

STARTLING TRUE STORIES OF THE SWAN HOTEL OMNIBUS

DANGER... HORSE BROKE KNEES... BOY RUN OVER

The Swan Hotel ran an omnibus, pulled by horses, which, after the opening of the railway in Wells in 1859 would take its patrons and their luggage to and from the station. The omnibus would also take passengers to Bath, Bristol, Shepton Mallet, Cheddar and Glastonbury before the coming of the railway.

However the archives of the Wells Journal show that not all these journeys were free from danger and hazard.

Wells Journal
August 23, 1855

On Thursday night a pair of horses in a fly were returning to the city when the horse took fright of the lightning at Portway Gate and ran away. The driver James Day of the Swan Hotel was thrown from his seat and received injuries of so dangerous a nature that his recovery is despaired of.

Wells Journal
September 8, 1881

An omnibus belonging to the Swan Hotel was standing outside the Cheddar Valley Railway Station when the horse for some unexplained reason took fright and dashed off at a violent rate up St Cuthbert Street and into the High Street and towards the Market Place. On reaching the corner leading into Broad Street however the vehicle came into a violent collision with a heavy railway van and swung round and fell on its side across the street causing much damage. The horse broke free from the traces and continued its course but was quickly stopped by the by standers. Fortunately the omnibus was empty so no one was hurt though no doubt if it had not been for this fact there would indeed have been serious injury.

Wells Journal
August 6, 1885

On Monday evening a four wheeled carriage belonging to Mrs George of the Swan Hotel was turning the corner in front of the Mayor's premises when the horse stumbled and fell and began to plunge vigorously but the wheels became locked and the vehicle being a heavy one began to tip to one side. The horse was got under control before much damage was done and speedily unharnessed and returned to the Swan stable. The only damage was a broken shaft.

Wells Journal
October 29, 1885

The omnibus with a pair of black horses belonging to the Swan Hotel was at the Somerset and Dorset Railway Station waiting for the arrival of the 11.15am train when one of the horses, a fresh one, appears to have become frightened by the engine and the pair bolted along Priory Road at a rapid pace. An attempt to stop their flight near Priory Villas was unsuccessful and they dashed nearly to the end of the road when Police Sergeant Knight saw them coming and man-



Two pictures of the Swan Hotel omnibus, the top one from Wells Museum's Phillips collection

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aged to seize the reins and with some great difficulty succeeded in pulling them up though not until they had got into Queen Street. The plucky act of Sergeant Knight was very praiseworthy for had the horses not been stopped a serious accident might have occurred. Sergeant Knight was slightly bruised but did not sustain grave damage.

Wells Journal
November 7, 1889

On Friday evening about half past five as the Swan Hotel Omnibus was being driven up the High Street a child of about 8 years of age named Thomas Woodgate ran in front of the vehicle and before Marsh the driver could pull the horses up, two of the wheels passed over the boy in the region of the abdomen. He was picked up insensible and taken to the Cottage Hospital where he remains under the care of Mr Risdon. It may be added that the weight of the omnibus was 14cwt and it carried 6cwt of luggage besides two passengers and the driver.

Wells Journal
July 3, 1890

On Tuesday evening last the Swan Hotel omnibus was going to meet the 7.45am train at the Somerset and Dorset

Railway and when entering the gates of the station the horse stumbled and fell breaking both its knees and injuring its shoulder and breaking one of the shafts of the omnibus.

From the place where the horse stumbled to where it fell is a distance, quite 20 yards, so that it was clearly no fault of the driver. The horse was unharnessed and tended to by the veterinary surgeon.

Another horse was despatched to fetch the omnibus and on the road back to the Swan another accident happened. As the 'bus was turning the corner from Broad Street into the High Street a cyclist named Talbot ran in to the horse's breast and was unseated and the 'bus passed over the front wheel making it like a concertina. No fault is attributed to the driver as there was plenty of room for the cyclist to pass either side of the 'bus.

In the Journal of December 31, 1891, there appears a small item which reads;

"The driver of the Swan Omnibus fell from his seat inflicting injuries to his head. He was incapacitated from driving any more that evening."

The following week in the paper of January 7, 1892, there was an addendum to this incident;

"We are asked by Mrs George of the Swan Hotel to point out that it was not the regular driver of the Swan omnibus Mr Marsh who fell from his seat outside the hotel in Sadler Street last week."

In October 1880 a letter to the editor is printed in the Wells Journal under the headline;

Furious Driving In the Public Streets of Wells.

Dear Sir,
I wish to bring your attention to the following incident that occurred to me last week.

On approaching St Cuthbert's Church on my horse at a steady pace I saw the omnibus belonging to the Swan Hotel coming towards me up St Cuthbert's Street at a great rate and although I called out to the driver he did not apparently pay the least attention to me nor even try and pull his horse to the side. I was obliged to pull my horse right around in order to avoid serious accident.

These men are frequently to be met galloping to and from the stations at full speed and I have heard so many of my neighbours making the same complaint."

An advertisement in the Journal of August 7, 1884, reads: Omnibus driver wanted; Must be able to drive a pair of horses. Apply Swan Hotel, Wells.

Elections

Wells Journal
November 2, 1867

The election of four town councillors for this city and borough took place yesterday. In the afternoon near the time of the closing of the poll a good deal of excitement was felt as to the result.

At about half past four the numbers were published and stood as follows:

Mr George Liberal 251
Mr Hillier Liberal 251
Mr Smith Liberal 234
Mr Harris Liberal 204
Mr Mead Cons 144
Mr Ball Cons 104

Mr George being in the Market Place when the score was made known was laid hold of by some lusty supporters and was conveyed in triumph on their shoulders to his hotel. There was comparatively but little drunkenness and the affair passed off peaceably.

Wells Journal
November 6, 1896

Municipal Election - The election of Councillors this year was attended with more than usual interest and excitement. Both parties, however, carried the contest with vigour, and polled all the electors they could by any means induce to record their votes, and the result was a somewhat heavier poll than usual.

Mr. H. C. Norton, who last year lost his seat by the apathy his friends, appears to head the list. A good number of people bad assembled in the Market-place and their numbers were increased as the night wore on the square being three parts filled when the poll was declared soon after nine o'clock. The tedium waiting for the result was enlivened by the performances of the City Band.

Fortunately, the weather was fine though cold. The appearance of the Town Clerk at a window of the hall was hailed with cheering, and when these had subsided he declared in stentorian tones the result to be as follows;

Norton 420
George 364
Bennett 318
Richards 298
Collins 235

Merry peals were rung the bells of St. Cuthbert's church after the declaration the poll.

Wells Journal
December 22, 1910

Declaration Of The Poll - Captain Sandys MP (Conservative) returned with record majority of 2064. "As your representative in the House of Commons I will endeavour to serve your interests."

Subsequently Captain Sandys was "chaired" to the Swan Hotel where he again addressed the crowd from the balcony.



A snapshot in time

The Wells Journal of December 1, 1898, carries a reminiscence by William Tate, a son of the city of Wells, who went on to become a renowned Victorian historian and writer

and who wrote an occasional column for the paper.

"We have to take a leap back of half a century and we find ourselves in Sadler Street in Wells.

There is old Mr Mead, proprietor of the Swan Hotel, tall, broad shouldered, with ample waistcoat, rotund with dangling seals and cheerful countenance, standing on the steps of the hotel. Beside him is the tall, rather aristocratic figure of the coachman, John and roundabout the coach the ostlers, guard and passengers.

All is hurry, bustle and confusion.

The horses are prancing, champing at their bits and tossing their heads: the ostlers shouting, the guard looking anxiously into "the boot" where there are many parcels, portmanteaus and a formidable looking blunderbuss.

Mr John the coachman, meanwhile nervously consults his watch. The he exhorts the motley group to look sharp and with a friendly nod to all he mounts the coach untwists the lash of his whip and with a signal to the ostler at the lead horse head, shakes the reins, flicks his whip and the "Swiftsure" rattles away leaving a group of admiring school children and several Wells citizens behind who have been to see friends off. Mr Mead returns inside his hotel and Sadler Street soon becomes as silent as the grave again."

R.I.P.

Wells Journal
July 16, 1893



Death of Mr Edwin Purnell George, youngest son of Mr F.C. George and Mrs Louisa George. Five years ago a bright, merry boy of 13 he joined the training ship "Conway" where he spent two years learning the rudiments of his profession.

He then joined the merchant service and during this period sailed unscathed to various parts of the world including China, Australia, New Zealand and returned safely but this last voyage was destined to be his last. On his return home two weeks ago he was taken ill and this illness quickly developed into typhoid and this took his life within 10 days.

The greatest sympathy is felt with the bereaved family and this was kindly shown by the citizens of Wells by the blinds being drawn and the windows shuttered.

Napkins stolen

Wells Journal
July 10, 1879

Mary Ann Stevens was charged with stealing two napkins the property of Mr F.C. George of the Swan Hotel. As Mrs Stevens left the hotel he noticed she had a parcel upon her person.

In it he found it was a napkin with some butter and pudding wrapped up in it. He was afterwards shown another napkin found in the prisoner's house with SWAN on it.

Mr George said that Mrs Stevens had been in his employ for some years as a charwoman.

Mrs Stevens was sentenced to seven days hard labour.