

The Winchester Royal Hotel History



The Royal Hotel today consists of the main building dating back to the 16th century, once the home of a titled Lady, and much older buildings from the 13- and 1400s. One of these buildings was a cook house where meat was prepared, possibly for the Royal Palace or the great town houses belonging to the nobility and important clerics, who attended the King's Court in the city.

The building that now contains the Winton and Darials rooms has had many uses over the centuries, including that of a Silk "Manufactory." In 1992 there was a small fire

in one of the hotel's buildings (to the right of the archway on St Peter Street) which attracted the attention of the inspectors of the Threatened Building Section of the Royal Commission on Historic Buildings.

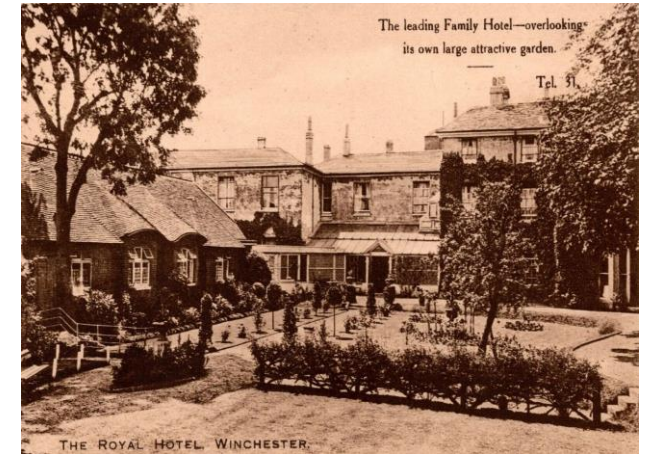
From this we learnt that the property was owned by St John's Hospital and was leased as three separate cottages between 1395-6 and 1437-1459. In addition to its use as a cook house there is evidence also of use by a string maker, hat maker, a shoemaker, and a butcher. In the 12th century this part of the city was a favoured residential area. Many of the nobles and clerics had their town houses here.

We learn from the Winchester Records that in 1583 and again in 1884 complaints were made, both to the Bishop and the Mayor that "an assembly was determined to meet and hear Mass." A search was instigated and whilst no priest was found, they did find "divers new and old papistical books, a chest full of vestments and many other Popish stuff and relics." Lady West must have been well connected as she was never punished for her beliefs, and she carried on as before and died of old age.

Lady West's House

Our story really gets going in the days of Elizabeth I, when the house was owned by Lady West. She was related by family to Thomas Baron De La Warr, famous as the "Founding Father" of Virginia in the USA, who is credited with saving the colony from extinction and has

an abiding place in American history. Lady Mary West is famous, especially in Catholic circles, for providing, at great risk to herself, a meeting place for those of the "Old Faith" who could not conform to Queen Elizabeth's religious rule. Hunted priests found refuge here and Mass was said in a secret chapel.



Fleshmonger Street (Now known as St Peter Street)

Fleshmonger Street next came into prominence during the reign of Charles II. The "Merry Monarch" brought his Queen, court and mistresses to Winchester to escape a plague-stricken London. The beautiful and intriguing Duchess of Portsmouth, Charlotte De Queraille, who was the mistress of both King Charles and Louis XIV of France, occupied a building across the street from Lady West's house. Another figure from Charles' circle was Roger Corham who owned Lady West's house, either by purchase or inheritance; we are not sure which.

Corham - a Royalist and staunch Catholic - was related on his grandmother's side to the Marquis of Winchester. He fought at the siege of Basing and was captured but later exchanged. He went into exile with King Charles, and later returned with him to England.

The Bishop's House

There were great plans to turn the Bishop's House into a college for the education of priests, as the seminaries on the continent were forced to close by the events taking place in France. Doctor Milner, the priest in charge of St Peter's from 1779 to 1803, wrote long letters to the Bishop of London extolling the virtues of Winchester, the "healthiness of the situation" and the lower cost of living there. In 1794 his plans were abruptly changed by the arrival of a congregation of Benedictine Nuns, driven from Brussels by the French Revolution. This congregation had been one of the first to be founded after the Suppression of the Religious Houses by Henry VIII. Dr Milner installed the nuns in the Bishop's House and supervised the construction of a chapel that exists today (bedroom suites Milner and Sheldon) on the second floor of the hotel. The sisters soon started a school for English girls from good families, and amongst their pupils was an Irish girl, Jane Hanlon, paid for by the Duke of Wellington and it seems the result of an alliance with a beautiful young Irish woman during his younger days in Ireland.

In 1792 a silk "manufactory" was established by a Mr Shenton, in an adjacent building which now houses the hotel's function rooms. It only lasted a few years as it was necessary for the drums to be turned by hand. Finding this a great inconvenience Mr Shenton had erected a new silk mill on the river Itchen, below the Abbey Mill, where his business prospered and brought much needed work to the poor. A branch of the Shenton family went to Australia and was amongst the founders of the Swan River Colony, now Perth in Western Australia.

The Convent of the Glorious Assumption

The sisters kept strictly to the Rule of St Benedict, but only wore their habits in the early morning when no-one could see them. They changed into secular dress for the rest of the day; nuns were still a novelty in Winchester at the time. In 1810 the sisters purchased the building from the London District and renamed it The Convent of the Glorious Assumption. When Dr Milner was consecrated Bishop in 1803 in his own chapel (now the Milner Hall, across the street from the hotel) the ceremony was followed by a Synod of all the Catholic Bishops of England, held in the convent. The Benedictine Nuns remained in Winchester for 63 years, until they departed in 1857. It was said that their privacy had been disturbed by young soldiers sitting on the wall watching them and their young pupils. It is more likely that the building of numbers 7, 8 and 9 St Peter Street was a greater threat because the windows from the upper stories looked right

into the convent gardens. The sisters slipped quietly away one night (by special train) to their newly purchased home, Old Hall at East Bergholt in Suffolk.

As of 1857 the building has operated as the Winchester Royal Hotel.

