THE BELL INN

HOTEL | EATERY | COFFEE HOUSE

A BRIEF HISTORY

BY WILL SWALES

WELCOME

Welcome to a brief history of The Bell Inn, Stilton. During the late spring and early summer of 2016 we had the good fortune to be able to revitalise and refurbish one of our fabulous sister inns, The King's Head in Richmond, North Yorkshire.

During the planning stage of this project we started to look hard at the building and its many historical attributes, at how some parts of the building had been added during its 300 years of existence. And whilst contemplating the small changes and additions we wanted to make, it dawned on me that we will only be its custodians for a generation or two at most. I can't foretell who will follow but started thinking about who had been its keepers in the past.

Therefore, we asked a good friend if he would research The King's Head and try to separate the fact from the fable; what's true and what has been elaborated during the storytelling process over the years.

Will Swales made such a good job of The King's Head that we then asked him to complete the same task for The Bell Inn.

What follows is that research. We think it's as accurate as can be, but naturally there are many gaps and we would welcome any additional information.

I hope you enjoy this small booklet and the hospitality and service we provide within The Bell Inn. Please feel free to take this copy with you.

Kevin Charity
Managing Director
The Coaching Inn Group

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“ONE OF THE OLDEST AND MOST FAMOUS OF THE FORMER COACHING INNS ON ENGLAND’S HISTORIC GREAT NORTH ROAD”

ICON OF A BYGONE AGE

"...the place to buy the best of a locally distinctive and much-sought-after cheese that became known throughout England as Stilton."

The Bell Inn, in High Street, Stilton, Cambridgeshire, is one of the oldest and most famous of the former coaching inns on England's historic Great North Road.

The fully restored Bell Inn at Stilton.

The beautiful building has long been regarded as an icon of a bygone age, captured by generations of artists and photographers. In the late 1700s and early 1800s it was renowned as a posting house where 100 or more horses were routinely stabled to provide fresh mounts for long-distance riders and a change of pulling power for fast coaches making their way north and south against the clock. It was famed for its extraordinarily large and ornate hanging sign, which projected out into the road, and it was also known as the place to buy the best of a locally distinctive and much-sought-after cheese that became known throughout England as Stilton.

But perhaps the most interesting feature of The Bell Inn is its remarkable story of survival. After a collapse in competent management as far back as 1814, the historic building endured 150 years of a diminished role, with lack of investment causing slow decay, leading to its eventual closure in 1964, and followed by a further slide into dereliction. Not until the 1980s was it brought back to life by visionary entrepreneurs who rescued it, restored it, and reopened it to meet the needs of the modern market.

THE BELL AND THE ANGEL

The earliest surviving records of an inn called The Bell at Stilton, originally in the county of Huntingdonshire, date from 1500.

Today's Bell Inn is at least as old as the 1642 date inscribed on a front-facing gable, although the greater part of the building probably dates from the 1500s. Its history is entwined with that of its sometime rival and sometime partner in Stilton, The Angel Inn, which occupied a matching plot on the opposite side of the Great North Road. The Angel is recorded as early as 1608, and while nothing of its early fabric survives, it appears that the two inns were originally about equal in size, and together they made Stilton a landmark staging post for travellers heading between London and towns across the whole of the midlands and the north.

'OLD' AND 'GREAT' NORTH ROADS

From the earliest times of The Bell, there were two principal routes from Stilton into London, both of which are important to the story of the inn.

From York, the ancient Roman road of Ermine Street ran through Stilton and south to Alconbury Hill, where it veered south-eastwards through Huntingdon, then south through Royston and Ware in Hertfordshire, and down the Lea Valley to Shoreditch. An alternative route from Alconbury Hill was developed by livestock drovers heading long-distance all year round to London's Smithfield Market. It went south via Biggleswade in Bedfordshire and Hatfield in Hertfordshire. The whole of the route from York to Smithfield became known as the Great North Road; whereupon the older section from Alconbury Hill to Shoreditch was dubbed the Old North Road.

BEST CHEESE IN TOWN

A plate and dome for Stilton cheese, celebrating its association with The Bell Inn. Designed and crafted by the London potter David Birch in the late 1980s, a hand-painted, numbered, limited edition was produced exclusively for Harrods. Later, Birch released a slightly amended version (seen here), which became more widely available.

"...the man at that house keeps strictly to the old receipt."

Cheese was a staple of the innkeeper's fare all over the country, but by the early 1700s, Stilton innkeepers had become famed for selling large quantities of a local type of creamy cheese, of such distinctive quality that it became known as Stilton cheese.

It appears to have been made widely around Huntingdonshire, Northamptonshire, and Leicestershire, although recent research has shown that it could have originated in Stilton village, and it was certainly being made there from at least about 1710. The earliest known reference to Stilton cheese by name is in a newsletter of 1723 produced by Richard Bradley, the first professor of botany at Cambridge University. He described it as: 'the famous Stilton cheese' and commented: 'all that taste it allow [it] to be superior to every other cheese, either of foreign or English make'.

Bradley also asserted that the Stilton cheese sold at The Bell was: 'much the best cheese in town; the man at that house keeps strictly to the old receipt [recipe]'. The identity of that innkeeper is unknown. However, the owner of The Bell Inn at that time was John Brownell, a wealthy gentleman of St Ives, in Huntingdonshire. Brownell was acquainted with Bradley, and through him had promised to leave funds in his will to create a botanical garden at Cambridge University, which suggests that Bradley's praise of the cheese at The Bell might not have been entirely unbiased.

Nonetheless, the established fame of Stilton cheese at that time is not in doubt because it was endorsed by other writers. In 1724 the Lincolnshire-born antiquarian William Stukeley commented in his 'Account of the Antiquities ... Observed in Travels Through Great Britain' that: 'Stilton is famous for cheese, which they sell at 12d per pound, and would be thought equal to Parmesan, were it not too near us'.

TWO UNFAVOURABLE REVIEWS

Hot on the heels of the endorsements for Stilton cheese by Bradley and Stukeley, came two writers who were not so complimentary.

In the second volume of a three-part travelogue 'A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain', published in 1725, the great author Daniel Defoe (1660-1731) reported:

> 'We passed Stilton, a town famous for cheese, which is called our English Parmesan, and is brought to table with the mites or maggots round it, so thick that they bring a spoon with them for you to eat the mites with, as you do the cheese.'

Defoe didn't name the inn, but in the same year that this review was published, a friend of his, the much younger Lord Edward Harley (1689-1741), heir to the earldom of Oxford, visited Stilton with his entourage while on a tour of the midlands. In a diary written by his chaplain, Timothy Thomas, the party's lunch stop in Stilton was named as The Bell Inn, about which he wrote:

> 'This place has gained great fame and reputation for its cheese, but if one were to judge by what they produced for us (and I presume they brought the best that the town affords in its present state), it is by no means deserving of that high repute, though an extravagant apologist might very properly cry it up for food for the gods, for I verily think few human stomachs would care to devour it.'

At that time there were no standards for cheese production. Most farmers made it, but a lot of it was poor quality. Only a few dedicated small farmers, or the larger, more-sophisticated farm dairies, could be relied upon to supply a consistently good product. Perhaps Defoe and Harley arrived in Stilton on days when the best cheese was unavailable, or perhaps the quality of innkeeping was not as it should have been. Either way, reviews like these suggest that the reputation of Stilton cheese, or of The Bell, or both, was under threat.

Daniel Defoe, in the style of Godfrey Kneller. © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London, Caird Collection.

Lord Edward Harley, circa 1725, attributed to Jonathan Richardson. © National Portrait Gallery.

THOMAS HIGBEE'S ALARMING DEBTS

A glimpse of an early spiral staircase at The Bell.

The earliest-known innkeepers at The Bell of this period were Thomas Higbee and his wife, Jane.

It isn't known when they took over, only that they had married in 1705, and that they were looking after The Bell when Thomas died in 1729. It's clear from an account of Thomas Higbee's estate after his death that things had not been going well. Jane was left with a long list of creditors, to whom she owed a total of £906 (about £100,000 in the money of 2021). The debts included £160 in rent owed to The Bell owner, John Brownell, and nearly £400 owed to three money lenders. Jane Higbee remained at The Bell, but a future report showed that she obviously struggled.

CATASTROPHIC VILLAGE FIRE

Jane Higbee's difficult start to her solo tenure at The Bell in 1729 came at a time when the whole village was suffering from a recent and serious hit to its economy.

In 1728 there had been a catastrophic fire, which according to a very brief report in an early newspaper published in Newcastle, began in a bakery and was driven by high winds until it burnt the village 'almost down'. From reports of later events, it seems probable that the conflagration had destroyed most of The Angel Inn. To make matters worse, it happened at a time when other inns on the Great North Road were investing to capitalise on an accelerating growth in trade.

"...began in a bakery and was driven by high winds until it burnt the village 'almost down'."

The introduction of properly maintained toll roads, called turnpikes, was gaining pace and had recently been completed along 68 miles of the Great North Road from London to Alconbury Hill, improving the frequency and speed of travel by public coaches running between the capital and the north.

THE ANGEL REBUILT AND RESTORED

The first sign of recovery for Stilton after its devastating fire was a press notice in July 1731 advertising The Angel Inn for sale or to let.

It was described as having: 'the greatest part of the house new-built and the whole well furnished'. This must have referred to the Georgian building, most of which is still standing today, although bearing the apparently contradictory date of 1741. To the right of the archway, a part of the original Angel Inn that survived the fire continued to be part of the business.

Site of the old Angel Inn and its surviving Georgian building and archway.

ROYAL GARDENER WHO OWNED THE BELL

John Brownell, the Cambridgeshire gentleman who owned The Bell Inn from at least 1696, died in 1732.

His promised funding for a botanical garden at Cambridge University did not materialise. However, his interest in gardens appears to be confirmed in his will in a different manner. He instructed that in settlement of his debts The Bell at Stilton should be given to Charles Bridgeman (1690-1738), then nationally revered as the Royal Gardener. Living a generation before the more famous Capability Brown, Charles Bridgeman was a pioneer of grand-scale landscape garden design.

He is associated with some of the greatest gardens in England, most notably the one he created for Field Marshall Lord Cobham at Stowe House In Buckinghamshire, now owned and maintained by the National Trust. Bridgeman worked there from 1711, and attracted such plaudits that in 1726 he was appointed joint chief gardener to George I. After the king's death a year later, he became the sole Royal Gardener to George II, with responsibilities for the gardens at Windsor, Kensington Palace, Hampton Court, St James's Park, Hyde Park, and Richmond.

Royal gardener Charles Bridgeman (circled) in a 1725 painting of leading figures of the day, entitled 'A Conversation of Virtuosis...' by Gawen Hamilton. © National Portrait Gallery.

An impression of Cooper Thornhill by local wood carver Glyn Mould. The figure was copied from an apparently very old image painted on a plastered wall and found behind wooden panelling at the inn in the late 1980s. The unidentified figure appeared to be from Thornhill's era, and could have been Thornhill himself. It was too fragile to be preserved.

ROBERT APREECE

Ownership of The Bell changed hands in 1741 when a local squire, Robert Apreece (c.1677-1744), bought it from the son of the late royal gardener Charles Bridgeman. Apreece lived mainly in London, but he retained a great house and park three miles west of Stilton, at Washingley Hall. It had been his family's seat since at least the 1500s.

FAMOUS COOPER THORNHILL

Under Charles Bridgeman's distinguished ownership there was a swift move to restoring The Bell's reputation.

From May 1733, the new tenant innkeeper was Cooper Thornhill, aged 28, who by his extraordinary achievements is still recognised today as Stilton's most famous resident. In a local press notice, he announced that he had been several years at another inn on the Great North Road, The Sun at Biggleswade, and that he was taking over The Bell, which he declared had been 'under some disorder of late by reason of the person who lately kept it, Mrs Higbee, being under some misfortunes, which obliged her to be absent from the house'.

FICTION OF TURPIN'S LEAP

A tale that during the time of Cooper Thornhill, the notorious highwayman Dick Turpin escaped his pursuers by leaping from a window at The Bell can be dismissed as a romantic invention.

Turpin's robberies occurred around his home in Essex and in London in the years 1735-7. Although his exploits were widely reported in the press of the day, no window escape was ever mentioned. However, a fictionalised biography published shortly after his execution in 1739 gave three imaginary accounts of him escaping through windows – from his home in Epping and from ale houses in Westminster and Hertford. These fabrications inspired imitation, such that today a quick internet search finds Turpin's window escapes claimed by five more inns located from Berkshire to Yorkshire, and no doubt there are many others.

THORNHILL BUYS THE ANGEL INN

During his early years running The Bell, Cooper Thornhill developed multiple business interests.

In addition to being the postmaster of Stilton, it was reported that he was 'one of the most considerable corn factors in England', and land deeds reveal that at the rear of the inn he had six grain stores. He took on the tenancy of a 127-acre farm at Caldecott, about a mile south-west of Stilton. He sub-let it in 1743, the same year in which he bought the freehold of The Bell's main competitor, The Angel Inn. He must have put a tenant in charge at The Angel, presumably with the instruction to harmonise with The Bell rather than compete against it.

Thornhill's grain stores probably looked like this period example at Cowdray House, Midhurst, West Sussex.

HEIGHTENED FAME OF STILTON CHEESE

Thornhill almost certainly kept for himself The Angel Inn's trade in Stilton cheese, which he developed to new heights of fame.

According to one report he became the principal supplier of Stilton cheese to retailers in London. He needed a reliable, large-scale source of a consistently high-quality product. So, he struck a deal for exclusive supply from a long-established cheesemaker at a farm in the village of Wymondham, near Melton Mowbray in Leicestershire, about 30 miles north-west of Stilton.

The farm had been occupied by the same family for three generations, and by 1743 the new head of the cheesemaking operation was Mrs Frances Pawlett, aged about 25. Some reports say Thornhill and Pawlett were relatives of some sort. Most importantly, the cheese she supplied was consistently good, and so Thornhill's cheese business went from strength to strength. Such was the fame of the partnership that for many years afterwards it was thought, incorrectly, that Thornhill and Pawlett had created the first cheese to be called Stilton.

A large selection of Stilton cheeses are available to purchase today at The Bell's deli and coffee shop.

GREATEST HORSEMAN OF HIS AGE

Some stories of Cooper Thornhill's horse racing exploits might be apocryphal, but the two most extraordinary of them are verifiable by extensive reports in the newspapers of the day.

Cowper Thornhill. Master of the Bell Inn, Stilton. Unknown artist. EP III 108.1. © The National Galleries of Scotland. This print commemorating Cooper Thornhill's record ride was published sometime between 1792-1816, by Robert Wilkinson, London.

In March 1745 he accepted a 'considerable wager' challenging him to ride the 72 miles from The Bell at Stilton along the Old North Road to The King's Arms at Shoreditch in four and a half hours. By changing horses at several points, he completed the journey in three hours 56 minutes. Flushed with success, he immediately took another bet, this one reported to be for 500 guineas (about £60,000 in the money of 2021) that he could not complete the same course three times in succession, from Stilton to Shoreditch, back to Stilton and back to Shoreditch again, a total distance of 216 miles, in 15 hours.

The challenge aroused the interest of the nobility and gentlemen gamblers far and wide, who according to one report staked on the outcome, between them, at least £50,000 (more than £5 million in 2021 money). Thornhill set off on his marathon ride from The Bell at 4am on 24 April 1745. The route was said to be lined with crowds of spectators and punters, many of whom saw him pass three times during the day. He completed the course in 12 hours 17 minutes, using 16 horses, two of them ridden twice. It was proclaimed the 'greatest performance of its kind ever known'.

THE STILTON HERO

Thornhill's extraordinary ride inspired the highest forms of recognition.

An epic poem of 182 lines entitled The Stilton Hero was published as a 14-page pamphlet in London in 1745. The anonymous writer is thought to have been a surgeon turned poet, Tobias Smollett (1721-71). Thornhill's Stilton Hero epithet became so famous that in 1749 it was given as the name of an ocean-going merchant vessel. Later, and more surprisingly, it was recorded as the name of a 28-gun American frigate that was active in 1780 during the War of Independence.

Immortal THORNHILL ! let his Name
Shine foremoft in the Rolls of Fame.
With all his Feats you never read
Æneas crofs'd the fiery Steed ;
And like an Arrow from a Bow,
Or Satan paffing to and fro,
From *Stilton* flew to Town ; and then
To *Stilton* ; and to Town again ;
In Twelve Hours Space the Journey o'er,
A Brace of hundred Miles, and more.

An extract from The Stilton Hero, Anon., 1745

THE BELL INN ESTATE

Cooper Thornhill's sporting fame seems to have helped him to become a gentleman of property.

He bought the freehold of his farm at Caldecott for an unknown sum, and then in 1755, after installing a tenant at The Bell, he bought the freehold of the inn for £3,400 from the daughter of the late Robert Apreece. Deeds show that at that time The Bell Inn estate included property alongside the inn, two shops and four houses, while at the rear were six granaries, malting vaults, and a brew house. There was also a farm of unknown size.

By the time of Thornhill's death in 1759, aged 53, he owned farmland around Stilton totalling 900 acres, which together with the rest of his property provided his second wife, Orme, with a rental income of £600 a year. On her death in 1766, the property passed to Thornhill's four daughters from his first marriage. During 1771-72, Thornhill's daughters sold The Angel to its tenant Thomas Sibley, who was then aged 34, and they sold The Bell Inn estate to two investors who quickly resold it to a Peterborough merchant called Charles Bayley.

This headstone to the memory of Cooper Thornhill stands in the graveyard of the Stilton parish church of St Mary Magdalene. It was erected in 2009 next to the original flat memorial stone of 1759, which had become badly eroded.

COACHING ERA OF PITTS AND SIBLEY

By 1772, great improvements in road surfaces and in the ride-quality of carriages and coaches meant that long-distance travel was rapidly gaining popularity.

It was a bonanza for well-run roadside inns. Those along the Great North Road were at the forefront of the booming trade in 'posting' - the provision of horses and carriages for private hire, and changes of horses for public coach services. Innkeepers invested in larger stocks of carriages and horses, and naturally had to erect more stabling; in the case of The Bell and The Angel, enough for 100 horses each.

The London-Edinburgh Royal Mail Coach on the Great North Road, by John Frederick Herring. From the Berger Collection, Denver, Colorado,

The tenant innkeeper at The Bell in 1772 was John Pitts, then aged 30, and, like Thomas Sibley at The Angel, he was a highly respected citizen of Stilton. Pitts and Sibley were both in the prime of life at exactly the right time. In addition to running their inns, they also joined other innkeepers on the Great North Road, and on routes connecting to it, to form business partnerships to run new coach services. They competed hard to provide the best quality in rest and refreshment for increasing numbers of weary travellers.

Royal Mail coaches were established on the Great North Road from 1784, which raised standards and encouraged more competing coach services, rising to a peak in the early 1800s. Good innkeepers were able to make a lot of money, and this seems to have been the case with John Pitts, who in 1788 took the opportunity to buy the freehold of The Bell. The vendors were the executors of the will of a King's Lynn Merchant who had previously repossessed the inn from Charles Bayley. Pitts paid £2,500 for it.

FIRST SIGNS OF THE DIFFICULT LONG YEARS AHEAD

After at least 23 years running The Bell, John Pitts retired in 1796. The inn was offered for sale, along with a 'considerable quantity of land' and a 'very considerable cheese trade'.

No buyer was found, so Pitts installed John Gibbs as tenant innkeeper. Four years later, in 1800, Gibbs took on a mortgage to buy the freehold of the inn for an apparently bargain price of £2,000. In 1801, Thomas Sibley offered The Angel for sale, after running it for 34 years. He also failed to find a buyer, and so also installed a tenant, but not successfully. The Angel lost the bulk of its posting and coaching trade to The Bell.

John Gibbs should have thrived, but for some reason he struggled to keep his head above water for many years, until May 1814 when he was declared bankrupt. The inn was repossessed by the mortgage lender, Thomas Oxley, a merchant of King's Lynn, who immediately put it up for sale. The prospectus described the inn's extensive buildings, which included its stabling for 100 horses. No buyer was found, either then or at a second attempt in November 1814, by which time The Bell was closed.

The closure was a major concern for John and Jane Scarborough, who ran The George Inn at Buckden, 14 miles south of Stilton, and the next coaching and posting house along the Great North Road. Jane Scarborough was reported as saying: 'We knew that the innkeepers in the line would not continue in connection with our house at Buckden if The Bell Inn at Stilton was shut up, for they considered The Angel Inn at that place a house too inferior for the first line of posting'.

Left: Helpful mileages displayed for travellers and coachmen leaving The Bell yard. The date of the inscription is unknown. **Right:** The courtyard at the Bell Inn.

POST BOY BEATEN ON THE ROAD

In May 1816, James Rowe, a post-boy at The Bell, was on the Great North Road driving a carriage containing three customers, when he was violently attacked and horse-whipped by a guard on the Leeds Union coach. The assailant's punishment was to publish in local newspapers an admission of guilt and an apology.

SCARBOROUGH FAMILY FIASCO

In May 1815, John and Jane Scarborough took the tenancy of The Bell, and 'completely repaired' the inn at a cost of £1,000.

With their own inn at Buckden still to run, they installed their son William to run The Bell. He suffered early setbacks, losing posting trade to aggressive pricing tactics by a new tenant at The Angel, and then in December 1815, someone broke into and pilfered The Bell's Cheese Room. Throughout 1816, the Scarborough family struggled at both their inns, not helped by the fact that Jane was awaiting a prosecution for stealing £20 from a customer at The George. In January 1817, John Scarborough and his son William were both declared bankrupt, and both inns were lost. Jane Scarborough eventually went to court in August 1817, when she was found guilty and jailed for a year.

OWNER LOSES PATIENCE

One of The Bell's newly renovated and 'desirable' bedrooms

The next tenant at The Bell Inn quit 'under distress' in January 1818, causing the then owner, William Oxley, of Kings Lynn, to lose patience and to sell all that remained of the once-substantial Bell Inn estate.

He split the property into nine lots, and by June had disposed of the maltings, cellars, store houses, half the stabling, a tap room, two cottages, and a house with a stable and granary. All that remained was the main building of today's Bell Inn, which was in two lots divided at the central archway, each with a small amount of land at the rear. The part to the left of the archway was described as forming a 'desirable residence', while the reduced inn to the right was offered with the remaining stables for 40 horses. Neither lot was sold. The diminished Bell Inn continued to trade but failed to provide a viable living for any tenant innkeepers, who came and went in quick succession over the next 11 years.

SUPREMACY OF THE ANGEL

At the decline of The Bell from 1818, The Angel, still with stabling for 100 horses, began to secure all the coaching trade passing through Stilton.

By 1820/21 it was being run by James and Ann Worthington, both in their mid-30s, who were probably owner-innkeepers from the start. First-hand accounts from that time tell of The Angel's supremacy over The Bell. A trade directory of Huntingdonshire for 1839 confirms that all the coaches calling at Stilton changed horses at The Angel. It was said they totalled 42 a day, travelling between London and York, and onwards to Newcastle, Edinburgh, and Glasgow, as well as between London and Peterborough, Boston, and Lincoln.

Famous names from Stilton's two principal inns commemorated in some of the village's modern street names.

THE BELL'S NEW FOCUS ON BEER

Unable to compete against The Angel for its posting and coaching trade, by 1829 The Bell's ownership and style of management had changed. It was then owned by William Herbert, 59, a long-established brewer in Huntingdon who owned many other inns and ale houses in and around the county. His business was selling beer, and so The Bell, then confined to the part of the building to the right of the archway, became a small pub with rooms. The publican from about 1829/30 was Charles Wood, who with his wife Ann and their family stayed for another 11 years.

The Bell's cosy bar today.

END OF THE COACHING ERA

From 1850, the completion of the railway from London to York brought the coaching trade on the Great North Road to a sudden end. While The Angel held on to a reduced amount of posting trade, the total loss of the coaches must have been devastating. Over time The Angel's impressive three-storey building was converted to residential use, and the inn was confined to the former tap room to the right of the archway, much like the already reduced status of The Bell.

DROVERS AND PUBLICAN BLACKSMITHS

Cattle shoes. Photo courtesy of Elke Treitinger, www.kuh-und-oxn-schule.de

The practice of driving livestock on the hoof along the Great North Road to London's Smithfield Market continued into the second half of the 1800s.

And Stilton had become an especially important resting place for drovers because of a trade that had developed in the village of shoeing cattle. Iron plates were fitted to their hooves to protect them on the long journey to Smithfield. With hundreds of animals in a drove, it was a substantial and labour-intensive task. Its importance is reflected in official records. On the night of the 1841 census, three of the four guests at The Bell Inn were drovers.

The census of 1851 recorded that The Bell Inn's licensee, John Ward, was also a blacksmith, and at the 1861 census, both he and his opposite number at The Angel, John Austin, were recorded as having dual occupations of blacksmith and publican. Droves of geese were also prepared for the journey from Stilton by having their feet dipped in hot tar and then in sand. Livestock movement gradually started switching to the railways, bringing an end to almost all long-distance traffic on the Great North Road, and leaving inns like The Bell and The Angel with further reduced incomes.

This blacksmith's bellows, restored and standing in the bar of The Bell, was found in outbuildings during the late 1980s. It might have been used by John Ward.

JOHN WARD'S METALWORKING SKILLS

John Ward, the blacksmith and innkeeper of The Bell, was listed in a trade directory of 1854 as an agricultural implement manufacturer. It's reasonable to speculate that he might have restored or repaired The Bell's famous and unusual all-metal inn sign (see Page 20). By 1864, when John Ward had apparently left The Bell, he was mentioned in a press notice as the proprietor of Stilton Iron Works.

THE OLD BELL'S WITHERED HEART

The old Bell building is seen above in the time of Thomas Spriggs, in about 1900. A writer of the day described its 'withered heart; as gaunt, ghost-like, deserted, but half alive, it stares night and day on the lonely North Road'. Another said it 'looks like a deserted barrack with its long, gabled front a mere faded relic of a bygone age'.

The Georgian sash windows might have been installed as far back as the period of Cooper Thornhill's tenure (1733-59). Most of the sidelights in the bays are seen to have been bricked in. To the left of the archway are three doorways into residential tenements. The famous inn sign is in its original position, with the stays attached above and below the only surviving 16th or 17th-century mullioned bay window.

Image courtesy the Norris Museum, St Ives, ref. PH.STILT.14.

SAVING THOMAS SPRIGGS

From at least 1871 and until his death in 1913, the tenant of The Bell was Thomas Spriggs, a carpenter.

'Thomas Spriggs licensed for beer spirits and tobacco'. A detail from the image across.

Appropriately, his name-board above the pub door was distinctively carved. At the 1871 census, Thomas was aged 35 and lived at The Bell with his wife Sarah, 26, three young children and a teenage maid. In this and later census returns, he didn't record his secondary occupation as a publican. Sarah probably did all the pub work, which the family must then have relied upon during a period when Thomas reportedly fell into a deep depression and couldn't work. It was said that he was cured by a sermon given by the rector of Stilton, which 'raised the cloud from his mind, and he took to work again, and remained perfectly sane to the end of his days'.

THE FAMOUS INN SIGN

The structure and wrought-iron decoration of The Bell Inn's famous sign were typical of the larger inn-signs of the 1700s – a time when the wealthiest innkeepers competed by erecting increasingly elaborate signs, often supported, as in this case, by a pillar on the public footpath.

But local authorities complained that the pillars were causing too many obstructions, and so they were banned by legislation in 1797. Gradually, most were removed, leaving only a few rare survivors, including this one at The Bell Inn.

In this photograph, taken around the year 1900, the enormous, two-metre-high hanging sign could still have been the original because it was made from durable materials – a sheet of copper within a thin iron frame. On the other hand, any or all parts of the sign structure could have been restored or replaced at any time, but especially during the 1850s and early 1860s when the Stilton metalworker John Ward ran The Bell.

The photograph shows the sign painted to promote Marshall Brothers, the brewery owners in around 1900. They had purchased The Bell in 1864 as part of the whole business of the Huntingdon brewers and pub owners, the Herbert family.

The Bell Inn sign c.1900. Image courtesy the Norris Museum, St Ives, ref. PH.STILT.16.

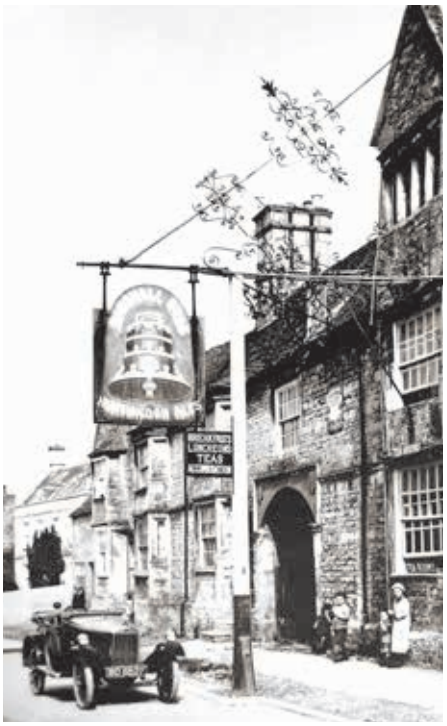
THE AGE OF THE MOTOR CAR

After the Great War of 1914-18, motor cars entered mass production, forging the beginning of a new era for roadside inns.

Motor cars raised the aspirations of the well-off and popularised long-distance travel and tourism. In 1921, the Great North Road was designated the A1 - the nation's primary long-distance route. It all created new opportunities for the Stilton inns to provide sustenance for a growing number of new travellers.

Signs went up advertising tea rooms and service for breakfasts, lunches, and teas. Fanny Spriggs, who was born at The Bell and was a spinster daughter of the late Thomas Spriggs, resurrected the village's long-abandoned trade in Stilton cheese, which she sold to motorists from a small general store in the High Street.

Meanwhile her father's replacement as tenant publican at The Bell was George Woodbridge. Like his predecessor, his main source of income was not from the inn. He worked sometimes as a farm labourer and sometimes as a council road worker. No doubt he left most of the innkeeping to his wife, Emma.



The Bell Inn, probably in the 1920s. Image courtesy the Norris Museum, St Ives, ref. PH.STILT.26.

THE END OF THE ANGEL

In August 1923, a shocking fire razed The Angel Inn to the ground. It would never reappear as an inn. The fire also caused serious damage to neighbouring properties, including the old Angel's former three-storey building, which had long-since been converted into residential tenements.

A VILLAGE DEATH TRAP


STILTON FATALITY.

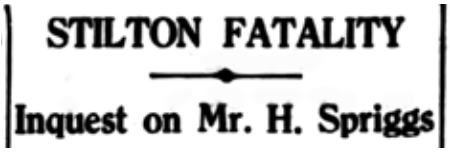
Killed on Way Home from Whist Drive.

Peterborough Standard 4 December 1931.


OLD LADY OF 75 KILLED BY CAR

STILTON STREET FATALITY

Peterborough Standard 23 October 1936.


STILTON FATALITY

Inquest on Mr. H. Spriggs

Peterborough Standard 11 December 1936.


STILTON FATALITY

Motor Cyclist Crashes Into Rear of Lorry

Peterborough Standard 10 June 1938.


STILTON MAN KILLED BY VAN

On Centre of Great North Road

Peterborough Standard 12 January 1940.

As motor vehicle numbers increased rapidly during the 1930s, Stilton gained a reputation as a notorious accident blackspot, once called the 'suicidal portion of the Great North Road'.

Heavy traffic and primitive standards of driving and car safety, compounded by the poor quality of the roads, meant that crashes were commonplace everywhere in the country, but especially so in Stilton, which presented some special challenges. For traffic heading north from London and the home counties, it was the first built-up area encountered after the merger of the Old North and Great North Roads.

Drivers complained that parts of the A1 were little wider than a country lane, but the opposite was the problem in Stilton. The road through the village, once described as 'of royal breadth … like the artery of a nation', varied in width from 15 to 25 metres: enough for two or three lanes each way. It was also straight, and so perfect for fast driving and overtaking. But without lane markings it was also a place where some vehicles could drift unpredictably across the road. Resident pedestrians risked their lives every time they attempted the long dash to cross it.

Things came to a head in December 1936 when Harry Spriggs, a 68-year-old retired Post Office engineer and a son of the late Bell innkeeper Thomas Spriggs, collided with a car, and was fatally injured. It was Stilton's third death on the road in two months. The police called for the carriageway to be narrowed to a consistent width. But instead, it was decided to erect pedestrian islands with illuminated 'Keep Left' signs at three points along the centre of the road. Government plans for a by-pass were shelved at the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939.

In January 1940, the pedestrian islands proved no help for George Woodbridge, who had recently retired from running The Bell. He was trying to cross the road through the village one night when he collided with a furniture van, was knocked down and killed.

FAMOUS SIGN REPOSITIONED

The famous sign of The Bell Inn was taken down in 1947 by the then owners, Huntingdon Breweries, who wanted to repair the corroded iron frame surrounding the copper-sheet hanging sign.

It seems that the rest of the structure was also taken down, including the illegal supporting pillar, which could not be put back. Without it, the wall of The Bell cannot have been strong enough to hold the enormous copper hanging sign, which was weighed at the time at seven hundredweight, or more than a third of a metric tonne. Instead, the connecting stays had to be attached through the wall and onto a major structural beam within the building. Such a beam existed behind the gable to the right of the sign's original position, and so that is where it was re-erected. A first-floor window was remodelled into two windows to create a central fixing point for the main stay.

A temporary sign during repairs to the famous sign at The Bell. With thanks to Peterborough Images Archive.

The Bell c.1950 showing the remodelled first-floor window where the historic sign was re-erected in its new position, now without the supporting pillar. Note also, the pedestrian island in the road. With thanks to Peterborough Images Archive.

INTO THE TERMINAL PHASE

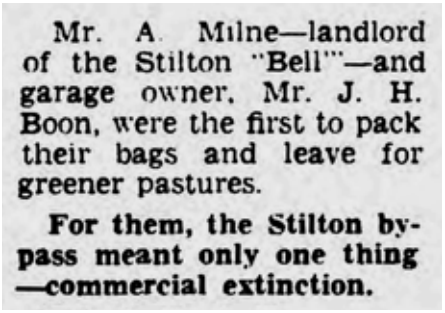
Throughout the Second World War, tenant licensee Miss Frances Whattam had kept The Bell Inn going, but peacetime brought tougher challenges.

In 1950, the owner, Huntingdon Breweries, merged with a competitor to form East Anglian Breweries, with headquarters in Ely. The new owner appears to have had no interest in further investment in The Bell. Frances Whattam carried on until 1953, when it was recorded that she quit because of financial difficulties. No tenant licensee after her would stay longer than three years. The Bell Inn's century-long struggle for survival had entered its terminal phase.

WARTIME CELEBRITY VISITORS

Stilton residents recalled that during the Second World War, The Bell Inn's old-world charm attracted visits by American airmen from nearby bases, including the film star Clark Gable and the boxer Joe Louis.

BY-PASS SAVES LIVES, KILLS TRADE



Mr. A. Milne—landlord of the Stilton "Bell"—and garage owner, Mr. J. H. Boon, were the first to pack their bags and leave for greener pastures.

For them, the Stilton by-pass meant only one thing —commercial extinction.

Extract from 'A town prepares to die of traffic starvation', by Mike Ewing, Peterborough Advertiser, 19 July 1957.

In 1957, work started on a £150 million programme of improvements along the A1, beginning with the construction of a dual carriageway by-passing Stilton.

It was the first by-pass on the A1 and was opened on 21 July 1958. Sudden loss of trade had been anticipated, and within days of the new road opening, a newspaper article branded Stilton as a deserted village. It described how children now roller skated in the middle of the road and used the 'Keep Left' bollards as goal posts. It wasn't long before the village petrol station and many of the shops and tea rooms were closing for ever.

THE BELL ABANDONED

"...its famous sign was stolen, and by 1970, the whole of the original Bell Inn building was empty, abandoned and falling into decay."

Fast-paced consolidation in the brewing industry brought about the end of The Bell. Its owner, East Anglian Breweries, was acquired in 1957 by Steward and Patteson, a major regional brewer, based in Norwich. In 1963 that company was purchased by a rapidly expanding national firm, Watney Mann. The income from The Bell was not enough for such a large corporation to justify the cost of long overdue and necessary repairs, and so in 1964 it was closed. Soon afterwards its famous sign was stolen, and by 1970, the whole of the original Bell Inn building was empty, abandoned and falling into decay.

RESURRECTION OF THE ANGEL

The death of The Bell heralded a kind of resurrection for its historic arch-rival, The Angel, which had been standing empty and abandoned for a while. A local builder and entrepreneur, Jack Rayner, added a fourth floor to the Georgian building, and converted the whole site into a nightclub and casino, which opened in 1966. It was burnt down in 1974. A year later, the surviving two storeys were repaired and reopened as a small private club with a public restaurant at the front, named The Angel. It was a return of the old inn name after an absence of 50 years.

RESCUE AND REVIVAL OF THE HISTORIC BELL INN

In 1983, an entrepreneur started work on a major restoration of the old Bell Inn with the aim of developing it into a hotel.

The section to the right of the archway was revitalised, including the replacement of some of the Georgian windows with replica stone mullions, and the erection of an exact replica of the 1947 version of the famous inn sign. The bar was reopened, but the project ran into difficulties. The whole building was sold in 1985 to another entrepreneur, Liam McGivern, who with his wife, Jill, set about completing the project.

Early stages of the restoration work, seen in the autumn of 1983. Image courtesy Huntingdonshire Archives, Huntingdon, ref. 5218/2/363/3.

RESTORATION BEFITS ICONIC STATUS

The fully restored Bell Inn, occupying the whole of its original site, was formerly opened on 19 January 1990 by the Chancellor of the Exchequer and soon-to-be Prime Minister, John Major, MP for Huntingdon.

It was a rebirth that befitted the historic building's iconic status, which had endured through many decades of adversity. During their 35-year tenure, Liam and Jill McGivern continued to make a great success of The Bell Inn, injecting further investments to develop its facilities and standards of hospitality. They retired in 2020 and sold the inn to the specialist hotelier, the Coaching Inn Group, which is committed to preserving and enhancing the heritage of all its hotels, while also adapting to customers' changing needs.

Full restoration completed by January 1990.

Chancellor John Major (right) at the opening of the restored Bell Inn, with his wife Norma, and (left) Liam and Jill McGivern.

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The Bell Inn, Stilton, 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 eighteen 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 Bell Inn, Stilton, 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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