown rather than been made. We cannot point to any definite time when it began; as far back as our reports go we find judges assuming that there is a Common Law not made by any legislator . . . We have no authoritative text of the Common Law. There is no one form of the words in which it has as a whole been expressed at any time". W.M. Geldart, *The Elements of English Law,* (5th ed., 1953).
14. Richard Burn, *The Justice of the Peace and Parish Officer,* (11th ed., 1770).
15. Peter Clarke, *The English Alehouse.*
16. Joan Parkes, *Travel in England in the Seventeenth Century,* (1925), p.127.
17. Ronald Rubinstein, *John Citizen and the Law,* (1947 edition), p.86.
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19. W.J. Hardy, *Hertford County Records, Notes and Extracts from the Session Rolls,* vol. 1, (1905), p.47.
20. Roger Lockyer, *Tudor and Stuart Britain,* (1985), p.308.
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23. Henry Kamen, *European Society 1500-1700,* (1984), p.34.
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27. Alan Everitt, 'The English Urban Inn 1560-1760', in *Perspectives in English Urban History,* ed. Alan Everitt, (1973).
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29. John Taylor quoted in Joan Parkes, *Travel in England in the Seventeenth Century,* p.199.

See also:
F.W. Hatchwood, *Inns, Ales and Drinking Customs,* (London, 1909).

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