

## Lion Hotel

“When we arrive at an inn,” wrote Robert Southey in 1807, “we have not to send abroad to purchase wine and seek for provisions; everything is ready; the larder stored; the fire burning, the beds prepared, and the people of the house are asking our orders and solicitous to please.”

If we measure out today’s long-distance journeys in coffee spoons at motorway service stations, we once counted them in coaching inns. Back in the early 19th Century the inns reigned supreme in every town which lay on a major route across the kingdom, each a day’s ride apart. Three days and nights to London, two to Holyhead, four to Edinburgh.

Robert Southey called at many, as did Charles Dickens, both of them inveterate and curious travellers. They would struggle to do the same today. Many - perhaps most - of our ancient coaching inns have ended their journey. Birmingham’s two great inns - the Swan and the Coach and Horses - have gone, as has the Angel in Wolverhampton.

Those that remain have had to adapt to a less regular and more disparate kind of clientele, serving up a menu of wedding fayres, murder mystery nights and cheap weekend breaks. The sheer size of some of them has undermined their economic credibility.

We stayed at one in Alnwick in April. An ambitious earlier owner had purchased the ballroom fittings from a White Star liner to bedeck the restaurant. It echoed dolefully over breakfast.

Of all those great Midland coaching inns one or two still hark back to their glory days. The Lion at Shrewsbury, for one, still roars at passers-by on Wyle Cop, as they head downhill towards the Welsh Bridge. Most inns would be content with a painted sign; the Lion has two stone beasts of that ilk, one above the porch and another at the rear.

Each of these great inns deserves a book to itself, for they have remarkable stories to tell. There are the tales of famous visitors to recount, of course, but also the election campaigns fought tooth-and-nail in their bars and on their balconies, and the assembly rooms that staged musical soirees, hunt balls and royal visits. And that is not to mention the brightly painted coaches themselves, which once charged through the gateways and disgorged their travel-weary passengers in time for supper.

The history of the Feathers at Ludlow has been written up, and so, more recently, has that of the Lion, penned by John Butterworth, a former editor of the Shrewsbury Chronicle. As the major inn on the road that connected Ireland, Wales and London, the Lion Hotel has seen enough history, and enough comings and goings, to fill a volume twice the size.

The schedule of famous customers is an impressive enough dictionary of biography

on its own: William IV, Charles Dickens, Thomas de Quincey (who had to be put up in the ballroom), Nathaniel Hawthorne (who thought the place “uncheerful”), Benjamin Disraeli, the Beatles, Tony Hancock, Niccolò Paganini and Charles Darwin.

The building which stands, a dozen bays long, on Wyle Cop today was built in the 1770s, when the owner with the deep pockets was John Ashby, a former mayor and town clerk of Shrewsbury. But there was an earlier inn - then known as the Red Lion - on the site at least as far back as the 16th Century.

Subsequently it turned out that Ashby’s pockets were not so deep as he thought; he died in bankruptcy in 1779 and the contents of the hotel were sold to pay off some of the debts. As a grand gesture, it might have been one of the shortest on record.

But the Lion was too well-built, and too well-placed, to be down at heel for long. In 1780 the hotel lease was taken on by Robert Lawrence, who turned the place into one of the most successful travel inns in the region. And as long as the stage-coaches rolled through Shrewsbury (and the route of the Severn made this hard to avoid) the Lion could hardly fail to have a constant supply of customers.

When the trade was in its heyday, the coaching business was intensely competitive, and ever more wondrous vehicles, gaudily painted and fancifully named, tussled with each other for a share of the market. The Shrewsbury Wonder, plying the route between Shrewsbury and London in its distinctly yellow livery, was one of most recognizable, and certainly one of the fleetest of foot. Leaving London at 6.30 in the morning, it pulled into the Lion at 10.30 at night.

The claim was that the Wonder was always on time, and the 20 minutes allowed for breakfast, and 35 minutes for dinner in Birmingham, streamlined the journey to the point of indigestion. The original coach, I believe, is now in the BMAG Collections Centre at Dolman Street. The marks of its wheels, as it charged headlong through the hotel archway into the Lion, can still be seen on the gateposts today. At 5.00 am it was on its way again to the capital.

It’s a surprising tribute that the Lion’s restaurant is named not after one of the glittering celebrities who stayed at the hotel, but in honour of Sam Hayward, who drove the Wonder for 16 years, without ever being more than 10 minutes late.

Only at his death in 1851 could he be accused of that. The late Sam Hayward is buried in the graveyard of nearby St Julian’s, coachman and coaching inn still looking down on Wyle Cop as they always have.