

THE FEATHERS
HOTEL, EATERY & COFFEE HOUSE

A BRIEF HISTORY

BY WILL SWALES



WELCOME

Welcome to a brief history of The Feathers Hotel, Helmsley, North Yorkshire. During the late spring and early summer of 2016 we had the good fortune to be able to revitalise and refurbish one of our fabulous sister inns, The King's Head in Richmond, North Yorkshire.

During the planning stage of this project we started to look hard at the building and its many historical attributes, at how some parts of the building had been added during its 300 years of existence. And whilst contemplating the small changes and additions we wanted to make, it dawned on me that we will only be its custodians for a generation or two at most. I can't foretell who will follow but started thinking about who had been its keepers in the past.

Therefore, we asked a good friend if he would research The King's Head and try to separate the fact from the fable; what's true and what has been elaborated during the storytelling process over the years.

Will Swales made such a good job of The King's Head that we then asked him to complete the same task for The Feathers Hotel.

What follows is that research. We think it's as accurate as can be, but naturally there are many gaps and we would welcome any additional information.

I hope you enjoy this small booklet and the hospitality and service we provide within The Feathers Hotel. We are now busy researching the other inns we own and operate within our group and hope that eventually we will have all our inns within one publication, but until then please feel free to take this copy with you.

Kevin Charity
Managing Director
The Coaching Inn Group

www.coachinginngroup.co.uk





**“..THEY SAW AN OPPORTUNITY TO PURSUE
A DREAM OF DEVELOPING A FAMILY HOTEL.”**



TWO HOUSES WITH FASCINATING HISTORIES

"...home to a succession of medical doctors and their families."

The Feathers Hotel in Market Place, Helmsley, North Yorkshire, opened for business early in 1959, having previously been two private houses, both owned by the Duncombe Park Estate, and each with very different but equally fascinating histories.

From 1782 until 1958 the main building and its predecessors was home to a succession of medical doctors and their families. And from at least 1780 until 1948 the adjoining cottage, which forms the public bar of the hotel, was continuously the home of the Thorpe family, including three generations of market-toll collectors. The properties are still recalled by many people in the town as Thorpe's cottage and Dr Porter's house – the latter after the last and the most-remarkable doctor to have lived there.



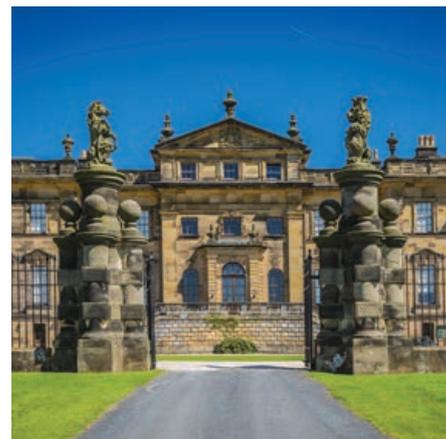
The two houses of The Feathers Hotel.



THE LANDLORD

The Duncombe family's connection with the town dates from 1694 when Sir Charles Duncombe, a very wealthy London banker, acquired the manor and castle of Helmsley from the bankrupt estate of the late 2nd Duke of Buckingham.

Sir Charles Duncombe died childless in 1711, so the property passed to his sister, wife of Thomas Browne, both of whom then changed their names to Duncombe. Thomas built the grand house now standing at Duncombe Park outside the town. The stories in this booklet begin in 1780, the year following the date when the Duncombe Park Estate was inherited by Charles Slingsby Duncombe, aged 40.



Duncombe Park House.

THE DOCTOR

In 1780 the main building of The Feathers was not yet built. The site was probably occupied by two large cottages, although it's not clear who occupied them.

Rent and valuation surveys of the Duncombe Park Estate for 1782 indicate that one or both cottages was occupied by John Ness, an apothecary, which was the term then used for a doctor in general practice. The cottages were seemingly demolished in around 1790 and replaced by a substantial single house. It was not yet the house we see today, although it must have been quite impressive because by 1796 John Ness's rent was £10 – the highest for any private house in the estate.



THE TOLL COLLECTOR



Inside Thorpe's cottage which forms part of The Feathers Pickwick Bar today.

Thorpe's cottage is thought to be the oldest surviving house in Helmsley. It dates from at least the 1600s, and possibly the 1500s. In 1780 it was home to George Thorpe. In 1782, while still recorded in the Duncombe estate books as 'Thorpe's cottage,' it was shown to be divided, with George Thorpe occupying one half and Thomas Cooper the other half.

In 1784 George Thorpe paid an annual rent of £3 for the half cottage, plus just under £6 rent for a bowling-green, and £16 for the 'tolls of Helmsley', which are taken to mean the market tolls. The rent for the right to collect the tolls must have included use of the toll booth, which was in the Market Place on the site that later became the Town Hall. George Thorpe died in April 1802. His burial record described him as a school master, which fits with evidence that at this time there was a school held in the upstairs room of the toll booth.

His son John Thorpe retained the tenancy of the half cottage, and he continued collecting the market tolls. There were some changes in other parts of the tenure of John Thorpe. The 1822 estate valuation shows that he then had a free rent of a 'stall house' on the south side of the Market Place. This seems to have been a replacement for the toll booth, now given over to another tenant and used as a butcher's shop. John Thorpe also seems to have given up renting the bowling green, which might explain why his son William, born in 1807, was by this time training to earn a living as a lead-worker and glazier.



WILLIAM THORPE – A RECKLESS GLAZIER...

As an adult, the lead worker and glazier William Thorpe earned some notoriety as a despoiler and destroyer of precious medieval religious art, through his work in local churches. His reckless activities might have been quickly forgotten except that he had the misfortune of being observed by his next-door neighbour, who recorded the events.

In the other half of Thorpe's cottage at this time lived a young Isaac Cooper (1818 – 99), who was there until his family moved to Pottergate in 1829 or 30. Isaac Cooper later became a bookseller and local historian who wrote about William Thorpe's misdeeds in a newspaper article in 1887. He didn't name Thorpe but the identification is clear from the evidence of a combination of records. When commenting on repairs to the stained-glass at Helmsley church, Cooper wrote:

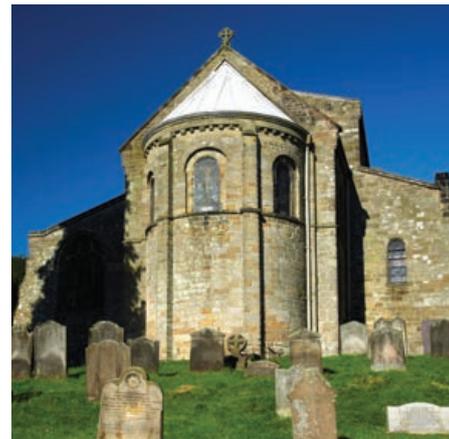
"...so often had the windows been repaired by indifferent workmen that a great many of the squares were put in their wrong places. I can speak as to the manner in which they were repaired 60 years ago; the glazier's shop being next door. He had four colours of glass – blue, red, green and yellow. The churchwardens being good paymasters, he was always ready to replace the dirty old squares with some of his own showy colours."

William Thorpe's greater discredit, also recorded by Cooper, came in 1834 when he was hired to work on a major restoration of the ancient and much-admired church at Lastingham, about 11 miles north-east of Helmsley. Cooper wrote that the church had some rare examples of carved oak, which:

"... our Helmsley operative, with the exception of a certain fragment, burnt all up to melt his lead... [he] told us when he came home on the Saturday that he had an altercation with someone about the useless old wood."

The surviving fragment, which can still be seen in two parts in the church crypt at Lastingham, was later reported in a directory of the North Riding as dating from the Norman period.

William Thorpe took on the tenancy of the family's cottage after the death of his father, John, in 1852. The last record of him paying rent for the market tolls was in 1861, after which the market declined.



St Mary's Church, Lastingham.

"...so often had the windows been repaired by indifferent workmen that a great many of the squares were put in their wrong places."



THE DISTINGUISHED CAREER OF DR JOHN NESS, JUNIOR

" In 1844 he initiated and became the first president of the North Riding Medical Protection Association, which sought to reform sick clubs for the poor..."

John Ness died on 10 May 1803. The burial record described him as an apothecary. His son Job Ness, who described himself in his will as a surgeon and apothecary, died in April 1826, after which the practice was taken over by his son, John Ness junior, then aged 22.

John Ness junior had trained at St Bartholomew's Hospital in London, and in the year of his father's death gained the Licence of the Society of Apothecaries (LSA), a recently established qualification for general practitioners. He built a large practice in Helmsley, always having an assistant doctor living-in with him at the Market Place house. And through a succession of distinguished appointments he became a leading figure in the wider area.

In 1837 he was appointed Helmsley District's first registrar of births, marriages and deaths. In 1841 he was promoted to become a North Riding coroner for the Pickering and Helmsley District, having previously been assistant coroner. In 1843, when the Royal College of Surgeons extended its membership outside of London, he became one of the first members from the provinces. In 1844 he initiated and became the first president of the North Riding Medical Protection Association, which sought to reform sick clubs for the poor so that they ceased to be infiltrated by people wealthy enough to pay full fees for their medical treatment.

For many years he was the surgeon to the 2nd North Yorkshire Rifle Volunteers. In 1860, in recognition of his clinical skills, his distinguished service as a coroner and his contributions to the advancement of the medical profession in general, he was elected to the Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons (FRCS).

Sometime during the mid-1860s, the rent on the Market Place house and grounds went up from around £12 to £35, suggesting a major redevelopment. A note in an estate survey of 1868, the first record of the new rent, described the property as 'a slated house and surgery, three-up and four-below, with stables and garden.' The entrance to the surgery was at the side of the house, down a passageway to the right of the front elevation. The third storey, which has different stonework on the fascia, was clearly a later addition.





Today the garden area is an open courtyard for guests to enjoy refreshments.





Helmsley Market Place c.1890. At the right of the doctor's house can be seen the passageway leading to the side entrance to the surgery.
Image courtesy The Helmsley Archive, www.helmsleyarchive.org.uk.



MEMORIAL TO THE 2ND BARON FEVERSHAM

Charles Slingsby Duncombe, Lord of the manor of Helmsley, died on 11 August 1803, aged 64. The estate was inherited by his son Charles Duncombe, aged 39. He was MP for Aldborough in the North Riding, and in June 1826 was elevated to become the 1st Baron Feversham of Duncombe Park. It was reportedly his reward for giving support in the House of Commons to the prime minister the Earl of Liverpool.

Baron Feversham died in 1841, and was succeeded by his son William Duncombe who through his prodigious work in the House of Commons, and later in the House of Lords, was said to have displayed great passion in improving the lot of the ordinary people. It was said his tenants were "possessed of one of the most considerate landlords, never reluctant to advance their material prosperity."

The 2nd baron was almost certainly responsible for rebuilding Dr Ness's house in Market Place, as well as erecting other new buildings around the town. His last significant project was a major restoration of the parish church, which he funded entirely at an estimated cost of £10,000, but didn't live to see finished.

After his death in 1867, the townsfolk of Helmsley raised funds among themselves for an enormous monument to be erected to his memory in the middle of the Market Place.

His son and heir, William Ernest Duncombe, who had also served in the Commons, took his seat in the Lords as the 3rd Baron Feversham. A year later he was elevated to the titles of Viscount Helmsley and 1st Earl of Feversham. The reasons for this reward are unknown, but might have been partly related to the achievements of his father.

The restored Helmsley Church was formally reopened by the new Earl of Feversham in October 1868. Meanwhile, the project to erect the monument to his father, the 2nd baron, was being overseen by the Vicar of Helmsley, George Dixon. After his death in 1869, it fell to John Ness to see it through to completion and in 1871 it was John Ness who conducted the official event to mark its completion – the unveiling of a statue of the baron within the monument.



Statue of William Duncombe, 2nd Baron Feversham.



THE IMPRESSIVE DR PORTER COMES TO TOWN

" Dr Porter was immediately appointed to several high-profile positions in the community..."

In 1875 John Ness junior retired at the age of 70. His practice was taken over by Dr Robert Bruce Low, who hailed from Scotland. He had already been in Helmsley for two years, probably as John Ness's assistant, and was probably already living in John Ness's large house. Dr Low and his wife, Henrietta, had their first child in Helmsley in 1875.

Two years later, John Ness junior died suddenly and unexpectedly while attending a meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in Plymouth. A tribute published by the Royal College of Surgeons stated: 'He was a skilful operating surgeon ... in the combat against disease and suffering, his conduct was marked by great intelligence, benevolence, and devotion, which shone brightly throughout a natural brusqueness of manner.' John Ness junior had no children, but left a widow, Amy, aged 40. She moved away from Helmsley, handing over the practice and tenancy of the house to Dr Low and his growing young family.

In 1887 Dr Low moved to Lambeth in London, handing over the practice and house to Dr Joseph Francis Porter. Known as Francis, he came from London with his wife and two children, both aged under two. He was aged 47, although in official records he consistently understated this by five or six years, probably to appear closer in age to his wife Edith, who was 25 years his junior.

Dr Porter was immediately appointed to several high-profile positions in the community, becoming the Medical Officer of Health for Helmsley Rural District Council and Poor Law Union, a justice of the peace and later chairman of the Ryedale Bench, a deputy coroner and later coroner for the north-eastern district of the North Riding, a surgeon captain and later lieutenant colonel in the local army reserve force, the 2nd Volunteer Battalion of the Princess of Wales's Own Yorkshire Regiment, and also senior medical officer and surgeon to the entire Yorkshire Volunteer Infantry Brigade.





Dr Porter (bowler hat), in Church Street, Helmsley, thought to be in 1903 with his five daughters. By deduction they appear to be: (in the cart) Muriel, 17, Doreen, 7, said to be infirm, and Lorna, about 6 months old (white hat brim just visible behind Doreen); while standing are Enid, 15, with Phyllis, 5. The saddler was Frank Ward and the apprentice was his nephew William Ward. Image courtesy The Helmsley Archive, www.helmsleyarchive.org.uk.

His family continued to grow, the last of eight children being born in 1903. One boy died in infancy, leaving the couple with five daughters and two sons. A wonderful photograph preserved in the Helmsley Archive shows Dr Porter, apparently with his five daughters in 1903. They seem to be collecting a newly equipped donkey cart for the children from a Helmsley saddler, Frank Ward, in Church Street.

By the census of 1911, considerable further extensions to the Market Place house, including the addition of a third storey, had been completed. It was recorded in the census as having 14 principal rooms, providing accommodation for Dr Porter, his wife, their three youngest daughters, together with Dr Porter's visiting brother, a cook, and two maids. Dr Porter's daughter Doreen was noted on the census as 'infirm'.



DR PORTER'S GREAT-WAR LOSS AND PERSONAL FURY



The plaque in Helmsley Church to the memory of Alwyne Porter. Image by Bob Willis and Keith Dorey, supplied by Gravestone Photographic Resource www.gravestonephotos.com.

On Britain's declaration of war against Germany, on 4 August 1914, the two sons of Francis and Edith Porter were committed to the cause from the start.

Alwyne, aged 23, was in India, and already 19 months into his service in the regular army as a lieutenant in the 1st Battalion the Lancashire Fusiliers. On 26 August, the younger son, Cedric, aged 20, wasted no time in volunteering, and joined the Essex Regiment as a 2nd lieutenant.

Alwyne's battalion, after a brief spell in England, was despatched in March 1915 to join an allied amphibious assault on the Dardanelles peninsula at Gallipoli, south-west of Constantinople. On 25 April, the first day of the attack, while leading his men up a cliff in what became known as the 'Lancashire Landings', he was hit by 14 machine-gun rounds and killed. Dr and Mrs Porter erected a plaque to Alwyne's memory in Helmsley church.

In September 1915 Dr Porter had a letter published in the Yorkshire Post expressing his vehement support for the introduction of conscription. Without mentioning his own loss, he complained that "millions of young, free, unmarried men enjoy themselves at home, while their braver brothers bleed and die... they will be the live dogs while the dead lions who saved them lie still in death."

Conscription was introduced in January 1916, but it was not enough to prevent Dr Porter's fury being vented once more. In May that year, now aged 75, as chairman of the Helmsley Magistrates he was obliged to consider the case of a young grocer from nearby Ampleforth who had refused the draft on the grounds of conscience. The local press reported that in court Dr Porter described his refusal as "an attempt to escape a sacred duty to the nation which had fostered and sheltered him ... a nauseating nonsense ... an unspeakable shame and a disgrace." The defendant was fined £10 and escorted to the army barracks at Richmond.



MORE GREAT-WAR LOSSES ...AT DUNCOMBE PARK

Three other deaths during the Great War are relevant to this story.

The first was the natural death of William Ernest Duncombe, 1st Earl of Feversham, in January 1915, at the age of 85. His son and heir had predeceased him so the title and estate went to the earl's grandson, Charles William Reginald Duncombe, aged 35, the MP for Thirsk and Malton.

He had joined the Yorkshire Hussars at the start of the war, but then in September 1915, as the 2nd Earl of Feversham and in the rank of lieutenant colonel, he raised his own battalion of yeoman farmers from north-east and east-midlands counties – the 21st Battalion (Yeoman Rifles) of the King's Royal Rifle Corps. Dr Porter was appointed the new battalion's honorary surgeon and medical officer.

While commanding the Yeoman Rifles, the earl was killed in action on 15 September 1916 at the Battle of Flers-Courclette, part of the great Somme offensive. He was succeeded by his son, Charles William Slingsby Duncombe, who became the 3rd Earl of Feversham at the age of nine.



From The Graphic newspaper, 30 Sept. 1916, Charles William Reginald Duncombe, 2nd Earl of Feversham.

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With thanks to the British Newspaper Archive
www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.

...AND AT THORPE'S COTTAGE

At the start of the war, Thorpe's cottage was occupied by Ann Gladwin, the 72-year-old widowed daughter of glazier William Thorpe (1807 – 94) and his wife Mary Ann Thorpe (1820 – 1900). Living with Ann Gladwin was a nephew, Joseph William Thorpe Petch, aged 19.

The young man joined the York and Lancaster Regiment on 14 June 1915. He survived nearly three years of the war in the rank of private but died from multiple shrapnel wounds in Flanders on 10 March 1918. He was aged 23. His injuries were inflicted at some apparently minor action, just before the start of the German spring offensive.



THE LAST OF THE THORPE FAMILY

" John William Thorpe...
was the last of the
Thorpe family at
Thorpe's cottage, and
the last person to have
a home there at all."

Ann Gladwin of Thorpe's cottage died, aged 75, on 25 March 1918, only 15 days after the death in Flanders of her nephew, Joseph. Afterwards, three of Ann's siblings, who had previously moved away from Helmsley, seem to have returned to their home town to continue the tenancy of their family's half of Thorpe's cottage.

Ann's unmarried brother, John William Thorpe, a carpenter, definitely returned, probably with a widowed sister, Margaret Cooper, moving from their shared home in Northumberland. And apparently an unmarried sister, Martha Thorpe, also returned, coming from Scarborough after the death there in 1917 of her housemate and widowed sister, Mary Jane Petch, the mother of Joseph.

Over the ensuing years, the aging Thorpe siblings gradually reduced in number. In Helmsley churchyard, additions to the 1918 headstone of Ann Gladwin commemorate her sister Margaret Cooper, who died aged 83, in 1928, and their sister Martha Thorpe, who died aged 82, in 1931. John William Thorpe's separate headstone at Helmsley records his death, aged 87, in 1948. He was the last of the Thorpe family at Thorpe's cottage, and the last person to have a home there at all. After his death it was left empty.

The other half of the cottage seems to have been already standing empty for many years previously. After the era of the Cooper family in the early 1800s, it had been home to a shoemaker, Robert Hindson and his family from about 1850 until 1892. But at the 1901 census it was recorded as uninhabited. It probably remained so during and after the Great War, and for decades to follow.



THE OLDEST CORONER AND MAGISTRATE IN ENGLAND

Before and during the Great War, Dr Porter, still working in all his private and public jobs, had found time to give first-aid training to young women of the Red Cross Voluntary Aid Detachment.

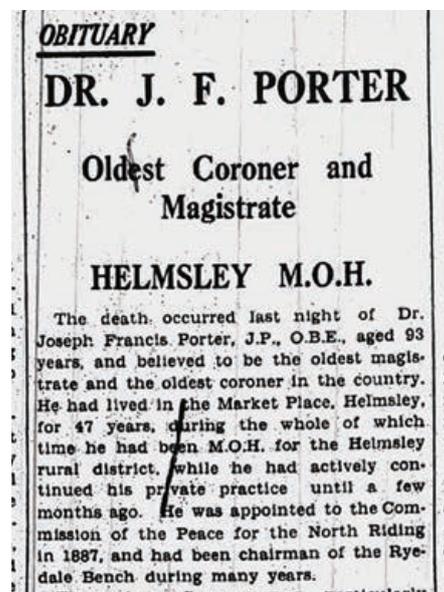
In recognition of this, and no doubt also for his honorary roles as an army surgeon and medical officer, in January 1920 he was one of dozens of senior medics awarded the Order of the British Empire.

Francis and Edith Porter's children were fleeing the nest at around this time. Their eldest daughters, Muriel and Enid, had both married before the war. The only surviving son, Cedric, had served in the war in the Royal Flying Corps, and afterwards continued his service in the RAF, first as a captain and then, in a long career, rising to the rank of air vice-marshal. He married in 1925. His youngest sister, Lorna, married the following year, leaving only Doreen and Phyllis at home in Helmsley.

Remarkably, Dr Francis Porter maintained all his private and public commitments throughout his 80s and into his 90s. Latterly he engaged an assistant doctor, David Murray, who moved into the house in Market Place, but otherwise Dr Porter remained active in all his posts until his death in December 1933, at the age of 93, which for once was reported to the authorities correctly. He was said to have been the oldest coroner and the oldest magistrate in England, and was surely also the oldest local authority medical officer of health.



Dr Porter's house photographed by Bessie Garbutt on 5 June 1931. Image courtesy The Helmsley Archive, www.helmsleyarchive.org.uk.



Yorkshire Post 5 December 1933.

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Image courtesy the British Library Board.

With thanks to the British Newspaper Archive

www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.



THE LAST OF THE PORTER FAMILY



Dr Porter's house and Thorpe's cottage – both overgrown by creepers, and abandoned, in a shot thought to be from 1958 and taken from the top of the church tower. Image courtesy The Helmsley Archive, www.helmsleyarchive.org.uk.

In the 1930s Dr David Murray continued the medical practice in the house in Market Place, and carried on sharing the house with the widowed Edith Porter, her two daughters and a housemaid.

The younger daughter, Phyllis, married in 1938 and went to live in Westmorland, but returned soon afterwards, apparently because of illness.

For Doreen Porter, who was recorded on a civilian register in 1939 as 'incapacitated', there was a double tragedy to come in 1942. Her mother, Edith, died in February, aged 76, and then her sister Phyllis died in October, aged 44. They were both buried in a family plot in Helmsley churchyard alongside Dr Porter.

Doreen, aged 47, was the last of the Porters in the Market Place house but she continued to live there, in the home where she was born, presumably with the agreement of Dr Murray. Then in August 1948, suddenly and unexpectedly, Dr Murray died, aged 50, while on holiday in Scotland. It was the end of the Market Place practice, and Doreen was left alone, possibly with just a housekeeper for support.

It's not clear how long Doreen Porter, or 'Miss Porter' as she was known, carried on living in the large house. It is recalled that she sealed off rooms that were no longer used, putting tape around the doors. She died in Helmsley on 4 March 1958, aged 62, and was buried in a lone plot in Helmsley churchyard.

For a brief period the status of the doctor's house joined that of Thorpe's cottage next door; being empty and neglected, as indicated by the photograph (left), which is thought to have been taken in 1958.



JACK AND PEGGY FEATHER'S DREAM

In 1958 the Duncombe Park Estate put the vacant doctor's house and the abandoned Thorpe's cottage on the market together.

The lot was acquired in November 1958 by the licensees of The King's Head at Kirkbymoorside, Jack and Peggy Feather. They were aged 41 and 38, and with two sons aged 13 and nine they saw an opportunity to pursue a dream of developing a family hotel. They paid £3,700 for the property, and initially developed only the main house as a guest house and a home for themselves. Without any prompting from Jack and Peggy, the enterprise naturally became known locally as The Feathers Hotel.



One of the hotel's rooms today.

THE VAMPIRES ENTERTAIN THE CROWDS

Jack and Peggy's elder son Lance started working full-time in the business on leaving school in 1960, followed by his brother Andrew in 1964. Around then the brothers and two friends formed a successful pop group called The Vampires.

With Lance and Andrew playing rhythm and lead guitar, the teenage band performed in town halls in and around the Helmsley and Pickering district, and even achieved the distinction of being hired to entertain the crowds during concert intervals at the highly regarded Scarborough Spa concert hall.



‘MOUSEMAN’ FITTINGS ADORN THE NEW BAR



One of numerous examples of the famous mouse trademark of Robert Thompson's Craftsmen to be found in the bar of The Feathers. Further information at www.robertthompsons.co.uk.

In 1963 the dilapidated Thorpe's cottage was developed into a snack bar. Jack and Peggy commissioned perhaps the nation's most famous firm of oak-furniture makers, Robert 'Mouseman' Thompson, to do all the wood fittings.

Jack was a good friend of the late Robert Thompson's grandson, Bob Cartwright, who with his brother John had carried on the business after their grandfather's death. The workshop is just 10 miles down the road, at Kilburn, where today there is a visitor centre and where the family firm continues the tradition of identifying its work with a trade-mark carved mouse.

It was almost certainly Bob Cartwright who personally crafted and installed the principal wood fixtures and fittings at The Feathers, including a huge bar top that was said to be the largest single piece of oak that Thompson's had ever worked on.

In 1965 Jack and Peggy Feather obtained a full licence for the sale of alcohol, and consequently developed the bar further, acquiring another eight tables and a dozen stools from the Robert Thompson workshop. Further purchases from Thompson's continued over the next five or six years. Today, Thompson mice can be seen on the edge of the bar top, on pillars, window sills, tables, chairs, and stools throughout the bar.

Visitors to the bar will also spot other local trade-marked oak furniture of the 1960s and 70s – from the Thompson-trained Colin Allmack, who set up his own 'Beaverman' workshop at Sutton under Whitestone Cliff, near Thirsk, and from Derick Slater, whose fish trademark came from his workshop in Crayke, Near Easingwold





The bar top in The Feathers Pickwick Bar is said to have been built using the largest single piece of oak that Thompson's had ever worked on.



A SPECIAL CARVING SIGNIFIES A CURIOUS TWIST OF FATE



Dragon carving in the bar of The Feathers.

There are more special features in the Thorpe's cottage bar. A wall of plain, rustic, oak panelling, possibly from the 1500s, has been preserved intact, and could be original to the building. But of greater interest is a small panel of exquisitely decorative carved oak, of unknown provenance, which has been recessed into a wall, probably at the time of the 1963 installations.

It depicts a feather-winged dragon about to eat some grapes on a vine. It's a Christian allegory warning that the devil is ever-present and threatens to consume the fruit of the vine, representing the followers of Christ. Similar carvings conveying the same allegory are rare but can be found in churches around the country on wooden screens known to survive from the 1400s and 1500s.

Bob Cartwright, of Robert Thompson's, might have sourced the dragon carving and considered it appropriate to The Feathers because of its depiction of feathered wings. Alternatively, it might have come from Helmsley Church. Isaac Cooper, the one-time occupant of half of Thorpe's cottage who became a local historian, wrote that as a child in the 1820s he saw in the church a number of discarded decorative carved wooden pew canopies, which he thought were probably later burnt. "When I was a boy, carved wood was considered of no value," he wrote.

Neither Jack Feather nor Bob Cartwright would have known about Cooper's recollection, or about the story of Cooper's neighbour in Thorpe's cottage, the church glazier William Thorpe, who burned precious carvings at Lastingham. But in a curious twist of fate their preservation of the dragon carving – wherever it came from – seems at least in part to have unwittingly atoned for Thorpe's destruction.





The Feathers Atrium.



BOOMING TRADE OF THE 1960s



The Ryedale Suite at The Feathers is still one of the largest function suites in Helmsley today.

Jack and Peggy Feather made such a success of their hotel during the 1960s that they were able to build a two-storey suite of function rooms in the yard at the back.

It provided the town's first, and still its only venue for large-scale dinners and balls, attracting custom from organisations throughout the district. And it brought in considerable daytime trade as well.

On summer weekends, up to 25 coaches from booming industrial Teesside used to stop in Helmsley Market Place to break their journeys on day-trips to and from Scarborough. The Helmsley hotels together served as many as 1,000 coach passengers with breakfasts in the mornings and with teas in the afternoons, but Jack and Peggy served the most because they could handle up to 300 meals at every session.

Jack was always a lively personality, and sometime around 1970 he dressed as the Dickens character Mr Pickwick for a charity horse-and-carriage parade from Helmsley to the village of Coxwold. It inspired the naming of the bar in Thorpe's cottage as the Pickwick Bar.



THE END OF AN ERA

Everything changed in 1972 with the sudden and unexpected death of Peggy Feather, aged 52.

Jack was devastated and struggled to cope, especially because Peggy had looked after the books. Sons Lance, 27, and Andrew, 24, stepped up to take charge. Their wives, Pat and Winsome, both gave up their own jobs in order to become fully involved in running the hotel, while Jack effectively retired.

Jack Feather died in 1993, aged 76. Two years later his sons decided to give up the business, bringing to an end the family's association with The Feathers stretching back 35 years. The hotel was sold to a businessman from Ampleforth, who sold it in 2003 to a North Yorkshire hotelier. It was acquired by the Coaching Inn Group in October 2015.



Jack Feather (centre) with his sons and daughters-in-law (left to right): Lance, Pat, Winsome and Andrew, circa 1973.



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