



The West Front of Wells Cathedral from the Swan Hotel

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STUNNING VIEW OF CATHEDRAL

BUT DEMOLITION OF HOUSES DID NOT IMPRESS EVERYONE

The Swan Hotel is world famous for the magnificent view it gives of the West Front of Wells Cathedral but the exact date of the demolition of the houses opposite to afford this view has been open to debate.

Sherwin Bailey in his book "Wells Manor of Canon Grange" states that the house was demolished in about 1850. The house he says dated from about 1573 and 1600 and was "erected by the ancient wall which enclosed the churchyard." Bailey thinks that the house was once a bakers and a coffee house.

Professor Edward Freeman an eminent Victorian academic who lived at Wookey in his book "History of the Cathedral Church of Wells" does not give the date of demolition but was not impressed by the fact if it;

"Look, for instance, at what was some time back trumpeted as a vast improvement, the pulling down of a house to open a view of the west front of the Cathedral to the windows of the Swan Hotel. The doers of that deed most likely knew not what they were doing. They perhaps did not even remember that, in opening the view of the west front of the Cathedral to the windows of the Swan Hotel, they were also opening the not very picturesque view

of the Swan Hotel to those who came out of the western doors of the Cathedral. They did not stop to think that the space before the west front was really too open already, and that at any rate matters were not mended by opening a view through so ludicrous a gap, which I have heard witty people compare to the space left in a man's mouth by drawing a single tooth. Still less did they think that, in a thoughtless moment of destruction they were wiping out the whole history of the church and city. The house indeed was in itself valueless. I should not have wept for the removal of the house or of the whole row of houses of which it formed a part. But, along with the house, the destroyers overthrew the wall against which the house was built up, and that wall was the history of the city of Wells. At Wells, as I have already set forth, the church was not founded in the city, but the city grew up under the shadow of the church. The wall of the Close is everywhere a sign of separation, marking off ecclesiastical and temporal property, and often marking the limits of distinct jurisdictions. But at Wells the wall has a special significance, as a memorial of the days when the city arose outside the eccle-

siastical precinct. Thus, by a single thoughtless act not only is a material piece of antiquity destroyed but a page of local and thereby of national history is torn away."

The archives of the Wells Journal provide the definitive date of demolition on May 20, 1864.

"Improvements in Sadler Street Wells."

"One of the greatest improvements we have witnessed in Wells for some time is now being effected in Sadler Street exactly opposite the Swan Hotel. Two houses fronting the hotel are in the progress of demolition by which a good view of the Cathedral and Cathedral Yard is gained from the street windows of the hotel. Two or three trees, now rather in the way of this prospect will, we suppose, also be removed."

The hotel was then under the ownership of Sarah and John Mead. Further evidence is found in the Wells Journal of July 30 1864;

"The Grand Masonic Festival held at Wells attracted a large number of brethren. They paraded the streets until they reached the beautiful moated palace of the Bishop. The Cathedral was next inspected and the party then retired to the Swan Hotel where Brother Mead had laid out a sumptuous banquet. The brethren expressed themselves not only pleased with the fare but also the room in which it was served commanding as it now does a magnificent view of the west front of the Cathedral."

In the Journal of 1866 in a report of a meeting of the City Council it is recorded that Mr John Mead of the Swan Hotel appeared personally to appeal against the rating of "a plot of ground opposite to his hotel as being excessive as it was rated at £15 per annum. After some

discussion the rating was fixed at £2 per annum."

As a footnote to the opening up of the view of the Cathedral from the Swan an article of March 1938 in the paper gives a further insight into its importance as a unique selling point among the many hotels of the city.

"It is stated that Mr George's grandmother, Mrs Louisa George, owner of the Swan Hotel in the 1880s, was travelling to Bristol in an omnibus when she overheard a conversation between two gentlemen who had decided to purchase the Mitre Hotel, next door to the Swan in Sadler Street, and decided to pull down the houses opposite so as to have a view of the Cathedral. On returning to Wells Mr George's grandmother immediately bought the house and it has remained in the family ever since."

A shrewd businesswoman.

Caught in cart

Wells Journal
February 3, 1891

At Wells Police Court a boy named James Savage who is well known to the police, was charged with sleeping behind the Swan Hotel the previous night. He was found by police Sergeant Knight in a cart with a horse rug around him.

He said his mother had turned him out. His mother was sent for and admitted that she had turned him out sometime since but it was against her wish that he should sleep from home.

The Mayor said the bench had decided that the best thing they could do for the boy was to send him to reformatory school. He would therefore be sent for 14 days hard labour in Shepton Mallet Goal and thereafter five years in a reformatory.

Inquest: Suffocated while feeding at the breast

Wells Journal
Saturday, May 3, 1863

An inquest was held at the Swan Hotel, in this city, before Bruges Fry, Esq, coroner; on the body of the illegitimate child of Fanny Hodges, aged 6 days, an inmate of the Wells Union, that the mother (a young and inexperienced person whose tender age was only 15) whilst giving the child the breast fell asleep and turned over upon it, thereby causing suffocation.

Dr. Livett, the house-surgeon, was of opinion that the child had no foul treatment from the hands of its mother, but died from the cause above stated. The jury returned a verdict of Found Dead.

Stolen meat

Wells Journal
August 14, 1890

Susan Woodgate (45) charwoman of Southover was charged with stealing meat, fat, butter, scrubbing brush, knife, dish cloth, house cloth and soap the property of Mrs Louisa George at the Swan Hotel. The prisoner pleaded not guilty.

Mr Brand George of the Swan Hotel said as the prisoner was leaving his mother's premises after working there all day his mother called her into her presence. He noticed that the prisoner had something under her shawl and at his request she lifted up her arm and he found the scrubbing brush.

The prisoner said she picked up the brush on the mixen heap and said that Mrs Langley the housekeeper had given it to her. Mr George took possession of the brush and followed her into the yard where she produced another bundle. He asked her what she

had there and she said dinner and supper. He sent her back inside and sent for Police Sergeant Knight who found the knife on the floor close by to the bundle.

The beef in the bundle must have been cut from the joint after it left the supper table. Mrs Atkinson, cook at the Swan Hotel, said the prisoner had been employed to help in the kitchen and that the giblets produced were given to the prisoner to put in a dish not to be taken away.

Mrs Atkinson said she never gave the prisoner any butter but that the meat was what had been given for her supper and dinner. The prisoner said in her defence that if she did not have time to eat the meat she took it home. The butter must have been put in her bundle and the soap she took home to wash her clothes as she had no time to wash then during the day.

The bench considered the general charge had been proved and fined the prisoner 5s with costs of £1.

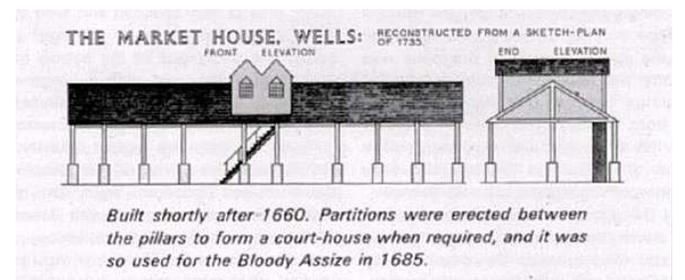
Left without paying

Wells Journal
December 1867

Mr George of the Swan Hotel has been victimised by an Irishman giving the name of Mr H.C. Hughes who represented himself to be an engineer on the Cheddar Valley Railway and he was given accommodation from the 15th to the 26th November on such representation. He then disappeared without paying any of the expenses amounting to £5 and upwards.

He is about 6ft high and is conspicuous from wearing an open waistcoat showing his shirt front also a frock coat without a waistcoat and without an overcoat. Sergeant Baker holds a warrant for his apprehension and has been making diligent enquiries after him.

THE MONMOUTH REBELLION AND THE SWAN HOTEL



The Monmouth Rebellion in 1685 was an attempt by the Duke of Monmouth to overthrow King James the Second. Monmouth, the illegitimate son of Charles the Second, claimed to be the rightful heir to the throne.

Monmouth and his friend Lord Grey arrived in Wells on July 1 1685. Their soldiers damaged the Bishop's Palace and west front of Wells Cathedral tearing lead from the roof to make bullets, breaking the windows, smashing the organ and the furnishings, and for a time stabling their horses in the nave. Lord Grey was in charge of the cavalry and it is said that their defeat may have been caused by his cowardice.

Both men stayed at the Swan during their brief time in Wells.

The Bloody Assizes was the

end result of the ill-fated Monmouth Rebellion and its instigator the "Bloody" Judge George Jeffreys came to Wells in September 1685.

In a makeshift court held under the Market Hall shut in by wooden screens in a single days sitting over rebels were tried the majority of whom were sentenced to death.

Judge Jeffreys and Colonel Kirke whose "Lambs", white coated soldiers, actually carried out the executions, also stayed at the Swan.

The Judge seems to have paid the Swan a compliment in one of his brutal jests, for cutting short the defence of a prisoner in Wells he told him that the dinner that was waiting for him was too good to be spoiled by the tediousness of a defence by a traitor and straightaway sentenced him to death.