

BENSON HIGH STREET BY JOHN ALDRIDGE
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Starting in Castle Square, next to **Elm House** is a retail shop with a frontage of vitreous bricks with red brick dressings finished with a parapet to a clay tile roof. The original 18th century building with a small walled courtyard, stables and stores is built in ragstone and brick, with extensive careful and sympathetic alterations in recent times. Records show that these premises were used by provision and wine merchants from early "Posting Days" until the late 1950's. To the rear was a bake house which was used mainly for baking bread until about 1925. My Grandmother, who was the last of the Clinch family who had lived in the village since the early 1700's, told me that these brick ovens were also used to cook the Christmas goose or larger-than-usual joints of meat for those with small kitchen ranges.

Recorded owners include John Baily 1830, John Burgh 1883, Hannah Burgh 1895, Walter Fuller 1903, Charles A Wood and Sons 1907, Frank Mattingley 1935 and Chamberlain and Son 1939. From 1907 to about 1928 Charles A Wood delivered all provisions, including freshly-baked bread, by a horse-drawn van to homes in Benson, Roke, Berrick and Ewelme six days a week. Paraffin oil and vinegar were dispensed directly into customers' own cans and bottles. Sugar, biscuits and most dry goods were stored in large containers and sold by weight, then wrapped in twisted paper cones. Butter and lard was patted on marble slabs and wrapped in grease-proof paper.

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. Rooms, sheds, hovels and lofts were frequently used as overnight dormitories for a few pence by coachmen, merchants and casual servants.

Kemp House, and Monarch's Court, form a single block, all of which was once The Red Lion Posting Inn, and known prior to this as The New Inn. The original building, which probably incorporated an arched entrance to a

courtyard at the rear, is 17th century or even late 16th century. It is recorded that King Charles I held a One-Day Court there in 1642. 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 (I have an intact reel holding one mile of black cotton which my Father bought amongst other items when Mary ceased trading); Walter Bennett (Tea Rooms) to 1930; Percy Toms (Confectionery) to 1969; and then Barclay's Bank Ltd.



An old photograph of the High Street from the Red Lion, looking east

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.

Number **11 High Street** was once a "beer house" called "**The Ship**". The Deeds of the property show it had very early origins. For many years Mr and Mrs Brighting conducted their decorating and general hardware business here. The workshops and stores to the rear were once used by Mr Harry West in conjunction with his building business.

“**Ashcroft**” adjoining is an 18th century colour-washed ragstone and brick construction. To the rear of the eastern wing was a Millwright’s workshop where my Father obtained his first job at the age of thirteen as a “striker”. This work involved using a sledge-hammer to strike the hot metal on the anvil with alternate blows in conjunction with the smith’s hammer to fashion the piece into the desired shape. He was also a general assistant and gained his first experience as a millwright here with William Llewendon, who owned the business from about 1890 to 1928.

“**The Old Malthouse**”, **17 High Street**, is late 18th century with an early 19th century frontage. Thomas Hinton was a baker and confectioner here from about 1894 to 1920. The bakehouse was the cottage to the rear called “Ivy Cottage” which now has access from Chapel Lane. The premises may well have been used as a malthouse, although I can only find one record of a maltster in Benson and this was in 1830 under the name of James Burgis.

Continuing in **High Street**; **Nos. 8 to 12** are 18th Century with later re-facings and alterations built mainly in ragstone with brick dressings and clay tile roofs. All of these premises, including those houses adjoining in Mill Lane, may have been a Coaching Inn with courtyard to the rear, entered through an archway which is still visible between Nos. 10 and 12. The front room of No. 10, when in the possession of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Pengilley, was used as a retail Dairy from 1928 to 1948. Milk, cream, butter and eggs were all brought direct from their farm opposite the school in Oxford Road. In my young days milk was dispensed directly into your jugs or special milk cans with hinged lids from large churns by pint or half-pint measures. Cream was skimmed from the top of milk which was allowed to settle overnight in large shallow pottery vats. The front room of No. 12 was Mr. George Pether’s Shoe makers shop for many years.



Nos 8-12 High Street looking west

UPDATE to **No. 10**. A recent visit by experts from the South Oxfordshire Project has given further information. They describe: ‘a timber framed house of c.1700 with front underbuilt in stone, rear range added c1750 to 1800. Walling of diaper pattern blue/red brick under a clay tile roof and brick stacks. Attic has two bays of truncated and diminished queen strut plus king strut trusses’. Indeed, the boundary wall between Nos. 8 and 10 is timber-framed (from ground to roof), as is some of the original rear wall of No. 10. Further, it is obvious from this framing that, at some point, the two properties were one. The addition of the rear range in brick can be clearly seen on the side of No. 8 from Mill Lane.

Next is “**Kingsford House**”, an early 19th Century residence, which had a large, beautifully maintained walled garden to the rear (until it was developed in the 1960s to accommodate Nos. 15 to 23 Mill Lane). It was built in vitreous bricks with red brick dressings and Westmorland Slate roof (“Paddock House”, “Troys” at Goulds Grove and “The Cedars” [since demolished] were built at the same period using the same bricks and slates to a very similar three storey design). This house had a formal front garden enclosed by a dwarf wall and fine wrought iron railings and gate parallel to the road in line with the front wall of No. 12.

From about 1914 to 1926, under the name of **Chiltern Lodge**, Miss Rebecca Anne Bishop used the premises as a boarding house. She advertised in Kelly’s Directory of Oxfordshire as “Also providing Tennis, Croquet, Fishing and Boating”. My uncle, Gerald Aldridge, purchased the property in 1959, removed the front railings, paved the garden area and converted the ground floor rooms to a retail Drapers and Haberdashery Shop which he successfully administered until retiring in 1968. He sold the property and business to Mr. Ronald Banks who converted the coach house and stables adjoining to a Ladies Outfitting Shop. The sales shop to the west, adjoining No. 12, was constructed in the early 1970s.

Nos. 20 and 22 High Street are roughcast ragstone and brick 17th Century cottages, with clay tile roofs. During 1932 the right- hand room of No.20 and the bedroom above were built by my father. I remember being on the scaffolding on my way home from school when an old tramp stopped to tell Dad and his men that he knew which horse would win the “Derby” the following day and for an old pair of shoes, he would name it. Dad had an old pair of shoes on site which he used when concreting and gave to him. He tipped “April the Fifth” which was correct. I’ll never forget the tramp taking off his worn-out sandals and cutting off the toes of Dad’s shoes before putting them on,

saying “I like my feet to breathe”. This new room was used by Mrs. F. Wharton for the retail of sweets and confectionery until the 1950s. She had daily deliveries of exotic cakes, small trifles in waxed cardboard containers and other goodies from the “Cadena Cafe Ltd” at Oxford. These were a special treat when my mother could afford them. The premises were later purchased by Mr. and Mrs. R.W.K. Brighting and used as a showroom before being added to the living quarters. Number 22 was once used as a salt ware house.

Next is the village **Supermarket**, built on the site of a much smaller grocery, provisions and general hardware shop. That business was conducted by Mr. Harry Hargreaves from about 1880 to 1915. During this time, it appears he was involved in anything that would sell and advertised in Kelly’s Directory as a draper and tailor. Also that he was collector and assessor of the King’s taxes. Mr. W.B. Smith conducted a similar business until 1918 when Mr. W.G. Slaughter continued in a more modified form as a general grocer until the late 1940s. Between the original shop and the Slaughter family’s home, No. 22, was a very fine lawn tennis court which was one of those courts used for the annual Benson Tournament.



High Street from the Old Malt House looking east towards the old Post Office

Now I come to number **26 High Street**. To the south of this cottage was a single storey wooden building which was occupied from 1934 to 1963 by Mr Stan Blisset and Mr Sheppard as a Ladies and Gents Hairdressing Salon. After that it was used as a greengrocer’s shop and in recent times, after some renovation, for the retail of health foods.

Numbers 28 to 32 is a 17th and 18th Century single block of two-storey cottages in ragstone and brick with flint bands, all colour-washed, with clay tile roofs. Number 30 was a butcher's shop occupied by Edward Townsend from 1923 to 1938, then by George Rice for a few years, and by Lester and Sons until the early 1970's. The slaughter-house to the rear was in use until the late 1940's, when it failed to conform to new Government regulations. Number 32 was once a beer house called "**The Anchor**" and renowned as the place where Tom Sayer lived. He was one of the last bare-fist boxers.

Numbers **34 to 40 High Street** are 18th Century cottages in one block. They were extensively and sympathetically renovated and modernised internally in 1979. Here I pay tribute to The Bensington Society and members of the Parish Council at that time for their strenuous representations to local authorities to ensure that the exterior constructions and character of these four cottages should be retained.

Number **42 High Street** is a butcher's shop with extensive outbuildings, which used to include a slaughter house, stables and pigsties. The building is mainly 17th Century with an 18th Century frontage in vitreous brick and red brick dressings, a plain parapet with a clay tile roof. Recorded owners are William Brooker from 1830 to 1875, William Strainge to 1905, J Price to 1923, Richard Clark to 1927, Ralph Nash to the early 1960's, W H Smith for a few years, until purchased by Calnan Ltd in the late 1960's.

The **Post Office**, with living accommodation, is an early 19th Century brick construction with stucco finish and slate roof. Listed Postmasters are William Goodey from 1863 to 1894, Robert Smith to 1902, Marion Smith to 1910, Edgar John Munday to 1938, the Shotton family to 1979 and latterly Mr and Mrs Olley. Benson Post Office used to be the centre for receiving, dispatching and delivering Royal Mail for North Stoke, Ipsden, Turners Court, Roke and Berrick, in addition to the village and Preston Crowmarsh.

There were two deliveries and dispatches each day except Sundays via Wallingford from about 1860 to 1929 and then up to 1977 via Oxford. Now dispatches are made to Oxford and deliveries are once a day only to addressees by postmen and women employed at Wallingford. My Grandfather was a part-time postman for many years. I still have, and use, the sorting shelves containing 120 pigeon-holes which my Grandfather purchased from Edgar Munday when he altered the premises to accommodate his Saddler's business, which he ran in addition to the Post Office.