

THE CROWN INN, BENSON

The Crown Inn, situated on the corner of the Old London Road and High Street, was ideally placed for offering hospitality to travellers in the days when Benson was an important stop for stage coaches. It has a date plaque of 1709, but the building is 17th century and timber framed. The outbuildings behind the Crown form an L shape, with the rear of no. 48 High Street on one side, and a barn forming the other. Newspaper advertisements show that the inn had stabling for 16 horses in 1830, when William Costar was the innkeeper. The trade directory for 1839, (*see below*) shows that three Royal Mail Coaches departed from the Crown Inn daily. In 1842, William's brother, Richard Costar, was the innkeeper and advertised that he now had stables, harness room and a lock-up coachhouse.



A photograph of the Crown Inn thought to date from about 1915



Before an extension of 1918, there was a carriage entrance next to the Crown Inn

An excerpt from Catherine Murray's report on the Crown Inn written in 2008

Miss Ditmas, in her History of Benson, explains how the main coaching road originally entered the village from the London direction via Coach Way and Mill Lane, but was re-routed along the present Old London Road and down the High Street so as to avoid the marshy nature of the ground around the Mill Stream. To this change she attributed the advance in prosperity of The Crown, and the decline in popularity of The Red Lion (on the corner of Mill Lane and High Street).

Outbuildings and services

The importance of the outbuildings is borne out by 19th century evidence for the coaching trade. Benson was the first stop out of Oxford for changing horses, with the inns supplying fresh horses necessary for climbing the steep Chiltern scarp up to Nuffield and taking a coach on the next stage to Henley. The stables and rear paddock would have been essential in caring for the horses that had already done their stage, and in ensuring that they were fed, fit and ready for the return journey.

It is clear that associated yards were providing services such as shoeing horses and repairing and even making coaches. The 1841 and 1851 Census Returns and the 1841 Tithe Returns show that a coach maker, Robert Verdon was living in the cottage at the High Street end of the stables, and that two other coach makers and a carpenter were living in the immediate vicinity. There was a blacksmith operating immediately across the road at the Plough (Wisteria Cottage) and several more from the cottages down Old London Road. The 1897 Morland documents refer to the Crown Inn with Coach House, messuage and shop, the shop presumably a workshop rather than a retail outfit. At the peak of the coaching era, in the early 19th century, Crown Square would have been a hive of activity.

William Pleasant, innkeeper

The earliest certain written reference that I have found to 'The Crown' is an entry in Jackson's Oxford Journal for November 19th 1785, which gives notice of a Sale to be held "at the House of William Pleasant, known by the Sign of The Crown, in Bensington". The Parish Registers record the earlier marriage of William Pleasant, innholder, and Elizabeth Stevens in 1765, but do not state which inn he held.

The Costars

William Pleasant's daughter, Sarah married William Costar in 1785. William Costar came from a family of wheelwrights, who would have played a role in establishing Benson as a significant centre for building and repairing coaches. The 18th century

Costars were prolific and the family tree has a confusing multiplicity of Williams and Richards. Family experts, however, believe that this particular William was the ‘natural’ son of Kety Costar and Willoughby Bertie, Earl of Abingdon, and that he turned down grander career opportunities because of a strong penchant for the coaching trade.

William’s son, Richard was the innkeeper throughout much of the first half of the 19th century. This Richard Costar, born in 1788, is recorded as a publican at the birth of his first daughter in 1822, and as innkeeper in the Census of 1841. In 1851 he carried out the Census for the southern half of the village, with himself and his daughter’s family as the first entries. When he died in 1858 he was described on his tombstone as “*for many years a much respected inhabitant of this parish*”.



**Memorial to Richard Costar (1788 – 1858)
In St Helen's Churchyard, Benson**

ROBSON'S DIRECTORY 1839

The list of coach services below shows that the Gloucester Mail Coach, the London Mail coach and the Stroud Mail coach all departed daily from the Crown Inn, Benson.

Coaches to

- Cheltenham, Berkeley Hunt, from *Crown Inn*, $\frac{1}{2}$ bef.
12 noon, daily, (Sun. exc.); returns $\frac{1}{2}$ p. 2 aft.
Cheltenham, Magnet, from *Crown Inn*, $\frac{1}{2}$ p. 12
noon, daily, (Sun. exc.); returns $\frac{1}{2}$ p. 2 aft.
Gloucester, Mail, from *Crown Inn*, $\frac{1}{2}$ p. 1 morn.
daily; returns same time.
London, Alert from *Crown Inn*, $\frac{1}{2}$ p. 11 morn.
daily, (Sun. exc.); returns $\frac{1}{2}$ p. 3 aft.
London, Berkeley Hunt, from *Crown Inn*, $\frac{1}{2}$ p. 2 aft.
daily, (Sun. exc.); returns $\frac{1}{2}$ p. 12 noon.
London, Defiance, from *Crown Inn*, 12 noon, daily;
returns 7 evn.
London, Magnet, from *Crown Inn*, $\frac{1}{2}$ p. 2 aft. daily,
(Sun. exc.); returns $\frac{1}{2}$ p. 12 noon.
London, Mail, from *Crown Inn*, $\frac{1}{2}$ p. 1 morn. daily;
returns same time.
London, Mazeppa, from *Crown Inn*, $\frac{1}{2}$ aft. daily;
(Sun. exc.); returns 11 morn.
London, Queen, from *Crown Inn*, $\frac{1}{2}$ p. 9 morn. daily,
(Sun. exc.); returns 7 evn.
London, Stroud Mail, from *Crown Inn*, every morn.
 $\frac{1}{2}$ p. 1; returns same day.
London, Stroudwater, Coach from *Crown Inn*, $\frac{1}{2}$ p. 1
morn. daily, (Sun. exc.)
London, Wellington, from *Crown Inn*, $\frac{1}{2}$ p. 10 morn.
daily, (Sun. exc.) returns $\frac{1}{2}$ p. 7 evn.
Oxford, Alert, from *Crown Inn*, $\frac{1}{2}$ p. 3 evn. daily,
(Sun. exc.); returns $\frac{1}{2}$ p. 11 morn.

Oxford, Defiance, from *Crown Inn*, 7 evn. daily; re-
turns 12 noon.
Oxford, Queen, from *Crown Inn*, 7 evn. daily, (Sun.
exc.); returns $\frac{1}{2}$ p. 9 morn.
Oxford, Wellington, from *Crown Inn*, $\frac{1}{2}$ p. 7 evn.; re-
turns $\frac{1}{2}$ p. 10 morn.
Stroudwater, from *Crown Inn*, $\frac{1}{2}$ p. 1 aft. daily,
(Sun. exc.)
Worcester, Mazeppa, from *Crown Inn*, 11 morn.
daily, (Sun. exc.); returns $\frac{1}{2}$ aft.

Carriers to

- London, Besley's Waggon, from *Crown Inn*, every
Wed. morn; returns Fri. at noon.
Oxford, Bond's Van, every Wed. & Sat.; returns
same day.
Reading, Bond's Van, every Fri.; returns same day.

Below: The Crown Inn Advertisement in Jackson's Oxford Journal of 1842

RICHARD COSTAR,
CROWN INN, BENSON, OXON,

BEGS leave to inform the Nobility, Gentry, and the Public in general that in consequence of the large Inns at Benson having closed he has made great improvements in the above establishment, such as excellent new-stalled Stables, Harness Room, and lock-up Coach House, together with new Bed and other Rooms in doors; and, as it is now the only House in Benson for the accommodation of families who are travelling that road, he hopes, by strict attention to every duty as an Innkeeper, to merit a liberal share of public support.

N.B. A Horse and Gig to let, and Post Horses procured on the shortest notice.—Home-brewed Beer, &c. &c.

By 1842, when the advertisement was published, The Red Lion Inn in the High Street had closed and moved to smaller premises, across the High Street, and the White Hart was being renovated. This left the Crown Inn as the “*only house in Benson for the accommodation of families*”. Richard Costar had made great improvements in the facilities of the inn, and also offered “*post horses procured on the shortest notice.*”

The Costar family’s reign at the Crown Inn ended in 1858, when Richard Costar died and Edward Glanville took over, but he went bankrupt in 1864.



An old photograph of the Crown Inn from Old London Road

The advertisement (*on the next page*) shows the range of outhouses, including stables, wheelwrights and smiths shops as well as gardens and a skittle alley, behind the Crown by 1860. The Crown Inn was still being advertised as being “*on the turnpike road from Oxford to Henley*”.

Below: Advertisement offering The Crown Inn and other property for sale
Jackson's Oxford Journal 1860

Valuable FREEHOLD PROPERTY,

BENSON, OXON,

T O B E S O L D B Y A U C T I O N,

By Messrs. FRANKLIN and GALE,

(By order of the Trustees and Executors of the late Mr. R. Costar) at the Crown Inn, Benson, on Wednesday the 18th of July, 1860, at Three o'clock in the afternoon, in two lots.

LOT 1.—All that old-established well-known FREE COMMERCIAL HOUSE, called the CROWN INN, containing five bed rooms and three attics, commercial room, parlour, bar, kitchen, larder, scullery, cellar, store room and out offices, yard, skittle alley, stables, coach house, wheelwright's and smith's shops, greenhouse and viney, and a large and exceedingly prolific garden, the produce of which gained the late Mr. Costar numerous prizes at Chiswick, Oxford, and other horticultural shows, now in the occupation of Mr. E. Glanville, situate in High-street, in the centre of the populous village of Benson, and on the turnpike-road from Oxford to Henley. A convenient COTTAGE and GARDEN, in the occupation of Mrs. Allnutt, and a DWELLING HOUSE and SHOP, late in the occupation of Mr. Josiah Horn, grocer, &c.

LOT 2.—A comfortable COTTAGE RESIDENCE and GARDEN, situate at Littleworth, Beason, in the occupation of Mr. G. Hicks. Also an ALLOTMENT of ARABLE LAND, near thereto, containing 0A. 2R. 18P., in the occupation of Mr. William Green.

Particulars and conditions of sale may be had on application to Messrs. Stevens and Satchell, 6, Queen-street, Cheapside, and at the Estates Gazette Office, 200, Fleet-street, London; at the Crown Inn, Benson; and at the office of the auctioneers, Market-place, Wallingford.

By 1902, advertising material shows that the innkeeper was W.W. Rayward who was promoting the place as an ideal holiday centre. The Crown obviously believed in keeping up with modern trends for, in addition to "*electric launches for hire, electric cars and batteries charged and every convenience for hunting, shooting, golf, fishing and boating parties, the Crown garage was always open, cars stored and cleaned, petrol and inspection pit.*"

In the 1955 Women's Institute scrapbook it is noted that the shoemaker, whose shop was next to the Crown, was Special Constable before a village policeman was appointed. His staff of office, the handcuffs and the key of the stocks were held in the shop.