



# The Feathers

## A BRIEF HISTORY

BY WILL SWALES



# WELCOME

Welcome to a brief history of The Feathers Hotel, Ledbury. 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 Feathers 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 Feathers Hotel. Please feel free to take this copy with you.

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

**[www.coachinginngroup.co.uk](http://www.coachinginngroup.co.uk)**





**“ONE OF THE PRINCIPAL  
MONUMENTS OF LEDBURY.”**



# THOMAS PANTALL AND THE BOOTH HALL



Detail of the pattern on an original wall painting in the private house, built 1560-70.



The lord of the manor's Booth Hall, built in about 1600.

The Feathers Hotel in Ledbury comprises two extraordinary buildings standing side-by-side in the High Street. The Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England has described the hotel as one of the eight 'principal monuments' of the town.

Both of its buildings are widely acknowledged as among the best surviving examples in Ledbury of a great period of re-building that was commissioned by a group of the town's wealthy Elizabethan clothiers, or cloth merchants. The left-side building has been dated by architectural historians to the period 1560-70. It is the earliest building of its type in the town, and was possibly the model for others that followed.

Its top storey is thought to have been added in the early 1600s. Inside it retains large areas of exposed timbers, some examples of original wall painting, and a grand staircase dating from the late 1600s. The building seems to have been erected as a private house, and to have remained so until about 1700.

The building on the right was erected around 1600, and was originally used for various functions of local-government. It belonged to the lords of the manor, and was known as the Booth Hall, or sometimes the Boothall House, the Manor House, or the Lord's House.

The story of The Feathers Hotel began in 1698 with the appointment of Thomas Pantall as tenant of the Booth Hall and as bailiff of the manor. His contract with 12 joint lords of the manor is on public display in the Painted Room at 1 Church Lane, another of the town's early timber-frame buildings.

Pantall, a cutler of Ledbury, took a lease on the Booth Hall for 20 years. His rent was £10 13s 4d a year, in addition to which he was required to collect and account for the rents of the tenants of the manor, and to maintain the Booth Hall as the court chamber, a prison, and a 'park house'. His reward was to keep the profits, normally due to the lords, from the tolls of three annual fairs held in the town at Easter, Michaelmas and Christmas.





The staircase of the late 1600s.



## A HOUSE ‘NOW CALLED THE PLUME OF FEATHERS’



The Prince of Wales emblem on one of the street-facing timbers of the private-house building could be a late addition.



James Francis Edward Stuart, acknowledged as Prince of Wales from 1688 to 1701, painted c.1700-05, attributed to Alexis-Simon Belle, Royal Collection Trust, © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, 2018.

An abstract of deeds reveals that in 1699 Thomas Pantall purchased the house adjoining the Booth Hall for £230. In 1702 this property was described in a deed of marriage jointure for Thomas's wife Joane as 'now called or known by the name of the Plume of Feathers'.

This could be one of the earliest recorded examples of this particular inn-name, and so possible explanations of its origin are worth exploring. Generally, it came to be represented on inn-signs by the symbol of a crown and three ostrich feathers, being the heraldic device of the heir to the throne and the title Prince of Wales. The symbol is said to have been first adopted by Edward the Black Prince (1330-76), the son and heir of Edward III.

There was no holder of the title Prince of Wales between 1553 and 1610, the period in which both buildings are thought to have been erected, so the small carving of the Prince of Wales emblem on one of the street-facing timbers of the private-house building could be a late addition. Significantly, at the time of Thomas and Joane Pantall's marriage, and of the naming of the inn, there was an important national event concerning the then Prince of Wales that could point to the choice of inn-name having political undertones. Earlier, in 1688, the Catholic King James II had been deposed and replaced by Protestant joint monarchs, William of Orange and his wife Mary. James fled to France with his family and entourage, including his baby son and heir, James Francis Edward Stuart, the Prince of Wales.

The young James's titles continued to be recognised by the English establishment on the understanding that if he converted to Protestantism he could later accede to the throne. But on the death of his father in 1701, the 13-year-old prince, still a Catholic, proclaimed himself now the rightful king of England and Scotland. He was immediately attainted for treason and stripped of his titles.

So-called Jacobite sympathisers were often not shy about declaring their allegiance to the Catholic claimant. Therefore, it's possible that the naming of the Plume of Feathers in Ledbury, seemingly at almost precisely this time, was an oblique declaration by Thomas and Joane Pantall of their support for the young Prince of Wales, and a hoped-for return of a Catholic king.



## THOMAS PANTALL'S FLASKS

Supporting evidence for Thomas Pantall's period as owner and innkeeper of The Plume of Feathers exists in the rare form of the remains of four glass flasks, each bearing a moulded seal of a plume of feathers surrounded by the words 'Thomas Pantell 1709'.

They were found during an archaeological dig in 2009, buried among a large quantity of old bottles, clay pipes and other items, in what is thought to have been a rubbish pit, under a car park adjoining the back of the inn.

"... buried among a large quantity of old bottles, clay pipes and other items..."



Brilliantly coloured through age, this is the best example of the glass flasks bearing a moulded seal of the plume of feathers with the innkeeper's name and the date of 1709. Photo arranged with thanks to Tim Hoverd, Herefordshire Archaeology.



## ACQUIRED BY A FAMOUS PUBLISHER



Publisher Jacob Tonson (1655-1736),  
by Sir Godfrey Kneller. © National Portrait Gallery.

A deed dated 1719 recorded that Thomas Pantall 'innholder' leased for nine years 'all that inn commonly known as the Plume of Feathers' to Humphrey Owen, 'innholder'.

The lease terms included 'the boards and trestles that are in and about... for standings to be used in the fairs and markets', which suggests that Humphrey Owen had also succeeded Pantall in the Booth Hall contract, with its right to collect the market tolls.

In 1726 Humphrey Owen got a new landlord when Thomas Pantall sold the inn for £450. The conveyance deed confirmed that the inn at this time comprised – 'All that messuage... commonly called or known by the sign of the Plume of Feathers... in the High Street in the borough of Ledbury in the county of Hereford, between: the street on the east part; land late of Richard Cox, clothier deceased, and now of Chas. Lacy, on the west part; the Booth Hall House on the north part; and the house, buildings, garden and backside of Caleb Randolph, lately called the Royal Oak, on the south part.'

The new owner from 1726 was Jacob Tonson, a relatively new but very wealthy and distinguished landowner in the district. He was nationally famous for having made a fortune as the London publisher of two of the country's leading poets of the period, John Dryden and John Milton. As a founder and the secretary of the famous Kit Cat Club, he enjoyed the company of great writers, politicians and aristocrats.

He retired from business in 1720, aged 64, and used some of his riches to buy a new home and estate for himself at The Hazle, a historic home of one of the lords of the manor of Ledbury. His purchase of The Plume of Feathers was one of several later acquisitions in the area.

In 1736 Jacob Tonson renewed the lease of The Plume of Feathers to its innkeeper, Humphrey Owen, for another eight years. If Owen stayed to the end of the term then he would complete 25 years in charge. It isn't known how long he stayed, nor whether he carried on beyond this lease period because of an event following soon after the signing of the lease.



## INTO THE HANDS OF A GLOBAL COMPANY BOSS

Jacob Tonson died in 1736, aged 80. He left the Hazle Estate and his other properties in and around Ledbury, including The Plume of Feathers, to his nephew's daughter, Mary Baker, and thus in practice to her husband William.

At the time of the inheritance, William Baker (1705-70) was aged 31. As a trader in the Caribbean and the North American colonies he was in the process of building a stellar career. His reputation for leadership led in 1741 to his appointment as a director of Britain's great trading company operating on the other side of the world, the East India Company.

In 1749-50 he served a one-year term as the East India Company's chairman, and then after a second term in the top job in 1752-3 he left the company to focus on his deputy governorship of the Hudson's Bay Company in North America. He had been in that role since 1750 and retained it until 1760 when he was knighted and appointed the company's 11th governor, remaining in post until his death.

Baker was probably the only man to hold the top jobs in these two great international trading companies, both of which acted as de facto governments in some of their trading areas. He also served the mother parliament as a member of the House of Commons between 1747 and 1768. He amassed a great fortune.



Hudson's Bay Company ships Prince of Wales and Eddystone anchored in the Hudson Strait.  
© Library and Archives Canada C-040364.

"Baker was probably the only man to hold the top jobs in these two great international trading companies."

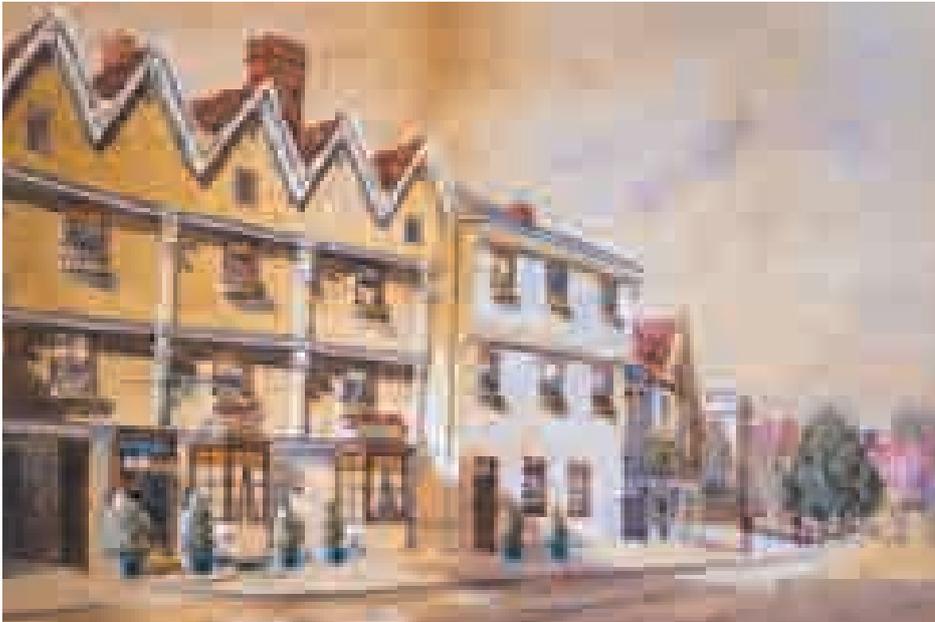


# A GEORGIAN MAKEOVER FOR THE INN

**At William Baker's death in 1770 his home estate at Bayfordbury in Hertfordshire descended with his Ledbury properties to his eldest son, also called William Baker.**

William Baker the younger (1743-1824) was almost certainly the man responsible for erecting a Georgian façade on The Plume of Feathers, completely masking the timber framing. The transformational process was the popular fashion of the time, when by comparison with the new architecture of clean, classical lines, the old timber-framed edifices had come to be regarded as primitive, ugly, and outdated.

Rather than incur the cost of demolition and rebuilding, owners erected brick and plaster frontages in the contemporary style, and installed the new sash windows, which were bigger and more light-enhancing. The Plume of Feathers Inn and the Booth Hall next door were among more than 30 timber-frame buildings in Ledbury now known to have been modernised by cladding in this way during the late 1700s and early 1800s.



The Georgian face of The Plume of Feathers and the Booth Hall captured in 1893 by an unknown artist (signature indecipherable). The painting hangs at The Feathers today.

The period of these makeovers fits almost perfectly with the spell of ownership of The Plume of Feathers by William Baker, the younger. He was aged 27 at the time of his inheritance, and therefore it might be speculated that he was well-disposed towards modernising his property assets. He certainly had the money for it.

It seems likely that in addition to commissioning a new façade for The Plume of Feathers, the younger William Baker might also have ordered a general refurbishment of the inn throughout. It would have been timely, given the developments underway at the time in passenger transport, and the great commercial opportunity they afforded the best-equipped and most attractive inns.

A national network of inns serving as staging posts, where coach operators could change horses and refresh crews and passengers on long-distance journeys, was expanding rapidly.



## LUKE MORRIS AND THE STAGE-COACH ERA

**It might not have been until about 1780 that stage coaches started calling regularly at Ledbury, but by this time The Plume of Feathers was in a strong position to attract the trade.**

Its innkeeper, Luke Morris, the first known under the ownership of the younger William Baker, had been in post since at least 1773 and had already established The Plume of Feathers as one of the town's principal inns for hosting property auctions and meetings of local officials and organisations. He had also established the inn as the place for two functions of national importance, as confirmed by a trade directory for the county for 1793.

It listed Luke Morris as innkeeper of 'The Feathers' as well as the keeper of the town's post and excise offices. It also listed 10 coach services passing each way through Ledbury every week, linking the town with Hereford, Worcester and Gloucester, and with onward connections to London and the whole country. It can be assumed that the six mail-coach services listed in the directory must have called at the post office at The Plume of Feathers. Some of the other coaches might have called at other inns, most probably The George Inn just up the road at Ledbury's Southend.

One visitor who was not impressed with Luke Morris's hospitality was the diarist John Byng, later to be the 5th Viscount Torrington, of Bedfordshire. In a preface to his account of a tour to South Wales in 1787, he listed dates spent in each place together with a rating for each inn visited, as either good, middling or bad. For his visit on Saturday 11 August, The Plume of Feathers at Ledbury was marked 'bad'. The diary entry for that day explained: 'arrived at Ledbury and dined there in haste on some tough mutton chops. A sad inn; and well that I had not made it my night stop'.

Notwithstanding this one bad review, by 1797 Luke Morris had seemingly made enough money to retire. He handed over the lease of the inn and the job of postmaster to Giles Taylor, who would stay in charge for the next 32-years. During this period the name of the inn would increasingly, and then permanently, be shortened to The Feathers.



'Arriving at the inn', from a series of drawings by Herbert Railton and Hugh Thomson, c.1893.



## **FEATHERS SOLD TO LEDBURY LANDOWNER JOHN BIDDULPH**

"He divided his time  
between London  
where he was a  
partner in the bank of  
Cocks and Biddulph..."

**In 1813 the owner of The Feathers, William Baker, now aged 70, had the misfortune to have to bury his 35-year-old son and heir.**

Perhaps connected to this event, in the same year he sold his Ledbury property, including The Hazle Estate and The Feathers Inn, to John Biddulph, 45, the head of one of the town's most notable families.

John Biddulph (1768-1845) lived at New House, the great Tudor mansion at the crossroads at the top of the High Street. He was descended from at least one of the earlier joint lords of the manor of Ledbury; he had inherited a fortune, and had married into another one. He divided his time between London where he was a partner in the bank of Cocks and Biddulph, of Charing Cross, and Ledbury where he was an active leader in the community.

## **BOOTH HALL ABSORBED INTO THE INN**

**John Biddulph already owned the Booth Hall next to The Feathers, generally referred to in Biddulph Estate papers as the Lord's House.**

Records show that it had no tenant in 1814, but the following year it was occupied by Giles Taylor, innkeeper of The Feathers. This was the beginning of the Booth Hall being absorbed into the business of the inn. In a Biddulph Estate repair book, a list of jobs to be done at The Feathers, dated July 1815, included: 'to wash the whole front next the street the same colour as the Lord's House'.

It's clear that both buildings had already been given their Georgian makeovers sometime earlier. Other tasks on the list for The Feathers included alterations and repairs to chimneys, making good walls, repairs to window frames, and painting the outside woodwork – all of which suggests that the previous owner had not kept up with the necessary maintenance of the building.



## LUKE TAYLOR TAKES FULL CONTROL

**In 1829 Giles Taylor, aged 70, and his wife Hannah, 50, left The Feathers and moved to Worcester to take over The Unicorn Inn. They handed The Feathers to Giles's 31-year-old son Luke, who was born and raised at the inn, and now took it over with his wife Eliza.**

At the same time Giles passed the job of postmaster to his new son-in-law, William, whose surname was also Taylor, and who ran a grocery shop across the street with his new wife Bessie.

Luke Taylor had apparently been well set up in the business because in 1832 he bought the freehold of The Feathers from John Biddulph. The deed of sale confirmed that the inn and the former Booth Hall were now treated as one conjoined property known as The Feathers Hotel. The term hotel had become fashionable among owners who considered they ran a better class of inn.

The price was £3,000, of which Luke borrowed £2,500 from John Foster Giles, a local dignitary and the highly esteemed and popular master of the Ledbury Foxhounds. At around this time Luke Taylor also became the owner of Ledbury's George Inn, in which he installed a tenant innkeeper, while he and Eliza continued running The Feathers themselves.

"Luke borrowed £2,500 from John Foster Giles, a local dignitary and the highly esteemed and popular master of the Ledbury Foxhounds."



A typical coaching scene of the period.



## ‘POST BOYS LOOKED QUITE SPICK AND SPAN’



Post boys, by Tom Bradley, 1889.

### THE JOB OF THE POST BOYS

The job of the uniformed post boys was to ride between stage-post inns collecting and returning horses and post-chaises (small carriages for hire) to their stable of origin. They were often men of small stature, and some were notable characters who had decades of experience on the road. Post boys leading spare horses or empty post-chaises were common sights on the principal roads of the early 1800s.

Ledbury resident George Wargent was aged 10 in 1834, and grew up retaining some vivid memories of the town of his youth. At the age of 81 he recorded them in a series of local newspaper articles.

These extracts concerning The Feathers in the 1830s paint an interesting picture of the times:

‘On market days, sheep were penned in High Street ... Horse dealers did a big trade outside The Feathers, the horses being trotted up and down High Street.

‘The Royal Mail (four horse) from London came via Cheltenham, arriving at The Feathers at 10am, and then proceeded, after changing horses, to Hereford, where another coach proceeded to Aberystwyth. The letters were not numerous, and the guard had collected his letter bags, was off his box and across into the post office run by Mr Taylor, opposite The Feathers, in a minute, and in about the same time had returned with the few outgoing mail bags.

‘Gloucester mail coach ran up to 1885, starting from The Feathers at 8am and calling at Dymock, Newent and Gloucester, returning to Ledbury at 6pm. There were several stage coaches, and at The Feathers six post boys were kept, and others at The George Hotel in the Southend. The post boys looked quite spick and span in their breeches, yellow and white top hats, also top boots, spurs and whips. A four-horse coach ran daily from Hereford to Worcester, passing through Ledbury each way.

‘Election times at Ledbury were of immense excitement ... those who voted Tory received a ticket for refreshments at The Feathers Hotel, and those who voted Liberal were given a ticket for The New Inn. This was a questionable proceeding, as was the free distribution of beer and cider during polling. Free fights were the rule rather than the exception, and generally the affair ended in a melee from which perhaps half a dozen would emerge with black eyes and broken noses.’



# WALTZING SCANDAL AT THE 1837 NEW-YEAR BALL

Luke and Eliza Taylor hosted a New-Year ball in the first-floor assembly room at The Feathers on Monday 2 January 1837. They were no doubt pleased to have the patronage of the hotel's former owner John Biddulph as steward of the event.

Unfortunately Biddulph did not have a good time that night. His diary reveals that he was outraged at the inclusion of waltzing. As the first popular dance to be performed in a close hold, it had caused a scandal when introduced to England in about 1800, and was still being deplored in the 1820s. John Biddulph's affront in 1837 must have been among the last cries of defiance. His account of his feelings that night is preserved at the Herefordshire Archives. He wrote:

'The company good and the attendance large, 104, full, as many as the house would accommodate. All went off well if I may except the voltzing, which distressed me to see, as my own daughters set the example.

'This may lead to much and very serious injury, in serving as a precedent and example to the young women of the place, and lead to their utter ruin. I am most decidedly of the opinion that no woman ever became a practised voltzer that retained her original purity of mind. I would willingly have given a hundred guineas than it should have occurred.

'When the poor heathen dancing girls are accused of immodestly dancing, and the poor harlots at the spell houses\* at Amsterdam (where mothers of the best families take their daughters), how can they be put in comparison with the indecency of a voltz, the most destructive to good moral and pure feasting of any dance ever invented.

'The company stayed 'til 3 o'clock am, and all seemed pleased except myself.'



Hereford Times, 31 December 1836. © The British Library Board. All rights reserved. With thanks to the British Newspaper Archive. [www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk).



'Couple dancing the waltz' by Jean Sorrieu after Anais Colin, 1844. Sometimes entitled 'The Victoria and Albert Dance' after Queen Victoria. © Lebrecht Music & Arts / Alamy Stock Photo.

\*The literal meaning of spell houses is unclear but might relate to the Dutch words spel and huis, therefore 'game or play house'.



## FRANCIS DEAKINS AND A COACH-TRADE MONOPOLY

"...The Feathers became firmly established as the principal hotel in Ledbury."

**Innkeeper Luke Taylor died in April 1839, aged 41. His widow, Eliza, remarried, and in November 1841 sold The Feathers Hotel to the mortgage provider, John Foster Giles, master of the Ledbury Foxhounds. He lived in a mansion at the town's Homend, and although he would later move to Hampshire, he would retain the ownership of the hotel for the remaining 36 years of his life.**

At the end of 1841 the leaseholder appointed to run the hotel was 25-year-old Francis Henry Deakins. He and his wife Martha would stay for 20 years, in which time The Feathers became firmly established as the principal hotel in Ledbury.

By 1851 Deakins had managed to monopolise the town's coaching trade. A directory of that year showed that The Feathers offered all five daily Royal Mail coach departures – to Worcester, Hereford, Aberystwyth and twice daily to Gloucester – and two other coaches: The Queen with daily departures to Worcester and Hereford; and The Hero running three days per week with departures to Monmouth and Hereford.



Extract from the Ledbury entry in Lascelles & Co.'s 1851 Directory and Gazetteer of Herefordshire. Reproduced courtesy of Herefordshire Archive and Records Office.

However, an event at The Feathers in 1851 threatened to decimate the hotel's coaching trade at a stroke. It was the first meeting of local landowners who were planning the construction of the Worcester and Hereford Railway, which would bring train services to Ledbury.

The railway would be a great boon for all businesses in the town, but it would also be a short-term shock to The Feathers Hotel with the inevitable loss of trade accompanying the immediate demise of the Royal Mail coaches, and eventually all the coaches. Francis and Martha Deakins must have realised that they would need some new business initiatives, and one idea was soon presented to them.



## **A CORN EXCHANGE IN THE HOTEL**

**The repeal of the Corn Laws in 1845, which led to a rush in cities and market towns throughout the country to erect grand and very expensive corn-exchange buildings, brought an unexpected opportunity for Francis Deakins.**

He fitted out a room at The Feathers, which he offered for use as a corn exchange for Ledbury, available free of charge on the one day a week it was required. It opened in June 1854 and would be the town's corn exchange for at least the next 60 years. No doubt it brought extra trade into the hotel on market days, and indirectly during the rest of the week as well.



The Feathers Hotel restaurant.

## **THE RAILWAY COMES AND FRANCIS DEAKINS GOES BUST**

**On 12 June 1861 there were great celebrations at The Feathers Hotel to mark the completion of the Ledbury railway viaduct, a crucial element in the construction of the Worcester and Hereford Railway.**

A party of 200 gentlemen witnessed the laying of the last brick of the viaduct, and then proceeded into the town 'to partake of an elegant dejeuner served up at three o'clock at The Feathers Hotel in Mrs Deakins' best style'. A railway station was erected at the north end of Ledbury town, and the completion of the line was reported in the Hereford Times on 21 September.

In the same issue of the newspaper there was a notice of an auction of the entire contents of The Feathers Hotel – furniture, stock, horses, carriages and harnesses – by order of Francis Deakins. He had gone bust. The bankruptcy hearings would run for several months.





The Feathers Hotel lounge.



# WILLIAM MANTON – INNKEEPER/AUCTIONEER

**William Manton, a former commercial traveller from Yardley near Birmingham, took a lease on The Feathers in January 1887, which was a time of important change in Ledbury.**

Soon after he took charge, the town's leading tradespeople met at The Feathers and decided to form a company to establish a new livestock market. In July 1887 it opened on a new, dedicated site providing toll-free auction sales of cattle, sheep and pigs, and it would rejuvenate the town's otherwise dwindling market trade.

William Manton was immediately inspired to set up a side-line for himself as an auctioneer of horses. He established his auctioneer's office in The Feathers, and held his first sale in the hotel yard in August. It wasn't long before he branched out into auctioning property, and then farm livestock. In April 1888 he was given the task of selling the freehold of his own hotel. The long-standing owner, John Foster Giles, had died at his home in Southampton the previous year, aged 76.

An advertisement for the sale in the local press reveals that on the ground floor were 'large commercial and coffee rooms, private and public bars, still room, sitting room ... [and] a room used as a corn exchange. There was also a billiard room, and on the first floor a large assembly room. In the yard were loose boxes and standings for more than 50 horses, five carriage houses, a covered carriage yard, saddle rooms, a boot house, corn and hay stores, piggeries and cow houses.

The Feathers was sold to W H Hughes, a banker from Coventry, who three years later sold it to Flower and Sons Brewery of Stratford-upon Avon. When the brewery took over, William Manton gave up his lease, but remained in Ledbury, continuing his auctioneering business, which went from strength to strength.



Worcester Journal 27 August 1887. © The British Library Board. All rights reserved. With thanks to the British Newspaper Archive. [www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk).



## STORIES IN A PHOTOGRAPH FROM CIRCA 1895–1907



The lamp-sign of The Feathers, possibly dating from 1823 or earlier.



An example of the CTC plaque that used to be fixed above the door at The Feathers.

© Christopher Hilton and licensed for reuse under [creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0).

The photograph of The Feathers on the opposite page, taken probably sometime between 1895 and 1907, prompts a number of stories about the hotel in this period.

**Omnibus** – The Feathers Hotel Omnibus looks as though it might have been a newly delivered vehicle. Its purpose was to take departing guests to Ledbury railway station, and to meet every arriving train in the hope of picking up trade. Old inns established these service as soon as the railways took away the coaching trade. The earliest surviving reference to The Feathers omnibus is an article in the local press of 1867 reporting that it ran over a woman in the street, breaking both her legs.

**Lamp sign** – Above the main entrance to the hotel is a large lamp serving as an inn-sign of The Feathers, and which remains in place today. Local historian Joe Hillaby reckoned it to be the same one that was mentioned in a document dated 1823, when one Thomas Taylor submitted an estimate for street oil-lamps for the town that would be 'the make and size of the Feathers lamp'.

**Cyclists' plaque** – Just below the lamp is a cast-iron plaque bearing the winged-wheel symbol of the Cyclists' Touring Club (CTC). The widespread popularity of long-distance cycling had led to the formation of the CTC in 1878, and within five years it had 10,000 members nationwide. In 1887 it introduced a system of recommended hotels, which were permitted to display the club's plaque. Close inspection of the plaque in this photograph reveals it to be one of the early models, which were allocated to the club's so-called headquarters hotels.

**Hosts** – The two women in the doorway are probably Mrs Sophia Edmunds, formerly the widowed Mrs Smith, of Aberystwyth, and one of her daughters; either Miss Lucy Smith or Mrs Sophia Howell. Shortly after remarrying in 1894 Sophia Edmunds moved to Ledbury where she took on the lease of The Feathers. She parted company with her second husband and then in 1906 bought the freehold of the hotel from Flower and Sons.



## FROM HORSES TO MOTOR CARS FOR HIRE

**Sophia Edmunds died on 2 January 1908, aged 57, after which the assets of The Feathers were divided between two of her children.**

The property freehold together with the 'carriages, horses, motor cars and effects', forming a separate 'posting' business, went to her son Charles Thomas Smith; while the fixtures and fittings, the stock and the goodwill of the hotel business went to her daughter Sophia Howell. Charles Smith, who had set up as an auctioneer in Ledbury, immediately sold the freehold, and almost certainly the posting business as well, to Sophia's husband, Thomas Howell.



The Feathers Hotel probably between 1895 and 1907.  
Reproduced courtesy of Ledbury and District Civic Society and the Butcher Row House Museum.

An interesting aspect of these transactions is the reference to motor cars among the hotel's assets. The business of a posting house had for a hundred years or more included the provision of horses and carriages for hire, which required keeping a large stable of good quality horses and a reasonable number of carriages. The provision of motor cars for hire might seem like a natural progression, but not one that would have been affordable to many hotelkeepers, especially at this very early stage in the development of motor cars.

Thomas and Sophia Howell would run The Feathers for the next 11 years, at the start of which the building would undergo a most remarkable transformation.





This painting of The Feathers Hotel in 1911, by Lilian Stephens, hangs at the hotel today.



## **STRIPPED BACK TO REVEAL ITS ELIZABETHAN SPLENDOUR**

**A revival of interest in Elizabethan architecture started in the late 1800s as part of a rejection of the heavily ornate Victorian Gothic style. New buildings designed in a so-called mock-Tudor style became fashionable.**

Out of these ideas came a growing enthusiasm for stripping away the Georgian cladding from buildings known to be Elizabethan in origin, in order to re-present them in their original splendour. The mood caught on in Ledbury where several of the largest properties were given the treatment. It's thought that the front of The Feathers was stripped in 1908. It was certainly done before 1911, the date recorded on the painting opposite by Lilian Stephens.

"...a growing enthusiasm for stripping away the Georgian cladding from buildings known to be Elizabethan in origin..."

## **THE MOTOR CAR COMES OF AGE**

**Thomas Howell sold The Feathers in 1919 to James Townsend, who died only three years later, aged 45. He left the hotel to his widow, Dora Townsend, who ran it for the next nine years. In this time she adapted the business to respond to a fast-changing world.**

The mass production of motor cars took off from about 1920, liberating travel for the well-off, who could now drive long distances straight into the yards of quaint and interesting old inns, just as their forebears had done in the days of the stage coaches. The freedom of the motor car promoted an increase in day-trips, weekends away and short-holidays.

Old coach houses and stables were converted into garages, and by the look of an information sign in a photograph taken in the 1920s, The Feathers continued providing motor cars for hire. Within a few years the emblem of the Cyclists' Touring Club would be joined or replaced by those declaring the approval of the Automobile Association and the Royal Automobile Club.



The Feathers Hotel sign of the 1920s advertising 'Garage' and 'Motor Cars'. Image courtesy Herefordshire Archive and Records Office.





One of the bedrooms at The Feathers.



# MODERN TIMES AT THE FEATHERS

In 1931 Dora Townsend retired, aged 59, and sold The Feathers to Alfred and Emma Parmee, who came from The Horse and Groom Hotel at Colwall, between Ledbury and Malvern.

Following the death of Alfred Parmee, aged 65, in 1942, his widow Emma ran the hotel for two more years before selling it to the well-known Birmingham brewer Mitchells & Butlers. From 1956 the brewer leased it to the famous national hotel operator Trust Houses, and then from 1973 to a tenant, David Elliston. He bought the freehold in 1988 and invested in major alterations, including the installation of a swimming pool and conference centre, and the conversion of the old first-floor assembly room into bedrooms.

In 2017 The Feathers was bought by the Coaching Inn Group, which is committed to preserving and keeping faith with the heritage and unique characteristics of all the historic buildings in its care, while also investing sensitively in order to meet evolving customer needs.



The Feathers Hotel conference facilities.



An advertisement placed by hotelkeeper Dora Townsend in Kelly's Directory of Herefordshire for the year 1926. Image courtesy Herefordshire Archive and Records Office.



# SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England, *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in Herefordshire, Volume 2, East*, (HMSO London, 1932).

Duncan James, 'An Analysis of the Historic Fabric of Late 16th and Early 17th Century Buildings in Ledbury, Herefordshire', report for England's Past for Everyone Project, Herefordshire (Presteigne, 2007).

Institute of Historical Research, University of London, *Victoria County History, VCH Explore, Herefordshire*, [www.victoriacountyhistory.ac.uk/explore/items/high-street-no-25-feathers-hotel](http://www.victoriacountyhistory.ac.uk/explore/items/high-street-no-25-feathers-hotel).

Joe Hillaby, *Ledbury: A Medieval Borough*, 3rd edition (Ledbury and District Society Trust Ltd., 2005).

Sylvia Pinches, *Ledbury: People and Parish before the Reformation*, England's Past for Everyone Project, Herefordshire (Chichester, 2010).

Sylvia Pinches, *Ledbury: A Market Town and its Tudor Heritage*, England's Past for Everyone Project, Herefordshire (Chichester, 2009).

Ledbury Community Portal, <http://ledburyportal.co.uk/portal/history/article/30>, John Eager, '16th Painted Room', transcription of a 1698 deed of indenture between Thomas Pantall and the lords of the manor of Ledbury.

I Cohen, 'Report on archaeology for 1952', *Transactions of the Woolhope Naturalists Field Club*, 1952, 33-4.

Herefordshire Archive and Records Centre, Biddulph Estate Records: G2 catalogue intro; G2/1564/1502 schedule of deeds concerning The Plume of Feathers 1672-1726; G2/237-238 deeds of lease Tonson to Owen 1736, Pantall to Owen 1719; G2/589 rents 1813; G2/1025/2 building repairs book 1815-17; G2/IV/1/70 diary of John Biddulph 7 September 1836 to 27 February 1837.

David Elliston archive: schedule of deeds for The Plume of Feathers, later The Feathers, 1672-1835; actual deeds 1888-1977.

Barrie Cox, *English Inn and Tavern Names* (Nottingham, 1994).

Tim Hoverd and Christopher Atkinson, 'St Katherine's Car Park Archaeological Evaluation', Herefordshire Archaeology Report no. 263, (Hereford, 2009).

Nick Kingsley, blog, Landed Families of Britain and Ireland, no. 331, Baker of Bayfordbury, <http://landedfamilies.blogspot.com/2018/05/331-baker-of-bayfordbury.html>.

C Bruyn Andrews, ed., *The Torrington Diaries*, vol. 1 (London, 1935).

Charles J Robinson, *A History of the Mansions and Manors of Herefordshire* (Hereford, 1873).

John Cary, *Cary's New Itinerary of the Great Roads throughout England and Wales* (London, 1798).

John Eisel and Ron Shoesmith, *The Pubs of Bromyard, Ledbury and East Herefordshire* (Woonton, 2003).

Herefordshire trade directories for the years: 1784, 1793, 1816 (unattributed), 1822, 1830, 1835 (Pigot), 1835-7 (Robin), 1844, (Pigot), 1850 (Slater), 1851 (Lascelles), 1858 (Cassey), 1859 (Slater), 1867, 1876-7 (Littlebury), 1885, 1891, 1900, 1905, 1917, 1922, 1926, 1929 (Kelly).

The British Newspaper Archive, The British Library, articles in: *Hereford Journal*, *Gloucester Journal*, *Worcester Journal*, *Hereford Times*, *Kentish Gazette*, *Birmingham Journal*, *Worcester Herald*, *Monmouthshire Merlin*, *Worcestershire Chronicle*, *Wiltshire and Gloucestershire Standard*, *Hampshire Telegraph*, *Gloucestershire Chronicle*, *The Cambrian News and Merionethshire Standard*, *The Abergavenny Mail*, *Gloucester Citizen*, *Gloucester Echo*, *Birmingham Daily Post*, *Staffordshire Advertiser*, *Illustrated Sporting News*.

J W Gibbs, *Hints of Ledbury, a brief description by a native inhabitant* (Ledbury, 1831).

John Chappell, website, Ledbury in the Nineteenth Century, [www.ledburyhistory.uk](http://www.ledburyhistory.uk).

Michael Lever, website, Ledbury History Society, [www.ledburyhistorysociety.co.uk](http://www.ledburyhistorysociety.co.uk).

Ledbury and District Civic Society, website, <https://ledburycivicsociety.org>.

Butcher Row House Museum, Ledbury.

Mary Ring, ed., *Recollections of Ledbury: Articles written by George Wargent in 1905* (Ledbury, 1998).

Tom Bradley, *The Old Coaching Days in Yorkshire* (Leeds, 1889).

The National Archives, Prob 11/1919 will and probate of Luke Taylor of Ledbury, 5 November 1839.

National census records, 1841, 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891, 1901, 1911, and the Civilian Register 1939.

England and Wales registers of births, marriages and deaths.

Keith Matthews website Winged Wheels: The emblems of the Cyclists' Touring Club, [www.wingedwheels.info](http://www.wingedwheels.info).



The Feathers Hotel, Ledbury, 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 Feathers Hotel, Ledbury, 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).



**The Feathers Hotel**  
**25 High Street**  
**Ledbury**  
**Herefordshire**  
**HR8 1DS**

**T: 01531 635266**

**E: [feathers.ledbury@innmail.co.uk](mailto:feathers.ledbury@innmail.co.uk)**

**[www.feathersledbury.co.uk](http://www.feathersledbury.co.uk)**



**The Feathers Hotel**

25 High Street, Ledbury, Herefordshire, HR8 1DS  
T: 01531 635266 E: [feathers.ledbury@innmail.co.uk](mailto:feathers.ledbury@innmail.co.uk)  
[www.feathersledbury.co.uk](http://www.feathersledbury.co.uk)

The Feathers Hotel is part of The Coaching Inn Group Ltd  
[www.coachinginngroup.co.uk](http://www.coachinginngroup.co.uk)