

BARNET & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

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THE OLD RED LION UNDERHILL BARNET Brian Wise



This Bulletin deals with the Old Red Lion, or Lower Red Lion, at the foot of Underhill in Barnet. Because of the frequency with which inns have changed their names, some clarification may be helpful. There have been at least three "Red Lions" in Barnet.

The original "Red Lion" occupied what is now 72 to 76 High Street. This is the establishment that was visited by Pepys. It is the subject of Bulletin No.18.

The building on the west side of the High Street, now on the corner of Fitzjohn Avenue has been called The Cardinals Hat, The Antelope, The Red Lion and now The Dandy Lion. It is the subject of Bulletin No.20.

The Old Red Lion or Lower Red Lion (LRL) is first mentioned by name in the Manor Rolls of 1804. These state that one Silver Crispin, a leatherseller and citizen of London had, in 1755 acquired a cottage at the east end of Totteridge Lane (now known as Barnet Lane) occupied by John Thomas. Crispin - quote - 'afterwards re-built the cottage and it became known by the sign of the Red Lion'. Guildhall Mss/768 indicates that John Thomas was in residence in 1735 and apparently running a cottage alehouse. His name figures in the Chipping Barnet Churchwardens' and Overseers' accounts. The Churchwardens, of which he was one, took a shilling's worth of refreshment in his parlour in 1726, and in 1733 Mrs Thomas was paid for nursing John Sanny, i.e. an instance of poor relief. These accounts, prior to Crispin's acquisition, make no mention of a Red Lion sign.

The War Office Billetting Return in 1756 shows that Edward Munday had succeeded Thomas at the ORL and that he could offer 2 beds and stabling for 4 horses. The sign thus existed as stated in the above mentioned citation. Viscount Torrington dined at the ORL in 1789 *1 and commented that 'it is a very bad inn with a dirty puzzle-headed Irish waiter. These when sober are stupid; when drunken, insolent'. However, in 1791 his Lordship, having found The Mitre in Barnet 'the nastiest of inns' he went back to the ORL. Torrington's accounts of his travels in England do much to dispel cosy notions of the 18th century hostelry and its jovial host.

At the Petty Sessions held in 1796 in Barnet at The Boar's Head - now the Crown & Anchor - licence was granted to Henry Gravestock at the ORL *2. It was described as standing adjacent to the Toll Gate or Barnet Block which was part of The Whetstone Turnpike Trust. Access then to High Barnet was via Mays Lane and a scramble uphill in the environs of what is now Bedford Avenue and Normandy Avenue. It is interesting that an earlier licence, in 1761 refers to 'The Red Lyon Wells'. This reflects the house's connection with The Physic Well, in Pepys Crescent and which is the subject of Museum Bulletin No.19. Visitors to the Well in its heyday doubtless found the ORL a convenient place for refreshment and if coming from nearer London, its position obviated ascent of the hill.

When the engineer McAdam completed the construction of Barnet Hill, c.1827, the ORL was bypassed and no longer on the main thoroughfare to the north. Custom must have been greatly diminished. The house was not convenient either for local people in High Barnet where they had a very wide choice of houses catering for their thirst and hunger, anyhow. New Barnet, before the coming of the railways was virtually non-existent and East Barnet remote. Some patronage would have come from Totteridge agricultural workers and the like, but for most of the year it was likely to have been a lean time. However, from news in the Barnet Gazette and later, the Barnet Press, it appears that the ORL was well placed to cater for the horse and cattle fairs, together with the swings and roundabouts of pleasure fairs which were at their height in the 1920's and 1930's. Earlier there was the Barnet Racecourse which functioned in the declivity via Mays Lane running towards the Arkley Gate. The Barnet Gazette in August 1860 advertised the first sheep fair to be

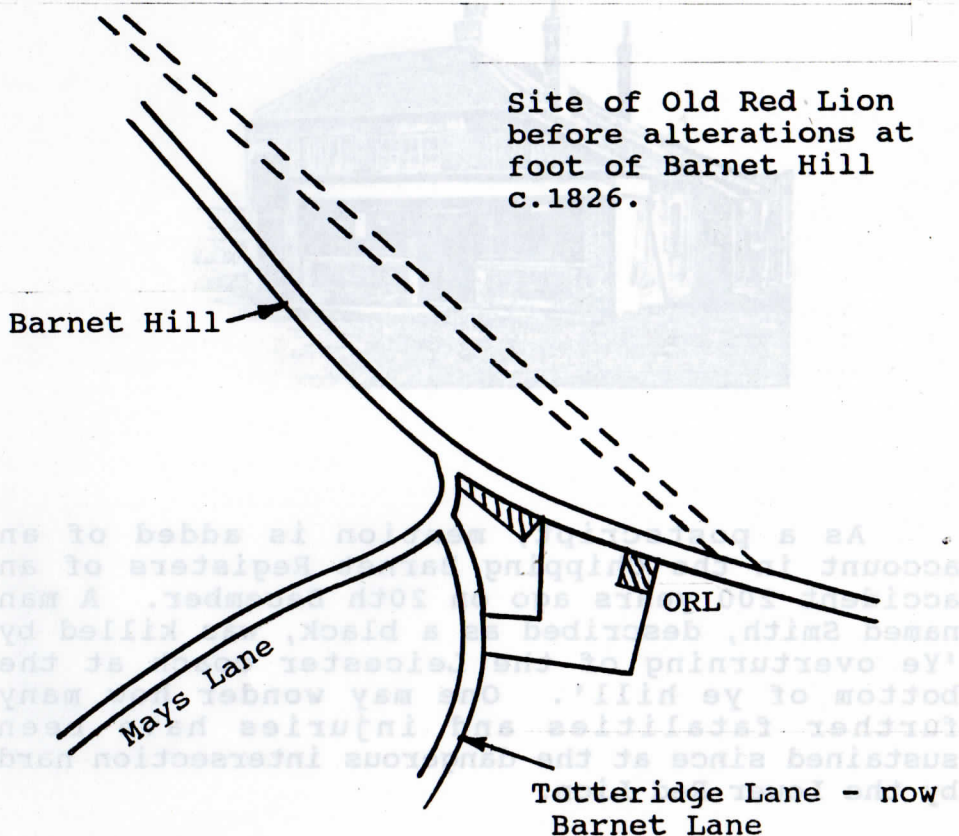
held at Underhill in Clayton's Field, later Elm Farm, nearby the ORL. Long before, however, livestock fairs were held Underhill. An unidentified press cutting the Museum collection includes an advertisement dated 1762 which refers to a Welsh Fair to be held for three days in September. Welsh fairs were so called because cattle were brought from Wales to be fattened for the London Market. It was a Charter Fair and no hawker's licences were required. Application to be made to the Red Lion at the bottom of the hill where stands and other facilities were to be hired.

On 24th June 1890 trustees of the estate of Charles Bryant, deceased offered 'the freehold roadside inn known as The Old Red Lion, Underhill for sale. Bryant was for many years the owner of the upper Red Lion as well, a successful hotelier and a notable local figure in the life of the town. The ORL then had 5 bedrooms, a bar, bar parlour, taproom and a general shop. At the rear was stabling and a skittle alley. Adjoining, as part of the parcel, was a lodging house with 3 bedrooms. The Inn was let on a repairing lease to the Hertfordshire brewers, Messrs. McMullen for a term of 7 years at a rental of £40 Op.a. *3

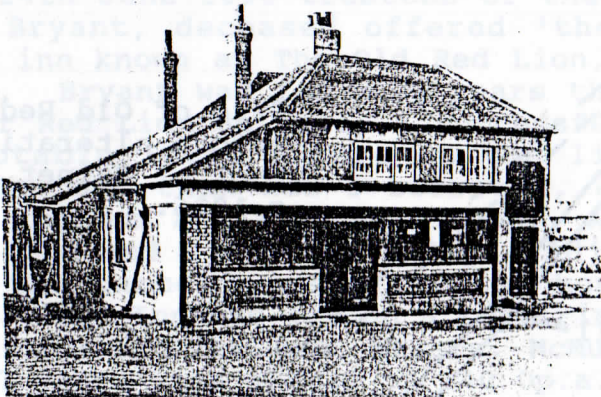
By the 1920's the ORL had become a convenient 'local' for supporters of Barnet Football Club whose playing field was established nearby and which boasted a covered stand known by some as The Chicken Roost. From personal and family recollections, football crowds were fairly well behaved although on one occasion an unpopular referee was seen immersed in the horse drinking through which stood near the ORL.

At a time in the mid 19th century, precise date unascertained, the parcel of property which

included the lodging house referred to and a terrace of cottages beyond it, was acquired by the joint parishes of St Andrew and St George, Holborn. It was used as an infant poor house for orphans of the Crimean War. In 1932 the property was released by the churches, their charitable venture having long ceased. That same year application was made to Barnet magistrates by Messrs. McMullen for permission to build a new public house on a site adjacent to the old establishment *4. By 1934 the work was complete and the Red Lion sign was set up again. The Herts County magazine, 1948, gives a full account of these manoeuvres.



The ORL was again rebuilt in 1952 *5, it still being in the hands of McMullens. The sign has witnessed the development and height of the coaching trade; the coming of the railways, the cycling fever early in the century and above all, in terms of casual business, ever increasing motor car traffic. It remains a senior licensed house among the few in Barnet, that is the town and not the borough, which has survived the economics of life today.



As a postscript, mention is added of an account in the Chipping Barnet Registers of an accident 200 years ago on 20th December. A man named Smith, described as a black, was killed by 'Ye overturning of the Leicester coach at the bottom of ye hill'. One may wonder how many further fatalities and injuries have been sustained since at the dangerous intersection hard by the Lower Red Lion.

- *1. Torrington Diaries Vol.4. Reprint of 19...
Methun 1970
- *2. Barnet Petty Session Records. Museum Archives.
- *3. Sale Notice. Museum Archives.
- *4. Barnet Press 23 April 1932
- *5. Barnet Press November 1952.

Brian Wise, Totland Bay, July 1990.

1. Torrington Diaries Vol. 4. Reprint of 1-
the Bulletin of the West Side
Hedge 1950
2. Torrington Diaries Vol. 4. Reprint of 1-
the Bulletin of the West Side
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3. Torrington Diaries Vol. 4. Reprint of 1-
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