

# THE THREE SWANS

Market Harborough

## A BRIEF HISTORY

BY WILL SWALES



# WELCOME

Welcome to a brief history of The Three Swans Hotel, Market Harborough, Leicestershire. During the late spring and early summer of 2016 we had the good fortune to be able to revitalise and refurbish one of our fabulous sister inns, The King's Head in Richmond, North Yorkshire.

During the planning stage of this project we started to look hard at the building and its many historical attributes, at how some parts of the building had been added during its 300 years of existence. And whilst contemplating the small changes and additions we wanted to make, it dawned on me that we will only be its custodians for a generation or two at most. I can't foretell who will follow but started thinking about who had been its keepers in the past.

Therefore, we asked a good friend if he would research The King's Head and try to separate the fact from the fable; what's true and what has been elaborated during the storytelling process over the years.

Will Swales made such a good job of The King's Head that we then asked him to complete the same task for The Three Swans Hotel.

What follows is that research. We think it's as accurate as can be, but naturally there are many gaps and we would welcome any additional information.

I hope you enjoy this small booklet and the hospitality and service we provide within The Three Swans Hotel. We are now busy researching the other inns we own and operate within our group and hope that eventually we will have all our inns within one publication, but until then please feel free to take this copy with you.

**Kevin Charity**  
**Managing Director**  
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A photograph of a bedroom featuring a four-poster bed with a dark wood frame and a yellow canopy. The bed is dressed in white linens with a yellow runner and several pillows, including one with a floral pattern. To the left of the bed is a small round wooden table. The room has floral curtains and a ceiling-mounted air conditioner.

**“THE INN HAS BEEN A HAVEN FOR  
TRAVELLERS FOR AT LEAST 500 YEARS..”**

## FIVE HUNDRED YEARS OF HOSPITALITY



Timber framed walls at The Three Swans.

The Three Swans Hotel, formerly The Swan Inn, High Street, Market Harborough, stands on one of the great old roads of England, linking London with Leicester and continuing on through Nottingham and Derby to Manchester.

The inn has been a haven for travellers for at least 500 years, and was especially important and vibrant during the coaching era of the late 1700s and early 1800s.

According to an assessment by Historic England's National Heritage List, at the heart of the current High-Street building is an early timber-frame construction. Part of it is still visible in one of the upstairs meeting rooms. The earliest surviving record of the inn is in the will of Richard Cade, dated 1517. He instructed that one Richard Page should have 'a lede, a mawnger, a rake and thelys, beyng at ye sygne of Swanne, Harborow...'

...Margt. Golde xx : to Helenor Suintyng my servant by my .  
I wyll y<sup>t</sup> Richard Page of Carrylton shall have a lede, a  
mawnger, a rake and thelys,<sup>1</sup> beyng at y<sup>e</sup> sygne of Swanne  
in Harborow, if y<sup>t</sup> he woll pay for them ye money aforseyd  
[*erased*] vj<sup>s</sup> viij<sup>d</sup> : also I wyll y<sup>t</sup> master Wylm Pope shall  
resave of my wyff v sponneys of Silver w<sup>t</sup> a par of beds<sup>s</sup>  
y<sup>e</sup> price xxvj<sup>s</sup> viij<sup>d</sup>, and they to be solde for y<sup>e</sup> helthe of my  
soul don, except y<sup>e</sup> man y<sup>t</sup> leyd yem to plege woll come  
and pay for theme.

The residew . . . to Agnes my wyffe . . . my executrix.

Witnesses : Wylm Brown, Robert Gryme, & oder moo.

Excerpt from Richard Cade's will, Market Harborough Parish Records to 1530, J E Stocks and W B Bragg (London, 1890).





The Three Swans Hotel façade.

## A VERY TENTATIVE LINK WITH CHARLES I

"... the king actually retired for the night two miles down the road at the private house of Lubenham Hall."

**Like most old inns, The Three Swans has become the subject of a number of legends, often passed on with varying degrees of accuracy. One is that Charles I visited the inn on the night before the Battle of Naseby in June 1645.**

According to surviving records made at the time, the king actually retired for the night two miles down the road at the private house of Lubenham Hall. He was raised from his bed at 11pm by reports of the unexpected arrival of the Parliamentarian army just eight miles away at Naseby. He rushed to Market Harborough to meet his senior General, his nephew, Prince Rupert of the Rhine, who had established his military headquarters in the town.

At midnight they met with several other commanders for a council of war. The venue for the meeting is unknown. It could have been The Swan, or it could just as easily have been anywhere else in the town. We know that the troops at Lubenham were roused at 2am, and by 7am the entire royal army was mustered at Market Harborough, from where it marched towards the enemy for what turned out to be a disastrous defeat.

## QUEEN ANNE WASN'T HERE

**A story from 1688 that Anne, Princess of Denmark, later to become Queen Anne of Great Britain, stayed at The Swan Inn during her passage through Market Harborough is a distortion of the facts.**

Local historian, John Harwood Hill (1809 – 86), recorded specifically that she stayed at the house of Mr Mackrith, two doors south of The Swan. Other historians have speculated, quite reasonably, that it was members of her large entourage, including the Earl of Dorset and the Bishop of London, who stayed at the inn.



Queen Anne when Princess of Denmark.  
Mezzotint by John Smith; Sir Godfrey Kneller, Bt. 1692.  
© National Portrait Gallery, London.

## WHEN THE INN HAD ITS OWN CURRENCY

During Cromwell's Commonwealth government (1649 – 60) and for a few years afterwards The Swan Inn had its own currency in the form of tokens. This was common practice in many parts of the country at this time because the government had failed to mint enough small change.

Instead, so-called trade tokens were produced by leading businesses to the value of a farthing or a halfpenny. Among the surviving Market Harborough trade tokens, there are two relating to The Swan Inn.

One has a swan symbol with the inscription 'AT THE SWANN' on one side, and on the reverse is the inscription 'IN HARBROUGH 1651' together with the initials 'SHF'. From the style of the period, these initials can be interpreted as belonging to a husband and wife the surname initial S and the first-name initials H and F.

The other token also bears the symbol of a swan, and is inscribed 'FRANCES REEVES' on one side, and on the reverse is inscribed 'IN HARBOROW 1667' and 'HER HALF PENY.' From the dates, we can assume that Frances Reeves must have followed H & F S as the proprietor of The Swan Inn.



Drawings of the two Swan tokens of Market Harborough, as reproduced in John Fothergill's book 'My Three Inns' of 1949.



The Three Swans Hotel's private dining room.

## A RESCUED KING WHO DINED ON A COLD COLLATION

**Another story of a royal association with The Swan comes from September 1768, and is much more reliable.**

Local historian William Harrod (c.1753 – 1819), writing just 40 years after the event, recorded that Christian VII, the 19-year-old king of Denmark, 'partook of a cold collation at The Swan Inn' while on his way from Leicester to London. The meal was probably not part of the young king's plan, but rather a case that The Swan Inn proved a handy refuge in a crisis.

It was reported that the king had left Leicester with a friend and one servant in a post-chaise (a small carriage) driven by a postilion, but rashly set out on the road before his entourage had managed to arrange their own chaises. Between Kibworth and Market Harborough the king's carriage broke down, whereupon he and his friend chose to walk while the servant and postilion were sent ahead on horseback to fetch replacement transport. The two rode into town with cries in the street in 'a foreign tongue' and in English of 'a chaise, a chaise... the king on foot, the king on foot.'

Such was the opportunity to provide a rescue for a king, that many people from Market Harborough heeded the call and raced along the road with chaises in tow. Some, not convinced that two commonly dressed pedestrians conformed to their idea of royalty, drove straight passed them. Perhaps it was the driver of a chaise from The Swan Inn who won the day, which might explain why the king and his party were brought there for refreshment and a recovery from their ordeal.



Portrait of King Christian VII of Denmark. Painted by Alexander Roslin. 1772. © The Museum of National History, Frederiksborg Castle.

## ELEANOR SELLERS — CENTENARIAN INNKEEPER

During the 1700s The Swan Inn was run by the Sellers family, most notably by Eleanor Sellers, who died in January 1768 at the age of 101. A newspaper report of her death noted that she had been 'many

years the mistress of The Swan Inn, which she managed with great reputation, and acquired a considerable fortune'.

Local historian John Throsby, who undertook his researches around the county of Leicestershire in 1790, gathered the following recollection of Eleanor Sellers: 'Few people of any curiosity who passed

through Harborough, on the decline of her life, but chose to visit her. She conversed with pleasantry and showed but little of the peevishness of old age; in short her character was that of a fine old woman.' Another recorded memory of Eleanor Sellers said that she was 'a miracle of a woman and tripped as nimbly as a young one.'

Eleanor Sellers was succeeded at The Swan Inn by John Benton and his wife Deborah. They had a son called George Sellers Benton, which suggests that John or Deborah was a close relation of Eleanor Sellers. One or the other had probably been running The Swan Inn for some time under the ownership of the long-since incapacitated Eleanor, and had probably inherited it on Eleanor's death.

**D E R B Y, F E B. 4.**

**On Wednesday the 27th of January last, died at Market Harborough in the County of Leicester, aged 101, Mrs. Sellers, many Years Mistrefs of the Swan Inn in that Town: which she manag'd with great Reputation, and acquired a considerable Fortune.**

**The Prince of Wales sold at the last Market-Day at**

Derby Mercury, 5 February 1768.  
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The Three Swans Hotel's breakfast room.

## BENTON'S REDEVELOPMENT



The Three Swans Hotel façade.

"...the richest and most entrepreneurial of the inn's independent owners."

The current façade of the hotel is said by Historic England to date from a few decades either side of 1800, and to have been erected at the same time that the third storey was added.

Research for this booklet suggests that the date of the new frontage can probably be narrowed down to around 1770 – soon after the time when John Benton took ownership of the inn – and that this was probably also the time when the famous, large and elaborate, wrought-iron inn sign, which still graces the High Street elevation today, was made.

John Benton appears to have been by far the richest and most entrepreneurial of the inn's independent owners. He was a significant businessman and landowner, with several interests outside The Swan Inn. He was apparently a partner in the firm that ran the London and Manchester Stage Coach. Newspaper advertisements promoting the service often published the names of the partners, who from 1772 included 'Mr Benton of Harborough,' later listed as 'John Benton of Market Harborough.'

The other partners were based in some of the other towns along the route of the coach – at Manchester, Leek, Loughborough, Northampton, and London. No doubt they all ran coaching inns as well. The coach left Manchester at 5am every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, heading for an overnight stop at Leicester, and taking two days to reach London. The return journeys started every Monday, Wednesday and Friday.



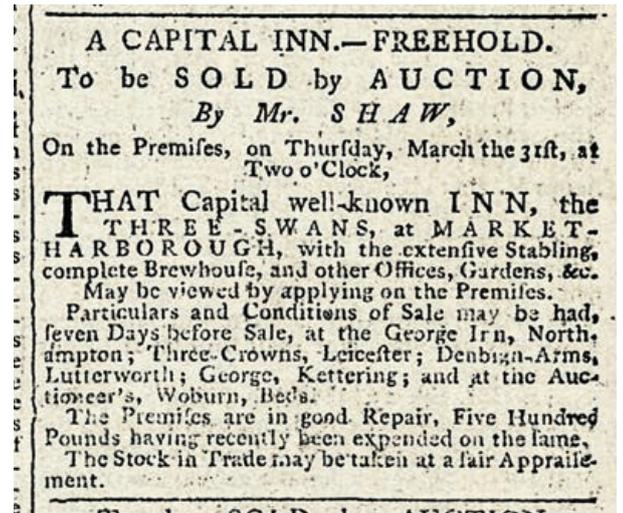
## A CHANGE OF NAME TO THE THREE SWANS

Two very different records from 1774 indicate that it was around this time that The Swan Inn became more generally known as The Swans, in the plural. A touching memorial stone in the graveyard of the town's now-ruined old parish church of St Mary-in-Arden reads: 'Susannah Wells, cook at The Swans, 41 years, died 1774, aged 59.' The inference is that the headstone was paid for by John and Deborah Benton. In the same year we find the first local-newspaper references to the inn as 'The Swans'.

Benton's business interests seem to have been booming in the 1770s and 80s. By 1779 his coach firm was advertising two departures per day from Manchester, on the same three days per week as before – one called the London Flying Coach and the other the Diligence. By 1788, newspaper notices indicate that John Benton also had a share in the ownership of a coach service from Leeds to London.

The earliest known reference to The Swans as The Three Swans occurs in John Benton's will, dated February 1788. Thereafter, from at least 1790, it was named in the press as The Three Swans, and then variously as either The Three Swans or The Swans.

John Benton died in 1789, and his will instructed his executors to sell the inn for the benefit of his family. It's not clear whether or not that happened straight away. It was definitely on the market in 1796, which was the same year as the death of John Benton's widow, Deborah. The auction advertisement described The Three Swans as freehold, with extensive stabling, a complete brew-house and other offices, and gardens etc. It was stated that the premises were in good repair, £500 having recently been spent on them.



Northampton Mercury, 12 March 1796.

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## THE PUZZLE OF THE THREE SWANS SIGN

"...among a small group of the most admirable English wrought-iron inn-signs..."

The ornate, wrought-iron sign of The Three Swans is reckoned by many admirers to be one of the best of its kind in England. The late poet-laureate and architectural critic John Betjeman praised it back in 1936.



The much-admired sign of The Three Swans.

In a newspaper article about a national exhibition of pub-signs held in London that year, he listed the sign of The Three Swans among a small group of the most admirable English wrought-iron inn-signs, all of which he ascribed to the Georgian era.

This authoritative indication of the sign's date accords with the likely period of the redevelopment of the inn during the 1770s, and its renaming as, first The Swans, and a little later The Three Swans. The apparent sequence of the name-change also seems to fit with the likely development of the sign, which today has the appearance of an unplanned, evolved structure. No-one knows how it came about, but there is enough information to make a reasonable speculation.



The central frame looks as though it was designed originally to be atop a free-standing pillar in the street, a once-common type of inn-sign known as a pillar sign. A perfect example of this survives at The Spread Eagle in Thame, in Oxfordshire, coincidentally from where a distinguished innkeeper of the 1930s was destined to move to The Three Swans.

The two painted-metal cut-out swans on each flank of the frame at The Three Swans seem incongruous, and are more representative of an earlier and now almost extinct type of inn-sign, known as a gallows sign. In such cases, a high-level beam was constructed across the footpath or road next to the inn, sometimes attached at one end to the inn wall and at the other to a pillar in the street. In addition to a sign hanging from the beam, there were also sometimes cut-out figures along the top of the beam. A few of these have survived around the country, such as the one at The Magpie at Stonham in Suffolk.

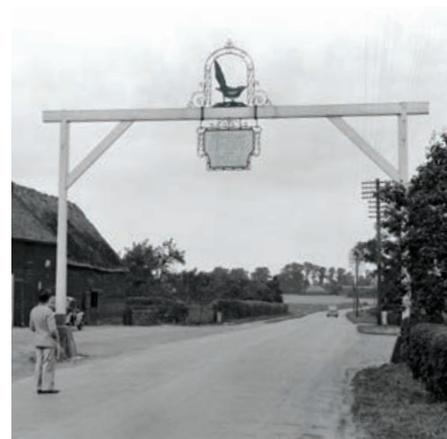
If in the 1770s, at the time of the redevelopment of The Swan, a new and ornate, wrought-iron-framed pillar sign was erected, but the old gallows sign was not removed, then it is easy to imagine that people might have started to call the inn The Swans, plural. If there were three different signs, then that would explain the emergence of the name The Three Swans.

However, the trend towards increasingly elaborate and space-consuming inn-signs soon became a source of inconvenience and irritation to many citizens, and in 1797 the government banned signs that were deemed to cause unfair encroachment or annoyance on the public street, and ordered their removal. Where local authorities chose to enforce the legislation, it meant the end of pillar signs and gallows signs.

The solution for many inns was to attach the pictorial elements of the signs to the building, high above the street. If this happened at Market Harborough, then one might speculate that the common acceptance of the name The Three Swans determined that the swan images of all the offending signs were amalgamated, to create and possibly explain the curious construction we have today.



Pillar sign at Thame.



Gallows sign at Stonham, circa 1937.

© John Topham/Topfoto.



## WILLIAM CARR OPENS THE THREE SWANS ASSEMBLY ROOM



One of the function suites at The Three Swans.

"...grand balls and concerts, attended by several members of the nobility and gentry."

**At some time after 1810 Thomas Munton, formerly owner of the Union Inn in Market Harborough, took over The Three Swans.**

His daughter Mary effectively managed the inn for him from 1821 to 1828, when it seems that she married William Carr. In that year, in a press notice headed 'Swans Inn and Old Established Posting House,' Thomas Munton announced that he was relinquishing control to his daughter and son-in-law.

In the same notice, William Carr announced that he was taking over, and was paying particular attention to developing the posting department, reminding customers that The Swans was a staging post for the Manchester Mail and other coaches to and from London daily. He also advertised that The Swans had 'a neat hearse and mourning coach with every article requisite.'

William Carr would go on to run The Three Swans for the next 35 years, although not without enduring many challenges and much personal grief. Only four years into the task, in December 1832, his wife Mary died, aged 34, followed less than five months later by the death of the couple's only daughter, Elizabeth Anne.

The ownership of The Three Swans must have remained in his late wife's family up to this point because at the end of 1833 it was advertised for sale by auction, and shortly afterwards William Carr announced in the press that he had bought it. The press notices at this time reveal that The Three Swans had stabling for 70 horses and lock-up coach houses sufficient to hold 12 carriages. William Carr offered for hire 'neat post chaises, flys and carriages of every description.'

A newspaper report of 1837 reported that William Carr had recently opened a 50-foot-long Assembly Room at The Three Swans. It was the first of its kind in Market Harborough, apart from the Town Hall, and aimed to meet an increasing demand for balls, concerts and large-scale dinners. There soon followed frequent newspaper reports of grand balls and concerts, attended by several members of the nobility and gentry. In 1839 a concert was given there by the Swiss composer Sigismund Thalberg (1812 – 71), who was one of the most famous virtuoso pianists of the 1800s.

At around this time it was also reported in the press that some of the bedrooms at the inn were still hung with antique tapestries, an archaic fashion so rare that it was a curiosity to guests.



# WILLIAM CARR'S HEROIC COACH DRIVE

The coming of the railways in the 1830s was widely welcomed by business people throughout the country. They included William Carr, who in 1836 held 10 shares valued at £500 in the South Midland Counties Railway Company.

He was one of 32 Market Harborough businessmen to be among the original subscribers. So rapid were the changes brought by the railways that for Market Harborough the scheduled coach services were over by 1840, even though the town would not get a railway station for another 10 years.

Nonetheless coaches continued to serve a purpose for shorter and private-hire journeys, plugging the gaps yet to be filled by the expanding railway network. In these circumstances, innkeepers could gain advantage by providing personal and bespoke services. William Carr was alert to this, and earned praise in the local press when in 1840 he personally drove a party of gentlemen a distance of 120 miles, to Cambridge and back, in a day. His started at 3am and finished his working day at midnight.

In the same newspaper edition it was reported that there was considerable excitement in Market Harborough and district about the London and Manchester Railway Project, with landholders in favour of the planned line, and tradesmen beginning to regard it as 'a God-send to repair the losses under which the town was suffering.' In fact the economic position of the town was probably no worse than the rest of the country, which was enduring a deep and devastating recession at this time.

William Carr remarried sometime in the 1840s. During that decade and into the next, he and his second wife Sarah gained a considerable reputation for the quality of the dinners and balls they hosted, on one occasion feeding 200 people to a reportedly very high standard in the Assembly Room, and on another occasion attracting the patronage of the Leicestershire County Ball.

Sarah Carr died in 1856, aged 52. William carried on for another seven years before retiring from the business in 1863 at the age of 71. He died the next year.



## OSTLER SERVED THE INN FOR 60 YEARS

A well-known ostler at The Three Swans was William Chapman, who died after sustaining serious injuries on the job. A press report of October 1874 noted that he was returning from Dingley with a three-horse trap when near to the turn by the railway station he was run into by another trap and thrown out. He fell heavily on his head, survived, but then in December the same year he died, aged 73. The death notice in the local newspaper said he had been at the 'The Swans' since he was a boy, which must have been for about 60 years.





John Fothergill. Photography by Howard Coster, 1939. © National Portrait Gallery, London.



## **JOHN FOTHERGILL – INNKEEPER, CONNOISSEUR, SCHOLAR, ARTIST, AND BEST-SELLING AUTHOR**

**After the very long tenures at The Three Swans during the 1700s and 1800s, first by the Sellers/Benton family for perhaps as much as 100 years, and then by the Munton/Carr family for 42 years, the fate of the inn then fell into the hands of a series of relatively short-term innkeepers until the arrival in 1934 of the inn's most extraordinary host of all time, John Fothergill.**

There can be few market-town innkeepers who have merited an entry in Who's Who or the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, but such was the remarkable character and talent of John Rowland Fothergill that he is to be found in both these eminent publications.

When he bought the inn he was aged 58 and already a famous hotelier and restaurateur as a result of his high-brow connections in the world of the arts, and of the widespread acclaim of his best-selling book 'An Innkeeper's Diary,' published just three years earlier. But it was his life before joining the hospitality trade that formed the characteristics that made him so exceptional.

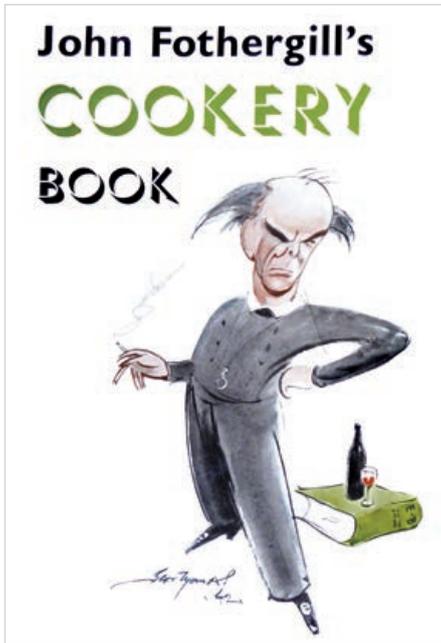
Despite failing as a student of St John's College, Oxford, he met there and became a close friend of Oscar Wilde. He was at one time a member of the so-called Lewes House Brotherhood, a group of up to six men living a scholastic and hedonistic life in a house at Lewes, Sussex. Led by an American, they indulged in fine wine and food, homosexual relationships, and travelled internationally collecting classical antiquities that eventually formed large parts of the collections of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and the Metropolitan Museum of New York.

Fothergill moved on from this set, was briefly married to Doris Elsa Henning, and then pursued the study of art. He was at Slade School of Art in London when he became acquainted with famous artists such as Augustus John and Jacob Epstein who were about the same age as Fothergill, and both of whom sketched portraits of him that appeared in his books. In 1922, at the age of 46, he married Kate Kirby.

"...he became acquainted with famous artists such as Augustus John and Jacob Epstein."



## FOTHERGILL'S LIFE IN THE HOSPITALITY TRADE



John Fothergill's Cookery Book, 1943.

"...he built his reputation as an erudite host, accomplished chef, and a connoisseur of wine."

In the year of his marriage, to the great surprise of his friends, Fothergill bought the Spread Eagle in Thame, Oxfordshire. There he built his reputation as an erudite host, accomplished chef, and a connoisseur of wine. He equipped the premises with fine furniture and attracted celebrity guests including Oxford dons and world-famous writers and artists such as Evelyn Waugh, George Bernard Shaw and H G Wells.

Images of John Fothergill during his years in the hospitality trade show him dressed in a favourite dark-green smock over a white shirt with Eton collar, and with a folding lorgnette suspended by a chord around his neck. It was said he was also noted for wearing breeches, stockings and buckled shoes. It seems that in all ways he was keen to portray the personality of a creative, eccentric intellectual.

He was less skilled at accounting. After 10 years at The Spread Eagle, despite the beginnings of revenues from his book, mounting losses forced him to sell-up. He spent a year at the Royal Hotel at Ascot but, seemingly in need of something less expensive, he gave that up and bought The Three Swans at Market Harborough.

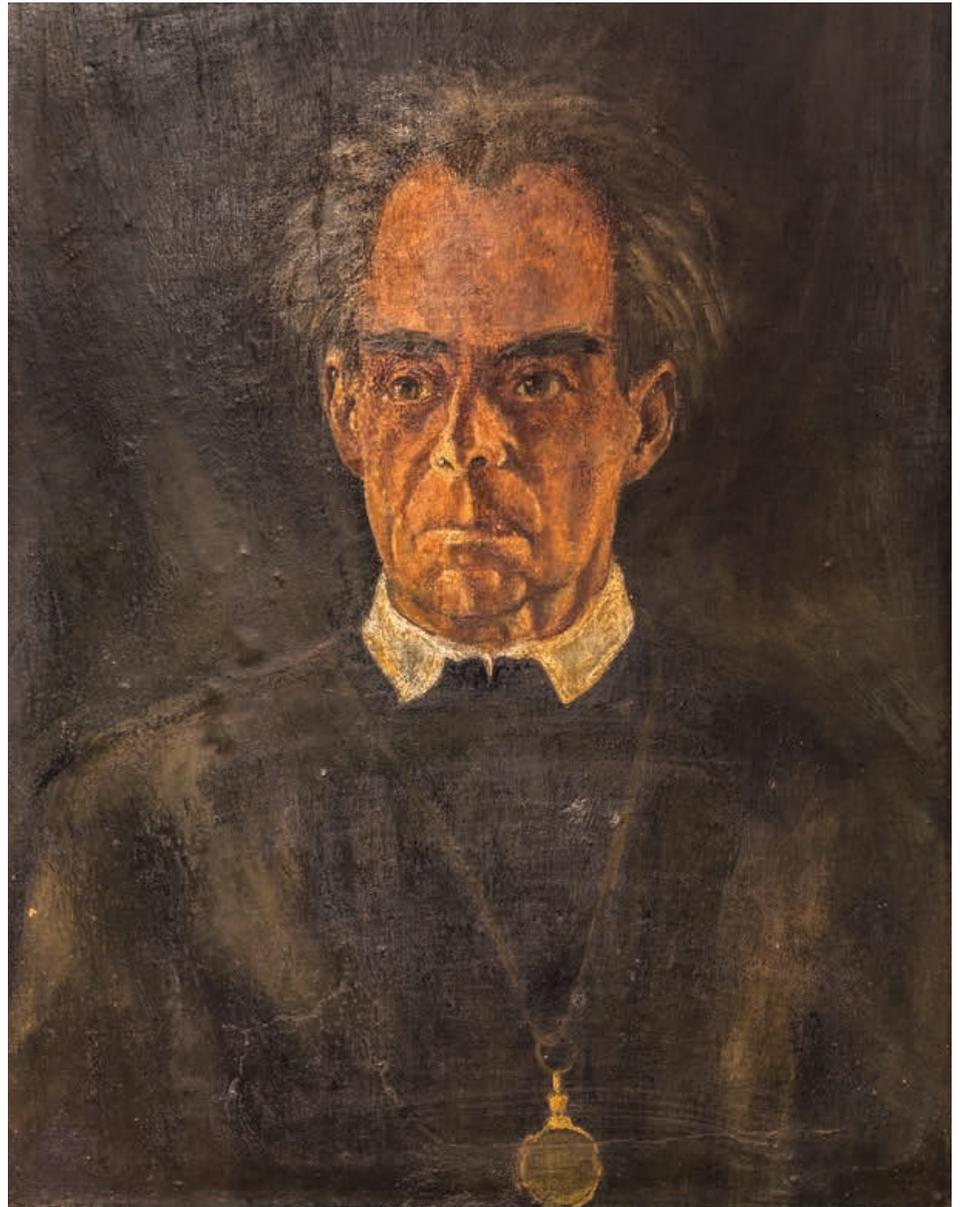
Fothergill claimed to have restored The Three Swans 'to health and beauty,' but he found its less-sophisticated clientele were sometimes a source of great irritation, as revealed in his second book 'Confessions of an Innkeeper,' published in 1938. He related that he did not like guests who failed to appreciate, understand or conform to his high ideals of beauty and excellence in all things, and he had no hesitation in expressing his thoughts in the most direct terms to any customer who displeased him, however innocent might have been their transgression.

John seems to have been a good family man. He and Kate raised two sons. He also maintained life-long connections with his friends in the upper echelons of the arts. In 1943 he published a third book, 'John Fothergill's Cookery Book.' The cover features a wonderful caricature drawn by the then-famous political cartoonist, Bert Thomas, formerly of Punch magazine. The image was reproduced in full on an inside page, where can be seen at the top the cartoonist's handwritten note 'Are we still friends?' Thomas needn't have worried. Fothergill not only appreciated the humour of it but added his own self-deprecating caption – 'The face that launched a thousand chips.'

A fourth book, 'My Three Inns,' was published in 1949. It gave further insights into his exceptionally talented, opinionated and uncompromising world, and revealed his keen sense of history. The section about life at The Three Swans was presented to his readers as an homage to Eleanor Sellers, Susannah Wells and William Chapman – three former faithful servants of the inn, all previously mentioned in this booklet.

Fothergill retired, aged 76, after 18 years at The Three Swans. He left behind a self-portrait that still hangs in the back bar and gives the impression that he casts a stern and critical eye over the proceedings. Such is the power of his gaze that a tradition has developed that ill-fortune will befall anyone who moves the painting. Apparent evidence of the truth of this has ensured that in recent years the portrait has remained firmly in place. It was not disturbed during a recent refurbishment of the bar.

It has been said he would have been the perfect role model for the TV sitcom character Basil Fawlty. In fact Fothergill was the subject of a TV play starring Robert Hardy, which was broadcast in 1981.



John Fothergill self portrait that hangs in the bar at The Three Swans.



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Brooks Peters, *Architect of the Moon*, blog article about John Fothergill, posted 14 December 2010.



The Three Swans Hotel, Market Harborough, is part of The Coaching Inn Group Ltd. The Group has a particular passion for lovely old historic coaching inns and is fortunate enough now to have thirteen of these iconic buildings in our collection. We have established a reputation for refurbishing, revitalising and breathing life back into these inns, creating elegant, comfortable and well-priced accommodation, tempting menus, relaxed and stylish bars and coffee lounges where friends, families and business people can relax and enjoy everything we have on offer.

Our vision for the future is based around our core value of 'Unlocking Potential'. From our properties to our people and everything in between, we take every opportunity to invest in developing all aspects of our business to give our guests the best possible experience.

As a company we are rapidly expanding and bringing new hotels into the Coaching Inn Group. You can see the latest additions to our group by visiting [www.coachinginngroup.co.uk](http://www.coachinginngroup.co.uk).

We hope you've enjoyed your visit to The Three Swans Hotel, Market Harborough, and would love to invite you to try our other venues, nationwide. For full details please visit [www.coachinginngroup.co.uk](http://www.coachinginngroup.co.uk).



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