



The Three Cups and the guildhall opposite.

spice and tea trades and for the tough fishermen hunting the whale 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 uncharted seas.

WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED

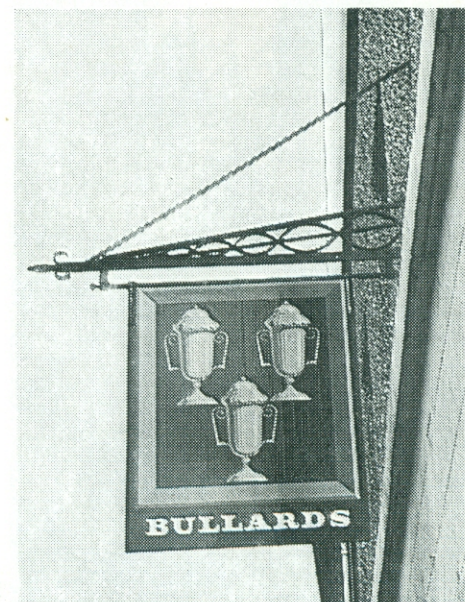
by Winifred Cooper

Captain Christopher Jones, master of the *Mayflower*, whose name will be forever 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, in 1678 he would have been received at the guildhall

The best inn sign in Harwich.



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.

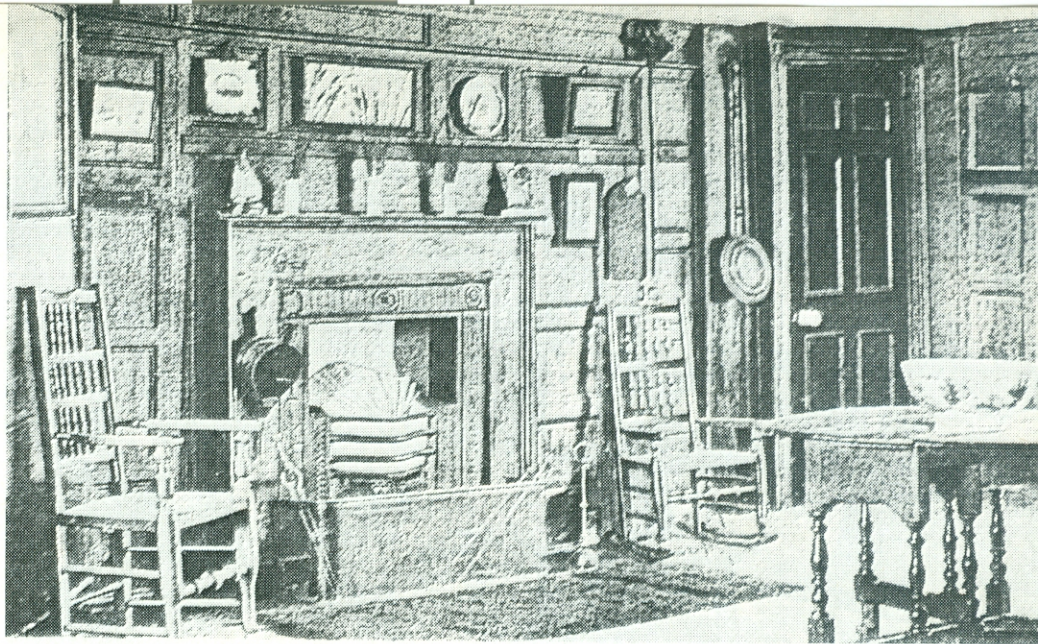


There are many references to the Three Cups in the archives at the town hall. For centuries it played a leading part in the colourful history of the town. It afforded shelter, food and rest to man and beast; council meetings, sessions of the peace, balls and assemblies were held there; plots were hatched 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 last 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

In spite of many ups and downs, and the appearance and disappearance of numerous other inns, the Three Cups at Harwich continues to offer hospitality to the traveller, although in a changed form to meet modern demands.



The Nelson room, pulled down about forty years ago.

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.

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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 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 at 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.

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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/- 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. At his 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.

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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.

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

On June 10, 1765, the mayor, 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.

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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.

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



The famous clematis courtyard in about 1900.

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 the same year the Sea Fencibles were formed, with fifty members, guaranteed safe from the dreaded and ruthless press gang. By 1801 the number had been reduced to forty-one and Admiral Lord Nelson came in the *Medusa* to reorganize them. He had often sheltered his fleet in the harbour, staying at the Three Cups with his paramour, Lady Hamilton. He usually occupied the same suite, and Lady Hamilton is said to have had another overlooking King's Quay Street.

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.

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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

come to light again hanging on a wall in Harwich and has been identified as an exact copy of Caravaggio's "Sacrifice of Isaac," 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?

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During the rumbustious elections of the middle of the nineteenth century the Three Cups served as a 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."

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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.

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 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."

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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 it still is.

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.

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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 upriver to Parkeston Quay and was running its own hotels and cross-channel steamers. Another period of doldrums set in for Harwich, but World War I again brought brisk business to the inns, whose brew warmed the hearts and bodies of the weary sailors.

Between the wars many changes took place. The expansion of Dovercourt 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 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 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.

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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 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. 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.

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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."

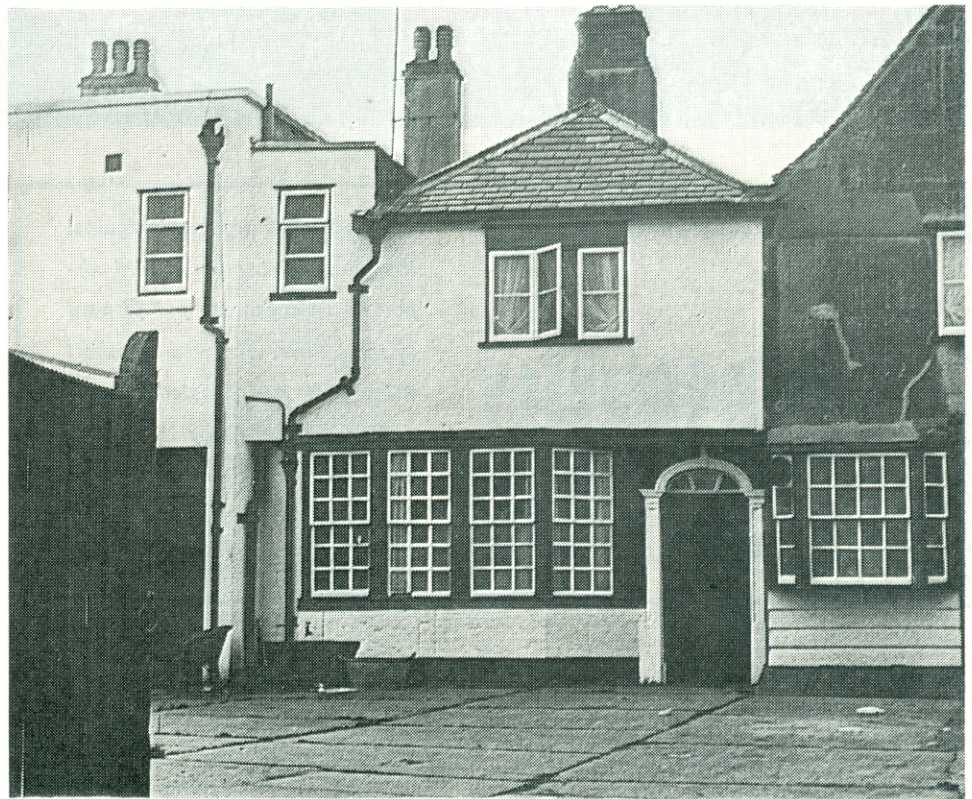
The inn was also famous for its old and beautiful clematis which climbed a pillar and trailed its beautiful flowers around the courtyard, but, alas, this too has gone and local people still talk about it with affection and regret.

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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 their legitimate purposes, the storage of wines and Dutch cheeses. During the



Above : the back of the Three Cups in 1925. All this was pulled down about 1952. Below : the rear of the Three Cups today.



alteration an old goblet was found in the secret chamber but was inadvertently smashed by workmen.

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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, 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 cheeseparer fashion for bald lettering which has obliterated some of the most picturesque signs of the past, and the Three Cups sign is the only one worth looking at in Harwich, even though the cups appear more like golden football trophies!

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