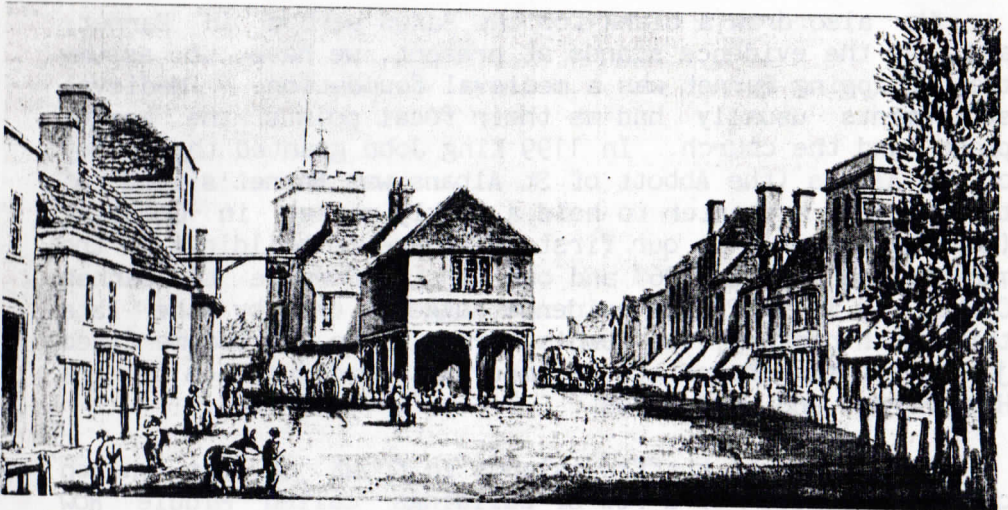


**CHIPPING BARNET'S
OLD TOWN CENTRE**

Brian Wise
History of Inns

Jennie Lee Cobban BA
Archaeology



In 1989, Chipping Barnet's new shopping centre, The Spires, was officially opened to the public. 1989 would therefore seem a fitting year to look back and review our knowledge of some of the buildings which comprised Barnet's old town centre - the medieval shopping centre of the town, located just below St John the Baptist Church. 1989 has also seen the continuing rapid re-development of Chipping Barnet, thus also making the year an appropriate one to consider our knowledge of the town's origins, as evidence is destroyed by the builder.

We still know very little indeed about the origins of Chipping Barnet. As yet, no firm evidence has been unearthed to suggest a prehistoric settlement, although Chipping Barnet (the highest point between London and York) is a likely spot for fortifications of this period. Traces of a possible defensive ditch were indeed observed during the building of The Spires, but a lack of dating evidence prevents any firm conclusions. Neither do we have any evidence of Roman activity, although it cannot be ruled out entirely. Roman bricks were said to have been observed at the Meadway junction, and the site of 62)64 High Street (Kitchens Galore) was put forward as a possible Roman signal station. Unfortunately, it is not known on what evidence this suggestion was based, if any.

We also draw a blank for the Saxon period in Barnet, and, as the evidence stands at present, we have to assume that Chipping Barnet was a medieval foundation. Medieval settlements usually had as their focal points the market place and the church. In 1199 King John granted the Abbey of St Albans (the Abbott of St Albans was Barnet's Lord of the Manor) a charter to hold a weekly market in Chipping (market) Barnet. As our first reference to buildings in the marketplace is in 1261 and our first reference to Barnet Church is in 1272, the evidence suggests that by the late thirteenth century, the town's market place had become fixed just below the church at the important road junction of the High Street and Wood Street.

The present traffic islands in front of the church cover the site of a row of buildings called Middle Row because they ran down the middle of the High Street. This row, which included Chipping Barnet's medieval market hall and lock-up, was finally demolished in 1889 after a fire. A plan showing the dimensions of the premises survives in Barnet Museum's archives.

The triangular area in front of the market hall would have been the centre of activity in medieval and later times. Where traffic now tears along, market traders once hawked their wares and boys played games. We know that

Barnet Fair, which yet again this year survived attempts to abolish it, was held here at times. The market place also holds darker memories of religious intolerance. In 1555, in the reign of Catholic Mary Tudor, John Hale was burned at the stake for his protestant beliefs, while in 1679 we are informed that an attempt was made by the Papists to blow up Middle Row and thus fire the whole of the town of Barnet.

As we have seen, Chipping Barnet was located at an important road junction, probably as a deliberate development by the Abbey of St Albans. Barnet became increasingly prosperous as it catered for travellers on their way to the North. By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the height of Barnet's career as coaching town 'par excellence', it is not surprising that Chipping Barnet's old town centre should be dominated by inns of all types and periods.

Within this sector has been concentrated many centuries of the licensed victualling trade. The area catered for those travellers who had struggled up Barnet Hill from London and for others travelling south who sought brief 'wash and brush up' before their arrival at the capital.

One of the inns catering for these travellers was the King's Head, which still stands in the bottleneck of Barnet High Street, facing the East side of the parish church. An early fourteenth century shoe was discovered in this section of the road in 1956. Recently renovated, The King's Head may still be remembered by some as "The Glasshouse", being, allegedly the first house in Barnet to serve beer in glassed rather than pewter pots. This was some time before the 1914 War. In the 17th century and well into the 18th the King's Head was managed by the family of Flexmore.

In 1661 John more was appointed joint aleconner for the parish his duties being those of an inspector of weights and measures. The premises were used as a form of workhouse, accommodating paupers and sick people, not least smallpox cases, whose last resort was parish relief. For example in 1751, a later Flexmore lodged "poor people" for 9/6d and in 1755 there was a payment of 13/0d for "Ye

smallpox woman". Some thirty similar entries paint a pathetic scene.

Continuing in its established trade, The King's Head in 1847 passed into the hands of outside brewing interests, Messrs. Clutterbuck of Stanmore who rebuilt the premises; their control, in turn, being taken over by Messrs McMullens of Hertford towards the end of the century. The latter firm, in 1927/28 successfully fought a closure order, one of a number instigated by local "temperance" advocates and today, the house can claim a run of not less than 360 years.

The original and long defunct Red Lion stood at Nos.72/76 High Street and was a substantial inn. It is referred to in some detail in Bulletin Nos 8, 19 and 20. It is still of interest to historians as being visited by the diarist Samuel Pepys who dined there in October 1664 and again in August 1667. First traced in 1551, by no means the date of origin, all that remains of this hostelry are vestiges of The Great Room and the covered passage way into Tapster Street which afforded access to the yard and stables.

Moving south down the High Street, we come to The Bull at No.68, which was called "Le Bull and La Hart" in 1560. S H Widdicombe highlights an interlude in 1749 when a man "killed himself with gin" on the premises. Without scrutiny of the original entry it seems reasonable to conject that the poor fellow in fact used a gun. The War Office Return showed that this establishment was more than a pothouse; there was stabling for 16 horses.

The present fabric dates from 1872 having been rebuilt, following destruction by fire and acquired by Messrs McMullen who held it until closure in 1963. Press reports subsequently reveal The Bull as a meeting place for Friendly Societies such as The Oddfellows and as being a venue for military and other bodies. Dinners with musical accompaniment and other entertainments were catered for, seemingly with some style. Fittingly, entertaining is still the name of the game as the premises are now well known as The Old Bull, Chipping Barnet's flourishing arts centre

which boasts its own theatre.

Although our earliest written reference to the Old Bull seems to be in 1553, excavations by Hendon and District Archaeological Society in 1982 unearthed fragments of Herts. greyware pottery dating from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. There has thus been human activity on this site for at least 700 years. It is unfortunate that Victorian landscaping had destroyed most of the evidence for this early use.

The Mitre, at No.58 has a confusing history. The late Mr Leftwich, in 1947 grappled with the complexities of its origins and concluded that this Inn once extended in a block from the site of No.66 (now Kitchens Galore), down to and including No.54 High Street (now Keywest Ltd.). Behind lay 12 acres of land running into Hadley parish. In 1553 (11) William Chester, Yeoman of Barnet, acquired a property known as "The Busshe". He was granted a licence to sell wine. This is next heard of as The Rose & Crown, being one of the notable hostelries of Barnet in the possession of a prominent family, the Briscoes.

The Rose & Crown was an amalgamation of three houses, The Man, The Rose and The Crown, one of which was the original "Busshe". By 1659 The Mitre was the sign displayed and best known for the visit paid on 2nd Feb. 1660 by General Monk, prior to the Restoration of Charles II. Monk stayed there with his troops, 6000 strong billeted as best could be in the little town. "Take care not to demean your quarters" was the order. He was accompanied by two Parliament spies. But it seems that the local legend relating to a "bugging" operation, i.e. the boring of holes into the General's room was conducted the previous day in St Albans. Monk marched the next day on London and after some hesitation, declared for the King. His troops were accorded the title of Coldstream Guards from whence they set out.

More than a hundred years passes before another national figure arrives at The Mitre. In 1774, Doctor Samuel Johnson, accompanying Mrs Hester Thrale, en route to

Wales, left Streatham and arrived in Barnet at 1.40pm on July 5th. They stopped for refreshment at The Mitre, partly at least because Mrs Thrale carried a letter for the wife of the host, John Conner, who had been in service with a friend of Mrs Thrale.

By that time the house was well established as suitable for official and social use. Vestry accounts for 1720 record ten shillings spent upon entertaining the Archdeacon of St Albans during a Visitation, together with sixpence for the provision of a new chamber pot - this for the Vestry and not their venerable guest. Shortly before Johnson's call, the War Office Return shows that The Mitre could offer 12 beds and stabling for 26 horses. The final traces of this stabling has now disappeared during the development presently taking place along Victor's Way, the new road linking Moxon Street with Park Road.

Barnet & District Local History Society and Hendon & District Archaeological Society have jointly watched this development with some attention (not to say apprehension) to attempt to ensure that anything of historical interest was recorded before total archaeological destruction of the sites which comprised the original Mitre was completed.

It was hoped that rescue excavations could be carried out at 60/62 High Street, bearing in mind the important mediaeval discoveries which came to light only next door at No.62 in 1934. Unfortunately this did not prove possible, although sitewatching will be allowed on this site. Site watching is a poor substitution for excavation, however. The development to the rear of 60/62 High Street also entailed the demolition of a nineteenth century granary, possibly associated with the brewing process, which retained all its machinery in full working order. Fortunately HADAS managed to salvage the machinery, which is now in the safekeeping of the Museum of London. Eventually it will go on display at the Harrow Heritage Museum as part of a working granary exhibition.

Viscount Torrington's Diaries of his travels in England contain some amusing remarks about Barnet inns, so we may

perhaps allow him the last word on The Mitre. On July 27th 1791, quote "I stopped and put up by way of trial at The Mitre which is of all inns the nastiest". He is, of course entitled to his opinion.

Next door to the Mitre stood The Swan, alias the White Swan and the Swan on the Hoop which was found on or hard by the entrance to Park Road. The latter is the first Barnet inn sign discovered, viz; 1398. Details are confusing for, across the High Road was another ancient White Swan, just below Fitzjohn Avenue. But the Will of William Chester, 1576 gives a positive location of the subject - it lying below The Man, The Rose and Crown, i.e. the subsequent Mitre. In 1690 appears as a "common Brewhouse" in 1724.

This inn may possibly be identified with 52 High Street (Louis Shoe Repairs) although this is by no means certain, and the premises may indeed have formed part of the original Mitre. The property is a seventeenth century or earlier timber-framed building, recently extended at the rear. During the extension work, a heavy spoon-shaped implement was discovered, concealed within the timber-framing on the first storey near the chimney. Its original function is unclear (it may be a salamander, used somewhat like a hot iron for browning bread and puddings). Be that as it may, the implement would seem to have been used as a charm against witchcraft, being boxed in during construction of the building to ward off witches and evil spirits and discourage them from entering the building by way of the chimney. We have many examples of iron objects being concealed in this way, particularly in the seventeenth century) that century being noted for the great witchcraft scares.

Crossing to the other side of the High Street, our evidence for Chipping Barnet's old town centre is more limited. Mention may be made of a discovery in 1880 at 11 High Street. During demolition, it was discovered that the original building was of Tudor origin, and 20,000 bricks were salvaged from a huge chimney stack. Several 'ancient' coins and a Barnet market token were found at the same time.

We have already noticed The Swan, just below Fitzjohn Avenue, which was an inn by the fifteenth century. Redevelopment is about to commence adjacent to this site, so the local societies will be observing progress with a beady eye.

The Dandy Lion, formerly the Red Lion, has been dealt with in some detail in Bulletin No.20. Suffice to say that an inn has stood upon this site for centuries, which appears to be the case also with The Crown and Anchor.

We thus end our brief survey of some of the buildings which once comprised Chipping Barnet's old town centre. It was a town centre dominated by inns, as befits a travellers' town. Much research remains to be done, to fill in the huge gaps in our knowledge of how and when Chipping Barnet originally developed, probably some time in the twelfth century. As our town is rapidly redeveloped, local historians must be constantly vigilant in looking out for clues that will help us towards greater understanding of the town's origins.

