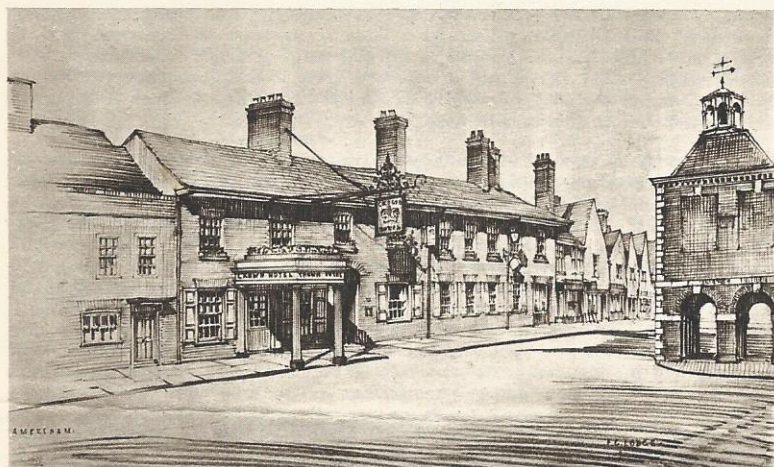


TALES OF OLD INNS

No. 4. The Crown at Amersham.



The "Crown," Amersham

THE *Crown* at Amersham is a shy old inn ; it does not obtrude its charms. To Amersham's broad High Street, surely one of the most unspoiled of country High Streets in all England, the *Crown* presents an austere red brick front, an unhappy modernization of a hundred odd years ago. But behind that rather commonplace frontage is hidden a remarkable building with a history going back to the days of the Tudors.

You have but to pass through the archway into its courtyard to discover the real old *Crown*. There you see the timbered walls that were new built in Queen Elizabeth's time, and the picturesque yard, with its stabling, that has known and sheltered the traffic of the road, from the cumbersome coaches that came lumbering along the muddy Buckingham highways three centuries ago, to the motor of to-day.

Like so many old inns the *Crown* has known many changes and alterations through the years, for an inn is forever modernizing itself, enlarging and improving its rooms. You see an example of this in the present comfortable lounge from which you look out upon the main street and Amersham's charming, late-seventeenth century Town Hall. The lounge was once two rooms, as the differing heights of its old timbered ceiling clearly shows. This room is probably one of the oldest parts of the house, and it contains one of its greatest treasures.

On the end wall, to your right as you enter, much mellowed by time, is painted the royal coat of arms of Queen Elizabeth, and above it you can make out the words : " GOD SAVE THE QUEEN." The coat quarters the

lions of England with the lilies of France and the supporters are not the familiar Lion and the Unicorn, but the Lion and the Dragon, and that dates it as sixteenth century, for the Dragon is Tudor: the Scottish Unicorn did not come into use until James I's time. Tradition has it that this decoration was set up in the *Crown* to commemorate a visit of Queen Elizabeth to the great house of Shardeloes, seat of the Drake family, on the outskirts of the town, and it is probable that at one time all the walls had painted decoration. Indeed traces of further wall painting were found recently, near the door, but they could not be saved.

Still, you may yet see the sort of gay decoration that once adorned the principal rooms of the *Crown*, for, happily, another fine example has been discovered and skilfully preserved. That is upstairs in bedroom No. 1, where one whole wall is painted in an elaborate and intricate design, and, though faded after three and a half centuries, the colours are yet bright enough to tell of the cheerful way in which the Elizabethans loved to decorate their rooms before the days of wall papers.

Although the report of the Royal Commission on Historic Monuments, published some years since, says tentatively that the *Crown* was built "probably in the early 17th century" these wall paintings go to show that it is at least fifty years older and they show too that the *Crown* was a house of considerable importance in its earliest days. It was sturdily built. Wherever you walk in the old place you see its original, massive oak-timbers in ceiling and wall. In the entrance hall, which you approach from the courtyard, the work of the old craftsmen is all about you, and in the Coffee Room, a pleasing, long low chamber looking out upon the yard, you may well visualise the *Crown* when it was new, with its heavily beamed ceiling and great wide open fire place of mellow red brick at one end. That chimney beam must have fully a twelve foot span, and the hearth has a cosy ingle-nook seat at one side where who can say how many generations have warmed themselves and drunk their ale, for this room was probably the kitchen of the inn, and the kitchen in the old days was the common dining-room for all but the rich travellers who could command a private chamber for their accommodation.

It is the same in the bedrooms. Massive oak beams obtrude in wall and ceiling, but to see the timber-work at its best you must go into what is now a tea-room in the courtyard. Once it was a stable, and there you find a magnificent open timber roof of giant beams that have been unaltered since the Tudor workmen put them in place.

Of Georgian times and the spacious Coaching Age, the *Crown* shows many traces, though it would have been more a Posting House than a Coaching Inn: a place for private rather than public traffic. It is interesting to note that Amersham was one of the last towns to be served regularly by horse coach from London. True, in the end, the coach had degenerated into a three-horsed omnibus, but up until 1890 the Amersham and Wendover stage plied daily to the *Old Bell* in Holborn, returning at five o'clock each evening.

It was in the hey-day of the Coaching Age that the old inn modernized itself, hiding what was undoubtedly a charming black and white timbered front behind the present severe brickwork, and building its impressive pillared portico entrance which now leads only to the Bar. But that room has its history. It is known traditionally as the Court Room, but whether a Court Room for the Local Justices, or a Court Room for the holding of the Manor Courts periodically, local opinion is uncertain. It was possibly the latter, since the inn once belonged to the Shardeloes estate, but recent research goes to show that a Court of Justice did meet here, though in what is now the Lounge. So although the Town Hall opposite would seem to provide the better accommodation, maybe it was to the *Crown* that they haled those "Common Beggars, Ballad Singers and other vagrants" a warning to whom, dated 1811, may still be read at the entrance to the old town.

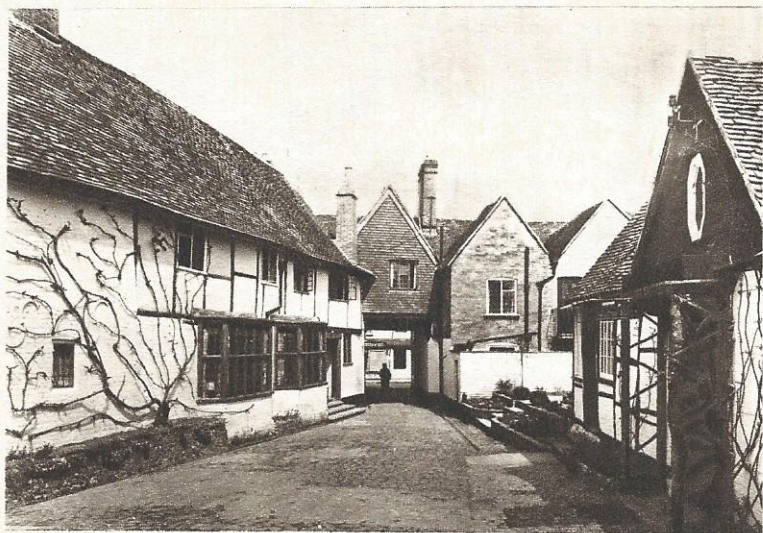
The *Crown's* latest alterations have recently been completed. They were the result of a fire which fortunately did little damage to the older parts of the building. But opportunity was taken for certain reconstructions of a practical kind—a new kitchen and new bathrooms were installed—and the old inn to-day is all the better for the change. None of its early charm has gone, its ancient walls are the fresher for re-distemping and most of its timbers have been exposed. And the fire added one more to the many tales the *Crown* has to tell. For forty years past those who frequented the inn knew its famous white cockatoo. He was a feature of the old place. He is still there, in the Lounge Bar, but alas! stuffed. He was taken away while the alterations were being made and he died. But his record on the wall of the Bar credits him with having given the alarm of the fire.

The *Crown* has a delightful garden. You reach it through the Courtyard—and notice as you go the big vine that grows against the Coffee Room wall and bears a good crop of black grapes each year. And in that pleasant garden you may sit on a summer day, and muse idly on the changes of life and manners that the old *Crown* has seen, and recall the custom, recorded by a local historian, of how the women-folk of Amersham took possession of its inns at election time, the two best inns, of which the *Crown* was one, being selected by the ladies of the town. Here they awaited the arrival of the newly-elected members, "who formally entered . . . and demurely kissed them in turns."

AMERSHAM AND ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD.

Amersham is one of the most picturesque old market towns in England. Although less than 26 miles from Marble Arch, its appearance and atmosphere are entirely of the Eighteenth Century.

Its long, broad High Street is bordered by mellow old houses of, it seems, every age but the present. Many of them were new built four hundred years ago: others show fine examples of early Georgian design. And set in the midst of this lovely street is a quaint Market Hall built in 1682.

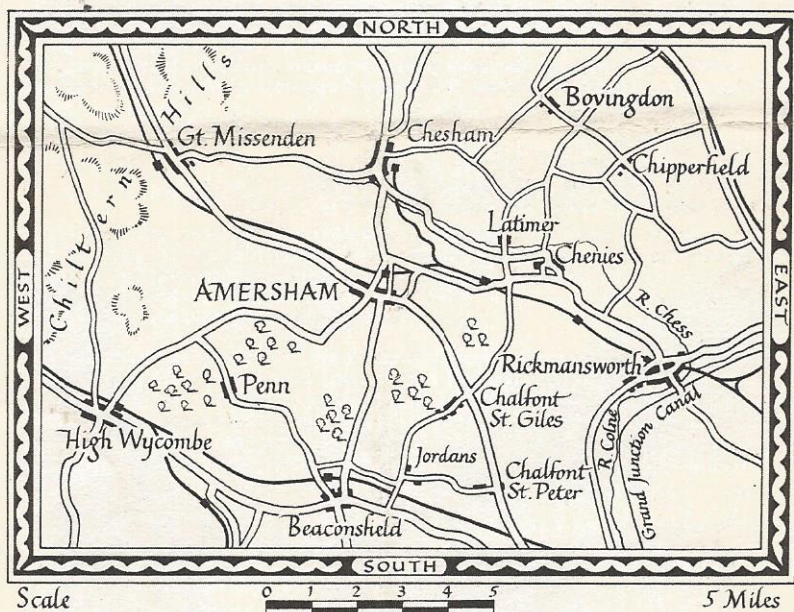


The Courtyard at the "Crown"

Old customs die hard in Amersham. The election custom referred to above is dead, because Amersham no longer sends members to Parliament. But they still ring the Market Bell at noon each Tuesday, although the market has ceased to exist long since, and all good Amersham folk danced in the main street until midnight to commemorate King George VI's coronation, as they danced to commemorate the crowning of the five Georges before him, and the Charleses and Jameses and Queen Elizabeth who came before them.

The little town, decently aloof from modern Amersham on the hill a mile away, is in the Chilterns, a most convenient centre for those who love to walk in those glorious, breezy beech-clad hills. Close at hand is the Quaker Penn country; indeed Gulielma Springett, who became William Penn's wife, lived for some years at Bury House on the outskirts of the town, and Penn lies buried in the Quaker cemetery of Jordans near Chalfont St. Peter, only a few miles away, and lived for five years at Rickmansworth, nearer still to Amersham. At Chalfont St. Giles, only a mile or so from the *Crown*, John Milton's cottage is preserved.

From London it is reached by rail in 50 minutes from Marylebone or Baker Street stations; or by motor coach in an hour and a half from Oxford Circus or Victoria. The most pleasant road route is through Uxbridge and Gerrards Cross; the alternative via Harrow and Rickmansworth.



Further particulars can be obtained from the Manager of the "*Crown*," Amersham (Tel. 60), or from Trust Houses, Ltd., 53, Short's Gardens, London, W.C.2, from whom a complete set of the leaflets in this series may be had on application, price 2s., post free.