

CHARLES G. HARPER

**THE OLD
INNS OF
ENGLAND**

VOL. 1&2

Charles G. Harper

The Old Inns of England **(Vol. 1&2)**

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*The Old Inns
of Old England*

CHAPTER I

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INTRODUCTORY

The Old Inns of Old England!—how alluring and how inexhaustible a theme! When you set out to reckon up the number of those old inns that demand a mention, how vast a subject it is! For although the Vandal—identified here with the brewer and the ground-landlord—has been busy in London and the great centres of population, destroying many of those famous old hostelries our grandfathers knew and appreciated, and building in their stead “hotels” of the most grandiose and palatial kind, there are happily still remaining to us a large number of the genuine old cosy haunts where the traveller, stained with the marks of travel, may enter and take his ease without being ashamed of his travel-stains or put out of countenance by the modish visitors of this complicated age, who dress usually as if going to a ball, and whose patronage has rung the death-knell of many an inn once quaint and curious, but now merely “replete with every modern convenience.”

I thank Heaven—and it is no small matter, for surely one may be thankful for a good inn—that there yet remain many old inns in this Old England of ours, and that it is not yet quite (although nearly) a misdemeanour for the wayfarer to drink a tankard of ale and eat a modest lunch of bread and cheese in a stone-flagged, sanded rustic parlour; or even, having come at the close of day to his halting-place, to indulge in the mild dissipation and local gossip in the bar of an old-time hostelry.

This is one of the last surviving joys of travel in these strange times when you journey from great towns for sake of change and find at every resort that the town has come down before you, in the shape of an hotel more or less palatial, wherein you are expected to dine largely off polished marble surroundings and Turkey carpets, and where every trace of local colour is effaced. A barrier is raised there between yourself and the place. You are in it, but not of it or among it; but something alien, like the German or Swiss waiters themselves, the manager, and the very directors and shareholders of the big concern.

At the old-fashioned inn, on the other hand, the whole establishment is eloquent of the place, and while you certainly get less show and glitter, you do, at any rate, find real comfort, and early realise that you have found that change for which you have come.

But, as far as mere name goes, most inns are “hotels” nowadays. It is as though innkeepers were labouring under the illusion that “inn” connotes something inferior, and “hotel” a superior order of things. Even along the roads, in rustic situations, the mere word “inn”—an ancient and entirely honourable title—is become little used or understood, and, generally speaking, if you ask a rustic for the next “inn” he stares vacantly before his mind grasps the fact that you mean what he calls a “pub,” or, in some districts oftener still, a “house.” Just a “house.” Some employment for the speculative mind is offered by the fact that in rural England an inn is “a house” and the workhouse “*the* House.” Both bulk largely in the bucolic scheme of existence, and, as a temperance lecturer might point out, constant attendance at the one leads inevitably to the other. At all events, both are great institutions, and prominent among the landmarks of Old England.

Which is the oldest, and which the most picturesque, inn this England of ours can show? That is a double-barrelled question whose first part no man can answer, and the reply to whose second half depends so entirely upon individual likings and preferences that one naturally hesitates before being drawn into the contention that would surely arise on any particular one being singled out for that supreme honour. Equally with the morning newspapers—and the evening—each claiming the “largest circulation,” and, like the several Banbury Cake shops, each the “original,” there are several “oldest licensed” inns, and very many arrogating the reputation of the “most picturesque.”

The “Fighting Cocks” inn at St. Albans, down by the river Ver, below the Abbey, claims to be—not the oldest inn—but the oldest inhabited house, in the kingdom: a pretension that does not appear to be based on anything more than sheer impudence; unless, indeed, we take the claim to be a joke, to which an inscription,

The Old Round House,
Rebuilt after the Flood,

formerly gave the clue. But that has disappeared. The Flood, in this case, seeing that the building lies low, by the river Ver, does not necessarily mean the Deluge.

This curious little octagonal building is, however, of a very great age, for it was once, as “St. Germain’s Gate,” the water-gate of the monastery. The more ancient embattled upper part disappeared six hundred years ago, and the present brick-and-timber storey takes its place.



THE OLDEST INHABITED HOUSE IN ENGLAND: THE
"FIGHTING COCKS," ST. ALBANS.

The City of London's oldest licensed inn is, by its own claiming, the "Dick Whittington," in Cloth Fair, Smithfield, but it only claims to have been licensed in the fifteenth century, when it might reasonably—without much fear of contradiction—have made it a century earlier. This is an unusual modesty, fully deserving mention. It is only an "inn" by courtesy, for, however interesting and picturesque the grimy, tottering old lath-and-plaster house may be to the stranger, imagination does not picture any one staying either in the house or in Cloth Fair itself while other houses and other neighbourhoods remain to choose from; and,

indeed, the “Dick Whittington” does not pretend to be anything else than a public-house. The quaint little figure at the angle, in the gloom of the overhanging upper storey, is one of the queer, unconventional imaginings of our remote forefathers, and will repay examination.



THE “DICK WHITTINGTON,” CLOTH FAIR.

Our next claimant in the way of antiquity is the “Seven Stars” inn at Manchester, a place little dreamt of, in such a connection, by most people; for, although Manchester is an ancient city, it is so modernised in general appearance that it is a place wherein the connoisseur of old-world inns would scarce think of looking for examples. Yet it contains three remarkably picturesque old taverns, and the neighbouring

town of Salford, nearly as much a part of Manchester as Southwark is of London, possesses another. To take the merely picturesque, unstoried houses first: these are the "Bull's Head," Greengate, Salford; the "Wellington" inn, in the Market-place, Manchester; the tottering, crazy-looking tavern called "Ye Olde Rover's Return," on Shude Hill, claiming to be the "oldest beer-house in the city," and additionally said once to have been an old farmhouse "where the Cow was kept that supplied Milk to The Men who built the 'Seven Stars,'" and lastly—but most important—the famous "Seven Stars" itself, in Withy Grove, proudly bearing on its front the statement that it has been licensed over 560 years, and is the oldest licensed house in Great Britain.



“YE OLDE ROVER’S RETURN,” MANCHESTER.

The “Seven Stars” is of the same peculiar old-world construction as the other houses just enumerated, and is just a humble survival of the ancient rural method of building in this district: with a stout framing of oaken timbers and a filling of rag-stone, brick, and plaster. Doubtless all Manchester, of the period to which these survivals belong, was of like architecture. It was a method of construction in essence identical with the building of modern steel-framed houses and offices in England and in America: modern construction being only on a larger scale. In either period, the framework of wood or of metal is set up first and then clothed with its architectural features, whether of stone, brick, or plaster.

The “Seven Stars,” however, is no skyscraper. So far from soaring, it is of only two floors, and, placed as it is—sandwiched as it is, one might say—between grim, towering blocks of warehouses, looks peculiarly insignificant.

We may suppose the existing house to have been built somewhere about 1500, although there is nothing in its rude walls and rough axe-hewn timbers to fix the period to a century more or less. At any rate, it is not the original “Seven Stars” on this spot, known to have been first licensed in 1356, three years after inns and alehouses were inquired into and regulated, under Edward the Third; by virtue of which record, duly attested by the archives of the County Palatine of Lancaster, the present building claims to be the “oldest Licensed House in Great Britain.”

There is a great deal of very fine, unreliable “history” about the “Seven Stars,” and some others, but it is quite true that the inn is older than Manchester Cathedral, for that—originally the Collegiate Church—was not founded until 1422; and toppers with consciences remaining to them may

lay the flattering unction to their souls that, if they pour libations here, in the Temple of Bacchus, rather than praying in the Cathedral, they do, at any rate (if there be any virtue in that), frequent a place of greater antiquity.

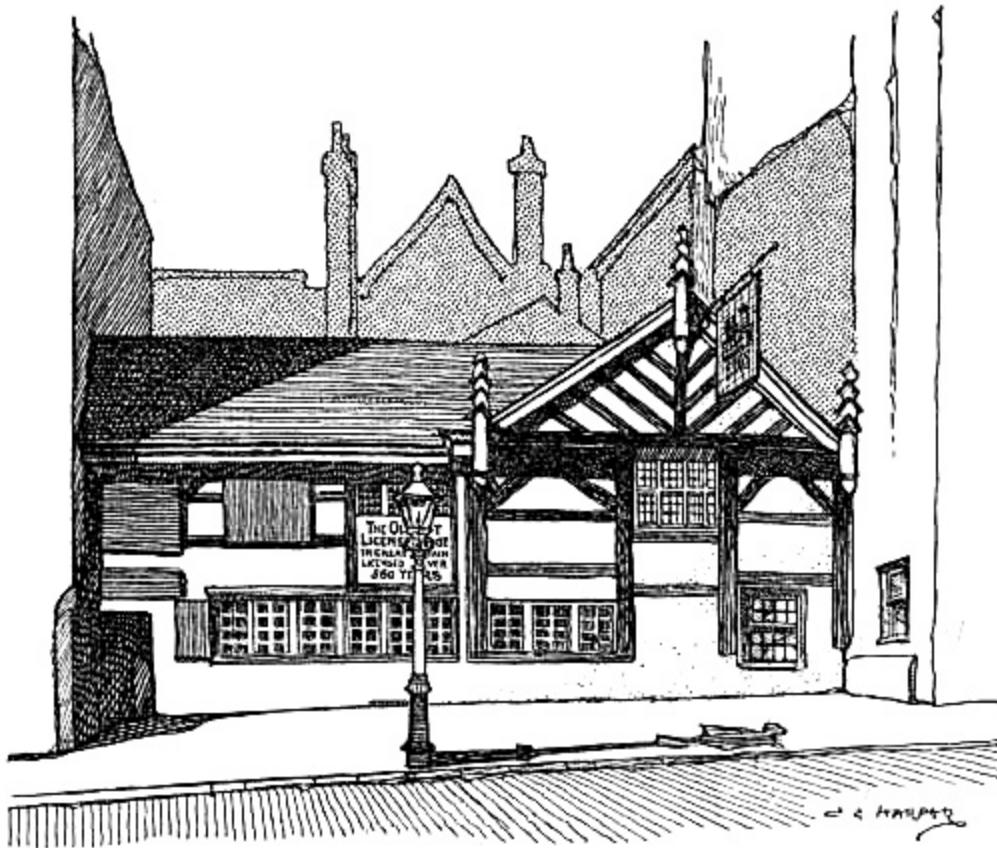
And antiquity is cultivated with care and considerable success at the “Seven Stars,” as a business asset. The house issues a set of seven picture-postcards, showing its various “historic” nooks and corners, and the leaded window-casements have even been artfully painted, in an effort to make the small panes look smaller than they really are; while the unwary visitor in the low-ceilinged rooms falls over and trips up against all manner of unexpected steps up and steps down.

It is, of course, not to be supposed that a house with so long a past should be without its legends, and in the cellars the credulous and uncritical stranger is shown an archway that, he is told, led to old Ordsall Hall and the Collegiate Church! What thirsty and secret souls they must have been in that old establishment! But the secret passage is blocked up now. Here we may profitably meditate awhile on those “secret passages” that have no secrets and afford no passage; and may at the same time stop to admire the open conduct of that clergyman who, despising such underhand and underground things, was accustomed in 1571, according to the records of the Court Leet, to step publicly across the way in his surplice, in sermon-time, for a refreshing drink.

“What stories this old Inn could recount if it had the power of language!” exclaims the leaflet sold at the “Seven Stars” itself. The reflection is sufficiently trite and obvious. What stories could not any building tell, if it were so gifted? But fortunately, although walls metaphorically have ears, they have not—even in literary imagery—got tongues, and so cannot blab. And well too, for if they could and did, what a

cloud of witness there would be, to be sure. Not an one of us would get a hearing, and not a soul be safe.

But what stories, in more than one sense, Harrison Ainsworth told! He told a tale of Guy Fawkes, in which that hero of the mask, the dark-lantern and the powder-barrel escaped, and made his way to the "Seven Stars," to be concealed in a room now called "Ye Guy Fawkes Chamber." Ye gods!



THE OLDEST LICENSED HOUSE IN GREAT BRITAIN: THE
"SEVEN STARS," MANCHESTER.

We know perfectly well that he did not escape, and so was not concealed in a house to which he could not come, but—well, there! Such fantastic tales, adopted by the house, naturally bring suspicion upon all else; and the story of the horse-shoe upon one of its wooden posts is therefore, rightly

or wrongly, suspect. This is a legend that tells how, in 1805, when we were at war with Napoleon, the Press Gang was billeted at the "Seven Stars," and seized a farmer's servant who was leading a horse with a cast shoe along Withy Grove. The Press Gang could not legally press a farm-servant, but that probably mattered little, and he was led away; but, before he went, he nailed the cast horse-shoe to a post, exclaiming, "Let this stay till I come from the wars to claim it!" He never returned, and the horse-shoe remains in its place to this day.

The room adjoining the Bar parlour is called nowadays the "Vestry." It was, according to legends, the meeting-place of the Watch, in the old days before the era of police; and there they not only met, but stayed, the captain ever and again rising, with the words, "Now we will have another glass, and then go our rounds"; upon which, emptying their glasses, they all would walk round the tables and then re-seat themselves.

A great deal of old Jacobean and other furniture has been collected, to fill the rooms of the "Seven Stars," and in the "Vestry" is the "cupboard that has never been opened" within the memory of living man. It is evidently not suspected of holding untold gold. Relics from the New Bailey Prison, demolished in 1872, are housed here, including the doors of the condemned cell, and sundry leg-irons; and genuine Carolean and Cromwellian tables are shown. The poet who wrote of some marvellously omniscient personage —

And still the wonder grew
That one small head could carry all he knew,

would have rejoiced to know the "Seven Stars," and might have been moved to write a similar couplet, on how much

so small a house could be made to hold.

CHAPTER II

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THE ANCIENT HISTORY OF INNS

Inns, hotels, public-houses of all kinds, have a very ancient lineage, but we need not in this place go very deeply into their family history, or stodge ourselves with fossilised facts at the outset. So far as we are concerned, inns begin with the Roman Conquest of Britain, for it is absurd to suppose that the Britons, whom Julius Cæsar conquered, drank beer or required hotel accommodation.

The colonising Romans themselves, of course, were used to inns, and when they covered Britain with a system of roads, hostelries and mere drinking-places of every kind sprang up beside them, for the accommodation and refreshment alike of soldiers and civilians. There is no reason to suppose that the Roman legionary was a less thirsty soul than the modern soldier, and therefore houses that resembled our beer-shops and rustic inns must have been sheer necessities. There was then the *bibulium*, where the bibulous boozed to their hearts' content; and there were the *diversoria* and *caupones*, the inns or hotels, together with the posting-houses along the roads, known as *mansiones* or *stabulia*.

The *bibulium*, that is to say, the ale-house or tavern, displayed its sign for all men to see: the ivy-garland, or wreath of vine-leaves, in honour of Bacchus, wreathed around a hoop at the end of a projecting pole. This bold advertisement of good drink to be had within long outlasted Roman times, and indeed still survives in differing forms, in the signs of existing inns. It became the "ale-stake" of Anglo-Saxon and middle English times.

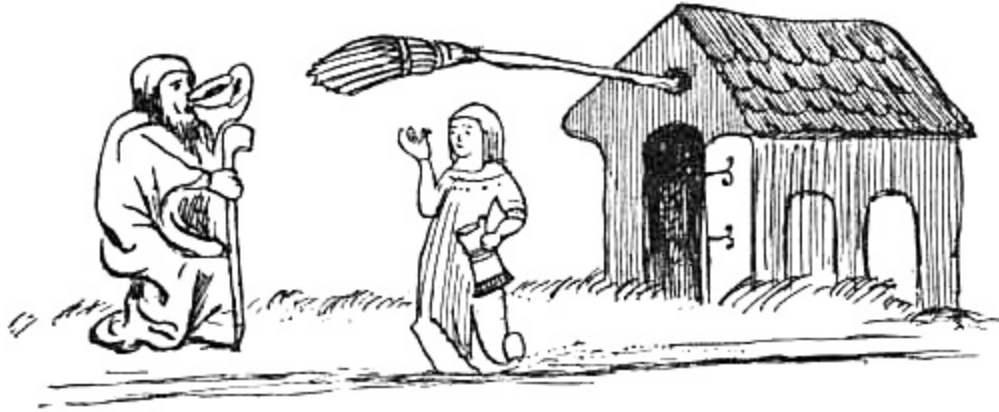
The traveller recognised the ale-stake at a great distance, by reason of its long pole—the “stake” whence those old beer-houses derived their name—projecting from the house-front, with its mass of furze, or garland of flowers, or ivy-wreath, dangling at the end. But the ale-houses that sold good drink little needed such signs, a circumstance that early led to the old proverb, “Good wine needs no bush.”

On the other hand, we may well suppose the places that sold only inferior swipes required poles very long and bushes very prominent, and in London, where competition was great, all ale-stakes early began to vie with one another which should in this manner first attract the attention of thirsty folk. This at length grew to be such a nuisance, and even a danger, that in 1375 a law was passed that all taverners in the City of London owning ale-stakes projecting or extending over the king’s highway “more than seven feet in length at the utmost,” should be fined forty pence and be compelled to remove the offending sign.

We find the “ale-stake” in Chaucer, whose “Pardoner” could not be induced to commence his tale until he had quenched his thirst at one:

But first quod he, her at this ale-stake
I will bothe drynke and byten on a cake.

We have, fortunately, in the British Museum, an illustration of such a house, done in the fourteenth century, and therefore contemporary with Chaucer himself. It is rough but vivid, and if the pilgrim we see drinking out of a saucer-like cup be gigantic, and the landlady, waiting with the jug, a thought too big for her inn, we are at any rate clearly made to see the life of that long ago. In this instance the actual stake is finished off like a besom, rather than with a bush.



AN ALE-STAKE.
From the Luttrell Psalter.

The connection, however, between the Roman garland to Bacchus and the mediæval “bush” is obvious. The pagan God of Wine was forgotten, but the advertisement of ale “sold on the premises” was continued in much the same form; for in many cases the “bush” was a wreath, renewed at intervals, and twined around a permanent hoop. With the creation, in later centuries, of distinctive signs, we find the hoop itself curiously surviving as a framework for some device; and thus, even as early as the reign of Edward the Third, mention is found of a “George-in-the-hoop,” probably a picture or carved representation of St. George, the cognisance of England, engaged in slaying the dragon. There were inns in the time of Henry the Sixth by the name of the “Cock-in-the-Hoop”; and doubtless the representation of haughty cockerels in that situation led by degrees to persons of self-sufficient manner being called “Cock-a-hoop,” an old-fashioned phrase that lingered on until some few years since.

In some cases, when the garland was no longer renewed, and no distinctive sign filled the hoop, the “Hoop” itself became the sign of the house: a sign still frequently to be met with, notably at Cambridge, where a house of that name, in coaching days a celebrated hostelry, still survives.

The kind of company found in the ale-stakes—that is to say, the beer-houses and taverns—of the fourteenth century is vividly portrayed by Langland, in his *Vision of Piers Plowman*. In that long Middle English poem, the work of a moralist and seer who was at the same time, beneath his tonsure and in spite of his orders, something of a man of the world, we find the virtuous ploughman reviewing the condition of society in that era, and (when you have once become used to the ancient spelling) doing so in a manner that is not only readable to moderns, but even entertaining; while, of course, as evidence of social conditions close upon six hundred years ago, the poem is invaluable.

We learn how Beton the brewster met the glutton on his way to church, and bidding him “good-morrow,” asked him whither he went.

“To holy church,” quoth he, “for to hear mass. I will be shriven, and sin no more.”

“I have good ale, gossip,” says the ale-wife, “will you assay it?” And so glutton, instead of going to church, takes himself to the ale-house, and many after him. A miscellaneous company that was. There, with Cicely the woman-shoemaker, were all manner of humble, and some disreputable, persons, among whom we are surprised to find a hermit. What should a hermit be doing in an ale-house? But, according to Langland’s own showing elsewhere, the country was infested with hermits who, refusing restriction to their damp and lonely hermitages, frequented the alehouses, and only went home, generally intoxicated, to their mouldy pallets after they had drunk and eaten their fill and roasted themselves before the fire.

Here, then:

Cesse the souteresse[1] sat on the bench,
Watte the warner[2] and hys wyf bothe
Thomme the tynkere, and tweye of hus knaues,
Hicke the hakeneyman, and Houwe the neldere,[3]
Claryce of Cockeslane, the clerk of the church,
An haywarde and an heremyte, the hangeman of Tyborne,
Dauwe the dykere,[4] with a dozen harlotes,
Of portours and of pyke-porses, and pylede[5] toth-drawers.
A ribibour,[6] a ratonere,[7] a raker of chepe,
A roper, a redynkyng,[8] and Rose the dissheres,
Godfrey of garlekehythe, and gryfin the walshe,[9]
An vpholderes an hepe.

All day long they sat there, boozing, chaffering, and quarrelling:

There was laughing and louting, and “let go the cuppe,”
And seten so till euensonge and son gen vmwhile,
Tyl glotoun had y-globbed a galoun and a lille.

By that time he could neither walk nor stand. He took his staff and began to go like a gleeman’s bitch, sometimes sideways and sometimes backwards. When he had come to the door, he stumbled and fell. Clement the cobbler caught him by the middle and set him on his knees, and then, “with all the woe of the world” his wife and his wench came to carry him home to bed. There he slept all Saturday and Sunday, and when at last he woke, he woke with a thirst—how modern *that* is, at any rate! The first words he uttered were, “Where is the bowl?”

A hundred and fifty years later than *Piers Plowman* we get another picture of an English ale-house, by no less celebrated a poet. This famous house, the “Running Horse,” still stands at Leatherhead, in Surrey, beside the long,

many-arched bridge that there crosses the river Mole at one of its most picturesque reaches. It was kept in the time of Henry the Seventh by that very objectionable landlady, Elynor Rummyng, whose peculiarities are the subject of a laureate's verse. Elynor Rummyng, and John Skelton, the poet-laureate who hymned her person, her beer, and her customers, both flourished in the beginning of the sixteenth century. Skelton, whose genius was wholly satiric, no doubt, in his *Tunning* (that is to say, the brewing) of *Elynor Rummyng*, emphasised all her bad points, for it is hardly credible that even the rustics of the Middle Ages would have rushed so enthusiastically for her ale if it had been brewed in the way he describes.

His long, rambling jingles, done in grievous spelling, picture her as a very ugly and filthy old person, with a face sufficiently grotesque to unnerve a strong man:

For her viságe
It would aswage
A manne's couráge.
Her lothely lere
Is nothyng clere,
But vgly of chere,
Droupy and drowsy,
Scuruy and lowsy;
Her face all bowsy,
Comely crynkled,
Woundersly wrynkled,
Lyke a rost pygges eare
Brystled wyth here.
Her lewde lyppes twayne,
They slauer, men sayne,
Lyke a ropy rayne:
A glummy glayre:
She is vgly fayre:

Her nose somdele hoked,
And camously croked,
Neuer stoppynge,
But euer droppynge:
Her skin lose and slacke,
Grayned like a sacke;
Wyth a croked backe.

Her eyen jowndy
Are full vnsoundy,
For they are blered;
And she grey-hered:
Jawed like a jetty,
A man would haue pytty
To se how she is gumbed
Fyngered and thumbed
Gently joynted,
Gresed and annoynted
Vp to the knockels;
The bones of her huckels
Lyke as they were with buckles
Together made fast;

Her youth is farre past.
Foted lyke a plane,
Legged lyke a crane;
And yet she wyll iet
Lyke a silly fet.

.

Her huke of Lincoln grene,
It had been hers I wene,
More than fourty yere;
And so it doth apere.
For the grene bare thredes
Loke lyke sere wedes,
Wyddered lyke hay,
The woll worne away:
And yet I dare saye

She thinketh herselfe gaye.

.

She dryueth downe the dewe
With a payre of heles
As brode as two wheles;
She hobbles as a gose
Wyth her blanket trose
Ouer the falowe:
Her shone smered wyth talowe,
Gresed vpon dyrt
That bandeth her skyrt.



ELYNOR RUMMYNG.

And this comely dame
I vnderstande her name
Is Elynor Rummynge,
At home in her wonnyng:
And as men say,
She dwelt in Sothray,
In a certain stede

Bysyde Lederhede,
She is a tonnysh gyb,
The Deuyll and she be syb,
But to make vp my tale,
She breweth nappy ale,
And maketh port-sale
To travelers and tynkers,
To sweters and swynkers,
And all good ale-drynkers,
That wyll nothyng spare,
But drynke tyll they stare
And bryng themselves bare,
Wyth, now away the mare
And let vs sley care
As wyse as a hare.

 Come who so wyll
To Elynor on the hyll
Wyth Fyll the cup, fyll
And syt there by styll.
Erly and late
Thyther cometh Kate
Cysly, and Sare
Wyth theyr legges bare
And also theyr fete.

Some haue no mony
For theyr ale to pay,
That is a shrewd aray;
Elynor swered, Nay,
Ye shall not beare away
My ale for nought,
By hym that me bought!
Wyth, Hey, dogge, hey,
Haue these hogges away^[10]
Wyth, Get me a staffe,
The swyne eate my draffe!

Stryke the hogges wyth a clubbe,
They haue dranke up my swyllyn tubbe.

The unlovely Elynor scraped up all manner of filth into her mash-tub, mixed it together with her “mangy fists,” and sold the result as ale. It is proverbial that “there is no accounting for tastes,” and it would appear as though the district had a peculiar liking for this kind of brew. They would have it somehow, even if they had to bring their food and furniture for it:

Insteede of quoyne and mony,
Some bryng her a coney,
And some a pot wyth honey;
Some a salt, some a spoone,
Some theyr hose, some theyr shoone;
Some run a good trot
Wyth skyllet or pot:
Some fyll a bag-full
Of good Lemster wool;
An huswyfe of trust
When she is athyrst
Such a web can spyn
Her thryft is full thyn.

Some go strayght thyther
Be it slaty or slydder,
They hold the hyghway;
They care not what men say,
Be they as be may
Some loth to be espyd,
Start in at the backesyde,
Over hedge and pale,
And all for good ale.
Some brought walnuts,
Some apples, some pears,
And some theyr clyppying shears.
Some brought this and that,
Some brought I wot ne're what,
Some brought theyr husband's hat.

and so forth, for hundreds of lines more.

The old inn—still nothing more than an ale-house—is in part as old as the poem, but has been so patched and repaired in all the intervening centuries that nothing of any note is to be seen within. A very old pictorial sign, framed and glazed,

and fixed against the wall of the gable, represents the ill-favoured landlady, and is inscribed: "Elynor Rummyn dwelled here, 1520."

Accounts we have of the fourteenth-century inns show that the exclusive, solitary Englishman was not then allowed to exist. Guests slept in dormitories, very much as the inmates of common lodging-houses generally do now, and, according to the evidence of old prints, knew nothing of nightshirts, and lay in bed naked. They purchased their food in something the same way as a modern "dosser" in a Rowton House, but their manners and customs were peculiarly offensive. The floors were strewn with rushes; and as guests generally threw their leavings there, and the rushes themselves were not frequently removed, those old interiors must have been at times exceptionally noisome.

Inn-keepers charged such high prices for this accommodation, and for the provisions they sold, that the matter grew scandalous, and at last, in the reign of Edward the Third, in 1349, and again in 1353, statutes were passed ordering hostelries to be content with moderate gain. The "great and outrageous dearth of victuals kept up in all the realm by innkeepers and other retailers of victuals, to the great detriment of the people travelling across the realm" was such that no less a penalty would serve than that any "hosteler or herberger" should pay "double of what he received to the party damnified." Mayors and bailiffs, and justices learned in the law, were to "enquire in all places, of all and singular, of the deeds and outrages of hostelers and their kind," but it does not appear that matters were greatly improved.



THE "RUNNING HORSE," LEATHERHEAD.

It will be observed that two classes of innkeepers are specified in those ordinances. The "hosteler" was the ordinary innkeeper; the "herberger" was generally a more or less important and well-to-do merchant who added to his income by "harbouring"—that is to say, by boarding and lodging—strangers, the "paying guests" of that age. We may dimly perceive something of the trials and hardships of old-time travel in that expression "harbouring." The traveller then came to his rest as a ship comes into harbour from stormy seas. The better-class travellers, coming into a town, preferred the herberger's more select table to the common publicity of the ordinary hostelry, and the herbergers themselves were very keen to obtain such guests, some even going to the length of maintaining touts to watch the arrival of strangers, and bid for custom. This was done both