



# History of the Chalk Hare and Royston

## History of Royston

Nearly 2,000 years ago the Romans constructed Ermine Street running north from London to York and Lincoln. It became one of the most important Roman roads in the country, and Royston has grown at its intersection with Icknield Way, another Roman road on the line of a prehistoric highway along the chalk ridge from Salisbury Plain to East Anglia.

It was not uncommon for a wayside cross to be set up at important crossroads and Royston was no exception. The origin of Royston's cross is unknown, but has been attributed to an unidentified Lady Rohesia or Roisia (Rose) sometime after the Norman Conquest, but she may have restored a cross established in Saxon times.

With the establishment of the Augustinian Priory in the late 12th century, Richard I took the opportunity to establish a new town based around what became a thriving market. By the early 14th century, Roisia's cross had become Roisia's Town or Royston.

The stone that formed the base of the cross now stands adjacent to the ancient crossroads at the northern end of the High Street.



Royston was an important place during the reign of King James I. On his journey south from Scotland, after the death of Queen Elizabeth I, he stopped at Royston.

James only stayed here for one night, continuing his journey south the following day. But he was so impressed by the suitability of Royston's countryside for hunting that, shortly after his coronation, he began looking into options for a country retreat in the area. A 'local knight' (who probably had no choice to) agreed to rent his Priory House to the King for one year. It's on Kneesworth Street and doesn't look at all like a palace, even though it's now known as the Old Palace.



Almost immediately, the King announced a 14 mile wide hunting ban surrounding Royston, so that hares, rabbits, partridges, marsh hens and other game would be preserved for his pleasure. A gamekeeper was appointed to protect the game from poachers; huntsmen were hired to care for the King's hunting dogs; and a vermin keeper was assigned to kill foxes, badgers, predatory birds and any other 'vermin' which preyed on the King's game.

What was only meant to be a year turned into many and the King returned often, putting huge strain on the local infrastructure and draining its resources. At one point the locals were so desperate for him to leave they 'kidnapped' his favourite hunting dog, returning him the next day with a note attached asking the dog to plead with his owner to return back to London as "all our provision is spent already, and we are not able to entertain him any longer."

He didn't listen to his dog.

The Queen didn't seem to stay with him here, instead this seemed to be where he spent time with his 'mates'. One of which, George Villiers, Earl of Buckingham has documents showing the purchase of golf clubs and balls and a lost wager. This is the first known record of a golf match outside of Scotland, where the game originated, and the first reference to golf being played by someone who wasn't Scottish. The King was fond of golf too and may well have played at Royston with Villiers.

On just the shortest walk from the pub, you are reminded of how historic Royston is by the amount of blue plaques adorning buildings. It really is well-worth a wander up the street. All carry the symbol of the Hooded Crow sitting on the 'Royse Stone'. At one time the hooded crow was so common in the district that it became known as the Royston Crow.

We have our very own on the side of our building.



## The Chalk Hare

The Chalk Hare has a history spanning over 300 years. It is a Grade II listed Georgian building originally built in the 1700s, it's served as a vicarage, a private home, and a boutique hotel.

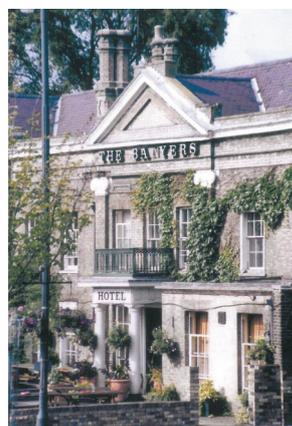
The house was built for the Reverend Edward Banyer, who served as the Vicar of Royston from 1739 to 1752. It functioned as the town's vicarage for many years and was known as Banyers House. Rumours persist of a secret tunnel connecting the house to the nearby Royston Parish Church.

It was later the home of Joseph Beldam who, from 1826 onwards, played an important part in the abolition of the slave trade in the British colonies and then across the rest of the world. Beldam died at Banyers House in June 1866 and is buried in a family vault at the Parish Church opposite.

A relative of Joseph Beldam very kindly sent us a photo of the house from the time that he lived there, it looks incredibly grand.



In the early 20th century, it was home to a local racehorse owner with his horses stabled to the rear of the pub. As still happens today, the race horses were exercised each day on Therfield Heath.



The building became a hotel in the 1930s until around 2012 when it closed for a 4-year period. It was bought by a pub group and re-opened in December 2016 having been refurbished and fitted out with a pizza oven and 'pods' in the garden. We came along at the end of 2025 and the pub was closed at the start of January 2026 to undergo yet another refurbishment and this time a name change, to the Chalk Hare.

We opened in March 2026 with 9 bedrooms, the start of another chapter in this beautiful, historic building's life.