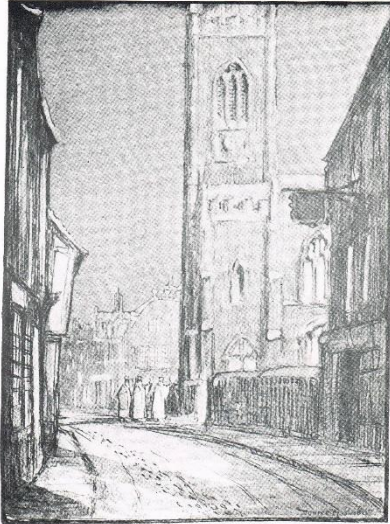


A HISTORY OF THE *THREE CUPS*, HARWICH, ESSEX

PART THREE – A GHOST, DETERIORATION, MODERNISATION AND SURVIVAL

In this issue the history of the *Three Cups*, Harwich, Essex, continues with my completing the examination of Winifred Cooper's article written in 1969 for *Essex Countryside* magazine.



THE LEGEND OF THE THREE CUPS

This Part begins just after the Great War when amateur sailor Donald Maxwell toured, wrote about and sketched parts of the County for his book *Unknown Essex* which was published in 1925. Winifred Cooper stated (in Part 2 of this series) her frustration (experienced by many of us at one time or another) of the lack of brewery records, specifically relating to their public houses.

Fortunately, Maxwell's work includes a chapter entitled 'The Legend of "The Three Cups"' which, although it includes a dream sequence, goes a little way to filling some gaps in my knowledge of the pub in the early part of the 1920s. His story is also accompanied by a number of his own sketches of Harwich and the *Three Cups*, some of which were utilised by Winifred Cooper in her article although her source was not actually cited. (The sketch, by Maxwell, shown here, although titled 'The

Legend of the Three Cups', actually shows the *Hanover* public house in the right foreground. The *Three Cups* is beyond the church on the right, more or less exactly where the people are gathered.)

It is December in the early 1920s and Maxwell had decided to do a 'somewhat foolish thing' and try to bring a yacht from Lowestoft to Harwich without any assistance. The wind was in the north-east, the ocean grey and the sky leaden and the North Sea was 'not attractive.' It was 'slow work, wet work and heavy work, wind against tide and a short fierce sea' but he eventually made it to safe anchorage and 'took the mud not far from Harwich church' near to the 'low-light' a former lighthouse, then a shelter.

It was the evening of 5th December and it was freezing cold. Maxwell, not wishing to spend another night on board, 'stowed everything, put on a riding-light, threw some clothes into a bag and waded ashore' the tide having ebbed sufficiently to enable him to do so. The shore was deserted. Snow threatened as Maxwell sat down in the shelter, put on his shoes and socks and took stock of his position. There were a few lights in the dark mass of houses across the green and he judged that he was not very far from 'warm fires and hospitable inns'.

As he approached an opening to a road or alley, Maxwell became aware of a dark figure just in front of him. Maxwell wrote

'It was that of an old man in a dress that suggested a pilot. He greeted me and we spoke of the weather and the chances of snow, and as we walked along together I asked him where he could advise me to put up for the night.'

“The Three Cups,” he said, stopping and pointing to a lighted window. “It is next to the church. I will show you the way.”

They walked together and eventually entered a paved court, over which, ‘upon a kind of trellis, there climbed a gigantic clematis. This sketch of the courtyard by Maxwell the clematis can clearly be seen leading to and away from a central pole. A welcome light streamed out, chequering the flagstones at their feet. Through the window Maxwell could see ‘a roaring fire and a glimpse of the warmth and comfort that made me very glad I was not still upon the sea.’

Maxwell turned to thank the old man and to invite him to accompany him inside but he was gone.

‘I could have sworn that he had entered the courtyard with me, but I had evidently been mistaken. I am not superstitious, but I felt there was something strange in the sudden advent of the old man out of the darkness and his equally sudden disappearance.’

But a hot bath and the genial hospitality of ‘mine host’ of the *Three Cups* together made him forget the incident and ‘I began to realize as I got through a prodigious supper how wet and cold and miserable I must have been.’

After supper Maxwell sought the comfort of the ‘cheerful fireside’ and sat talking with ‘mine host’ for a while and at some point conversation turned to the derivation of the pub sign, his host confirming the version expounded by Winifred Cooper (in Part One) of the inverted purses of St. Nicholas.

To cut a very long legend short, Maxwell retired to his room where, on the wall, was a



Photo—J. A. Saunders, Ltd., Dovercourt Bay

portrait of St. Nicholas ‘not unlike an icon’ which bore an uncanny resemblance to the old pilot who had shown him the way to the *Three Cups*. Mine host, who had lighted Maxwell’s way to his room said, “You are in luck tonight for tomorrow is the Feast of St. Nicholas. Good night and may the Saint preserve you.”

A dream sequence then follows involving St. Nicholas (the old pilot) guiding three ships coming up the river on the flood tide. Out stepped Three Kings who made their way to the church. Within when they knelt ‘to worship



Him, who is King of Kings, and to share the Sacred Feast, the priest who was before the altar took the golden chalice and with it touched the cups of the Kings.’

The first King presented a cup and into it was poured forth ‘wine to all who would receive it. And the wine of that cup was white as crystal.’ Into the cup of the second King was poured forth wine to all who would receive it, ‘And the wine of that cup was golden.’ Into the cup of the third King was poured red wine, after which ‘the people of the inn and of the town drank of the wine and made merry, and rejoiced because the Kings had come to Harwich.’

Maxwell sought the Pilot for an explanation, to interpret ‘the mystery of the cups’. He said

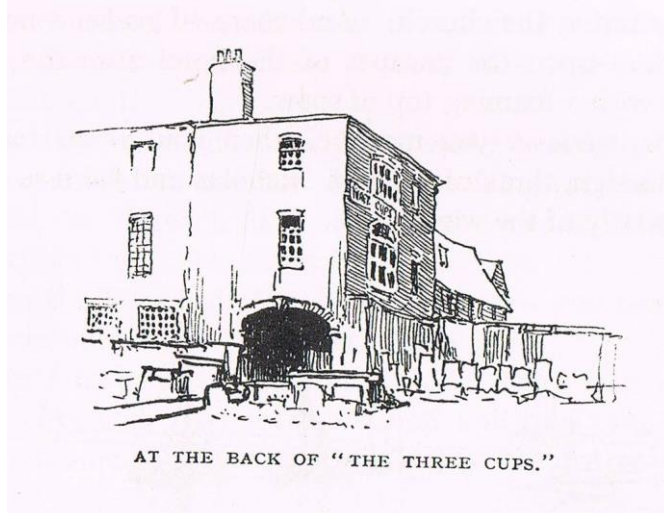
“In the cups are the Wine of Life. And that which is white is Truth, and that which is golden is Power, and that which is red is Love. And because the Kings have come to Bethlehem the wine which they carry has become precious and because their cups have touched the sacred Cup upon the altar all wine in the inns of the town and of this land has become sacred to men of good will. And he who drinks of the wine that is white, shall know of Truth. And he who drinks of the wine that is golden, shall know of Power. And he who drinks of the wine that is red, shall know of Love. For the King has come, that we shall have life, and have it more abundantly.”

Maxwell was confused by what the old Pilot had to say so asked “How came the Kings of the East to Harwich, for Harwich lies not upon the way to Bethlehem and why did they come so far? The Pilot smiled and replied “Know you not that all places are upon the Way to Bethlehem? For they that seek shall find, and they that are true men are become priests and kings in the City of God.”

Three Kings, three cups. So Maxwell’s tale proposed another theory of the origins of pub sign?

The clock struck nine and Maxwell awoke. He looked out of the window. Harwich was cloaked with snow and upon the parapet of the hotel were the three cups ‘each with a foaming top of snow.’

The morale, according to Maxwell, was ‘When you go to Harwich and see this sign, think of good St. Nicholas and learn to drink well and wisely of the wine of life.’



The Christmas message is obvious and, of course, so too is the fact that St. Nicolas is also ‘St. Nick, Santa Claus. (“Shame you couldn’t have had this ready for the Winter issue.” Ed.) And we will forget (for the moment) that the Bible does not make any mention of ‘Three Kings.’

The Maxwell sketch shown here is of the rear of the Three Cups in the early 1920s before the premises were reduced in size.

With Donald Maxwell's 'dream' considered, we now return to Winifred Cooper's original article with my occasional interruptions and additions in italics.

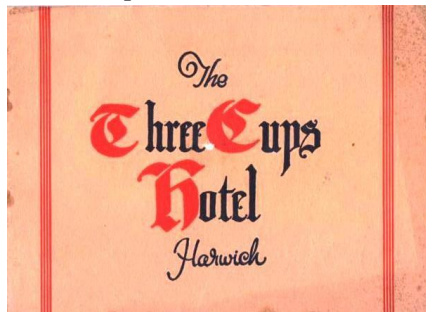
Between the wars many changes took place. The expansion of Dovercourt [*which adjoins Harwich*] as a holiday resort, which had started in the mid-1850s, had the effect of drawing the population to the western end of the borough and the trade followed it there. The *Three Cups* found itself unable to compete economically with the hotels and boarding houses of the new suburb, and about forty years ago [*circa 1930*] the brewers decided to reduce it in size. Part of the wing at the rear of the inn, including the famous Nelson room, was demolished.

[*The illustration of the Nelson Room shown here is from Winifred Cooper's private collection.*]



The Nelson relics disappeared and the very fine ceiling and magnificent oak door, both mentioned in old guide books, were removed by the late Mr. Ernest Bullard, a great collector of antiques, and installed in a little cottage adjoining the *Swan* hotel at Horning on the Norfolk Broads in what he called the Nelson room, and are still there. [*Are they still there? Can any PHS member help?*]

[*During the mid-to-latter part of the 1930s the Proprietors of the Three Cups were Swiss-born Edmond Charles Jules Guignard and M. Griffiths and it is their names which appear in a small booklet (cover shown here) produced at that time to promote the now 'up-to-date' Three Cups. The hotel was described as being 'modernized' with plaster ceilings and 'old*



oak-work still preserved' it being 'much more spacious than might be imagined from an outside view' having 'a comfortably finished Lounge, a Dining Room, and Private Rooms for Teas, Receptions, and other functions.'

There were also a number of 'comfortable bedrooms' with 'gas-fires and modern fittings' and 'Electric light...installed throughout.' The features of the Three Cups also included a fully-enclosed car park, a full-size billiards table and facilities for table tennis whilst 'Comfort, a social atmosphere and good cooking' were assured. 'En Pension' terms (inclusive of breakfast, lunch, tea, and dinner) were 10s 6d daily or £2.12s 6d weekly whilst bed and breakfast ranged from 6s 6d per night for a 'single' to 12s 6d for a double twin-bedded room.

Not surprisingly perhaps, the alleged Lord Nelson/Lady Hamilton connection was perpetuated as the modernised Three Cups also featured a carving of Lady Hamilton as 'a reminder that Lord Nelson was living at the Three Cups while the Fleet was re-conditioning in the Harbour.']

World War II brought the trade back to Harwich inns, but this was followed by a slump even greater than before. Deterioration in the fabric of the building was extensive, and about fifteen years ago [*circa 1944*] quite drastic alterations were carried out. The remains of the west wing of the *Three Cups* overlooking the churchyard, including the brick archway over the lane, were pulled down and at the same time the whole of the top story of the front was removed. [*According to Peter R. Goodwin the top storey was removed in 1949.*] It was a decapitated, truncated structure that remained. The extensive stabling at the rear was demolished to provide parking space and the building that was once the inn's laundry has been converted into a private dwelling.

The lane at the back of the *Three Cups* was once known as Cow Lane, which reminds me that in 1601 a "cow-gooing" on the marsh was "leased to Master Twitt for the 3 Cupps' cow."

[*Don't you just love this aside? Roald Dahl springs to mind for some reason...*]

The inn was also famous for its old and beautiful clematis which climbed a pillar and trailed its beautiful flowers around the courtyard, but, alas, this too has gone and local people still talk about it with affection and regret.



[*The photograph reproduced here from Winifred Cooper's private collection shows the 'famous' clematis courtyard in about 1900. Peter R. Goodwin has recorded a local newspaper in October 1892 stating that, in accordance with annual custom the 'clematis tree' was 'prettily decorated with fairy lamps and Chinese*

lanterns.' Goodwin also recorded that the tree was originally planted by Mrs. Bull in 1851 and 'covered the whole of the courtyard.']

There is a legend that there was an escape route from 'Nelson's Room' in the *Three Cups* down into the cellar, from which a tunnel led to the sea. This is only partly true. There was indeed a secret chamber which was removed to enlarge the public bar when the last alteration was made. Access to this chamber was through a trap-door (or rather two trap-doors) on the first floor down a perpendicular ladder into the chamber on the ground floor, from where there appeared to be no exit. It did not go down into the cellar and was probably used for hiding contraband or as a bolt-hole for those seeking refuge from the press gang. The cellars, it seems, were used for legitimate purposes, the storage of wines and Dutch cheeses. During the alteration an old goblet was found in the secret chamber but was inadvertently smashed by workmen. [*I hardly know what to say.*]

The ghost of Lady Hamilton, drifting like smoke up the stairs and along the corridors, is said to haunt the *Three Cups*, seeking perhaps a rendezvous with Nelson.



The present licensee [*August 1969*], Mr. A. Keeble, and his wife have kept the inn for the last thirty years. In spite of many ups and downs, and the appearance and disappearance of numerous other inns, the *Three Cups* continues to offer hospitality to the traveller, although in a changed form to meet modern demands. I am glad to say that the brewers have not succumbed to the current cheeseparing fashion for bald [*sic*] lettering which has obliterated some of the most picturesque signs of the past, and the *Three Cups* sign [*pictured*] is the only one worth looking at in Harwich, even though the cups appear more like golden football trophies!

Thus Winifred Cooper's highly informative article ends with the Three Cups continuing to 'offer hospitality to the traveller, although in a changed form' whilst many other inns around the Old Town had closed.

If only that was true today.

Patrick Chaplin (Original article ©1969 Winifred Cooper)

NEXT ISSUE: THE FINAL PART - CLOSURE, SALE, ERRATA AND SOURCES