

THE WHITE HART HOTEL AND WEST'S FARMHOUSE BY JOHN ALDRIDGE

The WHITE HART, recently converted to flats, has been sympathetically renovated internally whilst retaining the mainly early 9th century exterior. The original building is probably early 18th century and may have been purpose-built as a "posting house" - it was certainly used as such until about 1860. However, there is evidence of an Inn on the site long before and is certainly shown on a map of 1638. William Allnatt, in his book RAMBLES IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD OF WALLINGFORD wrote in 1874 that thirty-two years since [ie 1841] this was a first class hotel abounding with servants to command and viands to be procured of the costliest and most recherche description". There was a carved statue of a white hart on the roof which by 1874, Allnatt wrote, "was minus head and almost everything that he formerly glorified in".

I have a record of the landlords since 1754, many of whom remaining in possession for three to ten years. It is perhaps of particular general interest to note that the SHRUBB family were owners/or landlords from 1754 (and probably earlier) to 1863. This period of possession for 109 years in one family, together with their farming interests made them one of the most influential in the village at that time. The SHRUBB stained-glass window at the east end of the south aisle of the Parish Church was probably to commemorate this family. Various old maps show an extensive range of buildings to the north and east of the grounds at the rear of the former Inn (now developed with modern residences). There were coach houses, stables and storage barns, which were required to service the changing and feeding of horses for the stage coaches and private carriages passing through on their journeys from London to Cheltenham and from Birmingham to Newbury.

The **White Hart** was the home of the Bensington Horse Driving Club, which was established in 1807 with an elite membership from a very wide area, including London. To the east and near to the road was the site of a shed which housed the village Fire Pump. This was built in 1834 and recently was fully restored by the Thame Fire Brigade after its long retirement in a barn at Preston Crowmarsh. It was manually operated and drawn to a fire by a single horse. An extract from the record of Benson Annual Parish Meetings dated March 25 1923 records that"... Mr A Lane stated that four members of the fire brigade had resigned and that the remainder wished for a higher scale of remuneration. Also that the brigade could no longer rely on Mr Young's horse in case of fire".

Adjoining is **West's farmhouse**, a 17th century two-storey building, part ragstone with brick dressings and part timber-framed with coloured infilling under a clay tile roof. A brick in one of the infill panels is dated 1696. The rear of this house was used as Mr Bert West's Dairy, where, in my young days, milk was dispensed by one-pint and half-pint ladles directly into customers' own jugs. Unadulterated cream was skimmed from the top of large glazed earthen ware bowls filled with milk and left in a cool place overnight.