

What do the Harborough Theatre, a bicycle shed, a green dragon, bricks made in Little Bowden and the early town plan of Market Harborough have in common? No, this is not a local contribution to 'Round Britain Quiz', but some of the fascinating sidelights on our local history which emerged from an analysis of the theatre's title deeds.

When the site of the Harborough Theatre was purchased in April 1970 it was most fortunate that along with the property came a large bundle of title deeds.¹ This is made up of over 30 documents, which provide a continuous chronicle of the theatre property; its previous buildings, owners and occupiers from the 1670s to the turn of the present century.

Perhaps the most unusual fact to emerge from these documents is that the theatre building started life as a purpose-built bicycle shed. It was erected in 1935 by R & W H Symington & Co to accommodate the hundreds of bikes used by the large number of staff

HUNTING THE GREEN DRAGON

A look through the deeds of the Harborough Theatre

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THE GREEN DRAGON CAN BE SEEN ON THE RIGHT OF THE PHOTOGRAPH C. 1914.

¹ Jones, HA, *Stage by Stage: 60 Years of Theatre in Market Harborough* (Market Harborough Drama Society 1993), p32. Deeds are deposited in the Leicestershire Records Office, DE 3721.

employed in the corset factory close by. It is clear from interviews with past employees that most of the workers at 'Libertyland' either walked into work, or used bicycles, and to an extent this shed would be a similar amenity to a staff car park today.

This bicycle shed had not been erected on open ground. For over two hundred years before this the site had been occupied by the Green Dragon inn. Why 'green dragon' is still unclear, but sometime between 1682 and 1697 what had been a 'cottage' occupied by a roper called Richard Barwell was converted into an inn and it continued to be used as such until about 1908.

GREEN DRAGON DOOR



Unfortunately there is no good photograph of the Green Dragon when it was in use - Harborough photographers from the 1850s onwards preferred to turn the camera lens the other way, towards the church or Old Grammar School. The best image can be seen hazily on page 13 of *Around Market Harborough in Old Photographs*.² It was taken in 1933 and shows a rather uninspiring two-storey group of brick buildings, stretching back from the street frontage, but there is little further information to be gleaned here.

However, the Harborough Museum is fortunate in having an interesting series of photographs taken during the demolition of this part of the inn in 1935.³ These clearly show that it was built not only of early-looking brick, but also dressed ironstone and limestone blocks. There were even fragments of carved stone surrounding the windows, which look as if they date to the seventeenth, or even the sixteenth century. This suggests that although the Green

Dragon had been altered extensively between the 1690s and the 1900s, there was still a considerable amount of its original fabric left when the bike shed replaced it in 1935.

The obvious question is how old was the 'cottage' before it was converted into the Green Dragon in the 1690s? The answer to this is very unclear, but the descriptions of the property which subtly change as the sequence of deeds run back in time do provide some information. Although contradictory in many instances, the earlier deeds do suggest that the Green Dragon was only one part of a bigger property consisting of four 'bays' of building. This larger building was split up in the 1670s and only one of the other 'bays' was ever reunited with the Green Dragon portion. This probably occupied land now forming either the eastern or southern portions of the theatre.

The early deeds also give important information about other property in the area in the late seventeenth century. Between 1682 and 1697 the owner of the Green Dragon had built two brick 'tenements or shops' on land nearby referred to as 'on the lord's waste'. This normally means land which used to be part of the public thoroughfare. In this area such land would almost certainly have been used as part of the market area. Although the evidence is very thin, it is possible that these two shops lay to the west of the theatre, where the present TSB building is. It has long been suggested that this area was taken out of the much larger mediaeval market place, which stretched from the Welland to the top of the High Street in a giant triangle of open ground punctuated only by the St Dionysius church. The information from the theatre deeds at last provides some idea of when this 'infilling' of the market occurred.

And what about the Little Bowden bricks? Until early this century these were made in a yard situated to the south of Bellfields Street. Some of the associated probate documents

2 Mastoris S, *Around Market Harborough in Old Photographs*, 1989, published by Alan Sutton.

3 Harborough Museum Photos:
LEIMH 100-1983-1305;
1349; 1350; 1384; 1385;
1386 & 1390
LEIMH 99-1987-212;
214; 215; 217; 218
See also:
LEIMH 92-1983-61
& 77
LEIMH 3-1996-1

found with the theatre deeds show that one of the owners of the Green Dragon also had an interest in the Little Bowden brickworks. John Clarke senior was the fifth generation of this family to own the Green Dragon, and by trade he was a brick maker, although he also worked as a carrier, and served the town community as a parish constable (in 1776) and overseer of the poor (in 1781). His will, made in December 1791, gives a valuable insight on the wealth arrangements of probably the leading brickmaker in Harborough in his day.

Clarke lived in a house on the north side of 'St Mary's Lane' [i.e. Road], and besides the Green Dragon, he owned two properties 'at the upper end of the town'; three other houses in 'St Mary's Lane'; a three acre close of land in Great Bowden called 'Brick Kiln Close'; a third part share in three more houses in St Mary's Lane; and a half share in 'all that brick kiln and brick yard, with hovells, sheds and other erections...thereto belonging' in Little Bowden. Clarke's partner in the Little Bowden brickyard was William Slater, a maltster of Harborough.

It is curious that Clarke does not mention his son, John (junior) at all in the will; his wife Elizabeth is made joint executrix with William Slater, and she is the sole beneficiary. Three years after her husband's death however, she did convey to her son the Green Dragon and other property, which he promptly sold on in 1796. However this does not appear to have greatly affected his business as a draper, since by 1806 he was able to build a carpet factory on the other side of Tagg (Factory) Lane, which later became the major industrial venture in the town. In the 1860s this carpet factory was to provide the first accommodation for R & W H Symington's business.



CHURCH SQUARE. THE GREEN DRAGON INN SIGN CAN JUST BE SEEN ON THE LEFT OF THE PHOTOGRAPH WHICH WAS REPRODUCED WITH KIND PERMISSION OF MR M HOBBS.

And so the story had come full circle. The only way to get to the heart of a town's history in the period before oral testimony is available, is to study in detail the deeds of its historic properties. The documents relating to the Harborough Theatre illustrate this very well. There are still many uncertainties as to how this property changed in shape and layout, and the sequence of building and rebuilding over three centuries. Nevertheless we should be grateful for the lucky survival of such a fascinating and long 'run' of deeds which can reveal much about the old Green Dragon and so many other aspects of daily life in Harborough through the centuries.