

The King's Head – 'where a relaxed atmosphere prevails'

'Probably one of the nicest inns in Aylesbury with a great open courtyard'; 'By far and away the best pub in Aylesbury'; 'Excellent house in interesting & historic building, with excellent beers'; 'I have been impressed with this place'; 'beer and food are both excellent'; 'a relaxed atmosphere prevails'. These are just some of the comments on various blog websites, and they sum up people's feelings about the King's Head. It holds a special place in the history of Aylesbury and both are intertwined. Nowadays it is also more than just a pub. The Tourist Office, a coffee shop also selling secondhand books, and a florist can all be found off the Courtyard.



Sketch by Nick Carter, courtesy of the Aylesbury Society

History records that the King's Head has always been multi-functional. The building dates back to 1386, and perhaps even earlier. The first buildings on the site were where the Farmers' Bar is now situated and consisted of 3 shops and a cottage. There was a cellar underneath one of the shops, accessible by steps from the street. This was a tavern called the King's Head (Kynghshede) and would almost certainly have been named after the reigning monarch, Richard II. The shops and cottage would have had lesser buildings attached, with a ground level hall and parlour, and sleeping quarters on the first floor. All that remains of these buildings is the cellar underneath the Farmers' Bar. These early buildings would actually have overlooked the Market Square. In mediaeval times Kingsbury was the centre of the

town and would have been much larger than it is today. The same was true of Market Square. Market stalls gradually became permanent and eventually became shops, houses and inns. The area between Kingsbury and Buckingham Street were a later encroachment as are the shops in front of the King's Head and on the west and east sides of that square.

In 1382 the 2nd Earl of Ormonde, James Butler, granted the Friars Minor of England 10 acres in Aylesbury to found a Grey Friar's or Franciscan Friarage. It was located in an area near to the current Friarage Passage, Rickford's Hill and Friars Square Shopping Centre. As the King's Head buildings were adjacent they would certainly have been used as lodgings for passing visitors to the Monastery. A commemorative plaque in Friarage Passage, erected by the Town Council and Aylesbury Society, marks the location.

In the mid 15th century Sir Ralph Verney, the Lord Mayor of London who played a major role during the War of the Roses, acquired the King's Head properties. The properties had been purchased in 1455 by William Wandesford who had served in the household of Margaret of Anjou. Unfortunately for him, he was a Lancastrian during the War of the Roses and had to forfeit his estates in 1465 to Verney.

Between 1485 – 80 Verney set about demolishing some of the older buildings and acquiring adjacent land to build a Great Hall to house his important guests who, like Verney, were invariably successful London merchants.

Visitors to the Great Hall today marvel at the stained-glass window. Each of the five panes commemorates a connection with the period when the inn was built:

- (i) Edmond Beaufort (? – 1455) Royal courtier, soldier and supporter of Henry VI in the War of the Roses.
- (ii) Henry VI (1421 – 1475) The King at the time of the construction.
- (iii) William de la Pole (1396 – 1450) Earl of Suffolk. Played important role in marriage of Henry VI to Margaret of Anjou.

- (iv) Margaret of Anjou. Henry's Queen. The owner of the King's Head, William Wandesford also served in her household.
- (v) James Botlier. 4th Earl of Ormonde, (White Earl) (1390 – 1452). Descendant of the 2nd Earl of Ormonde Shield, founder of the Grey Friar's monastery nearby.

Other features of the Great Hall include a case on the wall showing the original wattle and daub under plasterwork, evidence of the original smoke hood inside the chimney and steps used by sweeps, hazel nuts for insulation found between the floor boards and glass in the door dated circa 1700.

By the late 15th century Verney had extended the Great Hall with a parlour, a secret room above and a kitchen. With the addition of the first gatehouse and stable accommodation, the area around the Courtyard was complete. Traces of the past can still be seen in the courtyard today: an 18th Century mounting block, a lamp holder for burning rags, hooks for unloading meat (which was used until the early 20th century), and some original cobbles. The old hotel reception office was originally used as an early Post Office. The stables, which are the only remaining example in Aylesbury, were built in the early 19th century replacing the 16th century originals. They were nearly destroyed in the 1930s to provide space for garaging, but fortunately survived. In addition to the court of Henry VI, the King's Head has been connected to other famous people such as Anne Boleyn, Oliver Cromwell and

the Rothschilds. Today that connection carries on in the tales of ghosts and 'presences' such as a lady in grey seen in the Great Hall, a pint pot seen to float mysteriously, an apparition of a nun seen in the old panelled dining room (now the Tourist Information Centre), an aroma of spices in the corridors and a 'presence' in Cromwell's bedroom.

The subject of Oliver Cromwell and the Civil War connection is a story in itself, and we will leave that for another time.

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