

The Lamb Inn

Written by Manfred Brod

The Lamb was a high status property towards the eastern end of the street, facing the Corner House across the Sheepmarket. It was already well established at the Amyce census, which shows it as a 300 by 30 ft property with pertinences and curtilage or close, held by Richard Ely under letters patent of 12 December 1553, and lately in the tenure of John Goodridge; it paid 40s annual rent on a 21 year lease. Ely was a founder member of the Corporation, and, for a short period before his death, a governor of Christ's Hospital. With the Lamb went a garden or orchard, leasehold, some way to its west and near the Ruddle Cross, which may in fact have been used as a pasture for customers' horses; its rent was 2s 8d.

In 1577, the double lease was renewed at 46s 8d by Avis Carter, Richard Ely's widow. She had married Robert Carter, a baker, but by 1589 was again a widow. Her will, when she died in 1594, has an inventory which is very informative on the organisation of a major sixteenth-century inn.

There were two main reception rooms, well furnished with wainscot, glass windows, and painted cloths. The kitchen (or buttery) seems to have been equipped to feed twenty or more people. The three bedrooms were of different classes of comfort, although travellers of the time would not have expected a room, or even a bed, to themselves. The Kingston Chamber had two feather beds and three straw beds, but two of the latter might have to be spread on the floor. The Four-bedded Chamber had four feather beds and three of straw, though again there were, as the name implies, only four bedsteads. Above this was another bedroom, much more spartan but probably adequate for most travellers. It had neither glass nor painted cloths, but there were two feather beds for its three bedsteads. Altogether, the inn boasted twenty pairs of sheets, with one missing.

The living and working quarters were separated from the public rooms. There was a family bedroom which had three bedsteads with featherbeds, and a trundle bed. A son, Robert Carter, had a room to himself; he seems to have been handicapped in some way and his half-brother, Richard Ely jnr, was asked in the will to look after him. The maid or maids had a chamber with miscellaneous furnishings and 'old' covers. There was a cellar, a kitchen, a brewhouse, and a milkhouse. Apparently in a separate building were storehouses of various kinds, mostly with lofts for grains and malt. Five hogs, a sow, and six piglets rooted about in the backside, at the far end of which were the stables and a wood store. Elsewhere, there were five 'beasts', either horses or cows.

The inventory also mentions a holding in Ock Meade, presumably the orchard, garden or pasture already referred to, which was valued at £9, and 'a certain mead' in Wilsham at £10 10s. This may well have been the 1 acre meadow in Wilsham mentioned by Amyce as belonging with Ock Street, and having a rental value of 3s 4d.

The inn remained in the hands of successive Richard Elys until the last of that line died in 1732. In 1676, the lease is made out to a Richard Green, who seems to be financing some modernisation. By 1695, a Richard Ely again had the lease and there had been a partial rebuilding and modernisation; instead of the untidy jumble of sheds in the old backside, there was now a Great Court with a stairway and gateway built over part of the yard. Presumably, Green had provided the funds, and had held the lease as his security. Also, the lease of 1695 indicates,

rather ambiguously, that Christ's Hospital now had 'lodgings or chambers' within the boundaries of the inn. In 1715, there was a further mortgage agreement, involving two prominent Abingdon men, Matthew Anderson and Thomas Prince, both sometime mayors, and a London goldsmith. Anderson would eventually take over the inn after Ely's death. In 1747 a Richard Clement was in occupation. Clement would later go into competition at the Rising Sun, which faced the Lamb from the north side of the Sheepmarket. In 1769, the Lamb passed to a Robert Ridge of Clifton, Oxon, and in 1773, Coventry Hardiman was the landlord and was followed by John Hardiman, presumably his son, in 1801. The father was still alive, and now described himself as a corn factor. In 1815, and again in 1830, the leases were renewed by William Westbrook. At the 1831 census, the inn was home to four adult males of whom two were described as innkeepers, and three adult female servants. Fidel's valuation of 1835 appears to show the house in the hands of the butcher John Collingwood as owner, which seems to be an error; Westbrook reappears in Read's valuation of 1838.

The Lamb closed as an inn in 1851, and was redeveloped as a dwelling house, the Square House, with remarkable ornamental brickwork. This was demolished in 1935 to make way for the Regal Cinema, and that in its turn has been replaced by a new block of flats.