

# the swan

STAFFORD

## A BRIEF HISTORY

BY WILL SWALES



# WELCOME

Welcome to a brief history of The Swan Hotel, Stafford. During the late spring and early summer of 2016 we had the good fortune to be able to revitalise and refurbish one of our fabulous sister inns, The King's Head in Richmond, North Yorkshire.

During the planning stage of this project we started to look hard at the building and its many historical attributes, at how some parts of the building had been added during its 300 years of existence. And whilst contemplating the small changes and additions we wanted to make, it dawned on me that we will only be its custodians for a generation or two at most. I can't foretell who will follow but started thinking about who had been its keepers in the past.

Therefore, we asked a good friend if he would research The King's Head and try to separate the fact from the fable; what's true and what has been elaborated during the storytelling process over the years.

Will Swales made such a good job of The King's Head that we then asked him to complete the same task for The Swan Hotel.

What follows is that research. We think it's as accurate as can be, but naturally there are many gaps and we would welcome any additional information.

I hope you enjoy this small booklet and the hospitality and service we provide within The Swan Hotel. Please feel free to take this copy with you.

**Kevin Charity**  
**Managing Director**  
**The Coaching Inn Group**

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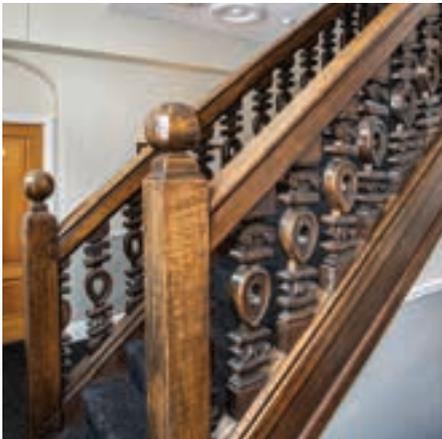
**“I DOUBT IF THERE ARE THREE ADJACENT BUILDINGS STILL STANDING ANYWHERE TODAY THAT CAN ILLUSTRATE 250 YEARS OF ARCHITECTURAL CHANGE BY SUCH SPLENDID EXAMPLES.”**

## THREE BUILDINGS AND 250 YEARS OF ARCHITECTURAL CHANGE



The earliest-known Swan Inn in Stafford stood in the town's Market Square as long ago as the 1400s. But little is known about it, so this story begins around the early 1600s and the erection of the current building, located farther along the principal road through the centre of the town, in Greengate Street.

Its architectural history is best considered in conjunction with two neighbouring properties, both of which have played parts in the life of The Swan. In a 1966 report for the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, the historic buildings expert Freddie Charles wrote: 'I doubt if there are three adjacent buildings still standing anywhere today that can illustrate 250 years of architectural change by such splendid examples as these.'



Immediately to the right of The Swan is the oldest of the three, dating from about 1550. Named Shaw House after a shoemaker who lived there in the 1800s, it retains its Tudor-period shape although its timber framing has been covered. Inside it is much altered, but within its upper floors, which have long been part of The Swan Hotel, it retains an ornate staircase, carved in the highly distinctive Jacobean style of the early 1600s.

That building's neighbour on the right, called the Ancient High House, is the jewel in the crown of Stafford's architectural heritage, and is thought to be one of the largest surviving timber-framed buildings in England. It was built in 1595 as a wealthy merchant's house. Now a museum, its upper floors were part of The Swan Hotel for much of the 1900s.

**Top:** The white-painted Shaw House with the Ancient High House to its right. **Bottom:** The Jacobean staircase preserved in Shaw House, now within The Swan Hotel.

# EVOLUTION FROM A MANSION OF THE EARLY 1600s

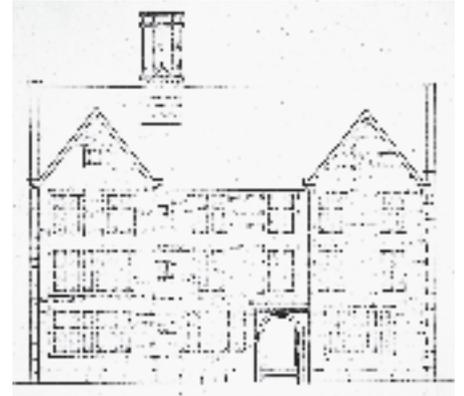
Historic buildings expert Freddie Charles identified in 1966 that despite centuries of change, The Swan Hotel still conformed to the typical layout of a mansion of the early 1600s, built around a large, surviving chimney stack. It still incorporated two wings, although originally they were gabled, standing either side of a central hall, which ran through building from front to back.

Importantly he explained that the hallway we see today was an original internal feature, which was only later converted into a coaching-inn carriageway, and then re-enclosed and restored to something like its original purpose.

He noted that the brick fabric, now hidden behind plaster, was a pioneering development at a time when timber-framing was still the regular construction method, and that it represented a period of lavish building and prosperity in the town. Others have suggested that this was Stafford's first brick building.

Charles outlined the typical changes made during a Georgian makeover. Without conducting historical research he dated it at around 1770, but it could have occurred during several decades either side of that date. As part of the redesign the gables were removed and replaced with attic windows across the roofline. On the façade, the two main sizes of stone-mullioned windows were replaced with wooden-framed bow and sash-sliding windows, all in the same position and of the same proportions as the originals.

At the rear of the property, Charles noted that the staircase turret retained visible evidence of the original fabric of the building, and had examples of the original windows, one of them with its original glass panes.



**Top and middle:** Freddie Charles's comparative drawings of the front elevation of The Swan; first as he envisioned it in the early 1600s, and then as it was laid out after its Georgian makeover. Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the William Salt Library, Stafford. **Bottom:** Today the original mansion chimney stack still rises above the Swan Hotel.

## **INNKEEPERS BRANDED 'UNDESIRABLE' AND 'MALIGNANT'**



Puritan soldier by John Pettie.

Photo source: The History Collection/Alamy Stock Photo.

The earliest record that is thought to relate to the Greengate Street Swan Inn is from 1606, and it's possible that by this time it was already the brick mansion described by Freddie Charles.

Local historian Roy Lewis has identified that from 1610 the likely occupant was Humphrey Bourne, who was apparently both an alehouse keeper and a baker. After his death in 1638, his widow Susan married John Felton, and it seems that this couple ran the Swan Inn during the eventful years to follow.

On 22 August 1642, after a schism with Parliament, King Charles I signalled the start of the English Civil War by raising his royal standard at Nottingham. In September he marched a loyal military force towards Shrewsbury with the aim that additional regiments would be raised by loyal supporters along the way. Arriving at Stafford on the 17th the royal procession rested for two nights. The king and his chief general, his nephew Prince Rupert of the Rhine, are reputed to have stayed at the High House – the home of Richard Sneyd – just two doors away from The Swan Inn. Before leaving, a small royalist garrison was established at the town.

In May 1643 the royalist defenders were overwhelmed by parliamentarians, who took the town with barely a shot being fired. Under parliamentary control, the royalists John and Susan Felton at The Swan Inn were classified as 'undesirables'. They were licensed to remain in the town, but in February 1644 John was temporarily expelled on suspicion of passing information to the enemy. Later in the year Susan Felton was declared a 'malignant', and the couple were ordered to dispose of their household goods and to leave the town.

Not until the king's surrender in 1646, when Stafford was returned to a civilian administration, were John and Susan Felton able to resume running The Swan Inn. Sometime in the 1650s the inn passed to their son, John Felton junior, a bookseller in Market Square, who apparently let the inn to a tenant innkeeper.

# A HOUSE DIVIDED AND REUNITED

**For the remainder of the 1600s and into the 1700s The Swan remained in the ownership of the Felton family, and continued to be run by a series of tenant innkeepers.**

In 1711 it was sold to Peter Walley, an apothecary in Stafford, and then it passed to Elizabeth Walley, of Lichfield. In April 1752 she sold the inn to John Hodgetts of Shut End, Staffordshire.

The deed of sale described the property as 'two messuages called The Swan Inn'. A later deed, recalling the earlier one, used the more expansive phrase: 'two messuages ... laid into one tenement commonly called The Swan Inn'. These deeds gave rise to speculation among local historians that The Swan was originally two properties separated by a carriageway, and then joined together by building over the top of the carriageway.

However, in the light of the Freddie Charles's report of 1966 it now seems more likely that the original large mansion he described had been divided, probably along the line of the entrance hallway, into two properties; one of them a reduced Swan Inn. Then by 1752 the two parts had apparently been reunited to form a larger inn, at a time when the economy of Stafford was starting to expand.



Freddie Charles's plan of The Swan indicating the original mansion layout that could have been divided along the line of the entrance hallway. Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the William Salt Library, Stafford.

# THE WEALTH OF JOHN HODGETTS

John Hodgetts, the new owner of The Swan Inn, was a past sheriff of Staffordshire. His home at Shut End, at the southern tip of the county, about 30 miles south of Stafford, was once described as 'a venerable structure'. He was born into great wealth, but became even richer in 1758 when he married the heiress Elizabeth Foley, owner of a nearby great mansion, Prestwood Hall. It became the couple's principal home.

## **ROBERT SILVESTER AND A GROWING LOCAL ECONOMY**



Horace Walpole by Sir Joshua Reynolds, c. 1756 – 1757.  
© National Portrait Gallery.

In 1757 John Hodgetts engaged Robert Silvester as the new tenant innkeeper at The Swan. He was the son of a former mayor of Stafford, and apparently a man of means and considerable acumen.

It was the start of a period of economic growth for the whole county of Staffordshire, stimulated by newly constructed and properly maintained toll roads, called turnpikes. One of the earliest was on the important London-to-Chester route, which ran through the Trent Valley, to the east of Stafford, and had a good link-road into the town from a river crossing at Wolseley Bridge.

Improved roads stimulated greater interest in travel, especially among the aristocracy and gentry. A new attraction that brought them to Stafford was an annual horse-race meeting held at Coton Fields, to the north-east of the town. In 1760 the writer and politician Horace Walpole declared in a personal letter that Stafford Races was one of the most fashionable sporting events of the season.

By October 1766 a press notice for the three-day meeting reported that entries and associated fees for the races were to be submitted a week in advance to Robert Silvester at The Swan Inn. The horses were then to be kept at Stafford, presumably at The Swan Inn, where also presumably the well-to-do participants dined as part of their celebrations of the races.

## **SILVESTER BUYS THE INN**

Trade must have gone well for Robert Silvester because at the end of December 1779 he bought the freehold of The Swan Inn from his landlord, John Hodgetts. It was the beginning of a golden period for the town, for The Swan, and for Robert Silvester.

## BEGINNING OF THE COACHING ERA

Robert Silvester was appointed postmaster for Stafford in 1781; the same year in which the Green Bridge over the River Sow, just south of The Swan, was widened, and in which two long-distance coach services started running through the town.

One ran daily between Manchester, Wolverhampton and Birmingham, and the other ran three times a week between Manchester, Wolverhampton and Bath. It isn't known which of the Stafford inns had contracts to provide the changes of horses, but it becomes clear that three of them soon emerged as the principal coaching inns – The Swan, and two adjacent to each other in Market Square, The George and The Star.

The status of Stafford as a coaching town was enhanced in 1785 when the riders who carried the daily London-and-Chester Royal Mail on horse-back along the Trent Valley, without calling at Stafford, were replaced by Royal Mail coaches that passed through the town to change horses at a designated inn. Soon additional coaches started to call at Stafford. A thrice-weekly service between Manchester and Bristol started in 1787, followed in 1788 by one running three times a week between Manchester and London.



An early illustration of one of the new Royal Mail coaches introduced in 1785.

## THE GEORGIAN MAKEOVER BEGINS

According to local historian Roy Lewis, Robert Silvester installed the first of the large bow windows facing Greengate Street in 1786, and a second in 1788. It's likely, although not certain, that this was done in conjunction with other major improvements to the façade, such as the installation of the smaller sash-sliding windows and the characteristic Georgian plaster covering of the brickwork.

## RIVAL INNS SHARE THE COACHES

**In 1791 Robert Silvester, became one of eight proprietors in a partnership to provide new coach services between Birmingham and the northern cities of Manchester and Liverpool.**

One of the earliest national commercial directories, published in 1793, showed that a Birmingham-Manchester coach, running four days a week, called at The Swan. The Star and The George had between them the daily Royal Mail between London and Chester, another Birmingham-Manchester coach, and a Birmingham-Liverpool service; while another inn, The Bear, opposite The Swan, had a London-Chester service running three days a week.

## AN ARISTOCRAT'S HARSH REVIEW

**At around mid-day on Saturday 30 June 1792, the Hon. John Byng, later to become the 5th Viscount Torrington, rode his horse into Stafford looking for food and rest. He was travelling from Manchester to Birmingham during a two-month summer tour of the north.**

He noted in his comprehensive travel diary, which was not published until 1936, that it was market day. He apparently didn't take that into account when he wrote 'All the inns here, The Swan perhaps the best, are merely ale houses, and fit for market folks only. Not choosing to dine with the ordinary [the set meal of the day], I got what I thought was a private room, and some leavings from the ordinary, when a company was put in upon me – good kind of farming people – but these are always whining and complainant. ... When gentlemen meet, there is a warm and rapid address, but farm-men and lower people, like children, never know what to say'.

In a summary of all the inns he visited, John Byng graded each one as either 'Good', 'Tolerable' or 'Bad'. The Swan was rated 'Bad'.



John Byng by Ozias Humphry, 1796.

## EXPANSION OF THE 1790s

**During the 1790s, the volume of traffic flowing into Stafford increased with the opening of more new turnpike roads, from Newport in the west, from Uttoxeter in the east, and from Cannock in the south.**

It is said that in 1793 Robert Silvester installed a third large bow window on the front of the building, while records confirm that in 1795 he expanded the property by buying a garden and part of a yard at the back of the inn. It was probably around this time when the original entrance and hallway was opened as a covered carriageway running from the front of the inn through to the stables at the rear. But this was getting towards the end of Silvester's achievements. He died in June 1799.



The Swan Hotel's garden today.

## ENTER SIR WILIAM JERNINGHAM

**Ownership of The Swan passed quickly to Thomas Webster, who announced his arrival in the press in September 1799. But by December 1801 he had gone bust, and another press notice invited his creditors to submit their demands for payment.**

To the rescue came a wealthy baronet, Sir William Jerningham, of Costessey Park, near Norwich; the man who had only recently sold the garden and yard to Robert Silvester. Jerningham had extensive properties in the Stafford area, all associated with his hereditary claim to the title of Baron Stafford. The barony was in abeyance, having been forfeited in 1680 when one of Sir William's distant relatives was executed for participating in a Catholic plot to assassinate Charles II. The family remained staunchly Catholic.

"... one of Sir William's distant relatives was executed for participating in a Catholic plot to assassinate Charles II."

## ‘LARGE BOW WINDOWS IN FRONT’



The Swan Hotel's renovated restaurant today.

Sir William Jerningham bought The Swan in 1802 and initially allowed Thomas Webster to continue as the tenant innkeeper. A press notice of February 1805, seeking a replacement for Webster, suggests that either he or the baronet had put the finishing touches to the Georgian-style remodelling of the inn.

The notice declared that the inn was of 'handsome appearance' and had 'lately undergone a thorough repair and improvement, both external and internal, and for extent and elegance of accommodation is far superior to any other in the town; and in point of business has maintained the first rank for a long series of years'.

It added that the facilities included 'excellent parlours with large bow windows in front'. The yard was described as 'entire, containing coach-house, granaries, and stabling for near 50 horses'. The location was: 'on the great road from London, through Chester and Holyhead, to Ireland, and from Birmingham to Manchester and Liverpool', which 'creates a great demand for post horses, of which ... this inn has long enjoyed a large share'.

## NEW INNKEEPER AND NEW OWNER

From the end of March 1805 the new tenant at The Swan Inn was John Hughes, aged 60 – a man with impeccable credentials for running the reputed best inn in Stafford. For the previous 13 years he had been the owner-innkeeper of one of its chief rivals, The Star in Market Square. He decided now to run both inns.

In 1809 Sir William Jerningham died, and so the baronetcy and the estates, including ownership of The Swan Inn, passed to his son and heir Sir George William Jerningham, then aged 38.

## THE ANN HUGHES YEARS

A trade directory of 1818 showed that John Hughes had contracts to change the horses for two daily Royal Mail coaches running through Stafford – one for each of his two inns. The London-Chester coach stopped at The Star, in Market Square, as it had done for more than 20 years, while the Royal Mail Birmingham-Manchester now stopped at Hughes' Swan Inn.

Another directory published in 1822 listed several new coach services running between Birmingham and the cities of Manchester or Liverpool, and all calling at The George, next door to The Star. It also showed that now the two Royal Mail coaches both called at The Star. No coaches called anymore at The Swan, where it becomes clear that John Hughes had installed his unmarried daughter Ann, aged 34, as innkeeper. She apparently focused on providing a posting house for independent travellers, hiring horses or carriages, and on maintaining a reputation for hosting important dinners and meetings.

John Hughes died in March 1822, aged 77. His Star Inn seems to have closed for a while, and a later trade directory shows that the contracts for the Royal Mail coaches were shared out between three other inns in the town – The Bear (opposite The Swan), The Dolphin, and The Three Tuns. Ann Hughes was granted administration of her father's estate. She was single, wealthy, and was running one of the most important businesses in the town. But apparently she had no interest in taking over The Star, or in taking on any of the coaching trade.

It becomes clear that the reason for her modest ambition was that she was ill. Her death on 18 June 1827, aged 39, was said to be sudden but not unexpected. The tenancy of The Swan was granted to William Sirdefield.

## OWNER BECOMES LORD STAFFORD

In 1824 the owner of The Swan Inn, Sir George William Jerningham, of Norfolk, finally succeeded in his family's decades-long fight to reclaim the Barony of Stafford, and was accordingly elevated to the peerage as the 8th baron. His name was changed to Sir George William Stafford-Jerningham, and from this time onwards he was generally referred to as Lord Stafford.



The Swan Hotel's private dining and function room.

## THE GREAT STAFFORD ELECTION SCANDAL OF 1832



William Sirdefield's Swan Hotel and Commercial Inn billhead dated 1832. Reproduced with permission from Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent Archive Service Staffordshire Record Office. Image reference D(W)1788/BoxB17 [4].

"...voters turned out in large numbers for election parades, demonstrations and open-air speeches."

An inquiry into a great election scandal at Stafford in December 1832 heard that before the poll, and after five years running The Swan, William Sirdefield had given notice to quit the following March. He had become frustrated by Lord Stafford's reluctance to pay for repairs to the building.

In the meantime the December general election promised exceptional profits for Sirdefield. Traditionally in Stafford, as in many other towns at the time, qualified voters turned out in large numbers for election parades, demonstrations and open-air speeches. Often, rival mobs turned to violence in the streets. A main reason for the enthusiasm was that voters expected to be generously treated by the candidates with free food and drink in the town's inns. They also expected to be encouraged with cash payments, so-called 'ticket money', while fervently denying that this constituted election bribery.

All these things happened at the Stafford election of December 1832, although for The Swan they were only part of the scandal. The events described here have been drawn largely from an excellent booklet 'Stafford Election 1832' by local historian Roy Lewis. He described how three candidates battled for two seats; the underdog being William Blount, the recently appointed local agent for Lord Stafford. Blount naturally made The Swan his campaign headquarters. Perhaps surprisingly, Blount's rival for the second seat, a famous London dandy called Captain Rees Howell Gronow, also used The Swan for managing his campaign and for entertaining supporters and voters.

Innkeeper William Sirdefield could afford to be non-partisan because his future already lay elsewhere. But the staff of The Swan would have been expected to be wholehearted supporters of William Blount, irrespective of his policies. The most enthusiastic of them was a man who worked with the horses and carriages in the yard. A former inmate of Stafford Gaol, having been convicted for riot and assault, he was Thomas Kenderdine, known as Dinah.

## **‘WE HAVE GOT THE BOOK’ ‘DINAH – YOU ARE A DEVIL’**

**At the election count it was becoming increasingly clear that Blount had been out-bribed by his rival for the second seat, and he would be the loser. The votes were entered in official poll-books, but before the result could be announced there were chaotic scenes during which one of the poll-books fell from the returning officer's grasp and disappeared.**

Dinah Kenderdine was alleged to have whispered to Blount 'we have got the book', at which Blount replied 'Dinah you are a devil'. The returning officer claimed to have another record of the votes, and so declared the winners for the two seats. Blount and his supporters launched appeals and petitions against the result, alleging bribery and corruption on many levels, including an illegal declaration because of the lost poll-book, which was never found.

The House of Commons ordered a Select Committee inquiry, at which all the evidence was open to public scrutiny. Kenderdine was condemned as a notorious liar. Conversely, his exchange of words with Blount at the election count was denied, and William Sirdefield gave evidence that Kenderdine was an honest man, who had been entrusted with banker's parcels worth up to £2,000. Sirdefield also confirmed that voters were routinely treated at The Swan by the agents for both Blount and Gronow. Blount had paid his bill of £250, but Gronow had not paid his of £183.

The inquiry found that there had been 'such open, general and systematic bribery and corruption that the borough of Stafford should cease to return members to Parliament'. A bill to disfranchise the borough was brought to the House of Commons, but delays and the instability of national politics meant that it was never passed.

William Blount's election agent during the Stafford campaign was William Meeson, whose brother John had also assisted the campaign, and both were reported to have handed out treats and gifts to voters. Therefore perhaps it wasn't surprising to find that from March 1833 the new tenant keeper of The Swan, now more commonly called a hotel, rather than an inn, was John Meeson.



Capt. Rees Howell Gronow.

Photo source: Chronicle/Alamy Stock Photo.



One of The Swan Hotel bedrooms.

## ‘WANTON AND FURIOUS DRIVING’

**New hotelkeeper John Meeson, possibly with some help from William Sirdefield before him, secured an impressive return to the coaching trade for The Swan Hotel, winning contracts that took the position from no coaches at all to becoming by far the leading coaching inn in the town.**

In 1833 he had six coach services, each calling twice a day at the hotel. He had the Royal Mail coaches between London and Chester and between Birmingham and Manchester, the Rocket and the Magnet coaches, both running between Liverpool and Birmingham, the Red Rover, between Manchester and London, and the Railway, between Manchester and Birmingham. By contrast, the rival Stafford hotels – The Star, George, Bear and Dolphin – had no more than two coaches each. It must have completely reinvigorated The Swan Hotel and re-established it firmly as the town's premier hotel.

The Rocket coach service was especially important to John Meeson because he and his brother William were junior partners in the firm that operated it. Unfortunately this also brought them to the centre of a violent dispute that arose in August 1833. The senior partner in Birmingham wanted to take the Rocket's change of horses away from The Swan, and instructed the coachman to drive past it. But the senior partner at Liverpool took the opposite view and instructed the Meeson brothers to stop the coach by force.

The Meesons instructed servants to use carriages as road blocks in the towns of Stafford and Stone, which led to outbreaks of violence at the barriers for several days and nights. Among the accusations subsequently laid before the courts was one from The Swan's now-notorious man, Thomas 'Dinah' Kenderdine. He charged the coach driver for 'wanton and furious driving through Stafford' and for assault. Neither case was proven. The principal dispute was settled out of court, in favour of the Meesons.

## THE HEIR TO THE FRENCH THRONE

John Meeson benefited from an early royal endorsement of The Swan when in May 1833 he was host to the 22-year-old heir to the throne of France, Prince Ferdinand Philippe, better-known as the Duke or Orléans. He and his entourage stayed overnight at The Swan while en route from London to Manchester and Liverpool. It was reported in the press that the party departed the next morning 'expressing themselves highly gratified with the accommodations of the Swan Hotel and the manner in which they had been entertained'. The duke died nine years later, not having succeeded his father.



Prince Ferdinand Philippe, Duke of Orléans, by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, 1832. Photo source: Heritage Image Partnership Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo.

## THE FIRST LONG-DISTANCE RAILWAY COMES TO TOWN



The style of trains that ran on the Grand Junction and Liverpool-and-Manchester Railways during the 1830s.  
Photo source: Chronicle/Alamy Stock Photo.

"...he set up an omnibus to fetch and carry travellers between Stafford station and The Swan Hotel."

**On 4 July 1837 the Grand Junction Railway – the world's first long-distance steam-locomotion railway – was opened from Birmingham to a junction mid-way along the existing Liverpool-Manchester line, a distance of 82 miles.**

Crucially, the railway company built a station at Stafford, which strengthened the town's position as an important economic centre on the route between the two great industrial regions. It might not have appeared to be such good news for The Swan because it brought an immediate end to all the principal coach services. Also the station was outside the town, so on the face of it passengers on the new railway had no need to visit the hotel.

However, hotelkeeper John Meeson was clearly a man of great foresight. He worked out how to turn such a radical change of circumstances to his advantage. From the opening day of the Grand Junction Railway he set up an omnibus to fetch and carry travellers between Stafford station and The Swan Hotel. The omnibus driver and a boy guard both wore red uniforms, and the service was scheduled to be in good time for each of the 12 trains stopping daily.

Meeson also set up a coach office at The Swan to co-ordinate a series of new daily coaches connecting surrounding towns to the hotel and to Stafford station. The Times coach ran initially to and from Uttoxeter and was soon extended to Derby; the Novelty, connected with Burslem and the Potteries; and the Queen, ran through Burton-on-Trent and Ashby de la Zouch to Leicester.

## SUCCESS OF THE SWAN SEES OFF ITS RIVALS

**While John Meeson's coach services would slowly disappear as the railway network continued its rapid expansion, he made sure he took every advantage of the changing world.**

By 1841 he was still advertising his local coach services at a time when it was also announced that he had been appointed the Stafford parcels agent for two railway companies – the Grand Junction and the London and Birmingham. They would soon merge to form the London North Western Railway Company.



A Swan Hotel billhead c.1845, promoting the railway station omnibus.  
Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the William Salt Library, Stafford.

Meeson's commercial acumen increased the dominance of The Swan in Stafford, and contrasted starkly with the fortunes of the hotel's traditional chief rivals, The George and The Star. During the 1840s they both fell into decline and closed permanently. In the same period a new railway line was opened from Stafford to Lichfield and Rugby, and hence to London, and another to Wellington and on to Shrewsbury.

Stafford was becoming a significant railway junction – a town where travellers frequently changed trains, and while they waited for a connection could spend time, possibly a night, in a convenient hotel. In April 1852, one such traveller, who took shelter at The Swan, was the nation's most successful and famous living author – Charles Dickens.

## CHARLES DICKENS' PRICKLY REVIEW



A rarely-seen clean-shaven Charles Dickens photographed in 1852 by Antoine Claudette. Photo source: GL Archive/Alamy Stock Photo.

When Charles Dickens arrived at The Swan in 1852 he was aged 40, and was at the height of his international fame having already published many of his most successful and enduring works.

Not keen on being recognised in public, he apparently succeeded in this desire during his brief stay in Stafford, which shortly afterwards he described in an article in his own weekly magazine 'Household Words'. It was a disparaging and prickly piece that condemned Stafford as 'dull and dead' and flayed The Swan, which he named mockingly as 'The Dodo, the extinct town inn'.

While Dickens' words clearly inflicted much hurt locally, a recent commentator has noted that it would have been wiser to recognise that it was fashionable for metropolitan writers to make fun of the comparative tedium of provincial towns, and it was also the great writer's job to be humorously scathing. So perhaps hotelkeeper John Meeson's wife, Mary, should not have been too upset to read of 'the landlady of the Dodo in the empty bar, whose eye had trouble in it and no welcome when I asked for dinner', or of the waiter who 'appears to have a silent sorrow in him'.

Dickens complained that the hotel's 'loose little bits of carpet writhe under my tread, and take wormy shapes', and he mocked the state of the 'dingy curtains of the great bow window, which so unwillingly consent to meet that they must be pinned together'. He mentioned the bow windows four times, most interestingly when describing the view across the street to a row of small shops. He focused on an ironmonger, a tailor, and a watchmaker; the latter where he was sure all the clocks and watches must be stopped 'for they could never have the courage to go, with the town in general, and the Dodo in particular, looking at them'.



The masthead of Household Words magazine, issue of 24 April 1852. From Dickens Journals Online, The University of Buckingham.

## THE VIEW FROM THE BOW WINDOWS

The row of shops viewed by Dickens from The Swan has long-since been demolished, creating an open aspect of St Chad's Church. But we have an impression of what he was looking at from a sketch made in around 1860. It shows from left to right: part of Philip Dale's ironmongers; the shop that in 1852 was run by Joseph Deakin the tailor; and just visible on the right is part of the watchmaker's shop of John Corker. St Chad's is visible behind.



Illustration from 'Know Your Town: Stafford', re-drawn by Ed Goring in 1946 from an original sketch c.1860.

## THE LOCAL PAPER'S GAFFE

**Dickens slated The Swan's sherry, complaining that a bottle consumed 'must make good for the doctor next day', but he was complimentary about the food: 'this mournful bird can fry a sole, which is much. Can cook a steak too, which is more'.**

And so it was especially unfortunate that the Staffordshire Advertiser, in attempting to defend the town against Dickens' broader criticisms, chose to speculate in response that the great writer's 'ordinarily vivid and accurate powers of perception' were 'deranged' by 'the discomfort he experienced at the hotel; the awful sensation of indigestion that made the sherry taste of pepper'.

Having added insult to the injury already caused to John and Mary Meeson, it might be significant that in October 1852 the Staffordshire Advertiser spared nothing in its praise of The Swan's catering. While making an overt reference to Dickens' article, the Advertiser noted that a dinner for the Stafford Social Club held recently at the hotel was 'one of the best dinners ever served in the Swan ... and that is saying a great deal as the house is justly celebrated for its cuisine'.

## A NEW ASSEMBLY ROOM



The Swan Hotel's renovated restaurant today.

John Meeson retired in April 1854 and was replaced as tenant hotelkeeper by Frederick Wood. His arrival was followed by the development of a new function room, known then as an assembly room. It was opened in December 1855 with a grand public ball, attended by the area's leading aristocracy and gentry and the town's senior officials. Thereafter The Swan became increasingly popular as a leading venue for balls, dinners and other important functions.

## OWNER HELD IN AN ASYLUM

In 1884 the death of Swan Hotel owner Sir Henry Valentine Stafford-Jerningham, 9th Baron Stafford, heralded a significant change in the management of the family's estate.

He was succeeded by his 54-year-old nephew, Sir Augustus Frederick Fitzherbert Stafford-Jerningham, the 10th Baron, who for the previous 24 years had been held in what was then called a lunatic asylum.

His estate was managed by the Commissioners in Lunacy, who almost certainly delegated more authority to the baron's local property agents. Possibly as a consequence of this, from 1885 The Swan Hotel ceased to be let to tenant hotelkeepers, and instead was run by a series of directly employed managers. It seems the opportunity was also taken to invest some of his lordship's wealth. An advertisement in the 1886 book 'History of Stafford and Guide to the Neighbourhood' proclaimed that The Swan Hotel had been 'thoroughly renovated'.



An advertisement of 1886 in the book 'History of Stafford and Guide to the Neighbourhood'.

## SHAH OF PERSIA'S ENTOURAGE

In July 1889 the then manager of The Swan Hotel, Miss Sarah Perks, received a surprise telegram at about eight o'clock one morning requesting rooms the same evening for 28 men – being the entire entourage of the Shah of Persia.

The Shah was visiting the country while on a tour of Europe. During his stay in Antwerp it was reported he had bought £8,000 worth of diamonds, 'miscellaneous articles for the diversion of the ladies of the harem', and on passing a bootmaker's shop had ordered, on a whim, 40 pairs of satin slippers.

His entourage was scheduled to join him on an engagement in Birmingham, but hotel rooms were limited in the city because of a meeting of the Iron and Steel Institute. So the British host of the shah's team, Major Gerald Talbot, a cousin of the Earl of Shrewsbury, brought his charges instead to Stafford, a town he knew well, and to a hotel he knew was up to the mark.

Miss Perks made hasty arrangements to re-accommodate guests already booked in, and thus fitted in the foreign visitors. They were thought to include the head of the Persian government and several men of senior military rank. The exotic scene of their arrival at The Swan was witnessed by crowds of townsfolk. The local press recorded that the visitors all sported moustaches, wore black fez hats, and were dressed in black frock coats, some of them 'voluminously kilted from the waist'.

At the conclusion of dinner that evening, Major Talbot told Miss Perks that the guests had 'enjoyed the repast better than at any hotel they had yet been to on their tour'. They caught the morning train from Stafford to Birmingham.



The senior members of the Shah of Persia's entourage, illustrated in *The Graphic*, London, 6 July 1889.  
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"...on passing a bootmaker's shop had ordered, on a whim, 40 pairs of satin slippers."

"The 11th baron was said to be a recluse, who rarely left his ancestral home..."

## THE BARONY COMES HOME

**When the 10th Baron Stafford died at his asylum home in 1892, he was succeeded by his 59-year-old brother, Sir Fitzherbert Edward Stafford-Jerningham.**

The 11th baron was said to be a recluse, who rarely left his ancestral home at Costessey Hall, Norfolk, apparently for fear that, like his late brother, he might not be allowed to return.

On his death in 1913, the barony passed to his nephew, Francis Edward Fitzherbert, aged 54, who lived at Swynnerton Hall, near Stone in Staffordshire. He transferred the title to his own family seat, creating a historic home-coming for the barony of Stafford. The 12th baron, now named Francis Edward Fitzherbert-Stafford, was a deputy lieutenant of Staffordshire and also Lord High Steward of the Borough of Stafford.

## ROYAL ROOMS INCORPORATED

**Since 1900 The Swan Hotel had been let by the Stafford Estate to the Charles Bunting Brewery of Uttoxeter, which installed a series of its own employed hotel managers.**

In 1913, the brewery extended the hotel by taking a lease from Stafford Borough Council on the upper floors of the Ancient High House, two doors along the street from The Swan. They knocked through from Shaw House, The Swan's immediate neighbour, which was already being used as bedroom accommodation on its upper floors.

New bedrooms were created in the parts of the old Tudor building that were reputed to have been occupied in 1642 by King Charles I and Prince Rupert of the Rhine. And so now the managers of The Swan were able to offer guests the opportunity to sleep in the royal rooms. The story was sometimes exaggerated to claim that the king and prince had stayed at The Swan.



Swan Hotel c.1915. Reproduced with permission from Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent Archive Service Staffordshire Record Office. Image reference 37483.

## A CENTURY OF CHANGE

Travel by bicycle, and for the better-off by motor car, became popular from the late 1890s. The photograph on the opposite page, of The Swan Hotel in around 1915, shows a circular wall-plaque, between two bow windows, identifying the hotel as approved by the Cycling Tourists' Club.

Stables and coach houses had been converted into garages, which were prominently advertised by a large hanging sign at the front of the hotel. At this time The Swan also boasted in press advertisements the provision of 'hot and cold baths'. In 1928, when it is unclear who held the lease of The Swan, there was a major renovation and modernisation of the building. It included enclosing the covered carriageway at both ends, restoring it to something like the hallway of the original 17th-century house. In 1933 the assembly room was fitted with a new sprung floor, and an advertisement for this added that 'hot and cold water in all bedrooms is nearing completion'. A press article at the same time also reported, astonishingly it seems, that The Swan had 'garage accommodation for 100 cars'.

**SWAN HOTEL**  
 (COUNTY,  
 FAMILY, AND COMMERCIAL),  
 STAFFORD.

COMFORT AND ACCOMMODATION  
 FOR VISITORS.  
 Five Minutes' from Railway Station.

BILLIARD ROOM.  
 HOT AND COLD BATHS.  
 MODERATE TARIFF.

LARGE ASSEMBLY ROOMS for  
 BALLS, BANQUETS, and PRIVATE  
 PARTIES.

CYCLISTS' TOURING CLUB QUARTERS.  
 POSTING IN ALL ITS BRANCHES.

EXCELLENT ACCOMMODATION FOR  
 MOTORISTS. Motor Garage.

For Terms, &c. apply to  
**WM. BEECH, Manager.**  
 [Tel. No. 26].

**STAFFORD'S**  
 LEADING HOTEL  
 IS THE  
**"SWAN"**

L.L.C. & R.A. Apartments. Phone 25.

*Mr. and Mrs. F. J. Dyke desire to  
 thank all their numerous patrons for  
 past favours and wish to inform them  
 that the*

**NEW OAK SPRING BALL ROOM**  
 1st FLOOR IS NOW OPEN.

*The installation of Hot and Cold Water in  
 all Bedrooms is nearing completion.  
 Your enquiries will have personal attention.*

In 1944 an entrepreneur called Sidney Hall, from Chipping Norton in Oxfordshire, took over as leaseholder and hotelkeeper. In 1950 he bought the freehold from the 14th Baron Stafford, and in 1955 sold the property to the Burton brewer, Ind Coope & Allsopp. The brewery sold the hotel in 1968 to the restaurant chain Chef and Brewer, under which the property was branded first as a Berni Inn and then a Schooner Inn. During the 1970s the upper floors of the Ancient High House were handed back to Stafford Borough Council, which after a major restoration opened the space as a museum. In 1993 ownership of The Swan transferred to Scottish and Newcastle Hotels, and then in 2001 to the locally-based Lewis Partnership.

The Swan was purchased in June 2018 by the Coaching Inn Group, which immediately invested in a comprehensive and sensitive refurbishment of the hotel in order to meet evolving customer needs.

**Left:** Staffordshire Advertiser 18 December 1915.  
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**Right:** Staffordshire Advertiser 18 November 1933.  
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The Swan Hotel, Stafford, is part of The Coaching Inn Group Ltd. The group has a particular passion for lovely old historic inns and is fortunate enough now to have fifteen of these iconic buildings in our collection, several of them former coaching inns. We have established a reputation for refurbishing, revitalising and breathing life back into these inns, creating elegant, comfortable and well-priced accommodation, tempting menus, relaxed and stylish bars and coffee lounges where friends, families and business people can relax and enjoy everything we have on offer.

Our vision for the future is based around our core value of 'Unlocking Potential'. From our properties to our people and everything in between, we take every opportunity to invest in developing all aspects of our business to give our guests the best possible experience.

As a company we are rapidly expanding and bringing new hotels into the Coaching Inn Group. You can see the latest additions to our group by visiting [www.coachinginngroup.co.uk](http://www.coachinginngroup.co.uk).

We hope you've enjoyed your visit to The Swan Hotel, Stafford, and would love to invite you to try our other venues, nationwide. For full details please visit [www.coachinginngroup.co.uk](http://www.coachinginngroup.co.uk).



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