

History of Highgate House



The year is 1663, three years into the Restoration Period with Charles II ruling 'Merrie England' after the eleven years of the Commonwealth under Oliver Cromwell and his son Richard who succeeded him as Lord Protector of England. The events of the Civil War are distancing themselves and taking their place in the nation's history, not least the decisive Battle of Naseby fought and lost by Charles I in 1645. Now, eighteen years after the battle and only three miles from its site, in the village of Little Creaton (called Crepton in William the Conqueror's Domesday Book) a farmer is building a house on the site of an old inn. This house, to be called Highgate House, is to be both farmstead and inn. Among the inhabitants of the village at this time was the great grandmother of George Washington, first president of the United States.

The road on which this new inn stood was described as 'ruinous' foundrous and almost impassable, so that in winter it is dangerous for all travellers'. This was typical of the highroads of this period. But it was the main road to the north-west and along it struggled coaches and hackney carriages, cunbrous wagons laden with commercial goods, local farm carts, cattle drovers and horsemen.

In 1721 the road was improved and became a turnpike. Traffic grew and the Inn became an important coaching and posting station. At one of the most exposed spots between London and York coachmen found it welcoming and hospitable. For travellers there was accommodation, food and drink; for horses there were stables, loose boxes, harness room, coach house and blacksmiths forge.

This inn was much used for a meeting place. There were also facilities for recreation, which included a bowling green. An advertisement in a Northamptonshire newspaper in 1725 announced that the green 'being now put in very good order will have on its opening day, Thursday 26th May a very handsome appearance of gentlemen'.

It remained a coaching station for 200 years, and from the establishment of the Royal Mail of Coach in 1784 it was on the mail route between London and Holyhead, and later between London and Liverpool. But in 1837, when the London to Birmingham railway opened, passenger traffic by coach came to an end, and the last mail coach passed Highgate House 1839. However, it remained an inn for some years.



Successive members of the Bosworth family were licensees of the Inn from 1757 to 1836 and it is during this period that we come across one of its most interesting inhabitants. The Reverend Thomas Jones, a fiery Welshman from Aberystwyth came to Creaton as curate in 1785. Unable to find lodgings in the village, he took up residence in the Inn - to the scandal of his bishop and fellow clergy and indeed in defiance of Canon law. He found that the business of the Inn did not affect his work and as the landlady assured the Bishop that his presence had a good effect on the conduct of the customers, the Bishop turned a blind eye.

Thomas Jones lived at Highgate House for fifty-one years, becoming Curate of the neighbouring village Spratton. Later as Rector, he must have stood out among the generally lax clergy of the Church of England of the time. His preaching filled the church, and he set up the first Sunday School in the county. He cared not only for the spiritual but also for the material welfare of his people. Distressed by the poverty in his parishes he organised a clothing club and a sick club, and arranged for the supply of food at prices which the poorest could afford. For many years he employed a woman to teach poor girls to sew - on his principal of helping the poor to help themselves. With the income from the books he wrote, he had six Almshouses built in Creaton.

The Inn and its out-buildings were put up for sale in 1858 as suitable for conversion into 'a most compact and convenient hunting box for a gentleman wishing for a residence in the centre of one of the finest hunting countries in England' which, of course, Northamptonshire still is. A few years later it was bought by one of the Langhams of the neighbouring Cottesbrook Hall, who in 1900 let it to Lt. Colonel Charles Eyre-Coote, a hunting man and a descendant of General Sir Eyre-Coote, the distinguished soldier who helped Clive in the establishment of British rule in India in the eighteenth century. Colonel and Mrs Coote liked the county and the house. They bought Highgate and spent a very considerable sum of money on extending and modernising it. Although it was at this rather late stage that the imposing Baronial Hall was built, it is worth noting that the Victorians were adept at architectural salvage, the oak linenfold panelling having been obtained from an Elizabethan Hall.

Sir Eyre-Coote died just before the outbreak of the Second World War, and his widow moved out in 1943. The house remained empty until it was acquired by the Chudleys in 1964 and restoration - very necessary after twenty years of neglect - began.

Very much smaller than today, Highgate became home for Diana and Michael Chudley and their large family. Having always welcomed guests into their large family, the house soon began to develop, with afternoon teas and bed and breakfast leading to a specialisation in group bookings and establishment as probably one of the first residential training centres of its kind in the country.

Still owned and managed by the family, every effort is made to continue the long history of hospitality and purpose which have made Highgate House what it is today. In an unspoilt area of our much under-rated county of 'spires and squires', the humble Inn has become one of the prestigious conference centres of the twenty-first century.

