

Short History of the White Horse, Stoke Ash



THE WHITE HORSE, at Stoke Ash, was built in 1647— that unhappy year when King Charles I, having surrendered to the Scots, was given up by them, and imprisoned. He escaped, was captured, and again imprisoned, at Casisbrooke. One cannot imagine that these painful events made very much impression on the inhabitants of slumberous Stoke Ash, or greatly interrupted the peaceful trend of their existence. Life had, after all, gone on pretty steadily ever since the Romans established Villa Faustini at nearby Thornham, and had created a burial ground opposite to the site on which The White Horse was built some centuries later. Not that the villagers of Stuart days were aware of this, for the Roman vessels containing calcined bones were not discovered until 1892. But we may be sure that a leisurely way of life was very much their ancient heritage.

Charles G Harper called The White Horse 'that pretty Inn', and, looking at it by and large, the description is fairly apt; but this Inn's entrance porch, so strangely like that of a Church, is slightly incongruous. The interior of the place is quite fascinating, and the Bar-room has a distinct atmosphere of antiquity. This, however, is not its only attraction; for people who like to do odd things the Bar-room of The White Horse is defiantly the place to visit. For here the Parish-boundary runs along the centre of the Bar-counter; therefore the Bar-tender stands in one Parish, and pushes mugs of beer across the parish-boundary to customers standing in another parish. A companion is vastly intrigued at being served in this admittedly unusual fashion, so there must be something in it; for my own part, I was far too thirsty to bother.

Historically, the most interesting thing about Stoke White Horse is that it was the scene of the annual Petty Sessions for the Hiring and Retaining of Servants. These 'Hirings' were held in each Hundred of Suffolk every Michaelmas.

The custom originated in certain old Acts of Parliament, which prescribed that ploughmen and other agricultural workers should be hired to serve for a full year and not merely from day to day. It appears, however, to have gradually embraced servants of all kinds, and by the middle of the 18th century the custom was generally observed throughout the country.

The day, time and place of each 'Hiring' were fixed by the Chief Constable, and the date invariably chosen for the Hartismere Sessions was October the 11th. On that day, therefore, the servants would assemble at The White Horse, and stand in a row whilst the formality of Hiring was observed. The

whole business was probably little more than an almost farcical formality, and most of the servants would merely be re-engaged by their old masters. Such of them as were open to fresh engagement stood with a straw in their mouths. A servant's hiring having been duly observed and completed, he was handed a small sum of money which was supposed to make the contract binding, but this again was merely a polite formality.

The legal ceremony over, the serious business of the day began. First, the assembled servants sat down to dinner, after which 'The lads brought in the lasses when the amusement began, and it is acknowledged that coarseness, if not something worse prevailed.' *

Article written by Leonard P. Thompson (1946)

* The New Suffolk Garland, compiled by John Glyde, Junior. (1866)