

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

PART 1

THE 'SAVIOUR OF HARWICH', SAMUEL PEPYS AND POOR MARY HART

Today Harwich in north-east Essex is the UK's second busiest passenger ferry port. Its harbour, which is the largest between the Humber and London, was created by a storm surge in the 1100s; a quirk of fate that gave rise to the area's long and fascinating seafaring history.

The attractive old town was built, on a grid pattern, in the 13th Century by the Earl of Norfolk, to exploit its strategic position at the mouth of the Rivers Stour and Orwell estuary. The famous seafarers Hawkins, Drake and Frobisher all sailed from Harwich during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I on various expeditions. It is also the place where the Pilgrim Fathers built the



Mayflower and where its captain, Christopher Jones, hailed from. Brewery historians will be aware that the (now defunct) Tolly Cobbold brewery was founded in Harwich in 1723 before moving to Ipswich, Suffolk in 1746.

So, with all these seafaring activities it is not surprising that, back in the day, Harwich, steeped in history, was simply teeming with pubs and beerhouses eager to slake the thirsts of hundreds if not thousands of men and, doubtless, women too.

My reason for looking into the history of one particular pub in the Harwich Old Town is, once again, by chance; this time the purchase a large photo-frame relating to the history of the *Three Cups*, 64 Church Street, that I purchased for a mere £6.00 at a boot fair not far from the town. (The photograph, above, shows Church Street circa 1914. The *Three Cups* can be seen in the distance, on the left, immediately before St. Nicholas's Church (Author's Collection)).



Under glass on one side is a four-page article about the *Three Cups* in Harwich written by Winifred Cooper (see photograph. Image © Moppix). Although no date was cited, it seemed to me to be in the style of the *Essex Countryside* magazine of yore.

Most surprisingly on the reverse of the frame were stuck numerous photographs of other Harwich public houses, all taken by the Reverend W. Davies from Needham Market, Suffolk when visiting the town in June 1981. Also affixed there were a few cuttings from local newspapers and magazines relating to the *Three Cups*.

A few weeks after my chance purchase, and purely by coincidence, a substantial number of miscellaneous back issues of *Essex Countryside* came into my possession. I spent many happy hours searching the contents for any mentions of pubs but in particular, of course, Mrs. Cooper's article about the *Three Cups*. A few evenings passed and then, there it was! The issue was dated August 1969. The article was titled *The Three Cups has played a leading role in Harwich's history*. I very soon discovered that Winifred Cooper had too.

Winifred Cooper (1909-1999) (pictured – artist unknown) was one of the founder members of the Harwich Society which was established in 1969 and from 1970, and for many subsequent years, she was its Chairman. However, Mrs. Cooper had arrived in Harwich much earlier, in the 1940s, a period during which the Town Council's policy had been to tear down dilapidated, if historically interesting, buildings, which had been ravaged by bombs, neglect, time and weather. Her sterling work and her dedication to the preservation of the Old Town over several decades led to her being described as 'Saviour of Harwich'.



Given that Mrs. Cooper had already researched the *Three Cups* I momentarily thought about simply re-publishing her article, with permission, in the PHS *Newsletter*. However, that would only have told part of the story; forty-seven years having passed since Mrs. Cooper's article appeared in *Essex Countryside*. So I delved further into the history of this historic public house and am now able to expand the story up to the present day.

What follows is Winifred Cooper's entire article about the *Three Cups* with a number of interruptions and additions from me in *italics* within her main text and in ordinary type without.

THE THREE CUPS HAS PLAYED A LEADING ROLE IN HARWICH'S HISTORY

The *Three Cups* is the most famous of many old Harwich inns, having been continuously licensed for nearly 400 years. Very few inns in Essex, or indeed in England, can claim this distinction.

It was built in Tudor times, a stone's throw from the old church of St. Nicholas, the patron saint of seafarers, children, dowerless maidens and bankers. In many coastal towns where the church is dedicated to this saint there will almost certainly be found a *Three Cups* inn nearby, the sign for both being similar. One explanation given is that the three golden purses tied at the neck, which is one of the symbols of St. Nicholas, were inverted to appear like three golden goblets and gave the name to the inn.

[The derivation of the pub name may well have been as Winifred Cooper suggests but the most common explanation for the sign is that Three Cups is derived from the arms of the Worshipful Company of Salters (1558), producers and sellers of sea-salt (Per chevron, azure and gules; three covered sprinkling-salts argent). Given the position of the port of Harwich and the fact that salt water spas were a feature of the town's history (see later) it seems likely that salt makers would have been there too.]

There are many references to the *Three Cups* in the archives at the town hall. For centuries it played a leading part in the colourful history of the town. It afforded shelter, food and rest to man and beast; council meetings, sessions of the peace, balls and assemblies were held there; plots were hatched behind its locked doors; many contracts were sealed in the traditional way over a glass of wine; and it was the centre of the parliamentary battles which took place in the [nineteenth] century.

The famous Elizabethan seafarers who fought on the Spanish Main knew it well and enjoyed its hospitality. Harwich was often the last port of call for explorers in search of the northern passages to Asia, for merchants seeking their share of the spice and tea trades and for the tough fishermen hunting the whales in the bitter waters off Iceland; and for many of those who took part in these expeditions it was often their last sight of England, for some failed to return from the unchartered seas.

Captain Christopher Jones, master of the *Mayflower*, whose name will be for ever connected with the new world, was a capital burgess of the borough and attended many meetings at the inn. Was he there, I wonder, in those dark days of superstition when they condemned poor Mary Hart to death? In the archives at the town hall is the following entry:

“They keep a Session of the Peace at Anthony Seward’s Mansion-House, commonly called the 3 Cupps, troubled with witchcraft. They condemn one Mary Hart for it to be hanged, whom the jury found guilty Oct. 2 1607.”



When Samuel Pepys visited his friend and fellow M.P. Sir Anthony Deane, the famous Harwich shipbuilder (pictured), in 1678 he would have been received at the guildhall by members of the council, after which all would adjourn to the *Three Cups* opposite to partake of refreshment. At that time the proprietor, Samuel Newton, was a burgess of the borough and had been mayor in 1677, following Sir Anthony Deane. During his year of office wine seems to have flowed freely and he appears to have been both guest and host in his own house, for which the council seems to have paid.

The council needed little excuse to celebrate an occasion. When a man was made a freeman (if he was not an apprentice it often cost him £25 [approximately £5,000 in today’s money] plus 3/6 for a fire bucket) they all crossed the road to the inn to celebrate, and the following is typical of many entries in the chamberlain’s accounts:

“1683. Dec. 1st. Pd. To Mr. Brown for wine had att the Three Cups when Mr. Whitmore was chose a Freeman £1.15.0.”

When the guildhall was being rebuilt in 1769-70 the council met at the *Three Cups*, a most convenient and sensible arrangement for all concerned.

The accession of the house of Hanover to the throne of England and the use of Harwich as their port of entry and departure brought trade to the town and business boomed. Travellers, including Defoe, complained bitterly of overcharging in the inns, and several victuallers were

presented before the bench for selling beer by small measure and for selling strong beer against the assize, the *Three Cups* being one of them.

When H.R.H. Frederick, Prince of Wales, arrived on the *Despatch* to set foot on English soil in December 1728 the mayor and corporation entertained him at the *Three Cups* to drink his health, the charge of £6/15/- [approximately £1,400 at 2016 prices] appearing in the chamberlain's accounts.

There is little doubt that the inspiration to establish Harwich as a spa was occasioned by the royal preference for the port.

In November 1967 *Essex Countryside* published an article of mine on the subject of sea-water baths, as a result of which Mr. Frank Hussey, historian of the Royal Harwich Yacht Club, contacted me and suggested that the baths had been built much earlier than had been thought by the Essex Record Office, as the cupola could be seen in Cleveley's painting of 1761.

[John Cleveley (c.1712-1777), marine painter. The painting in question (oil on canvas) was described by Bonhams, the London auctioneers in April 2014 as 'The flotilla of ships led by the Royal Charlotte, in company with five other royal yachts arriving off Harwich on 6th September 1761 conveying Princess Charlotte of Mecklenburg to England for her marriage to George III.' See image below.]



At his [Frank Hussey's] instigation I searched through early volumes of the old *Ipswich Journal* and discovered that the baths were erected in 1753 and, according to the advertisements, appear to have been sponsored by the *Three Cups* and the *Rose and Crown*, where accommodation of the most genteel kind could be obtained.

I also gleaned further information regarding the mechanics of this most advanced “contrivance”:

“The elegant building...stands in a vast lake of pure Sea Water renewed by every Tide. By turning two large Brass Cocks curious artificial Salt Springs rush violently in at the Bottom, and discharge themselves at the Tops of the Baths into an adjacent Marsh; and consequently carry with them any Foulness which may arise from the Bodies of those who bathe as it naturally floats on the Surface of the Water. Thus there is no necessity of Bathing in the same Water with all sorts of People (however loathsome their Disorders may be); which must always be the Case, where the Water is simply retained at High Tide in a Cistern.”

This was a knock at other, simpler, baths in Harwich.

“To ensure absolute privacy there is a Drawbridge from the Bank which can be raised by any Person within the Dressing Room rendering the Baths inaccessible while in use.”

These baths continued in operation for many years, and we are told that people of quality flocked to the town for the sea bathing and, to cater for the increase in traffic, a stage-coach ran daily from the *Three Cups*, setting out for London at the unearthly hour of 2 a.m.

Later that same century the *Rose and Crown* dropped out of the advertisements, its place being taken by the *White Hart* in conjunction with the *Three Cups*.

Patrick Chaplin

PART 2 – SEA FENCIBLES, LORD NELSON AND ‘VAGABOND VOTERS’ will be published in the winter Newsletter.

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