

HISTORIC PUBS

HEADINGLEY



The Original Oak Inn, c1900

THE OAK INN

The Original Oak pub – familiar as ‘The Oak’ to generations of Leeds locals, cricket and rugby fans, and students – stands by the road as you come into Headingley, across the way from the landmarks of the church and the war memorial, and facing its old rival, ‘The Skeyrack.’

Like Headingley itself, the pub has a long history. It dates back some 400 years, possibly to around 1620, when it stood on the edge of what was then the village green. It’s listed in military records in 1686, when it could provide two beds and stabling for the King’s soldiers when needed. It was basically a farmhouse, with a garden, some adjoining land, and access to fields along Kirkstall Lane. Like most of Headingley, it belonged to the estate of the Earls of Cardigan (the Brudenell family – look out for the name in local streets) but was rented out on a series of 21-year leases, as were most of the small local farms.

For some 200 years from the early 17th century the tenants were the Carrett family, who seem to have established the inn. Alongside local custom, it provided overnight lodging for drovers bringing their cattle or other livestock on the long route down to market in Leeds from as far away as Scotland, with grazing for their animals in the fields in Kirkstall Lane and stabling for their horses next to the house – a small but significant part in the vital business of providing food for the growing population of Leeds.

In the late 18th century it looks as though the house was extended or rebuilt to take advantage of the new passing trade brought by the turnpike road from Leeds to Otley, which was routed through the village in 1755 – an important development which led the way for Headingley’s transformation during the next century from rural village to bustling suburb.



The Original Oak, c1890 © University of Leeds

The inn was known first as ‘The Oak’ or sometimes ‘The Oak Tree’ or ‘The Skyrack Oak’, named after the ancient oak tree called the ‘Shire Oak’ or ‘Skyrack’, which had stood next to the house for hundreds of years (it collapsed from old age in 1941 – look out for the worn stone plaque in the wall near the pub). When Joseph Clark and his wife Hannah took over the inn in 1818, Joseph Clark insisted that the name should be changed to ‘The Old *Original* Oak’, probably to avoid any confusion with its upstart competitor opposite, which had styled itself the ‘Skyrack’. He had borrowed the name from the old notice nailed to the tree, which declared it to be ‘The Original Oak from which the wapentake is named Skyrack.’ People still went on calling the pub ‘The Oak’, just as they do now, but the full name ‘The Original Oak’ has been retained and revived.

Under the Clarks’ management in the 1820s the inn flourished, benefiting from the growth and increasing prosperity of the village. The front part of the old house was extended, and Joseph Clark could boast that he now had a room for dinner or tea parties of up to 40 people, with excellent wines, spirits and ale. But his old customers, the drovers and farmers on their way to market, were not forgotten: he promised good hay and corn, and grazing land near the house. After his death in 1825, Hannah Clark carried on as licensee and proved an active landlady, full of bright ideas. She developed the business with an upmarket flavour, adding more stables and a dining-room for societies, and the inn was restyled the ‘Headingley Hotel’. It was not a coaching inn – it was too near the town for that – but it offered bedrooms, a full range of food and drink, ale from its own brewhouse, and stabling for horses. The many alterations which were made over the years are still reflected today in the patchwork of rooflines and stonework of the pub, and the stables are still there in the yard behind, though a new wider entrance had to be cut through in the last century to allow for cars and parking.



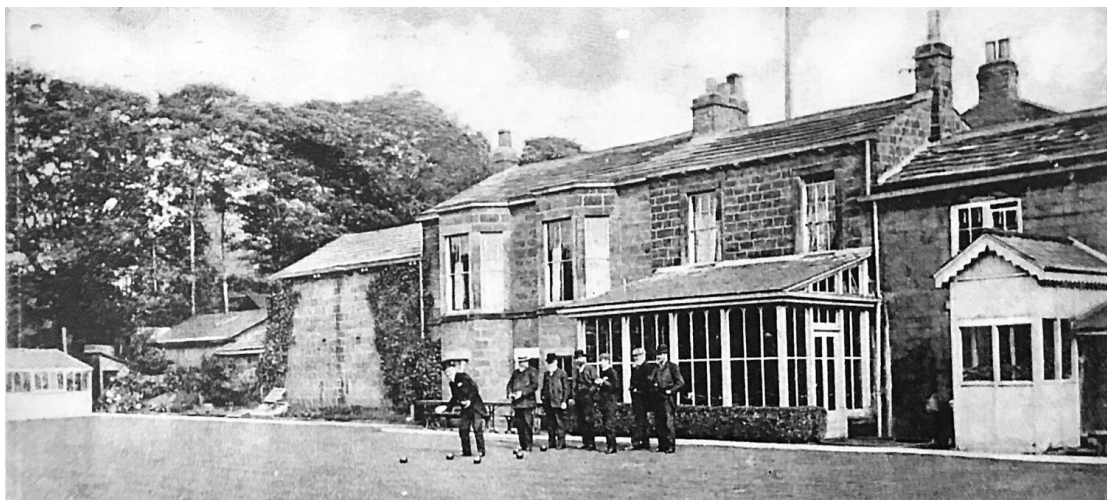
The Original Oak, undated © The Thoresby Society

The inn became an important focal point for local meetings and events. Almost all the public meetings associated with the enclosure of Headingley Moor were held there from 1829-34. It was the place for local auction sales, for political meetings, for societies and clubs. The annual dinners which Lord Cardigan as Lord of the Manor provided for his tenants were held there, with copious food and ale.

In 1847 a new lease was granted by the Cardigan estate to Hannah Clark. As well as the inn and outbuildings and the garden and bowling green, the lease still included the same fields as before as well as other grazing land – some 14 acres in all. So it looks as though the inn still catered for drovers and their cattle, though this trade was fading away with the arrival of the railway. But all was soon to change. Lord Cardigan, deep in debt through his own reckless exploits, needed to raise money and in 1850 began to sell his land around the village. Some tenants, including Hannah Clark, were offered the opportunity to buy the property they occupied at a negotiated price. In 1852 the inn was sold to Hannah's son on her behalf, but now without the associated land, so finally breaking the link with its agricultural past.

The inn was sold again in 1865 to a later landlord, James Waddell, and in 1876 was put up for sale by public auction. The Sale Particulars describe a flourishing business: the inn itself, a brewhouse, stables, coachhouse, clubroom, outbuildings, yards, garden and bowling green. All the fittings – the counters, long seating, bar pumps, brewing pans, etc – were for sale, together with the horses, carriages and cabs: the inn had been running a Hackney Coach service for the many new residents of Headingley who could not afford their own horse and carriage. It fetched the substantial sum of £8,500.

The inn had acquired a high reputation: it was said that in the 1850s and '60s 'everyone who was anyone' would gather there for a drink and conversation. The two Members of Parliament who lived locally sometimes called in, as well as merchants from the town who braved the journey along the ill-lit road across Woodhouse Moor and on up the muddy, rutted turnpike road to Headingley, to enjoy the camaraderie of the Oak. Some were regulars and had their own seats in the bar, the older men dressed in the 'Leeds uniform' of the time: ruffled shirts and suits of best black cloth, worn with the waistcoat open and a swallow-tail coat (rather a different style from today!).



The bowling green, The Original Oak, undated

Another popular feature was the bowling green, established around the 1830s – it occupied the garden where people enjoy their drinks nowadays. The Oak Bowling Club had its own room with its trophies on display, and over a hundred members at its peak. It won fame in 1888 when the team won the Plymouth Cup at the 300th Commemoration of Drake's famous match at Plymouth, a victory they celebrated annually with a match and dinner afterwards. The Club went on playing at the Oak throughout the next century until 1998 when, amid much public protest, the bowling green was finally dug up to provide outside drinking space.



The Original Oak, 1960s

A menu from 1879 gives an idea of the range of food offered by the dining room, alongside an extensive wine list:

Soups – Clear and Mock Turtle

Removes – Saddle of Mutton; Calf's Head; Roast Chicken; Boiled Leg of Lamb; Tongue; Boiled Chicken; Roast Beef; Ducklings; Pigeon Pie

Sweets – Cabinet Pudding; Lemon Pudding; Custards; Fruit Tarts; Cheesecakes; Blancmange and Jellies; Ice Puddings; Cheese and Salad.

You could dine well at the Oak.

After the sale in 1876 the inn had a number of different landlords, who lived on the premises together with the serving staff, but from 1903 it enjoyed another long period of continuity: it was bought by James Laycock, whose family continued to own and run it for over fifty years. It was finally taken over by Tetley's in the 1950s and is now owned by M&B of Birmingham. Long popular with the sporting fraternity and now packed with crowds of students and young people, it is said to be one of the five most successful pubs in the country.

Eveleigh Bradford

Local Historian, 2022

For further information, see Chapter 7 of Eveleigh Bradford's *Headingley* (2008).

See [People in the Past](#) for Hannah Clark, and see the gallery for more [Historic Pubs](#).

