



History of the White Hart in Ampthill

Ampthill at 350 feet (95m) above sea level sits upon the Greensand Ridge, with commanding views over the Vale of Bedford. Its position over the years has not gone unnoticed by those wishing to take advantage of these views. The first settlers were prehistoric stone age people who lived on top of the ridge. There followed the Romans and then the Saxons who moved from the ridge just south to where Ampthill town center is today.

Ampthill appears in the Domesday Book but is spelt Amaetelle. It is thought the name is derived from 'Ant infested hill'.

Within a short distance of the town center is the park, where King Henry V's uncle Sir John Cornwall (hero of Agincourt) built a castle in the 15th century. A sense of history and a good imagination can easily conjure up King Henry VIII and his court, for he was in Ampthill often hunting the deer in the park. It was in the castle's great drawing room that Queen Katherine of Aragon defiantly received news of the annulment of her marriage to Henry.

On the town's northern boundary stands the ruined Jacobean mansion, Houghton House, for over 100 years the home of the Bruce family (Earls of Elgin and Ailesbury).



Houghton House

They were visited by King James I on a number of occasions for the hunting.

In 1647 Charles I was held at Great Lodge in Ampthill Great Park having been arrested near Northampton. The previous year, in a brave expression of loyalty, the arms of Charles Prince of Wales were painted above the main fire place here in the White Hart.

In 1625 in Great Lodge, a boy was born by the name of Richard Nicolls. Richard was sent by Charles II in 1643 to take the North American colonies from the Dutch. He gave New York its name after his friend and commander James Duke of York. Richard is buried in St Andrew's church Ampthill.



Ampthill Park House

Ampthill's other great house is Park House, which is in Ampthill Great Park. The castle disappeared at the end of the 17th century. Various owners expanded Great Lodge to what is there today. The main changes were carried out by the 2nd Earl of Upper Ossary in the 1760's, with extensive landscaping of the park carried out by Capability Brown in the 1770's.

Amphill town centre was completely remodeled in the 1780's by Lord Ossary to what we see today, the pump on the market square bears his name.

At 20 Church Street is the former house of Sir Albert Richardson, an eminent architect who designed the Jockey Club at Newmarket, Manchester Opera House, as well as parts of Woburn Abbey.



The White Hart

The position of the White Hart makes it a natural stopping off point for accommodation and refreshment, as it is at the intersection of four roads from Dunstable, Bedford, Woburn and Shefford, it therefore became an important coaching inn.

It is not known when this building first became an inn. However, Amphill was given its Market Charter in 1219 which would have established the town as the commercial centre for the surrounding area, and therefore the inn being in the middle of the town would have played a major part in the district's life.

In 1542 a survey of King Henry VIII's estate, records this Amphill 'tenement with a great gatehouse called The Herte'. This is a reference to the deer that the King hunted in the park. In 1619 an inventory was made as to the inn's contents which it called the Redd Hart, probably because the majority of the deer hunted were Red.



The inn was given the name White Hart in the 1730's when the Georgian front was added to the building.

The building features early 18th century construction with some remnants of pre-Georgian design, such as our timber roofs and a brick barrel-vaulted beer cellar.

One of the most interesting features of the White Hart is the Fleur-de-Lys mural over the fireplace in our bar. It was discovered during renovations in 1975. It bears the date 1646 which was at the end of the first English Civil war. It's believed the mural was put there by Thomas Bruce Earl of Elgin and Ailesbury who at that time lived in Houghton House. He was a staunch Royalist, but Bedfordshire was a parliamentary county, so it is believed the mural was put there in defiance to the parliamentarians.

However, it wasn't there for long, as it is believed that it was hidden away on the execution of King Charles I in 1649 when commissioners surveying former crown property on behalf of parliament visited the inn.



The White Hart became part of the Acorn Pub family in 2025. It remains at the heart of the Amphill community, a position we hope it enjoys for many years to come. We look forward to the next chapter in its history.

*With great thanks to John Hele
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