

Better than Church

Reflections on Sherborne's inns and breweries – Barry Brock

I love William Blake - not just for his paintings and his poetry, but also because he wrote this:

*A good local pub has much in common with a church,
Except that a pub is warmer, and there's more conversation.*

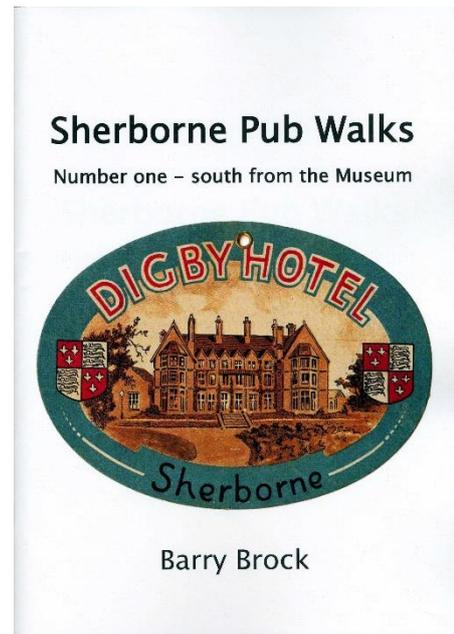
I should say immediately that this is in no way a criticism of our local churches, which are kept nice and warm, and are always welcoming; but it is, instead, an advertisement for the place that the pub once held in the English way of life.



The Antelope Hotel in the 1960s.

But I do wonder if it is still as true as it once was - in Blake's time and in my own youth? Sherborne used to have many more pubs than it has now, and those it still has sometimes find it hard to keep going. Alas, where are they now: the Antelope, the Queen's Head, the Greyhound, the Swan, the Black Horse, and all the others. And what has happened to Sherborne's breweries? We once had four, and two of them were still brewing beer in the twentieth century, although not remembered now.

It was this feeling that Sherborne was losing her pubs that caused me to start collecting information about them, the ones still alive, as well as the ones sadly departed. My objective was to write a book in memory of them all, and one day I shall, with Blake's words lending me the title - *Better than Church*. But in the meantime the collecting of information goes on, and each summer I lead a series of three walks around the sites of Sherborne's inns and breweries. The walks are described in a set of three booklets for Sherborne Museum - *South from the Museum*; *North from the Museum*; and *East from the Museum*. The first is written, the second is being prepared, and the third will be ready next year - hopefully they will provide a little extra income for our wonderful museum.



As we walk around the town, searching out the sites of the old pubs, there are still one or two where Blake's words may still hold true. Starting at the top of the town and working south, there is the Carpenter's Arms in Bristol Road - built as the Mermaid, and with name changed only recently. On the A30, once the great west road, the Crown is the only inn left to represent the story of Sherborne's coaching days, but still providing a warm welcome. Oldest of them all is the George at the top



The George – Sherborne's oldest surviving inn



of Cheap Street, old even when Sir Walter Raleigh might have called in for a drink. And just across the road is the White Hart, not as old, but just as good. As I write this, the future of the Cross Keys on the Parade remains in the balance, closed now, but possibly to re-open as a bistro bar.

The Cross Keys inn sign – manufactured in Eldridge Pope’s Dorchester workshop.

And around the corner in Half Moon Street, while the Half Moon itself benefits from an area where youngsters can enjoy a drink outside, the Plume of Feathers next door has struggled to keep going - hard to understand, given its wonderful location, looking out onto Sherborne Abbey.

East along Long Street is the Eastbury Hotel, not a pub, but with an inviting bar for a drink before a meal in the restaurant. And just as far to the west, the Teddy Rowe stands at the crossroads of Horsecastles and Horsecastles Lane. Back in town and just round the corner in Westbury is the Britannia, and above the fish and chip shop nearby you can find Docherty’s Bar. Then, last but not least, is the Digby Tap in Cook’s Lane - still as popular as ever it was with locals and visitors alike.

If the history of Sherborne’s pubs and breweries interests you, then why not join me on a summer’s evening pub walk? - this year’s dates are given below. Although many have closed, we will end up in one still open, where we can investigate for ourselves whether any truth remains in Blake’s words.

Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, 24, 25 and 26 July; and also 31 July, 1 and 2 August - Sherborne’s Vanished Pubs Walkabouts

A series of three walks around the sites of some of Sherborne’s vanished pubs and breweries, ending with a beer in a pub still open. Tuesdays - to the south of the museum; Wednesdays - to the north of the museum; and Thursdays - to the east of the museum. Walks start: 6 pm and last about 1 to 1½ hours. Price: £5 in aid of Sherborne Museum funds - meet outside the museum.