

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

### PART 2 – SEA FENCIBLES, LORD NELSON AND ‘VAGABOND VOTERS’

*In the autumn issue I began the story of the Three Cups, Harwich (pictured below c. 1969) based primarily on an article written by the ‘Saviour of Harwich’, Mrs. Winifred Cooper and published in Essex Countryside in August 1969.*

*In this second part I return to Winifred’s article with occasional interjections by me in italics within the text bringing the history of this ancient inn up to the Great War.*

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On June 10, 1765, the mayor [*of Harwich*], Griffiths Davis, and corporation waited upon the Duke of York at the *Three Cups*, where they presented him with a loyal address written in most eloquent terms and were received graciously by His Royal Highness, who allowed them to kiss his hand. The same day the Duke boarded his yacht, which was waiting for him in the harbour, but unfortunately the wind proved to be contrary and he went by water to Mr. Rigby’s at Mistley. The following day he returned to Harwich and as the wind was fair he sailed to Holland.



All this royal coming and going was very good for business, and Harwich seems to have been at the height of its prosperity, which stimulated a desire for modernization of the old stud-and-plaster houses. In common with many other buildings, the *Three Cups* was refronted in the current fashionable “Georgian” style. Either the overhanging upper story was shaved off or, what is more likely, the lower part was extended (thereby stealing some of the street) and the top surmounted by a parapet.

[According to Essex historian A.F.J. Brown (*Essex at Work*, 1969) during the mid-eighteenth century urban inns were often ‘rebuilt or refaced in brick and sashed’ and ‘fitted up in a genteel manner’. In his book Brown refers to the *Three Cups* having, during that period, £200 spent on renovations and refurbishment. That represents a cost of £39,400 at 2016 prices.]

But towards the end of the eighteenth century the effects of the French Revolution and the wars with Napoleon were being felt in England. Refugees were landing at Harwich, and we are told that many were befriended by the landlord of the *Three Cups*. Smuggling was carried on on a large scale, the capacious cellars of the town being full of contraband, but in October 1799 a grimmer cargo arrived in the form of transports carrying the wounded, who were dumped in the streets, and temporary hospitals were fitted up at the *Three Cups*, the *White Hart* and Mill House.

In [1798] Sea Fencibles were formed, with fifty members, guaranteed safe from the dreaded and ruthless press gang.

*[The Sea Fencibles (based on the word 'defensible') were a British naval militia, volunteers mostly from coastal areas, founded in 1793 to act as an anti-invasion force.]*

By 1801 the number of Fencibles had been reduced to forty-one and Admiral Lord Nelson came in the *Medusa* to reorganize them.

*[Nine years later, in 1810, when it was clear that the risk of a French invasion was over, the Sea Fencibles were disbanded.]*

*[Relating to around this time, Miller Christy (The Trade Signs of Essex, 1887) included in his book a curious poem published in 1804 which, in describing a return journey from London to Aldborough (Aldeburgh, Suffolk), referred to the Three Cups. The lady in question wrote;*

*“But now we’re at Harwich, and thankful am I,  
Our inn’s the Three Cups, and our dinner draws nigh,  
But first for a walk to survey this old Borough,  
To peep at the church, and the churchyard go thorough [sic].”*

*Presumably the church referred to was St. Nicholas’s, more or less next door.]*

*[Lord Nelson] had often sheltered his fleet in the harbour, staying at the Three Cups with his paramour, Lady Hamilton [pictured below]. He usually occupied the same suite, and Lady Hamilton is said to have had another overlooking King’s Quay Street.*



*[In a letter to Essex Countryside magazine (December 1971) Rex Bale from Barkingside, Ilford, wrote in response to an earlier article about Essex pubs that*

***‘there are two very historic pubs, one each side of St. Nicholas’s Church, Harwich. One is the Hanover inn, an old smuggling pub, and the other the Three Cups hotel, which is 400 years old. Lord Nelson stayed there with Lady Hamilton before the fleet left Harwich for the battle of the Nile.’***

*In the February 1972 issue a letter from Philip G. Mugford from Haslemere, Surrey seemed to put paid to any such suggestion that Nelson and Lady Hamilton met at the pub for a tryst before battle. Mugford wrote:*

***I am sorry to have to shatter this romantic delusion, for in fact the sequence of events occurred in the following chronological order.***

***Sir William Hamilton, British ambassador to Naples, had returned home on leave bringing with him a Mrs. Emma Hart who had been living in his house in Naples for the past five years. Sir William and Emma were married very quietly at Marylebone parish church on September 6, 1791. They set sail for Naples four days later and did not return to England until November 6, 1800.***

***On September 12, 1793, Captain Horatio Nelson, commanding H.M.S. Agamemnon, landed at Naples to meet Sir William and Lady Hamilton for the first time, and after only four days crammed with official activities Nelson set sail again, having been in Lady Hamilton’s company for only a few hours.***

***The Hamilton's next meeting with Nelson was to be five years later on the evening of September 22, 1798, aboard the battered Vanguard, where the admiral stood ready to receive them, still pale from his heroic exertions as victor of the Nile.***

*The Battle of the Nile had been fought in the Mediterranean 1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> August 1798.*

*So no secret tryst then...]*

Conditions were so bad in the Navy at that time that the sailors were not allowed ashore in case they deserted, and the soldiers had it to themselves, swaggering around the town, indulging in horse-play in the inns and slashing the pictures in the *Three Cups*.

Many years later, in 1863, the Rev. Richard Cutler described the oil paintings which he saw let into the panels over the fireplaces at the inn and thought them to be of Flemish origin. They were all scriptural subjects, only one of which was still perfect, that of the magi worshipping the child Jesus. Old Mrs. Bull, whose family kept the *Three Cups* for almost 100 years, mentioned another which she remembered as a child. It was of Abraham offering up the ram caught in the thicket, but, she added, "the young officers, roistering blades, pushed their swords through the canvas of most of them, which in consequence became useless and unsightly, and were removed."

Incidentally, this picture has recently [circa 1969] come to light again hanging on a wall in Harwich and has been identified as an exact copy of [Michelangelo Merisi da] Caravaggio's "Sacrifice of Isaac," [1598 -1603, pictured] which hangs in the Uffizi gallery in Florence, and, what is more interesting, an expert has stated that it was painted some time between 1600 and 1610, that is during Caravaggio's lifetime or immediately after his death, probably by one of his followers.



How did these obviously valuable pictures come to rest at the *Three Cups*? Were they the spoils of war or had they been accepted by the landlord of the inn in settlement of an unpaid bill?

During the rumbustious elections of the middle of the nineteenth century the *Three Cups* served as the headquarters for the parliamentary candidates, because "there was no other place where a gentleman could stay." Those with votes to sell offered themselves to the highest bidder and a steady stream of people went for payment to an upper room at the inn, where a pile of golden sovereigns glinted temptingly on the table. A good deal of treating went on in the bars, and although business was good for the *Three Cups* the proprietor, Mr. Bull, at the official inquiry into the bribery and corruption of one of the elections, showed his disapproval of the whole business by referring to "the vagabond voters."

The Bulls enjoyed a reputation second to none for service, comfort and good food. So great was the inn's fame that two male cooks were maintained on the premises, one of the specialities being a dish of stewed eels. Mine host, Mr. William Bull, following in the footsteps of more than one of his predecessors, was also a member of the council.

*[When members of the Essex Society for Archaeology and History (ESAH) travelled to Harwich on an all-day excursion to the town on 24<sup>th</sup> September 2011 their hosts were The Harwich*

*Society and their guided tour included the Three Cups. In a blog posted later on the ESAH 'blogspot' in November 2012 a member of that Society recalled:*

*Next to the church is the former Three Cups inn, which only in the last generation became a private house. It is reputed that Lord Nelson and Lady Hamilton stayed there, but evidence is flimsy to say the least. Mr Bull was the landlord in the 1820s, and I was able to contribute a story (reproduced below) which adds to the social history or folklore of the place. Sharing research is one of the pleasures of an amateur local historian. Our volunteer guide, a musician and local Morris dancer, hopes one day to weave the story of Harwich into folk-song, and the passage gave him a ready-made chorus.*

*The story of the Three Cups is taken from a commonplace book, written by Edward Henry Lisle Reeve of Stondon Massey in 1881. It reads:*

*“Mr Smythies of Colchester is to be remembered among other reasons for his celebrated toast at the hostelry of ‘The Three Cups’ at Harwich. The ‘Three Cups’ was kept by a Mr Bull who was a universal favourite. Mr Smythies being called upon for a toast when dining there one evening gave, to the delight of the party assembled, this following sentiment.*

*““Here’s to health of Mr Bull - And may his Cups be always full”.*

*“We have said Mr Bull was popular. And no wonder. He was a man whom it was impossible to put out of temper. At any rate he was capable of enduring considerable provocation without a murmur.*

*“On one occasion twelve officers [of the West Suffolk Militia] were to dine together at the “Three Cups”. While waiting for dinner to be served they began to form a wager among themselves as to the possibility or impossibility of ruffling the temper of Mr Bull, and for the sake of the bet, they divided their number equally, six taking one side, and six the other. Dinner was served in due course, and Mr Bull, according to his custom, brought on the first dish – a beautiful salmon – himself.*

*This the officers found great fault with, saying that it was bad, and odoriferous. And, all through dinner, they took occasion to complain of everything brought to the table. The very bill at the end they grumbled at, and called the items in question: the wine – the best Mr Bull could produce – they voted positively disagreeable. Mr Bull came forward himself to apologize. He was not the least ruffled, but said that he was truly sorry not to have given satisfaction, as he had taken a great deal of trouble about the dinner, and could only say that he begged they would think no more about the bill, but let it pass.*

*Upon this they all burst into a hoarse laugh; explained to Mr Bull that they had had a wager at his expense, voted him a capital good fellow, paid the bill, and ordered just such another dinner for the ensuing week.”]*

In 1561 Elizabeth I came to Harwich and stayed three days at a house in the High Street, but it has never been established with certainty which was the High Street. It was probably the street now known as King’s Head Street, which has changed its name several times, but one proprietor of the *Three Cups* decided to make a profit from the uncertainty and advertised that visitors to the town should not fail to see Queen Elizabeth’s bedroom in his historic house. The late T. West Carnie, in his charming little book entitled *Happy-go-lucky Harwich and Drowsy Dovercourt* (1902), comments that

**“the bed is not indigenous to Harwich; it was brought by a former proprietor of the hotel from some other resting-place of the great queen.”**

*[According to Kelly’s Directories, Thomas West Carnie was landlord of the Three Cups from circa 1906 to 1912.]*

For over 300 years the *Three Cups* remained in private hands and was run as a free house, but in July 1896 it was bought from Mr. John Osborne by Bullard and Sons Ltd., the Norwich brewers in whose hands *[in 1969]* it still is.

*[Bullard & Sons, Ltd., Anchor Brewery, St. Mile’s Bridge, Norwich. Bullard & Watts founded 1837. Watts left 1847. New brewery erected in 1867. Registered March 1895. Acquired by Watney Mann Ltd., 1963 with 530 public houses and brewing ceased in 1968. (Barber, Century Plus Plus 2012). As Winifred Cooper’s article was written six years after Bullards was taken over by Watney Mann it is clear that the latter allowed the Bullards name to remain connected to the Three Cups, at least for a time.]*

Unfortunately, once an inn gets into the hands of brewers and ownership is legally established and registered all the old documents are hidden away in the vaults of solicitors, or even destroyed, and there is little that the brewers can tell of an inn’s history. It is so with the *Three Cups* and one has to search deep into local records for the scantiest information. The visitors book dates back only to 1908.

*[According to Peter R. Goodwin (Harwich and Dovercourt Pubs, 2004) the Three Cups was at this time still an extremely popular establishment with many functions being held there including the Annual Dinner of the Harwich railway station staff in 1901, the Police Subscription Dinner (1904). But, as always, running a pub was not without its problems. For example, Goodwin discovered that in 1901 Mr. Bray, the landlord of the Three Cups ‘was charged with permitting his house to be used as a resort for persons of ill repute’ those persons being ‘ladies of the night.’ However, after evidence was submitted, the case was dismissed.]*

At one time the *Three Cups* covered quite a large area of ground and was probably constructed of old ships’ timbers, heavily pargeted on the outside with swags of flowers and fruit as was the custom in Essex, but so much alteration has taken place over the centuries that it bears no resemblance to the original building. The ceilings were richly plastered, the walls were panelled and the staircase was beautifully carved, and doubtless it was tastefully furnished to please and attract the wealthy and illustrious people who stayed there. For a time the Royal Harwich Yacht Club had its headquarters at the inn.

The brewers took over the *Three Cups* at a time when the railway had moved up-river to Parkeston Quay and was running its own hotels and cross-channel steamers. Another period of doldrums set in for Harwich, but World War 1 again brought brisk business to the inns, whose brew warmed the hearts and bodies of the weary sailors.

**Patrick Chaplin (Original article ©1969 Winifred Cooper)**

**NEXT ISSUE – Part Three – A ghost, deterioration, modernisation and survival.**