

CAROLINE SMITH: OLDEST LICENSEE IN ENGLAND

It is very clear from the census returns, the 1939 register and reminiscences in the Market Rasen Mail, that Caroline Smith was very much in charge when it came to running the White Hart Hotel, and was the driving force of the business.

For many years Caroline Smith ran the White Hart Hotel in King Street, which can be found close to the Market Place in Market Rasen. The hotel had a long history of being a place for travellers, initially those taking the coaching routes which passed through Market Rasen, followed later (with the arrival of the railway) by those that came to the town by train, with hourly carriages collecting people from the station to partake in the hotel's hospitality. In 1919 Mrs Smith was still providing this transport service and was paying the sum of 1/- per week to the Great Central Railway Co. for the right of 'plying for hire' from the railway station.

Mrs Smith is believed to have taken over the hotel around 1901, with her tenure ending around 1940 when she passed away at the grand age of 94. By the late 1930s Mrs Smith was considered the 'oldest licensee in England' (Market Rasen Mail, June 1940). Looking at the details of her birth and early life, the most likely narrative for Caroline Smith would be that of a farmer's wife, but that – in fact – is only half her story.

A CHILDHOOD AT MARKBY PRIORY FARMHOUSE

Caroline Smith was born Caroline Fanny Kirkham on the 29 December 1847, in the parish of Markby in Lincolnshire. Her childhood home was a 16th century farmhouse called Markby Priory, where her family were farmers. Her early life is likely to have been comfortable. She appears to have been educated for a period by a governess, and her parents employed other household staff. Caroline married young. Her husband was George Sidney Smith, who was a farmer of 465 acres in the parish of Haydor (Heydour), near Grantham. Their home was listed as 'Haydor Lodge'. Married life most likely continued to be comfortable but was probably also very busy. In the 1871 census Caroline's

occupation is listed as 'farmer's wife', with some domestic help. By 1891 no occupation is listed for Caroline, however the couple have seven children, and Caroline is supported by a 'teacher (governess)', a housemaid and a cook, living in.

STARTING HER OWN BUSINESS AT 54

As a farmer's wife in the second half of the 19th century, Caroline is likely to have been responsible for overseeing many aspects of farming (such as dairy and poultry work) as well as running the household. We can speculate that the experience and skills learned during this 20-30-year period prepared her for running her own busy hotel. It is unclear why, at the age of 54, Caroline decided to take on the running of her own business. George appears to have moved farms in this period and then retired. The 1891 and 1901 Censuses indicate that Caroline and George's two sons embarked on careers outside farming, one as a 'chemist's apprentice' in Gainsborough (aged 17 in 1891) and the other was a 'foreman to a timber merchant' in Woodstone, Northamptonshire (aged 25 in 1901). In the 1901 and 1911 Census, Mrs Smith's occupation is listed as 'hotel keeper'. By 1911 she was 64 years of age and is living with her husband George Sidney Smith, aged 66, who is recorded with 'no occupation, formerly farmer'. In the 1939 register she is listed as still living at the White Hart Hotel, occupation 'licensee of hotel', by this stage she is a widow.

However, it is very clear from the census returns, the 1939 register and reminiscences in the Market Rasen mail, that Caroline Smith was very much in charge when it came to running the White Hart Hotel, and the driving force of the business.



The White Hart Hotel from the Market Place (2)



The White Hart from the west, undated (4)

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A SNUG AND DICKENSIAN ESTABLISHMENT

In a Market Rasen Mail article from June 1940, the hotel under Mrs Smith's management is described as: 'old-fashioned, snug and comfortable, the White Hart carried on into the 20th century traditions and surroundings which belonged more truly to Dickensian times than to the present day. Its bar parlour looked out into a courtyard which had seen stagecoaches come and go and its assembly rooms were the scene of innumerable dinners and balls which are now no more than a memory.'

FROM KINGS TO CANARIES

Brian Ward, in his book *The Public Houses, Breweries and other Licenced Premises of Market Rasen*, gives the following account of Mrs Smith: 'The Rasen Mail of 17 February 1999 had an item by former Editor 'Teddy' Sharpe looking back at the White Hart's long term landlady, Mrs. Caroline Fanny Smith. He recalls her from personal experience as "both a matriarch and martinet. Her customers were the best in the district." Apparently when she was a girl she went abroad to visit her uncle who was engaged in building the railway line from Denmark to Germany, and "on one occasion when she was as light as a feather and a delight to behold she danced a quadrille with the then King of Denmark." Quite a character! She married a gentleman farmer at no more than 18 years of age, had 15 children and clearly was in total command of the running of the White Hart, "from the sounding of the brass bell for the market ordinary luncheon on a Tuesday to the proclaiming of a decision which she regularly reached that Mr. So-and-so, sitting in one of the great Windsor chairs which were ringed around in her smoke room, should drink no more because it would not be good for him." She ran the hotel from her bedroom until the end, presumably until the sale of the property in 1940 (see Fig. 30), and died at the age of 94. Apparently her "private room", in which she ruled the roost with canaries for companions, became the Managing Director's office when the Plastic Box Co. occupied the more modern factory to the rear, in Mill St.'



A photograph taken c.1900, part of an article in the Market Rasen Mail of 2001. Pictured is William 'The Ostler' Oldam who drove the coach for the White Hart Hotel between 5 am and midnight, meeting passengers from the train. Taken in Dear Street, Market Rasen (3)



An early image of the White Hart Hotel, from the letterhead of one of Mrs Smith's predecessors, Mr Thornton (1)

References

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Photography credits

- 1) www.raseheritage.org.uk, Brian Ward (2008)
- 2) www.raseheritage.org.uk, Brian Ward (2010-12)
- 3) www.raseheritage.org.uk, Brian Ward (2010-12) and The Market Rasen Mail
- 4) www.raseheritage.org.uk, Brian Ward (2010-12)