

The Three Ships RambAle – A Short Historical Diversion

Walking between three historic pubs reminds us of olden days when the area we live in was predominantly agricultural and very different to the built-up landscape we know today.

People would think nothing of walking three or four miles and often walked much longer distances on a regular basis – in all weathers, and through all the seasons. Sometimes they might hitch a lift on a cart but more often they were on foot – usually with stout but uncomfortable footwear that may have been referred to as “clodhoppers”.

All three of the Three Ships are very old pubs, frequented, back in the day, by agricultural workers. Working the land was hot, thirsty work so a couple of pints of good, nutritious ale at the end of a day was an important part of working life, and establishments anecdotally sold lots of mild, dark and lightly hopped beer.

The Ship Inn, Kirby-le-Soken

The Ship in Kirby-le-Soken was probably converted into a pub from two cottages at some point in the late 18th century and certainly by the early 1830s it was an established inn.

In 1832 the “Thorpe, Kirby, Walton and Adjacent Parishes Association for Prosecuting Felons” held their Annual Meeting at the pub:

Thorpe, Kirby, Walton, AND ADJACENT PARISHES Association for Prosecuting Felons. The annual meeting of the above association will be held at the Ship Inn, Kirby, Essex, on Whiit-Monday, June the 11th, when the attendance of the Members is particularly requested before One o'Clock, that the business may be transacted before Dinner. RICHARD STONE, Treasurer. Dinner on the Table at Two o'Clock.



From the late 19th century, the pub was owned by the Cobbold Brewery in Ipswich, becoming Tolly Cobbold in 1957 and Pubmaster in 1990. The pub became an independent freehouse in 2012.

The Ship Inn, Great Holland

It seems that the site occupied by the Ship in Great Holland has been occupied by a pub for a very long time – being located on a road junction in the old village that led to the Church.

Certainly, by the latter part of the 18th century the pub was known as the Ship and there is speculation that name came about from an association with smuggling. It might seem strange that a land-locked pub troubled the excise men, but the pub lay just across the mysterious marshes from Little Holland (now Holland-on-Sea) where illicit goods did come ashore.

The Essex Herald of 2nd October 1866 describes the magnificent Harvest Festival held in the village – with the two pubs providing the catering:

After service the procession re-formed, and marched to the large barn Great Holland Hall,



which had been gaily decorated with profusion of flowers and evergreens. Here an excellent hot dinner was provided— Mr. Cole, of the Ship Inn, and Mrs. Cunningham, of the Lion, being the caterers—to which about 140 men and lads did ample justice.

In more recent times the Ship became a freehouse, then the only pub in the village and changed its name to the Manor. Like many village pubs it has had to navigate stormy seas but has fortunately ended up being renamed the Ship, as a community pub owned and run by local people.

The Ship Inn, Great Clacton

Of our three ships, the Ship Inn at Great Clacton is the only listed building. In fact, it was listed Grade II in 1986 and the listing text specifies that the building is “C16 or earlier with later alterations and additions”. The building certainly has an extensive oak timber frame with some moulded beams and two types of bracing.

The building is reputed to have been a house owned by Lord Darcy in 1649 and was sold in 1709 to Thomas Joy for £45 and thereafter became an inn.

Once again, we find references to smuggling – modern Clacton-on-Sea wasn't a thing until 1871 and the wild Essex coast was the perfect place to land and distribute illicit cargo.

When the stock in trade of Mr. Thomas Fisher, shopkeeper of Great Clacton is auctioned in 1783 the Ipswich Journal of 18th January that year reports:



Catalogues may be had in due time at the Bell, Thorpe ; Lion, St. Osyth; Ship, Holland; Ship, Great Clacton, of N. Barlow, Colchester; and place of sale.

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