

19 The Great Sign of Scole Inn



Scole was famous in the 17th and 18th centuries for the enormous and extravagant sign of the White Hart Inn that straddled the road like a proscenium arch. In an age where the signs of inns and shopkeepers displayed remarkable beauty and ingenuity to gain public attention, the Scole sign was a prodigy, famous throughout the land for its size and expense, less so for its beauty. It was an enormous, spectacular and vulgar advertisement for the inn. one of the first built specifically for entertaining travellers.

The main roads between Norwich and Ipswich and Great Yarmouth and Bury St Edmunds crossed in the village, and up to forty coaches a day passed through. To take advantage of this trade, a Norwich wool merchant, John Peck, built the inn, one of the first with the specific purpose of entertaining travellers, in 1655 to provide lodgings, fresh coach horses and to take post office deliveries. He had a shrewd grasp of the need to advertise and, as well as commissioning the sign, gave additional distinction to the accommodation by providing a vast circular bed that could sleep thirty people.¹

The wonder of the sign, weighing about forty tons, was the mass of carving that populated it with mythological figures and a menagerie of animals. An extraordinary cast of twenty-nine figures and twenty one animals included, Diana, Father Time, a whale and Cerberus, the terrible three-headed guard dog of hell clawing at the support post. The most ingenious feature was a small figure sitting on a brass surveyor's compass that turned to face the direction of rain. The sheer lavishness of the sign and the wealth of allegorical references in the figures contrasted sharply with the austerity of the times. In 1655 England was ruled by Cromwell's major-generals who busied themselves with chopping down maypoles and banning christmas. The sheer swaggering ostentation of the sign and especially its motto, *Implentur veteris bacchi pinguisquae ferinae*,² was surely an elaborate riposte to the puritans and their grim godliness.

The sign was made by John Fairchild and cost the vast sum of £1057 - the inn itself cost only £1500 - and certainly fulfilled Peck's hopes of notoriety for there was scarce anyone in England who had not heard of it by the end of the century. However fame did not bring fortune. There was insufficient trade and the inn, despite being patronised by Charles II, did not prosper. Peck's hopes that it would become a venue for balls, concerts and assemblies came to nothing as well.



The sign stood, overawing all who passed beneath, until the 1750s when it was taken down, not because it was unsafe but because its baroque exuberance, offended the more refined eyes of the Georgians. They came to regard it, not as a triumph of good taste, but as a 'prodigy of human folly' and 'a sign of insanity', exciting the vacant wonder of only shallow intellects. M.J. Armstrong writing in 1781 sneered 'What could induce a merchant ...to erect such a costly piece of workmanship, we are at a loss to conjecture, ...for we do not discover the smallest trait of judgement or taste in the whole composition. Had he (Peck) consulted every artist in the kingdom to leave a monument to his stupidity, they could not have produced a better effect.'

¹ The Great Bed of Ware was made in 1590. Thirteen feet wide it could accommodate at least four couples. It is mentioned in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and is now in the V & A Museum.

² Filled with vintage wine and fat game



Charles II, not used to being ignored, is disconcerted to find that his subjects are more fascinated by the carved figures on the sign than his regal presence.

A *Dominum Cognos Cite Vestrum* *The Lord knows thee quickly.* **B** *Acteon Ego Sum* *I am Acteon.* **C** *Diana*
D *Tempus Edax Rerum* *Time devours all.* **E** *Implentur veteris bacchi pinguisquae* *Filled with vintage wine and fat game.*

1 *Jonah and the whale* *2* *A lion supporting the arms of Great Yarmouth* *3* *Bacchus* *4* *Arms of Lindley* *5* *Arms of Lord Hobart* *6* *A shepherd piping* *7* *An angel supporting the arms of Mrs Peck* *8* *An angel supporting the arms of Mr Peck* *9* *A white hart with motto* *10* *Arms of the Earl of Yarmouth* *11* *Arms of the Duke of Norfolk* *12* *Neptune on a dolphin* *13* *A lion with the arms of Norwich* *14* *Charon carrying a witch to hell* *15* *Cerberus* *16* *A huntsman* *17* *Acteon* *18* *A white hart couchant* *19* *Prudence* *20* *Fortitude* *21* *Temperance* *22* *Justice* *23* *Diana* *24* *Time devouring an infant* *25* *An astronomer seated on a surveyor's compass* *26* *A shepherd piping* *27* *An unidentified figure* *28* *A soldier* *29* *Two cherubs* *30* *Bird pecking grapes*

