

HISTORIC PUBS

HEADINGLEY



Anon, *The Skyrack Inn and the Shire Oak*, c1810 © The Thoresby Society

THE SKYRACK INN

The Skyrack stands at a bold, prominent angle on the roadside as you come down the hill from town into Headingley, to the side of the church and the war memorial, facing its old rival, the Original Oak, just across the way.

It's been there providing refreshment for travellers and locals for more than two hundred years. Some time around the 1780s this handsome stone house was built by an enterprising villager on a scrap of land taken from the old Headingley village green. There were many of these cottage encroachments on waste land during the late eighteenth century, particularly on what was left of the village green in the heart of the old village. These unauthorised cottages were permitted in return for a few shillings rent paid annually to the Earls of Cardigan, in recognition of their rights as Lord of the Manor, but there was no lease or security of tenure. So the rent paid for this rather fine building on its tight corner of land was correspondingly small: only six shillings a year even in the late 1850s.

There's no exact record of when it was built, though there seems to have been a house on this corner by 1781 when John Tuke made his map of the area. It may originally have been just one large double-fronted house, but at some early stage an extension, slightly lower and shallower, was added to the side to create a separate residence, perhaps to allow more room for the main house to be used as an inn. It stood in an ideal position for passing and local trade: on the verge of the busy turnpike road from Leeds to Otley, at the junction with the routes down to Kirkstall and Burley, set at an angle visible from all directions. It was and still is a solid, handsome stone building, and from the front it has remained remarkably unchanged over the two hundred years since its picture was painted around the start of the nineteenth century. This painting suggests that only the main building was used as the pub, with a painted sign over the door; the side part was marked off by a low front wall and had a small railed forecourt or garden and had a separate front door.



The Skyrack Inn and the Shire Oak, c1852 © The Thoresby Society

When the inn came up for sale in 1817 - described as 'well-built' - it had already been in business for some years as the 'Skyrack Inn'. Like the Original Oak opposite it was named after the ancient Shire Oak tree just across the road, Headingley's main claim to fame, and the tree figured on the pub sign. It has retained that name ever since, though the tree itself collapsed long ago in 1941 and the significance of the name has been mainly forgotten. (Look out for the faded plaque in the garden wall across the road, and the young oak tree nearby, planted in 1956 in memory of the old tree.)

Perhaps reflecting its humble cottage origins, the Skyrack did not enjoy the prestige of the Original Oak opposite, at least in its early years, nor did it try to offer the same facilities. It served a very different but important clientele: the village working men and labourers rather than the merchants and landowners. In the early years of the nineteenth century it had a succession of different landlords, including one who went bankrupt. It remained a working men's pub, with no aspirations to be a hotel like its competitor, but by 1840 it had expanded enough to offer a room for meetings and concerts. It seems to have had a rough reputation, with newspaper reports in 1846 of a fight when a gang of Kirkstall men invaded a concert there, armed with pokers and other weapons, bent on stirring up trouble.



The Skyrack Inn, c1890



The Skyrack Inn and the Shire Oak, c1900 © Leeds Library & Information Service

In 1850 the landlord of the time, John Parker, got into considerable trouble for allowing gambling on the premises every night. He was summoned before the Magistrates, and Lord Cardigan's agent sent him a stiff letter, accusing him of failing to 'conduct the house in a respectable manner', and warning him that he would be given notice to quit if there was no improvement. He must have toed the line after this, for he continued as landlord for some years and in 1862 was able to take over the inn from the Cardigan estate.

We can get an idea of what the inn was like in 1888 from the description given when the Cardigan estate finally sold off its remaining interest. By now it was a substantial establishment, occupying the whole house. The bar, smoke room, commercial room, sitting room, tap room and kitchen occupied the ground floor; upstairs there was accommodation for the licensee and family, with three bedrooms and a lodging room for any overnight visitors. Living over the pub must have been rather a tight fit for Mary Buckle, the licensee at the time, as she had eight children and her brother living with her there, as well as the occasional lodger! Outside, in the yard behind, stood various outbuildings, including a warehouse, a two-stall stable, brewhouse, and a coach-house. The jumble of rooflines is still visible behind the pub today. One of the outbuildings, now incorporated into the main building, housed a small shop with a narrow frontage to the main road and a bow window, let to a boot and shoe-maker. The adjoining cottage and garden (now all part of the pub) was apparently still rented out separately.

The inn became the home for a number of local societies. Kelly's Directory for 1888 lists the Headingley Branch of the Stonemasons' Society (a friendly society specifically for stonemasons – which shows how many there were in the village, working in the nearby quarries); a branch of the Oddfellows; the Headingley Football Club; and the Headingley United Cricket Club. The village still had a strong sense of community, with many flourishing groups of local working men, and the pub provided them with a friendly meeting place. It even hosted the inauguration in 1892 of the Yorkshire Ramblers Club which is still going strong, the second oldest mountaineering club in the country.



The Skyrack Inn, c1920 © Leeds Library & Information Service

Over the following century the pub was extended and developed, absorbing the various outbuildings and making full use of its cramped site to provide inside and outside space for its growing clientele - local people, cricket and rugby enthusiasts, groups of students and young people. It's owned now by Greene King of Bury St Edmunds, whose origins coincidentally also go back some 200 years, like the pub. It's come a long way now from its rural origins as a cottage on the village green.

Eveleigh Bradford

Local Historian, 2022

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

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