



Public Houses and Taverns of Truro

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In the third of the series covering the history of Cornish hostelries and ale houses, Tony Mansell presents a vivid history of Truro's public houses and taverns.

During the late 1700s and early 1800s, the proliferation of drinking houses across Cornwall was directly related to increased mining activity. The popularity of such places led people like John Wesley (1703 to 1791) to conclude that Cornwall was a place that did indeed need "saving". For some, alehouses were the ruination of their lives and the destroyer of family life but to others they were a break from their stressful lives and havens from the daily grind of the workplace. They were somewhere to socialise and a place of relaxation where news could be gathered and gossip exchanged. Food and lodging was available to the traveller and stabling and fodder for his horses. These early alehouses were the forerunners of the modern public house.

In 1742, Andrew Brice of Exeter described his experiences in Truro and it is clear from his comment that he was less than impressed with the local ale. "They have good Wine and Brandy here...but their Ale, at least when I was some Months here, was, generally, an Abomination to the Guts as well as Gust, and that, in some Houses, & on some Times, brewed one Day, and guzzled down the next, if not, more than lukewarm, in the Afternoon of the same Day."

Gin was popular, in many cases too popular. It was relatively cheap helped, perhaps, by often being illegally brought into the country by the "free traders" (smugglers). Whether or not the Cornish theologian Richard Polwhele had a vested interest in the trade we do not know, but he certainly threw his weight behind it as he declared, "Gin enables the stomach to extract

wholesome nutrient from the food which would otherwise have carried with it the certain seeds of disease”.

Beer was considered to be harmless and nutritious, healthier than gin or even water and for this reason the Evangelical church and the Temperance Movement looked on its consumption favourably. So, with this support, everything was in place for a growth in the number of brewers and public houses. Truro was no different than anywhere else in welcoming this burgeoning trade.

Road improvements, brought about by the setting up of Turnpike Trusts, led to the arrival of mail coaches in Cornwall. This, in turn, opened the way for the growth of coaching inns where refreshments, accommodation and fresh horses would be ready and waiting. The ‘George and Dragon’ which operated from before 1780 until its demolition in 1931, was one such establishment. Located at the bottom of Mitchell Hill (previously Bodmin Street), on one of the main thoroughfares into Truro, it boasted stabling for 20 horses and was clearly a prestigious coaching inn.

In 1775, Truro’s New Bridge was built. It replaced ‘The Steppings’ (stepping stones) in that street and created a more direct route into the town making travellers less dependent on Old Bridge Street and its ancient bridge. The ‘White Hart’ still stands on this route. It dates from about the 1760s or earlier and is Truro’s earliest tavern still using its original name. The location of its predecessor of the same name is somewhat less clear but was mentioned in an advertisement in the *Sherborne Mercury* of the 3rd October 1757 as being located where “...fresh water runs by the door”. This, no doubt, was a reference to the roadside channels.



The ‘White Hart’ (Photo: Tony Mansell)

A much later change in the road layout made necessary the closure of the 'Lord Nelson' public house sometime during the late 1960s. Once located on the corner of St Austell Street and Tregolls Road, it would now be somewhere on Trafalgar Roundabout. Its predecessor was described in the *Royal Cornwall Gazette* of the 2nd April 1841 as "... newly licensed, commodious and well-constructed build called the 'Union Hotel' or public house situated at the entrance to Truro...and adjoining the very extensive Tin Smelting Works of Messrs Vigurs and Co. Stables and other requisites will be provided contiguous so that nothing will be wanting to render this establishment equal if not superior to houses of the like description in Truro".

Just across the road was the 'Admiral Boscawen' (previously 'Boscawen Inn') which closed during the mid-1960s and greatly improved the entrance into Malpas Road. The name of this pub lived on as it transferred to No. 7 Richmond Hill. It was quite common for a name to be transferred when a landlord moved to a new location and this was also the case when the 'Exeter Inn' sign board moved from Old Bridge Street to there circa 1860.

Pyder Street (Strete Pyder) was the main entrance into Truro from the north, from the Hundred of Pydar. The 'Railway Inn' dated from the 1850s when the railway arrived in Truro. Located on the higher side of Truro Viaduct, it was consumed by fire in 1877 and following its re-building it was named the 'City Hotel' and later the 'City Inn'.



The 'City Inn' from the Viaduct (Photo: Martin Duff)

The entrance to Truro from the west also had its share of alehouses and on arriving in Kenwyn Street a traveller would have discovered an abundance of opportunities for refreshment of which the only survivor is the 'William IV' (previously 'George IV').



‘William the IV’ (Photo: Tony Mansell)

The route from Falmouth is more recent, having been created in the early 1800s. Lemon Street, together with its side roads, could boast a number of public houses with contrasting reputations. The ‘Thomas Daniell’ (previously ‘Daniell Arms’) probably dates from the 1830s and still stands guard at the top of the hill, directly below the gaze of Richard Lemon Lander.

Many houses were connected with specific “sporting” activities. ‘The Bear’ in Old Bridge Street, ‘The Bull’ in Boscawen Street and the ‘Fighting Cocks’ in Quay Street are fairly obvious examples. Although abhorrent now, bear baiting, bull baiting and cock-fighting were popular pastimes when cruelty to animals was considered entertainment. Other pubs were linked to specific activity and it seems that the ‘Barley Sheaf’ in Old Bridge Street was associated with badger-baiting and the ‘Ship Inn’ (later the ‘Victoria Inn’) was a wrestling Inn with bouts taking place on Caribee Island, later the fairground field and Moorfield.



The 'Barley Sheaf' (Photo: Tony Mansell)

The 'Turks Head' was one of a number of public houses in or around the old St Mary's Church, in High Cross. From circa 1739 to 1838 it was known as 'The Angel' and then, following re-building, it acquired its new name. In 1880 it was given yet another new name: 'Cathedral Hotel', for obvious reasons. The *West Briton* of the 12th October 1876 tells a colourful story which seems to have taken place about 25 years previously. It was a wife-sale when "the goods were tied to the church railings and knocked down to highest bidder – half-crown and some beer".

Also in High Cross was the first 'London Inn', on the site of the Assembly Rooms, the 'Unicorn' where the old Post Office once stood and just across the road, at No. 1 Pydar Street, was the 'Coach and Horses'. There was also the 'Red Cow' but its location in the 1800s eludes me. It was referred to by Mr H L Douch as having a "Brief but eventful history". He describes it as, "Yet another house where life was said to be lived to a disreputable, disorderly, rumbustious but usually unremembered and certainly unrecorded full". Highly descriptive and leaving not a lot to the imagination.

There is yet another purpose of the public house and that is as a place where trade and commerce was enacted. To some extent this applied to most public houses but there were those where businessmen gathered. 'The Bull' was an early example. It stood on 13 to 15 Boscawen Street, just across the road from the Coinage Hall. It is not hard to imagine the tinnerns quaffing their ale and wine as they reflected on the quality of their tin which had just been assayed and for which they would have to pay coinage tax. The tavern dates from before the English Civil War and H L Douch describes it as one of the best two in Truro in the

1680s. In *Truro in the Seventeenth Century*, June Palmer wrote that by 1713 it was, “a house now in decay”.

A more modern example of business use is the ‘Market Bar’ with a lifetime which probably spanned from about 1850 to 1980. It was a gathering point for farmers on market day Wednesdays and was operated by the landlord of the nearby ‘City Inn’.

‘The Bear’, too, was a favourite with the farming fraternity who stabled their horses and dined there on market days, this was when the market was held at High Cross. It dates back to the mid-1600s and its brick facade can still be seen in Old Bridge Street. Its life as a public house, however, seems to have ended in the 1870s when it was partly demolished to make way for the new Cathedral.

Another “business” activity that was found in many Truro pubs is often referred to as “the oldest profession”. Many landlords were taken to task in the law courts and it is probably for this reason that Mr Douch wrote his very colourful description which is quoted earlier. It was not limited to one area of the town but Calenick Street seems to have had its fair share of such places as it was described as an “interesting” and as “a disorderly street”. There were, “Eight public houses within a stone’s throw of the bottom of the street,” according to W H Polkinhorne and it was a place where, “drink, pugilism and other things played a great part in its life”. The *West Briton* of March 1849 gives a fairly graphic description of a case against Grace Stephens who was charged with keeping a “common bawdy house with four prostitutes...” She received six months’ hard labour.

The ‘Red Lion’ was located at the corner of Calenick Street and Victoria Square and dates from the 1600s. In the early 1900s the book *Edwardian Truro* includes a report of a “young girl engaged in prostitution in the back yard”. Arguably the ‘Golden Lion’ at 5 Calenick Street had the worst reputation as an “infamous house”. It seemed to have been a case of beer to the left and other services to the right with little attempt being made to hide the fact.

One of the public houses with the epithet ‘Queen’s Head’ was at 11 St Nicholas Street. It was there in 1746 and, according to H L Douch in *Old Cornish Inns*, “When the capital burgesses guzzled at the ‘Ship Inn’, the populace [or the mob] celebrated in mock style at the ‘Queen’s Head’”. From a report in the *Sherborne Mercury* in 1796 we know that when landlord Richard Perry died he attempted to exert his influence on his wife from beyond the grave. He instructed that she was to receive an annuity if she, “during her widowhood be induced to decline continuing the business of an innkeeper”. She was having none of it and decided to continue. This establishment seems to have closed in the 1860s.

No article on Truro’s public houses would be complete without mention of the famous ‘Red Lion’ of Boscawen Street. Originally located at 28/29 Boscawen Street, in 1769 it moved a couple of doors to a house built in 1671 for John and Jael Foote. It was then advertised as “superior accommodation” having been “fitted up...in a very genteel manner”. Sometime around 1900 an additional floor was designed by Silvanus Trevail to produce the building so admired and fondly remembered by Truro residents and visitors. It survived a fire in 1930 and another in 1967 but just a month later, an out-of-control lorry crashed into the front of the building. Within a few months the building was demolished, gone forever was an iconic Truro building.

The 'King's Head' in Boscawen Street once stood on the site now occupied by Lloyds Bank. It was not the only house of that name in Truro but it was certainly the most prestigious. The creation of Lower Lemon Street, around 1800, necessitated the removal of buildings in the way and the chosen solution was to demolish and re-build the public house so that it faced the newly-built street. A few years later it was re-named 'Pearce's Hotel' but that was changed to the 'Royal Hotel' following a visit by Prince Albert in 1846.



The 'Britannia Inn' was well-situated to serve those who worked in and around Truro's quays. Sailors, too, must have appreciated its offering as they waited for the next tide. Now, it finds itself next to Morlaix Avenue and has even lost its adjacent building, demolished when the by-pass was built.



The 'Britannia Inn' (Photo: Tony Mansell)

An amusing story from 1864 tells of Francis Harry who left the 'Britannia' by its back door, crossed The Green and headed for the lamps on Lemon Quay. Oblivious to the fact that the River Kenwyn was in his path, he fell straight in. Luckily, help was on hand and he was quickly pulled to safety. Rather than take him to the infirmary or to his home, he was taken to the 'William the IV'.

For many years there were strict regulations on opening times, particularly on Sundays, when it seems that only those houses which could be considered a necessity for travellers were issued a licence. Little wonder that the citizens of Truro made their way to these country pubs on the pretence of being genuine travellers. One of these was the 'Traveller's Rest' at Newmill, a convenient public house for Truro folk who could masquerade as travellers and avail themselves of its Sunday licence. Runners were also used to avoid the wrath of the law. Their job was to watch for approaching policemen when they would hotfoot it to the landlord with a warning.

In recent years, many public houses have undergone considerable change with small rooms giving way to open plan and the provision of food becoming the main attraction. Many have found it necessary to close due to regulations, re-development or for financial reasons. It is now difficult to find a traditional "spit and sawdust" pub but it is still possible to find one where the locals can be observed playing their traditional games of euchre, spoof, darts, and dominos.

Tony Mansell

Tony is the author of a number of books on aspects of Cornish history. He was made a Bardh Kernow (Cornish Bard) for his writing and research, taking the name of Skrifur Istor. He is the website manager for the "Old Cornwall Society" and a volunteer with the "Cornish Music Archive". His interests include Cornish history in general, the Civil War in Cornwall (1642 to 1646) and Cornish Brass Bands and their music.