



History of the Blue Boar and Witney

Witney is an ancient market town on the River Windrush in west Oxfordshire, roughly midway between Oxford and the edge of the Cotswolds. An estate centred on the town already existed by the 10th century, and in 969 AD King Eadgar granted it to his minister Aelfhelm. The Windrush divided two very different landscapes: to the north, rich Cotswold sheep country worked since Roman times; to the south, smaller farming settlements. Until the 1850s, the northern part of the parish also fell within the purlieu of the royal Forest of Wychwood, a hunting ground that once stretched for miles around.

In the early 12th century a Bishop of Winchester built a church and manor house here, and it was a later Bishop, Henry of Blois, who is credited with establishing the wool trade that would define the town for the next 800 years, managing the great episcopal sheep flocks himself. By the late 12th or early 13th century, an enterprising Bishop of Winchester had laid out Witney as a planned market borough, centred on the broad, wedge-shaped market place you see today, flanked by long burgage plots. By the 1270s the town had grown to more than 300 houses and a population above 1,000, making it comfortably the equal of its Cotswold neighbour, Burford.



Church Parade, High Street, Witney, Oxfordshire c1905

It was wool, and later blankets, that made Witney's name. By 1677 the natural historian Dr Robert Plot reported that "the Blanketing Trade of Witney is advanced to that height, that no place comes near it", with some 150 looms and around 3,000 people employed in the trade and its supporting industries. Witney blankets were shipped as far as North America through the Hudson's Bay Company.

As standards slipped in the early 1700s, established weavers petitioned for regulation, and in May 1711 Queen Anne granted a royal charter creating the Company of Witney Blanket Makers, a guild with authority over blanket production within twenty miles of the town. The Company built its own headquarters, the Blanket Hall in the High Street, completing it by Christmas 1721 at a cost of around £460 – blankets were weighed and inspected downstairs, with the Company's Great Room above. The Hall still stands, now Grade II* listed.

A town for drinking

Witney has never been short of a pub. In the early 1800s the town's population of around 4,000 supported some thirty inns and alehouses – a remarkable ratio that, by some counts, had barely changed 200 years later. The Market Square in particular was lined with coaching inns serving travellers on the roads between Oxford, Cheltenham and the west, among them the White Hart, once described as the 'chief inn of the town' and said to have been visited by King Charles I, and, on the north side of the square, an inn called the Blue Boar.

Our Building

Our own building began life as an inn on this spot in the early 18th century. The present frontage dates from around 1800, with older fabric behind it, and the building was substantially rebuilt in 1866 – the handsome Grade II listed structure you are sitting in today. For much of the 19th and 20th centuries it traded not as the Blue Boar but as the Marlborough Arms, later the Marlborough Hotel, serving generations of travellers, market-day farmers and Witney families in exactly the spot it does now.

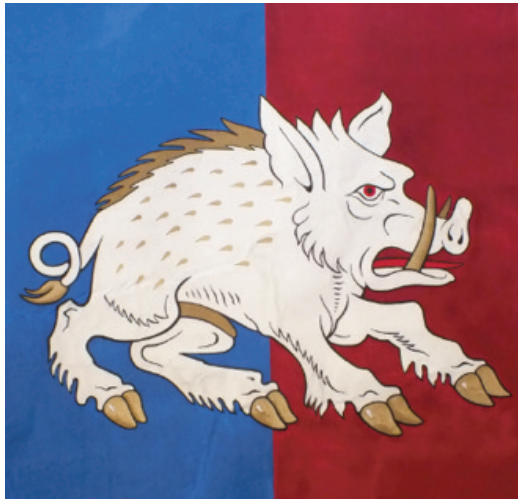


The former Marlborough Hotel

The old name was restored in the autumn of 2011, when the building was carefully refurbished and reopened once again as the Blue Boar – a rare case of a pub coming home to its own history. It remains one of the great landmarks of Witney's Market Square, its bedrooms, courtyard and dining rooms still doing the job this building has done for some 300 years: feeding, watering and putting up travellers passing through this corner of Oxfordshire.

Why a Blue Boar?

Boars, blue ones especially, have a long and slightly disreputable history as pub signs. The story most often told traces back to Richard III, whose personal heraldic badge was a white boar, worn by his household and carved and painted on buildings associated with him – nowhere more famously than the old Blue Boar Inn on the High Street of Leicester, where the King is said to have spent his last night before riding out to the Battle of Bosworth Field in August 1485.



The White Boar badge of Richard III

Richard lost that battle, and his life, and his badge became a dangerous thing to display. Legend has it that innkeepers up and down the country who had a white boar swinging over their door had it hurriedly repainted – blue. The colour was not chosen at random: a blue boar was the heraldic badge of John de Vere, 13th Earl of Oxford, who had commanded the victorious Henry VII's vanguard at Bosworth. Adopting his colours was a quick and prudent way for a landlord to swap allegiance overnight. True or embellished, it is the tale behind Blue Boars from Leicester to York – and, we like to think, gives ours a suitably roguish pedigree for a pub on an old coaching road.

Tales from the Square



Butter Cross

Witney's history has never been dull. In 1652, the town authorities banned travelling performers from using the Butter Cross, so a troupe of mummers took themselves upstairs at the White Hart instead. An hour into the performance the floor gave way, killing five people and injuring some sixty more; a local Puritan preacher wasted no time in declaring it divine punishment for such indecent entertainment.

In 1783 a wandering preacher told the town that something remarkable would happen within the month. A fortnight later a violent thunderstorm broke over Witney, and eighty-four townsfolk promptly converted to Methodism on the spot – a conversion rate any modern preacher would envy.

One of the town's more poignant stories belongs to Patrick Moulder, landlord of a Witney inn and a veteran of the 15th Hussars who had survived the entire Napoleonic Wars, from Corunna to Waterloo. In 1838, for reasons unrecorded, he took his own life in an upstairs room of his pub. He was so well regarded that more than 3,000 people are said to have attended his funeral, given with full military honours.

In 1871 Witney had its own murder ballad: Edward Roberts killed Anne Merrick with an axe, then calmly walked to the police station to confess. The crime became the subject of a lurid folk song sold at that year's Witney Feast, before Roberts was hanged in Oxford nine months later. It is, perhaps, just as well that today's Market Square has rather quieter tales to tell – and a good deal better beer. We are lucky to sit at the heart of a town with such a rich and colourful past – do come and raise a glass to it.

With thanks to the Victoria County History of Oxfordshire (British History Online), the Witney Blanket Story project, Witney and District Museum, and local history research by Will Hazell, from which much of this information was drawn.