

# ABINGDON'S



# Pub WALK



An insight into the colourful history of the local pubs

# Abingdon's historic pubs

A walking tour of Abingdon based on the history and importance of its public houses, coaching inns and the brewing industry will always be incomplete. We have tried here to give the participant an insight into the colourful history of the local pubs. We would like to acknowledge the use we have made of the book 'Inns and Alehouses of Abingdon 1550 – 1978' written by Jacqueline Smith and John Carter.

The walk is about 1 ½ miles in length and starts in the Market Square where at various times there have been eight pubs.



**1:** Perhaps the most notable pub was The Queens Hotel which once took up almost all of one side of the Market Square facing the County Hall Museum. It is where Costa and Starbucks are now. It was called The Antelope Inn when it was visited by Samuel Pepys. Before this the business here was called the New Inn and was originally a guest house for visitors to the Abbey. Back in the 1950's it was traditional for all pubs to give a pint of beer to delivering draymen. However the landlord at The Queens refused to do so, giving them a meal instead. One drayman took such exception to this that he always took a thin tube with him when they took the barrels down to the cellar and helped himself to what he considered to be his due from an opened barrel, and perhaps more!



**2:** Another of the pubs that used to be in the Market Square was The Plough and Anchor. It was positioned where the entrance to the shopping precinct is now.

It became notorious in 1753 for hosting a menagerie of exotic animals “...consisting of Monkeys, Baboons, Tygers, Wolves, Bears, Cubbs”.

These became a public nuisance and were auctioned off on condition the purchaser removed them from the town immediately and never return. They created a terrible smell which was reported as “...being excessive nauseous and infectious, – and their howlings and roarings very much disturb the peace and quiet...”. They also used to escape quite frequently “...particularly a large baboon who always carried a monkey on his shoulder”. Pubs doubled as places of entertainment as well as auction rooms, post offices and even doctors’ and dentists’ surgeries!



**3:** Go through the passageway off the Market Square and cross Stert Street, turn right and walk down towards the River Thames and onto the bridge.

Look across the road at the grassy

area by the bridge alongside the Old Gaol development.

This was the site of The White Hart Inn, noted as being in existence in a survey of 1554. The owner of the pub in the 1600’s was John Phelps. He was appointed Clerk to the Court that tried Charles I, leading to his execution. Following the restoration of the monarchy John Phelps was charged and tried for the crime of regicide, the killing of a king. He was found guilty and was to be executed but had escaped to Switzerland where he died a natural death.







**4:** On the bridge you can see The Nags Head pub. It probably takes its name from the island on which it is built. It is called Nags Head Island. The island may also have been the site of the town's ducking stool. Ducking stools were chairs formerly used for the punishment of disorderly women and dishonest tradesmen. There is a report in the Abingdon Quarter Sessions Records of the 17th century of a local Abingdon woman called Grace Stampe who was subjected to punishment by "ducking stool". Grace was accused of being "a common Schold, a brawler, scholder and disturber of her neighbours" and her punishment was to "be washed with water".

**5:** Retrace your steps back towards the town centre. Stop at The Broad Face, a pub since at least 1688 and originally called the Saracens Head. There are many theories about the origins of the name. It could refer to the face of a hanged man due to the gaol opposite or a drowned man. Both a bit gruesome. Alternatively it may refer to a landlord with a broad and welcoming smile or, perhaps, the pub showing a broad face to the river.





**6:** Carry on along the street towards the town centre. Stop at The Crown and Thistle. The name is a reference to the Union of the two Crowns of England and Scotland in 1603. It was a very successful coaching inn in the 18th century. For 30 years the landlord John Powell organised various entertainments and services to attract the wealthy customers. There were opportunities to see the dentist or in 1767 to get inoculated against smallpox or see the famous occultist Chevalier Taylor. It still retains its historic cobbled yard and the car park at the back was once the site of the stables.



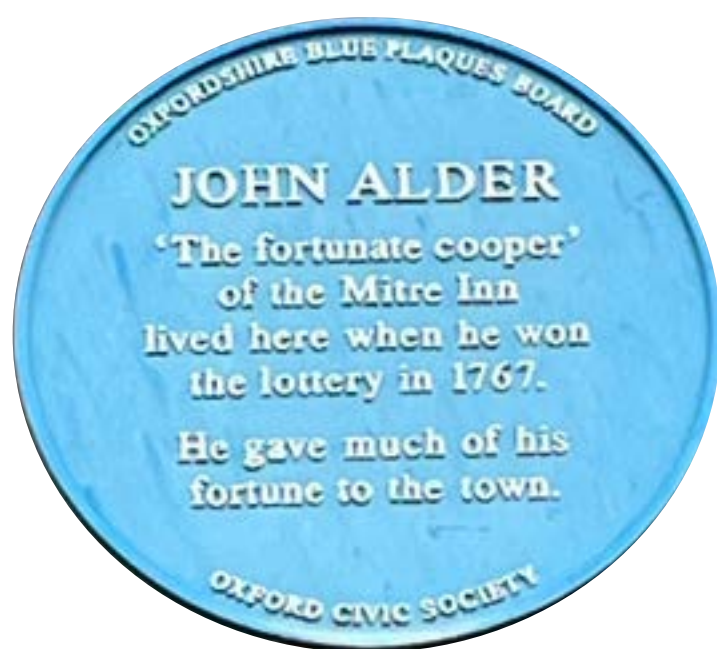
**7:** Pause at number 3 Stert Street. There are records of eleven pubs in Stert Street but we won't be mentioning them all! Number 3 was called either the Golden Cross or the Butchers Arms at different times between 1842 until 1921. When the building was being renovated a whistle with three holes and made from the humerus bone of a swan was found here. It was a type which would allow the player to play one-handed while using a drum with the other to probably accompany Morris Dancers. The whistle has been dated to the 13th century and can be seen in the Bate Museum of Musical Instruments in Oxford. Horses were led through the front door of this pub and along the corridor to the stables at the back. The flagstones were muffled with straw to deaden the noise of the hooves in an attempt not to wake sleeping guests!

**8:** Continue along Stert Street and stop at Pizza Express. This was once The George and Dragon. It was a coaching inn from 1673. There is a story that at one time this pub had a special licence to open at 6am on market days for farmers, market porters etc. To ensure that only these people were



able to benefit from this they imposed a rather unusual dress code – you had to be wearing wellington boots to be allowed in! Reputedly it also acquired the colloquial name the ‘blood bucket’ owing to the penchant for fisticuffs shown by the customers.

**9:** Further along Stert Street on the right is number 39, the site of The Mitre pub. This is marked by an Oxford Civic Society Blue Plaque The landlord, John Alder, achieved national fame in 1767 when he won £20,000 on the national lottery, equivalent to many millions today. His wife, who ran the pub, gave him £22 to pay the amount owed to the brewers who supplied their beer but he spent £12 of this at The Crown & Thistle to buy a lottery ticket. They were woken a few days later in the early hours to be told they had won the top prize. His first charitable acts were to clear all customer debts, he provided clothes for the poor in his parish, organized that two oxen be roasted to feed the poor and asked for the church bells to be rung and gave a guinea to each ringer. Carry on up Stert Street and cross at the pedestrian crossing onto Broad Street.





**10:** Pause by Abingdon Spice. This was where The Beehive pub used to be situated and at one time its landlord was appropriately named William Honey. Honey can also be used in the brewing process. It used to have a wonderful sign with the following rhyme.



Within this Hive we're all alive  
Good liquor makes us funny  
If you are dry, step in and try  
The flavour of our Honey.

I don't think people were really interested in tasting the flavour of honey when they drank here!

**11:** Continue along Broad Street and turn left into the precinct then turn right past Jhoots Pharmacy until you see The Black Swan on your left on Bath Street. In 1869 this pub was sold to Morlands for £600. The landlord, William Westbrook, was deemed to be blind so he 'signed' the deed by making a mark; Curiously he also signed his name later in the document! In 1960 the landlord, Basil Collins, started the first 'Aunty Sally' league in Abingdon. A game which looks simple but is remarkably difficult to master!





**12:** Turn left down Bath Street. Further along Bath Street, on your left, is The Blue Boar, most likely a reference to the pig market that was once held in this street and the street was once



known as Boar Street. In 1831 a man was arrested here in “a state of nudity” after a drinking session. He was found guilty of being a ‘rogue and a vagabond’ and sentenced to three months hard labour. We tend to think that the anti-social effects of alcohol are a new phenomenon. There is plenty of evidence in records and newspaper articles over hundreds of years that there was great concern about drunkenness and the easy availability of alcohol. Abingdon was no different to any other town of its size. The local temperance society did establish a temperance hotel called The Rising Sun to try to combat the problems caused by excessive drinking. It was in The Square, our next port of call. Walk to The Square.

**13:** The Square was the site of the old sheep market. The importance of the pubs for conducting trade is easily understood here. In this small area at different times there was The Sun, The Fleur de Lys, The Bear, The Cock and Bottle, The Chequers, The Katherine Wheel and The Bird in the Hand. Opposite, on the far side of the road, was the site of The Lamb Inn which, in the 18th century was one of the most prominent coaching inns in the town. Like other pubs and inns The Lamb Inn used to issue trade tokens as small change. The tokens could only be used in the issuing establishment, and some from The Lamb Inn are in the collections of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.





**14:** Proceed right and continue beyond The Square to the traffic lights and cross onto Ock Street where there were at one time 22 pubs. Continue until you arrive at The Brewery Tap. This building was once

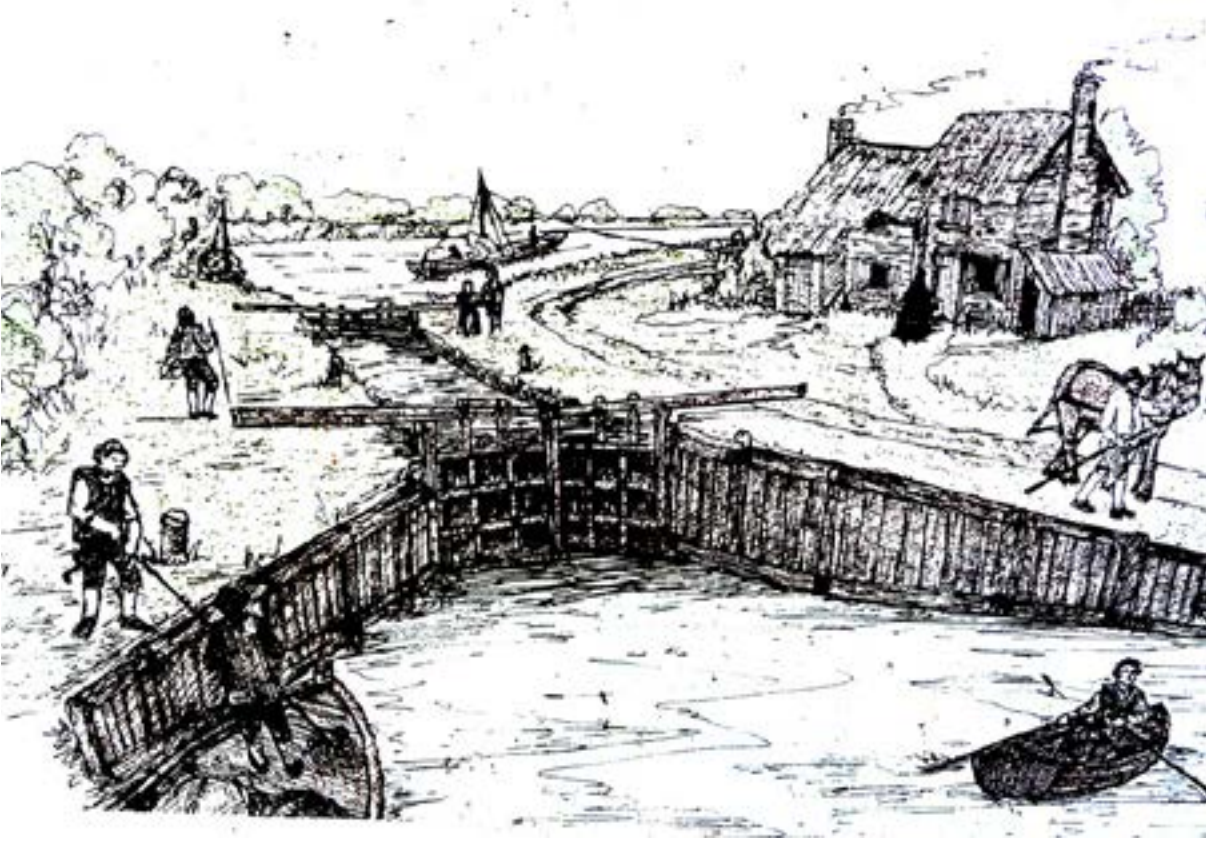


simply part of the huge Morland's brewery complex which was located here. It became a pub in the 1990's and is one of the newest pubs in Abingdon. It is well worth visiting the pub to see the large collection of brewing memorabilia. Some of the original stained glass can be seen in the lower windows of the building. To give an example of how important the brewing and malting industries were to the town so much damage was being caused to this road that in 1599 there was a decree that all heavy carts bringing in malt should pay a toll of a penny for repairing the "great ruin and decay done to the streets."

**15:** Take the small street on the right of The Brewery Tap called Coopers Lane. Returning towards the town along Coopers Lane you can get an idea of the size of the Morland brewery. This was once the site of The Eagle Brewery which Morland's acquired. Morland's brewery closed in 1999 but you can still see their iconic sign around Abingdon on the walls of buildings which were once Morland pubs. The sign commemorates George Morland a very successful painter during the 16th century whose career was destroyed eventually through alcoholism. Although never part of the brewing family George was the inspiration of the artists logo used by the brewery. Turn left by Ocklea House, once the home of the head brewer. Continue into St Edmunds Lane until you reach West St Helen Street.







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**16:** Turn right towards St Helen's Church. As you look down to the river on the left at 52 East St Helen Street is the probable site of a pub called The Chequer Inn. The landlord here, Charles Evans Shury, was executed in 1790 for his part in "The Waterturnpike Murder" three years before. It was in The Chequer Inn where booty was disposed and plots were hatched. In 1787 an elderly man, David Charteris, walking home from the Abingdon Michaelmas fair with money in his pocket, was robbed and murdered after leaving The Waterturnpike public house near the lock at the entrance to the Swift Ditch, the channel of the Thames that by-passed Abingdon. Four men were identified as the likely culprits, Charles Shury was hung at the Oxford Castle Gaol and his body given to the Oxford University Anatomy. School. Later the pub was called The Lord Nelson after his victories in battle. In the past this area was not the genteel residential area we see today. It was a busy wharf area for the unloading and loading of goods. The pubs served the thirsty workers. Turn and walk up East St Helen Street towards the town centre.





**17:** At the top of East St Helen Street, you will find The Kings Head & Bell. There has been an inn on this site dating back before 1554 when it was known as The Bell. It is one of the oldest establishments



still existing in Abingdon. There is a story that this is where King Charles I and Prince Rupert would meet to discuss strategy during the English Civil War. There is no proof of this but it is a great story. King Charles certainly visited Abingdon during the Civil War and it is known he stayed at Barton Court, at the invitation of his friend Sir Thomas Reade. The Inn itself had stabling for at least 100 horses at one time and had its own smithy. The idea of travelling by horse and carriage may sound romantic but during the 1780's and well into the 1800's highway men and footpads held up such vehicles and robbed travellers. The road through Bagley Wood was a favourite haunt of highwaymen.

**18:** Across the road is The Punchbowl which is known to have been a pub in 1775 but the building is much older. It was also known as The Fleur de Lys and the Coachmakers Arms in the past. Some of the wood panelling inside is thought to be 16th century and there is some excellent etched glass in the front windows. The etched glass is of the insignia of Morland's United Breweries.



*We hope you have enjoyed this walk. Return to the Market Square for some well-earned refreshment*