

Lost Pubs of Hythe 9 - The Ordnance Arms, Military Road

Public houses called The Ordnance Arms sprang up in many towns such as Dover and Chatham which had a military presence, and Hythe was no exception. It is first mentioned in Bagshawe's Directory of Hythe, in 1849, when the landlord was James Jackson Smale. It was conveniently situated near the barracks and, from 1853, the School of Musketry, in a site occupied today by an Esso petrol station. Its next nearest neighbour to the east was the Mackeson brewery and the pub was always a Mackeson house. It was only in existence for about 120 years, but it that time saw many licensees and more than its fair share of misfortunes.



In the early days, at least, it offered some accommodation. A newspaper report from 1853 recounts the melancholy story of a sixteen-year-old girl who had run away from home, pawned her gowns to pay the coach fare from Canterbury to Hythe and then spent the night at the Ordnance Arms with her soldier lover. She was found drowned in the Royal Military Canal the next day. The coroner's jury returned an open verdict.

Another sorry tale is that of William Durant, a prisoner who escaped from Hastings gaol and made his way in the snow to Hythe in January 1854. He was barefoot and had to crawl the last few miles as

'the soles of his feet had dropped off'. He was found a bed at the Ordnance Arms, cared for and removed back to Hastings.

The licensee James Smale died in 1870 and the licence was taken on by his son, Frederick a gasfitter by trade who acquired the licence of The Gate Inn in 1877. He was apparently very popular, being 'ever ready to do anything for his military and civilian friends' and the School of Musketry personnel started using the inn for their gatherings.

By 1881, the licence had passed to John Sorrell who was succeeded by Andrew Stapleton, a former sergeant in the Royal Artillery who had fought in the Crimean War. He died in 1886 and is buried in St Leonard's churchyard.



Andrew Stapleton's grave in St Leonard's churchyard

His widow, Sarah, took on the licence, assisted by her niece, Sarah Golder. She was still there in 1892, but by 1901, the licensee was Charles Collett, another ex-soldier. He was convicted and fined in 1903 for watering down the rum he sold and as a result the next year the Chief Constable of Kent opposed renewal of the licence. The magistrates ignored him, but shortly afterwards, the licence was given to George Norris, formerly a driver of horse-drawn buses to and from Folkestone. Norris died very shortly afterwards, aged 48. He had cut a corn from his foot, the wound became infected and he did not survive long enough to have the planned amputation of his leg.



George Norris

Once again, the licence was transferred to a widow, George's wife Elizabeth, who in 1911 passed it to Albert Ridley, formerly of The Bell Inn, Hythe. He was also an ex-soldier who had fought in the Boer War. In 1916, he was called up, rejoined the army and saw service in Salonika and France before being invalided out. After the war, he returned not to the Ordnance Arms, but to The Bell, where he died in 1930.

His wife had taken care of The Ordnance Arms during his absence but it passed to Thomas Henry Smith who in turn passed it in 1922 to Mr F.H. Bartlett. From 1918, probably because of its military connections, The Ordnance Arms became the regular meeting place for the local branch of the National Association of Discharged Soldiers and Sailors. The group campaigned for better pensions and retraining for ex-servicemen. In 1921, it merged with two other groups to form the British Legion.

The next landlord was, in 1927, Benjamin Beauchamp (who later had the Globe Inn). He was followed by William Beaton, who tragically hanged himself in the cellar in 1940. Frank Taylor, a wine and spirit merchant from Ashford took over but died himself in 1947.



In the 1960s, the landlord diversified into offering coffee and snacks, with picnic tables outside, probably to attract holiday-makers and day-trippers to the town. But no amount of diversification could compensate for the loss of trade when the Small Arms School (as the School of Musketry had been re-named) closed in 1968. The demise of the Ordnance Arms followed soon afterwards, its last licensee being Frank Milton.



Now a petrol station