

The Golden Ball, Lower Assendon

An Extract from “Gone Rustic” by Cecil Roberts

‘The real inn of the village, has both history and beauty. I discovered one day, almost by accident, that it is linked with romance, as we see it today. Mine host, Mr. Harris, an old soldier, is adept with a gun, a tankard of ale, a handful of darts, a shove-a’-penny board, a skittle ball, a tug-o-war rope, a ferret in a bag, a car that wants ‘looking at’, or anything else in which an all-round man with unfailing good nature can excel.

‘My admirable Mr. Harris one day gave me a start. I had been looking at *The Golden Ball*, and had come to the conclusion that it had once been a coach-stage. It has a space in front of the old taproom that suggested a former inn yard, into which the flying coach had come for a change of horses, or for additional horse power to tackle the old Oxford road that winds up behind. I could imagine the bustle of this inn, yard, with harness rooms, and a gallery surrounding the ostlers’ quarters.

‘The inn itself has a delightful bay window that juts out into the road, where it curves through the heart of the village. *The Golden Ball* shines gaily in the sun with its red tiles and yellow-washed walls, and seen from the surrounding hills, its shape, colour and position on the floor of the valley are altogether a perfect example of the English scene. I had known Mr. and Mrs. Harris for three years before their bombshell was dropped on me.



Views of The Golden Ball, Lower Assendon in 2000/2001

'Keeping an ever-open door and heart, I had turned to them a hundred times in domestic emergencies. When a sudden descent of visitors for tea had used up all the bread, it was to Mrs. Harris that my servant fled for relief supplies. When a field rat attacked my larder, again it was Mr. Harris, with a ferret 'Sally' and his dog 'Ponto', who delivered us from the raider. When I had a houseful, and another guest had to be slept, it was Mrs. Harris who took him in. A sudden shortage of matches or candles, a breakdown in the newspaper delivery, a demand for stamps after post office hours, *The Golden Ball* never failed me.

'This readiness to help was all the more gracious because I was the inn's worst customer. I am neither a drinker nor a smoker by choice. I make the effort in sheer sociability, but I should never be aware of the absence of either of these things. There is always a smile in *The Golden Ball* at my efforts to drink beer. Any friends gifted that way I eagerly take along to make up for my deficiency: I like to sit in the parlour and hear the vanishing Oxfordshire, as opposed to the expanding Oxford, accent. You meet there men still wise in the way of horses, followers of the plough, builders of ricks, thatchers, men who seemed doomed to be the last of a great line extinguished by the machine. You hear many a strange story, such as the one I have told of the cock with a wooden leg.

'But for some reason I had never regarded Mr. Harris as a repository of local history. Compared with some of the Methuselahs of the village he is a mere boy, and a newcomer. The air of the sergeant, the old soldier with Indian experience, the retired Oxfordshire constable, redoubtable in the tug-of-war, still hangs about him, for all his handiness with a beer pump or spade. I mentioned my suspicions about the coach stage. It was as if I had touched a spring. All I had surmised was correct. He showed me the place where the incoming mail coach from Aylesbury to Henley turned in, also the 'Tantivy' from Birmingham, a red coach; the 'Magnet' from Cheltenham, a blue; the 'Alert' from Oxford, and the Gloucester and the Stroud Mails. "No wonder Tom King and Dick Turpin hung about here," said Mr. Harris.

'He was building a hencoop at that moment, and I was glad he did not see my face. Astonishment quickly changed to incredulity. Of course this was the kind of local yarn one might expect. Dick Turpin was a hero of mine at seven. I can recall now the sore place on my thumb made by a pair of scissors, and the mess of gum on my fingers and clothes. My father had returned one day with a large coloured cardboard sheet on which was painted the wonderful pictorial history of Dick Turpin's great ride to York. I worked feverishly by night, cutting out and pasting up on the plan the toll gate, the astonished keeper, the six-barred gate, the leaping horse, and the great Dick going over it, masked, with pistol cocked. There was rebellion when I had to go to bed without the tollhouse's roof on. Waking early I descended through a sleeping house, and in a cold room returned to the scissors and the gum pot. Oh, that ecstasy of childhood, evoked by coloured cardboard and gallant, defiant Dick!

'Dick Turpin had ridden to York along the Great North Road. I could not believe that brave Black Bess had cantered past my garden, or that, booted and spurred, the highwayman had darkened the threshold of *The Golden Ball*.

"Haven't you seen his hiding place?" asked Mr. Harris, driving home a nail.

"No," I answered, and added, half in protest, "but Turpin couldn't have been here - he was on the Great North Road!"

"Well, he was born in Essex and worked all round London. He knew every inch of the Chilterns. He'd places to 'dive' in when it got hot for him. Come and have a look, sir."

'I followed Mr. Harris, determined not to be led away by the mere thirst for romance. Dick Turpin in my own village! It was fantastic.

'The old ostlers' taproom is now a private living room, but in the old days it communicated with the parlour for the gentry. Between these two rooms there is a thick chimneystack. As is usual with these old chimneys there is a bend in it. This bend had been completely hidden by boarding. To my surprise Mr. Harris opened a cupboard door, revealing a narrow staircase leading to a bedroom above. There was also a space in the bend for a man to stand and look down through a slit at all the occupants of the bar. The ingenuity and secrecy of this place were obviously designed to assist a hunted man. There was a main staircase to the room above. It was easy, while the officers of the Law were searching the house, for the occupant of the upstairs room to slip out by the hidden staircase, and observe from his secret place of vantage the movements in the bar below him. Further enquiries elicited the fact that Turpin and King had 'worked' the Oxford and Watlington roads. Mr Harris's exciting news was largely confirmed.'

From "Gone Rustic" by Cecil Roberts published 1934 by Hodder and Stoughton.

Memories of Tom Harris

Following the publication of the article above in *The Henley Standard*, a number of local residents remembered Mr (Tom) Harris from The Golden Ball. Here are some of their comments:

From *The Henley Standard*, April 16th 2010:

Two weeks ago I told how, back in the Thirties, the Golden Ball pub at Lower Assendon was run by a Mr and Mrs Harris and what a friendly and helpful couple they were. Ray Mitchell-Heggs has written to me with his memories of the pub.

He tells me that Tom Harris was a remarkable man who had three careers. He joined the army at the age of 16, having lied about his age, and fought in the Boer War in South Africa. After leaving the army he was a policeman with the Oxfordshire Constabulary, at which time he also boxed and taught the noble art to Oxford University students.

Tom retired from the police aged about 65, and took over the Golden Ball, which became immensely popular while paying scant regard to the licensing laws. Many customers didn't arrive until about 11 pm - after the time that the law in those days required the pub close - and stayed until the early hours. There was never any trouble though, so the police left well alone.

Sanitation, however, was not one of the Golden Ball's strong points. The toilets, if they existed at all, were supposed to be around the back in an area covered by brambles. Most men, and some women, would elect instead to make use of a huge field of nettles that lay between the pub and Old Bix Lane - a hazardous choice if it were not a moonlit night!

Tom would serve beer and recount tales of the South Oxfordshire and his own remarkable life while the pub was over-run with cats walking the bar and climbing furniture.

When the Harrises retired, Brakspear sent in the sanitation squad and the builders and the pub was completely rebuilt with the bar reconstructed at right angles to where it used to be, the position it remains in today.

From M.J.Day:

I attach a copy of a page of the recruitment register of the Oxfordshire Constabulary, which

show recruitments from 1878 - 1904.

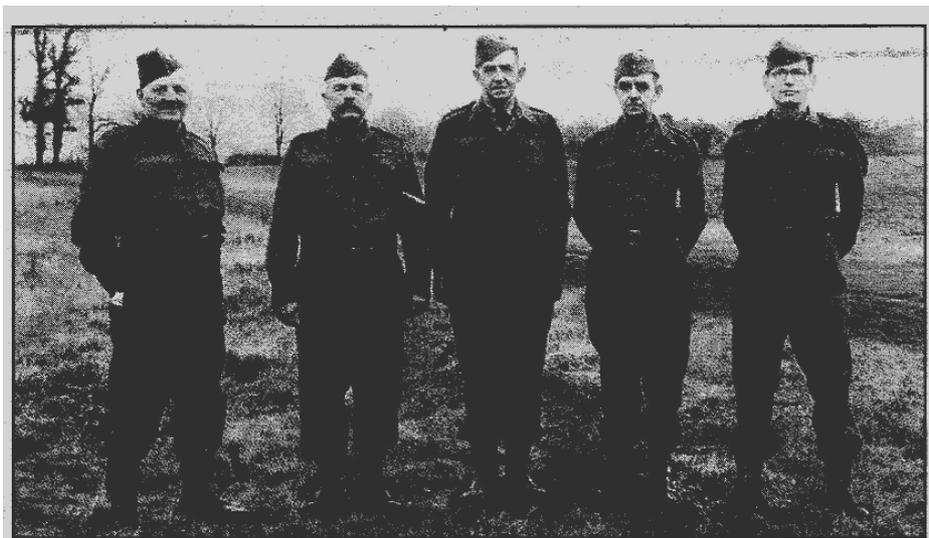
Summary of entry for Tom Harris
Born 16th March 1879, Kidmore End, Oxfordshire.
Married 10th April 1907.
Served in 2nd Battalion Oxford Light Infantry for seven years. Discharged 9th June 1904.
Appointed to Oxfordshire Constabulary 26th June 1904. Served in Bullingdon, Ploughey, Chipping Norton and Banbury divisions until 26th June 1929. Certified unfit for service from 14th August 1916 to 4th April 1919.
Volunteered for army service 11th December 1914 to 30th April 1916.
Died 22nd February 1959.

You will see in the record for Tom Harris that he served in the Oxford Light Infantry for seven years, being discharged in 1904. He joined the Constabulary on 26 June 1904 and served until 1914 when he volunteered for army service, which he did until 30th April 1916. He rejoined the Constabulary on 1st May 1916 but was certified as unfit for further service on 14th August 1916. He was certified fit for service and rejoined on 4th April 1919. He served until 26th June 1920 and the record shows he died in 1959.

I knew Tom vaguely when I was serving as a Constable in Henley on Thames in 1954 and Assendon was just over the boundary of the Henley Section. When on cycle patrol we often had to make a conference point at the telephone kiosk at the junction with the Stonor road and the Fair Mile. Occasionally if I needed to know my way around that part of the village I would ask Tom who always obliged.

From *The Henley Standard*, May 7th 2010:

More news on Tom Harris, who was landlord of the Golden Ball pub in Lower Assendon in the Thirties. The former boxer and police officer paid little attention to the licensing laws but would always help a villager in need. He could fix almost anything and with his dog Ponto and ferret Sally he would get rid of rats. Now David Painter has supplied me with a photograph of Tom.



It was taken on Bix Common in November 1944 prior to the disbandment of the Home Guard. Company Sergeant Harris is second from the left and David's late uncle, Second Lieutenant Nelson Painter, is on the far right.