

The Red Lion Coaching Inn in the 17th and 18th centuries
adapted from the book, “The Ditmas History of Benson” by Edith Ditmas

This is the oldest surviving building in Benson known to have existed as a coaching inn at least since the days of Ralph Quelche, who died in 1629. The memorial plaque in the church records that he and his wife, Jane, rebuilt the inn twice at their own charge, presumably after fires, so that an earlier inn may well have existed for some considerable previous period. The building, as it exists today at the junction of Mill Lane with the High Street, incorporated seventeenth-century rooms on two floors which, however, were given a new frontage in the Restoration period which is still visible in Mill Lane. The Georgian facade on the High Street was a still later modification.



The Mill Lane frontage as it looked in the sixties

We do not know who followed Ralph Quelche after his death in 1629 — possibly his wife and daughters carried on. He left a son who was responsible for the memorial tablet in St Helen’s church.

The Oxford students were staunch supporters of the Royalist cause in the Civil War and Ralph’s son may have been one of the casualties. It seems significant that there was no one to complete his father’s memorial by filling in the blanks left for the record of his mother’s death — from the burial register we know that she survived until 1649. It would therefore be chronologically possible for her to have been hostess to Charles I when he held his court in Benson, probably at the Red Lion; unfortunately we have no proof.

We do know, however, that in 1737 James Kemp was master of that inn, having been forty years in charge of it when his death was recorded in 1777. He was followed by William Adams who promptly married Jenny Kemp, daughter of James, and almost as promptly went bankrupt. His horses were sold in 1778 and his other possessions were sold a month later. William Adams had been licensed as a victualler in 1774 when James Kemp acted as one of his sureties, and twice in 1777, the year of Kemp's death. This may mean that he was in partnership in 1774.



The High Street frontage of the old Red Lion coaching inn

In 1785, it was recorded that the inn was owned by William Costar, a coachmaster from Benson who ran several coach routes based on Oxford. He also enjoyed driving the coach on the Henley to Oxford route. After William Costar died in 1802, the fortunes of the coaching inn began to decline.

The Red Lion coaching inn had been in an excellent position to attract trade from travellers on the roads between Oxford and London when coaches were using the Mill Lane route. However, this old coach road had to cross the millstream and coaches began to use an alternative route to Mill Lane. Once the coaches switched to the London Road route, the Red Lion became less important as a hostelry, the Crown being better situated for the “carriage folk”.

The Red Lion in the 19th century

During the early nineteenth century, a succession of owners passed through the inn. An advertisement from Jackson's Oxford Journal (below) describes the facilities boasted by the Red Lion Inn in 1812, when a landlord called John Andrews decided to sell up. He offered the following items for sale:

"Nine goose and other feather beds, twelve four post and other bedsteads, with cotton and Manchester striped furniture, wool mattresses in crankey cases, blankets, cotton counterpanes, bedside carpets, table linen, mahogany, lobby and dressing chests of drawers, washhand stands, Pembroke, claw and dressing tables, chairs, Scotch carpets, pier and dressing glasses"..... the list goes on.

In 1819, John Kerby sold up and in 1822, William Glanville handed over to Richard Carter, who advertised the Red Lion Inn as follows,

"Commercial Gentlemen will find the Red Lion Inn agreeable to their wishes in every respect, being supplied with excellent beds, genuine Wines and Spirits and good Stabling at very reduced prices. Coach Proprietors may be accommodated with excellent stabling for 40 horses."

Red Lion Commercial Inn,
BENSON OXON.
RICHARD CARTER
RESPECTFULLY informs his friends and the public that he has taken and entered on the above INN, where the utmost attention will be paid to the comfort and accommodation of his customers.—Commercial Gentlemen will find the Red Lion Inn agreeable to their wishes in every respect, being supplied with excellent Beds, genuine Wines and Spirits, and good Stabling, at very reduced prices.
Coach Proprietors may be accommodated with excellent Stabling for 40 Horses.

In December 1827, the unlicensed premises of the former Red Lion Inn were advertised to be let. The transcription (below) describes the premises.

TO BE LET

All those substantial road side premises known for many years as the
Red Lion Inn, Benson

Also a dwelling house, occupied as a grocer's and tea dealer's shop.

Five acres of orchard and meadow land, 46 miles from London and 12 from Oxford.

The Dwelling House or Late Inn is a substantial and respectable brick and tile building, sashed with a very extensive frontage, in good repair, replete with fixtures. It contains six lofty bedrooms, a dressing room and closets. On the ground floor are four parlours, a spacious kitchen (the tap room) and two smaller rooms, excellent cellars, garden etc.

A respectable dwelling house in Mill Street (lately a grocer's shop) containing the shop and small sitting room in front, a large parlour, kitchen and brew house, three front and a back chamber, three large rooms in the attic, excellent cellar and garden.

A very large yard, round which are six stables for sixty horses, with lofts and a granary over, a large carriage shed, over which is an excellent granary for 500 quarters of corn.

Also, unconnected with the above are two pieces of excellent orchard and meadow land.

Eventually, its function as a tavern was transferred across the road to its tap room, number 7 High Street, which eventually became known simply as The Lion. In 1851, Richard Newell was its landlord. The Lion survived as a popular village pub until the 1950s. The pub sign can be seen in the photo below.



John Aldridge takes up the story

Number 7 High Street is a 17th century building with an 18th century frontage, all roughcast with a clay tile roof. This was a Beer-House from the early Posting Days until the early 1930's, when it was licensed as a Public House and known as **The Red Lion**, with William Friend as landlord until he retired in the 1960's. The timber support holding the Inn sign is still fixed to the front wall. It is believed that this house, with its outbuildings and possibly others long since demolished, was used as a hostelry in conjunction with the original Red Lion Inn across the road. Sheds, hovels and lofts were frequently used as overnight dormitories for a few pence by coachmen, merchants and casual servants.

The Red Lion Posting Inn. The original building, which probably incorporated an arched entrance to a courtyard at the rear, is 17th century or even late 16th century. The present frontage is 18th century, in vitreous brick with red brick dressing and a clay tile roof. The Monarch's Court portion is partly in ragstone and may well have been developed from the original stables and coach-houses. The corner portion with return to Mill Lane was used by Richard James (Tailor) from 1876 to 1902; Mary Baker (Draper) to 1923; Walter Bennett (Tea Rooms) to 1930; Percy Tomms (Confectionery, below) to 1969; and then Barclay's Bank Ltd, after the building was restored.



The front rooms of the Monarch's Court portion facing on to Mill Lane was a Grocer's Shop run by Edward Paxman 1883, then Elijah Paxman until 1930, when Charles Douglas traded until the late 1940's. It was then used as a ladies' hairdressing salon, followed by a retail wool shop.

By the end of the twentieth century, the entire building had been beautifully restored and had reverted to houses.