

Chapter One

THE FIRST INNS

THE FIRST INNS in this country, where travellers could eat, drink and sleep after a day's journey, were built before the English ever arrived here, for they were introduced by the Romans.

Aulus Plautius and his legionaries landed on the Kent coast in A.D. 43 and after capturing their first objectives set about the problem of advancing through the rest of primitive Britain.

Their immediate task was to clear the wooded valleys for cultivation and build roads for their advancing armies. Government was difficult and made possible only by the maintenance of the miles of lonely roads, which were vital for the unification of the country, and the establishment of facilities for the long journeys of government officials, soldiers and road-builders. Posting houses were built, where horses could be changed. Ordinary drinking taverns inevitably followed, and in addition to these, inns or *diversoria* were established, where men and horses could refresh themselves and take a night's rest.

Along the roads, these inns were very simple affairs, but in the towns which soon came into being they were often important, well-equipped buildings. At Silchester, the Roman city built on the hill site of the original Celtic fortress of the Atrebates, roads converged from Cirencester, Exeter, Dorchester and Winchester, and amidst the wattle and daub cottages of the British there arose pagan temples, a forum and basilica, baths, stone villas and an important inn.

Though considerably larger and with more accommodation than the ordinary Roman villa, the inn seems to have been built on similar lines, arranged round two courtyards. The first, the atrium, opened from the public roadway, with sleeping quarters leading from one side, kitchens and the stoke-hole from the other, the dining-room occupying the fourth side, opposite the entrance. The far side of the dining-room opened on to the second courtyard or peristyle, which was an enclosed garden surrounded by colonnaded walks, with perhaps another reception room on the far side, opposite the dining-room.

Although there were public baths in Silchester, the inn was important enough to have its own system of baths, adjoining the stoke-hole. They were built with under-floor heating and, as in a Turkish bath, the bather went through a succession of steam-heated rooms of increasing temperatures, ending with a massage and cold plunge in the first room—the *frigidarium*.

Seneca, writing in A.D. 57, brings vividly to life something of the scene which must often have taken place at the Silchester inn when a party of weary and dusty travellers arrived for a night's lodging. 'I am living near a bath', he wrote. 'Sounds are heard on all sides. Just imagine for yourself every conceivable kind of noise that can offend the ear. The men of more sturdy muscle go through their exercises, and swing their hands heavily weighted with lead: I hear their groans when they strain themselves, or the whistling of laboured breath when they breathe out having held in. If one is rather lazy, and merely has himself rubbed with unguents, I hear the blows of the hand slapping his shoulders . . . or there is someone in the bath who loves to hear the sound of his own voice.'

The Romans liked their creature comforts, and after the bath and the massage, there was good food at the inn and also wine, but whether the wine was locally grown or imported is not certain. Wine was once produced in the southern part of Britain in considerable quantities and there were vineyards in and around London until the eighteenth century, but wine

was also one of the earliest imports of the Roman city of London.

Chess was a favourite diversion of the Romans and the chequer board was an early inn sign. In the years to come, when most of the Roman buildings had been destroyed by the English invaders or had fallen into ruin through neglect and disuse, the sign of the chequer board lingered on in the memory of the inn-keepers and was often used, the chequer pattern being painted on the door post, and to this day it is a common enough sign for an inn.

While the Roman inns displayed the chequer board for a sign, the ordinary drinking places, of which there must have been hundreds, displayed a garland of ivy leaves or vine leaves, in honour of Bacchus, tied to the end of a long, projecting, horizontal pole.

In A.D. 410 Rome fell, captured and sacked by the Goths, and the great days of the Empire were over. The Romans departed from Britain and the Anglo-Saxon invaders swarmed over the country. The lovely villas of Roman Britain, the pleasant farm houses, the inns, shops and market places, the pagan temples and the newly-dedicated Christian churches were all forsaken and then pillaged, till they crumbled away into ruin and desolation. The halls of the British chieftains were left 'without fire, without light, without songs'.

The English way of life was completely different from that of Roman Britain, for the English were solitaries who disliked city life. 'None of the Germanic people dwell in cities, and they do not even tolerate houses which are built in rows', wrote Tacitus. 'They dwell apart, and at a distance from one another, according to the preference which they may have for a stream, the plain or the grove.'

They lived in scattered, heavily-defended family settlements and the waste lands outside their boundaries were places to be feared, the haunts of evil spirits, will-o'-the-wisps and dragons. In this unfriendly, pagan country, where every stranger was a

potential enemy, there was no place for the friendly inn and none existed.

During the next two centuries, while the flame of British resistance flickered and died in despair, the English made England their own country. The fertile lands of the east and south gave an ease and plenty of living which, to some extent, subdued their harsh temper. They increased their trade with Europe and trading centres became small towns, many of which, including London, were rebuilt on the ruins of former Roman cities.

In A.D. 589 Pope Gregory sent St. Augustine and his band of monks to begin a Christian mission in Kent. The Christian Church made rapid progress in England and the country soon became once more part of a great cultural empire, based on Rome. European traders followed the Christian missionaries and England extended her European commerce. The quays of London were rebuilt and there was far more movement throughout the country than in the early days of the Dark Ages. Once more provision had to be made for travellers.

At first this was supplied by the monasteries, which during the seventh and eighth centuries were built in increasing numbers in England, for hospitality to strangers as well as succour and charity to the needy were regarded as one of the first principles of Christianity, the fourth of the 'seven works of mercy'.

There were several monastic orders in England but the largest and earliest was that of the Benedictines, which had been founded in the sixth century and to which St. Augustine of Canterbury had belonged. Travellers were always given food and a bed at a Benedictine monastery. The visitors' quarters were divided into three categories, based on social distinction. There was simple accommodation for the poorer guests and pilgrims, better rooms for merchants and men of similar social standing, and apartments for visiting nobles, which usually adjoined those of the abbot. No charge was made, but travel-

lers were expected to contribute what they could afford to the Abbey funds.

As well as these havens for travellers, scores of wayside ale-houses and wine-houses were also established along the roads. The sign of the ale-house was the 'ale-stake', very similar to the Roman sign, for it was a bush or besom tied to the end of a long, horizontal pole: and here you could buy ale, mead, cider or perry. The wine was probably of local manufacture, for Bede, writing from the monastery of Jarrow, early in the ninth century, described Britain as an island 'which excels for grain and trees and is well adapted for feeding cattle and beasts of burden. It also produces vines in some places. . . .' As for game and fish, he said that the country 'has plenty of land- and water-fowls of several sorts; it is remarkable also for rivers abounding in fish and plentiful springs. It has the greatest plenty of salmon and eels; . . . besides many sorts of shell-fish, such as mussels, in which are often found excellent pearls. . . . There is also a great abundance of cockles, of which the scarlet dye is made. . . . It has both salt and hot springs, and from them flow rivers which furnish hot baths, proper for all ages and sexes arranged according.'

During the ninth and tenth centuries came the invasion of the Norwegian and Danish Vikings, and it was they who promoted the popularity of ale, so that it soon became the daily drink of nearly all Englishmen. Scores more ale houses were opened throughout the country and restrictive measures had to be passed, controlling price and quality, while fines were imposed on any men who 'quarrelled and beat another in an ale-house'. Yet accommodation for travellers on the roads was still very scarce. The monasteries would lodge them for as long as three days, if necessary, but if, in the course of their journey, they did not come upon a monastery or a friendly and hospitable household before nightfall, they had no alternative but to sleep in the open air.

When Duke William landed in England, in 1066, the

population of the country was something between a million and a half and two million souls, most of them living in their small, isolated, scattered villages. William professed himself a devout Christian and built many more churches throughout the country as well as monasteries, thus providing more accommodation for travellers. However, he also built more towns and cities, and trade, both inland and overseas, developed steadily. This meant that there were more travellers on the roads, as well as hundreds of pilgrims visiting the numerous holy shrines.

By the twelfth century the Cistercians and Carthusians were also established in England, but the Cistercians were a more austere order than the Benedictines and the Carthusians were a silent order, so it was the Benedictines who did most of the entertaining.

Most travellers were generous to the monasteries, but some took advantage of their open-handed hospitality, so that in the years to come they were to run into financial troubles. For example, when King John visited Bury St. Edmunds, during the thirteenth century, with his retinue of grooms, fowlers and squires, and his horses and hounds for hunting and hawking, 'he availed himself of the hospitality of St. Edmund, which was attended with enormous expense', wrote Jocelin of Brakeland, 'and upon his departure bestowed nothing at all, either of honour or profit, upon the Saint, save thirteen pence sterling, which he offered at mass on the day of his departure.'

The Benedictine monasteries at this time were nearly all to a pattern, built round a courtyard with a gatehouse. On either side of the gatehouse were the almoner's office and the visitors' quarters. Leading from the north and south sides of the courtyard were the stables and granaries, kitchens, bakehouses and breweries. The church opened from the east wall of the courtyard, its west door being usually opposite the gatehouse, and on the sunny, south side of the church were the cloisters, with the refectory close by. Other vital parts of the monastery were the chapter house, the scriptorium and the infirmary,

which usually had its own chapel and kitchen. There was an outer parlour, where the monks received visitors, including merchants with whom they had business, and an inner parlour for their own diversions, with their dormitory above, which had easy access to the church for the services held throughout the night. In the monastery gardens they grew their own produce, vegetables and fruit as well as culinary and medicinal herbs, and had their fish ponds.

In addition to the abbot, the prior and sub-prior, the precentor, the sacristan and the steward, there was a hospitaller to look after the guests and an infirmarer to tend the sick.

After hours of walking or riding along the lonely, rough and dangerous roads of medieval England, the monasteries, which were the first English hotels, were blessed havens for exhausted travellers from all walks of life, and the infirmarers saved the lives of hundreds of sick and destitute peasants, nursing them back to health and giving them money to help them on their way.

Another important officer of the monastery was the cellarer, for the monasteries brewed their own ale. As early as the twelfth century, the abbey at Burton-on-Trent had acquired a high reputation for its ale, but according to the old rhyme, the abbot was canny.

The Abbot of Burton brewed good ale
On Fridays when they fasted

.....

But the Abbot of Burton never tasted his own
As long as his neighbour's lasted.

Ale at this time was made by fermenting an infusion of malt, made from barley or oats, and it was flavoured with ground-ivy or costmary. Beer was regarded as a superior kind of ale and it cost nearly twice as much, for it was much stronger, being made from the first mashing of the malt.

The monastic brewers marked their barrels X, XX and

XXX, according to the strength of the beer, the original form of the cross being like a crucifix and a sign that the monks had sworn on the Cross that their beer was of good quality and of the strength indicated.

It was during the fourteenth century that Flemish immigrants introduced hops into the brewing of beer, but at first the English heartily disliked the flavour. Hops were considered to be an adulterant and regarded with grave suspicion. The Common Council of the City of London petitioned against their use, protesting that they ruined the flavour of the beer and endangered life, whereupon Henry VI forbade brewers to use them. Henry VIII, who also liked his beer unhopped, repeated the prohibition, but the decrees of even that autocratic monarch were by no means always obeyed. Beer was brewed with hops and people gradually acquired the taste for them, so that before long they were being grown extensively, particularly in Kent. A Kentish squire of Tudor times announced: "From Bohemia cometh this goodly vine that I am minded to plant in the county of Kent. With its aid is made that good drink that we call Brunswick Mum. But the Almaines call it 'Bier', for it is made from the bere or barley plant. It is like our ale but not so sweet."

For a long time the beer brewers, who used hops, kept themselves apart from the ale brewers, who were the original members of the Brewers' Company, but in time the term 'beer' came to be used for all types of malt liquor.