

**THE GOLDEN FLEECE**  
HOTEL, EATERY & COFFEE HOUSE

# A BRIEF HISTORY

BY WILL SWALES



# WELCOME

Welcome to a brief history of The Golden Fleece, Thirsk, North Yorkshire. During the late spring and early summer of 2016 we had the good fortune to be able to revitalise and refurbish one of our fabulous sister inns, The King's Head in Richmond, North Yorkshire.

During the planning stage of this project we started to look hard at the building and its many historical attributes, at how some parts of the building had been added during its 300 years of existence. And whilst contemplating the small changes and additions we wanted to make, it dawned on me that we will only be its custodians for a generation or two at most. I can't foretell who will follow but started thinking about who had been its keepers in the past.

Therefore, we asked a good friend if he would research The King's Head and try to separate the fact from the fable; what's true and what has been elaborated during the storytelling process over the years.

Will Swales made such a good job of The King's Head that we then asked him to complete the same task for The Golden Fleece.

What follows is that research. We think it's as accurate as can be, but naturally there are many gaps and we would welcome any additional information.

I hope you enjoy this small booklet and the hospitality and service we provide within The Golden Fleece. Please feel free to take this copy with you.

**Kevin Charity**  
**CEO**  
**The Coaching Inn Group**

**[www.coachinginngroup.co.uk](http://www.coachinginngroup.co.uk)**





**“...THE NOBILITY, GENTRY, COMMERCIAL GENTLEMEN AND OTHERS WILL MEET WITH SUCH ACCOMMODATIONS AS CANNOT BE SURPASSED ON THE ROAD.”**



## ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT COACHING INNS OF THE NORTH



Inglenook fireplace in the dining room (pre refurbishment).

"...thanks to the entrepreneurial spirit and drive of an especially talented innkeeper."

**The Golden Fleece in Market Place, Thirsk, came to prominence in 1810 when under new ownership it was set on course quickly to become one of the north's most important coaching inns.**

The opportunity was down to its location, just off the Great North Road between York and Newcastle, while its particular success was thanks to the entrepreneurial spirit and drive of an especially talented innkeeper, whose family would go on to run The Golden Fleece for 108 years.

The early history of the inn is hazy. According to Historic England's listed-building description, the main part must originally have been a private house, with some structures thought to date from the 1500s. The exposed inglenook beam in the dining room is the oldest visible feature, while in a lounge called the Writing Room there is a splendidly preserved coffered ceiling of the 1600s.

It isn't known when the building first became an inn, nor when it first became known as The Golden Fleece. Its story begins with a Thirsk man called George Blythe. In 1795 he married Mary Cass, a daughter of William and Elizabeth Cass, who were the tenants at a Thirsk inn called The Three Tuns in Market Place. This was an established coaching inn, which the Cass family had run since 1773.

By 1809 George and Mary Blythe were running the Cass family's previous inn, The Old Three Tuns at Bridge Foot (now Finkle Street) in Thirsk, but had ambitious plans. In November that year George Blythe announced in the press that he was taking over the business of his now-widowed mother-in-law, Mrs Cass, and transferring it together with his own business to The Golden Fleece, which at that time was run by a tenant, James Hudson.





Writing Room coffered ceiling, circa 1600s.



## GEORGE BLYTHE DOMINATES THE TOWN'S COACHING TRADE

George Blythe bought the freehold of The Golden Fleece, and in May 1810 opened it as a new business under his own management, setting out to make it the town's premier coaching inn.

By June he was able to advertise in several local newspapers that the Mail and Highflyer coaches to Newcastle and London called at The Golden Fleece, morning and evening, and that 'the Nobility, Gentry, Commercial Gentlemen and others will meet with such accommodations as cannot be surpassed on the road;' also that 'a constant supply of good Post Horses, convenient Chaises and careful Drivers may always be depended upon.'

In November 1822, local newspapers reported the death in Thirsk of Mary Blythe. It was said that she died 'in the prime of life after two days' illness,' and 'she will long be remembered by those who have experienced the uniform liberality with which she discharged her public duties.'

It seems that after becoming a widower, George Blythe threw himself into the development of the business. By 1823 The Golden Fleece was recorded in Baines's Directory of the County of York as the staging post for five coaching routes – the Royal Mail between London and Edinburgh via Newcastle, and between London and Shields via Stockton and Sunderland; the Highflyer (usually and more accurately known as the North Highflyer) between York and Newcastle via Northallerton, Darlington and Durham; the Wellington between London and Edinburgh; and the Expedition to Leeds, via Boroughbridge, Knaresborough and Wetherby.

### COACHES,

*From George Blythe's, Golden Fleece Inn, S. side Market place.*

**The ROYAL MAILS** to London every evg. at  $\frac{1}{4}$  past 8; to Newcastle & Edinburgh every evng. at  $\frac{1}{4}$  past 11; to Stockton, Sunderland and Shields  $\frac{1}{4}$  before 11; to York and London every evg.  $\frac{1}{4}$  before 8.

**The HIGHFLYER**, every mg. at  $\frac{1}{4}$  past 10 to Northallerton, Darlington, Durham, and Newcastle, and all parts of the North; also every evg. at 6 o'clock to York.

**The WELLINGTON**, every evg. at a  $\frac{1}{4}$  past 8, to London, through York, Doncaster, Grantham, Stamford, and Huntington, arrives in London second morning at 7 o'clock; to Newcastle and Edinbro' every mg. at 1 o'clock.

**The EXPEDITION**, to Boroughbridge, Knaresbro', Wetherby, & Leeds, every evg. at 6 o'clock.

From the entry for Thirsk in Baines's Directory of the County of York, 1823.



## EXPANDING THE PROPERTY AND GROWING THE BUSINESS

North Riding deed registers show that in April 1823 George Blythe purchased another property fronting Market Place, two doors to the east of The Golden Fleece. In June 1824 he linked them by purchasing the property in between. He enlarged the accommodation of the inn, and modified the new properties to create a passage for coaches to go through to the rear of the complex. There he built improved coach houses and stabling, later estimated to accommodate up to 60 horses.

This might have been the time when George Blythe purchased the coaching clock bearing the maker's name, Palliser, Thirsk, which has been preserved and still hangs in The Golden Fleece today. It certainly wasn't much later than this. John Palliser's clock and watchmaking business was trading in the 1820s, and was carried on by his son Robert until his death, aged 43, in 1846.

The expansion of The Golden Fleece was announced in advertisements that appeared in several newspapers from Newcastle to York in July 1824. It was obviously a very important development for 54-year-old George Blythe, who might have thought that this was a good time to commission a portrait of himself. Two large, unidentified portraits from the 1800s still hang in the hotel today, and one of them in particular could be George Blythe.

It shows a man with grey hair, possibly in his 50s, sitting alone. According to a curator of fashion at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, who has seen images of both the portraits, the clothes of this man were typical of the 1820s. The few clues that exist seem to suggest it could be a portrait of George Blythe. Unfortunately he did not live much longer. He died on 31 March 1828, aged 58. He left no children, but had several nephews and nieces.



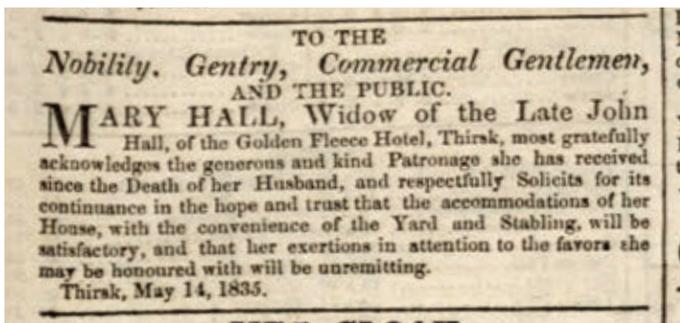
**Top:** The coaching clock, circa 1820s, preserved at The Golden Fleece.

**Bottom:** Possibly George Blythe, circa 1820s, in an unidentified portrait hanging at The Golden Fleece.



# JOHN AND MARY HALL TAKE THE REINS OF THE FAMILY BUSINESS

George Blythe's niece Mary and her husband John Hall took over the business in 1828, announcing in local newspapers that they 'trusted that from their having had a considerable part of the management of the business for several years past... they will receive that liberal share of public patronage which was so kindly bestowed upon their deceased relative, Mr Blythe.'



As far as can be ascertained from Hall family papers preserved at the North Yorkshire County Records Office, Mary and John Hall used profits from the business gradually to buy out the other nephews and nieces who were co-beneficiaries of George Blythe's estate. This became more difficult when on 8 April 1831 John Hall died, aged 37. His widow Mary carried on running the business, but with her own health failing, and at least five children to raise, it seems that some important coaching business was lost to a competitor in Thirsk.

Yorkshire Gazette, 16 May 1835.  
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By 1839 the Royal Mail and the North Highflyer, were no longer calling at The Golden Fleece. A trade directory published the following year recorded that the inn was a staging post for the Victoria, which ran between London and Newcastle, and the Hero and the Times, which both ran between Leeds and Newcastle; one of which must have replaced the Expedition. During the summer months, a coach called the Cleveland and Earl Zetland ran every day except Sunday between Leeds and the north-east seaside resort of Redcar.

The struggle to raise a family and run a business while also battling ill-health proved too much for Mary. On 24 September 1839 she died, aged 46, reportedly 'after a long illness which she bore with exemplary patience.'



# WILLIAM HALL ADAPTS THE BUSINESS TO THE COMING OF THE RAILWAYS

The Golden Fleece came under the control of Mary's two eldest children, Elizabeth, who was no more than 23, and William, who was barely 21.

According to the census of June 1841 both siblings were in charge, while their younger brothers and sisters were living elsewhere. William was nominally head of the house and was recorded as the innkeeper. He was managing a staff of six who were living in, and no doubt many more who were not resident.

As a young man he might have lacked experience in the trade, but he was perfectly equipped to adapt to the extraordinary social and economic changes of the time, which were brought about principally by the arrival of the railways. In March 1841 a railway station was opened one and a half miles west of Thirsk on the new York-to-Darlington line. In 1848 a second railway station was opened in the town centre, the terminus of the new Leeds-to-Thirsk railway.

In 1850 the first through-line between London and Edinburgh was completed when Queen Victoria opened railway bridges across the River Tweed at Berwick and the River Tyne at Newcastle. Some of the trains running from capital to capital stopped at Thirsk's out-of-town station, then known as Thirsk Junction. It was a tipping point in the development of a national railway network, which gradually brought an end to the coaching trade that had been the mainstay of The Golden Fleece for at least 40 years.



Thirsk Junction © John Alsop.

"... he was perfectly equipped to adapt to the extraordinary social and economic changes of the time..."



## NATIONAL RECOGNITION FOR TWO FAITHFUL OLD SERVANTS

Two of The Golden Fleece's longest-serving and most faithful servants died within a week of each other in 1853.

Both were so well-regarded and well-known among gentlemen travellers passing through Thirsk that William Hall arranged for their deaths to be reported in a London newspaper, Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle.

Billy Baines, aged 73, a famous post boy who was reported to have worked at The Golden Fleece for 50 years, was the first loss. It was recalled by a local journalist up to 40 years later that his greatest achievement occurred in a year of the York Music Festival when he rode to Easingwold and back six times in a day, a total distance of 120 miles. An idea of how Billy Baines looked might be gauged from a drawing of his son, Billy Baines junior, who was also a post-boy. It appeared in Tom Bradley's book, The Old Coaching Days in Yorkshire, published in 1889.

The second death was that of Elizabeth Gill, 72, a chambermaid known to all as Old Betty. The press report said she was 'for 55 years a faithful servant in the family of Mr Hall'.



Billy Baines junior, drawn by Tom Bradley for his 1889 book 'The Old Coaching Days in Yorkshire'.



## HOW WILLIAM HALL MADE THE GOLDEN FLEECE THE NO. 1 VENUE IN TOWN

**William Hall seems to have known exactly what to do to make a success of The Golden Fleece after the demise of coaching.**

He maintained the stables, and established a good trade in hiring horses and carriages. He made his establishment a leading venue for the functions of various social organisations of the great and the good, which invariably included him as a member. Even at dinners held at other venues it appears that William Hall was the preferred choice of outside caterer.

He would be described in the local press many years later as a 'much-esteemed townsman.' He was a member of the Lighting and Watching Committee, a Freemason, and for many years a churchwarden. Census and land records show that he also had a 500-acre farm on tenanted land at Barbeck, on the eastern side of Thirsk town. He bought the freehold of 19 acres, some of which he made available to the town for a new cricket ground. It was designated for 'amateurs of the first class.'

The opening match in 1851 was between an All England eleven and 22 players from Thirsk and District – a curious form of handicapping, but a common one at this time preceding international cricket. The ground would later become known as the 'old cricket ground' when it was used as the venue for Thirsk Agricultural Show, and for which the generosity of William Hall in providing the land would be acknowledged in the local press. In these ways, William Hall secured the reputation of The Golden Fleece as one of Thirsk's pre-eminent inns. He dropped the word 'Golden' from the name of the inn, promoting it instead as Hall's Fleece Hotel.

In 1854 he married Sarah Faint, an innkeeper's daughter from Sowerby, near Thirsk. They had a daughter, Mary, in 1855. In the same year, a meeting of local gentry was called at The Fleece Inn to found Thirsk Racecourse, and William Hall became a member of the original racecourse committee. Also in that year, local newspapers reported that HRH Prince George, Duke of Cambridge, a cousin of Queen Victoria and future commander-in-chief of the British army, was a guest at The Fleece when stopping off for refreshments on his way to Newburgh Park.



"He made his establishment a leading venue for the functions of various social organisations of the great and the good."



## A PAINTING OF WILLIAM HALL AND SON?

"...a wealthy man,  
looking about 40 years  
old wearing clothes  
characteristic of the  
fashion from the  
1840s onwards."

**William and Sarah Hall had a son, William Welbank, in 1858. By 1863, the survival of the boy beyond the vulnerable years of infancy must have seemed like a good time for William, then aged 39, to commission a portrait.**

The result appears to be the second of the large unidentified portraits still hanging in The Golden Fleece today. It shows a wealthy man, looking about 40 years old wearing clothes characteristic of the fashion from the 1840s onwards. He is seated alongside a young boy of about five years old. The circumstances seem to suggest that this is William Hall with his son and heir William Welbank Hall. A later photograph known to be of William Hall, perhaps aged in his early 70s, indicates facial features very similar to those of the man in the portrait.



**Left:** Possibly William Hall and his son William Welbank Hall, circa 1863, in an unidentified portrait at The Golden Fleece.

**Right:** William Hall, possibly circa 1890, as featured in Edmund Bogg's 1906 book 'The Vale of Mowbray'.



## CAPITALISING ON THE NEW FASHION FOR TOURISM

**The prosperity of late-Victorian Britain, which introduced the notion of holidays and travelling for leisure to a wider public, brought tourists to Thirsk and thus created more opportunities for The Golden Fleece.**

Although the town railway station had closed to passenger trains as early as 1855, the out-of-town station became increasingly important.

Railway travellers who wanted to explore the historic and scenic delights of this part of Yorkshire could be assured that every train stopping at the station would be met by an omnibus – first horse-drawn, then steam driven, and eventually petrol-driven – that took passengers to the town centre. Consequently, in local press advertisements William Hall recommended The Fleece Hotel as the perfect base for visits to sights such as the picturesque ruins of Rievaulx Abbey, Byland Abbey, and Mount Grace Priory. And he would be sure to provide whatever horses and carriages his guests required for them to get from the hotel to the sights.

A new alternative form of travel of the period was the bicycle. Long-distance cycling, involving overnight stays in hotels, became especially popular, and such enthusiasm led in 1878 to the formation, in Harrogate, of the Cyclists' Touring Club (CTC). The organisation produced handbooks of recommended hotels, and quickly expanded nationally. Within five years it reached 10,000 members and established a head office in London. In 1887 the CTC introduced large cast-iron plaques bearing the organisation's logo of a three-winged wheel, which were affixed to the front elevations of its recommended hotels.

The style of the one erected on the front of The Golden Fleece at Thirsk, and still in place today, indicates it dates from about 1890. No doubt a special attraction for cyclists visiting Thirsk was the challenge and excitement of riding up and down the nearby Sutton Bank, with its one-in-four gradient and hairpin bend. The CTC continues to thrive and remains the world's oldest touring club.

Sarah Hall died in April 1894, aged 77, followed almost exactly a year later by William, aged 76. By this time their son William Welbank Hall, the fourth generation of the family to run the business was already firmly in charge.



The CTC (Cyclists' Touring Club) plaque at The Golden Fleece.

"Long-distance cycling, involving overnight stays in hotels, became especially popular..."





One of the bedrooms at The Golden Fleece.



## FOURTH GENERATION TAKES CHARGE — THE ERA OF WILLIAM WELBANK HALL

In April 1899, when he was aged 41, William Welbank Hall married 22-year-old Louisa Anne Foggitt. From a newspaper report at the time it might be judged that he was either a master of self-promotion or was held in even greater esteem in the community than his late father; or possibly it was both. The report of his home-coming from honeymoon is so extraordinary that it merits reproduction in full.

'Home coming – On Tuesday night Mr W. W. Hall the proprietor of The Golden Fleece Hotel, and his bride, the daughter of Mr William Foggitt JP, of South Villa, returned from their honeymoon, which had been spent in the Metropolis and Brighton. The bells of the Parish Church rang out merry peals, and the happy pair were met at Thirsk Junction by a carriage and pair, and driven into the town where a multitude of well-wishers were assembled to give them a hearty welcome home... The greatest amusement was caused shortly after their arrival by plateful after plateful of heated silver and copper being thrown out onto the pavement amongst the juveniles. A select party was entertained by the bridegroom within the hotel, and during Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, home-coming receptions were held by Mr and Mrs Hall.'

Yorkshire Gazette, 29 April 1899



"... held in even  
greater esteem in  
the community than  
his late father..."



# HOSTING PRINCE HENRY OF PRUSSIA AND HIS INTERNATIONAL MOTOR-CAR RALLY



Prince Henry of Prussia, 1896.  
Albumen print. © National Portrait Gallery.

On 12 July 1911, William and Louisa Hall were luncheon hosts at The Fleece Hotel to some of Europe's richest and most famous people. They were competing in one of the most extraordinary sporting events of the age – the Prince Henry of Prussia Cup.

It was an international motor-car rally devised by the prince, a brother of the German Kaiser Wilhelm II and a cousin of the newly crowned King George V of Great Britain and Ireland.

The idea was to promote peace and harmony between the two nations through sport, precisely at a time when an attack on the British Empire by the Germans was already anticipated. The rally started in Hamburg, went north to Bremerhaven, then by ship to Southampton. Back on the road, it went north to Edinburgh, via Thirsk, and then south along a western route to a grand finish in London.

The visit to Thirsk was part of a one-day stage from Harrogate to Newcastle, and was chosen for a special trial of getting the cars up Sutton Bank. It was speculated in the press that many of the German competitors were in fact spies who were sizing up the country's weak spots as they toured its towns and cities. Prince Henry of Prussia was a competitor, and among the other celebrity drivers was Arthur Conan Doyle, by this time already world-famous as the author of the Sherlock Holmes mysteries.

The Yorkshire Post reported that after the morning trial the cars arrived in Thirsk 'where luncheon was served at The Fleece Hotel. A crowd, large in its numbers for Thirsk, assembled in the Market Place and inspected with much interest the foreign cars as they drew up... When Prince Henry arrived he was greeted with a hearty cheer by the crowd, though one or two ancients of the Market Place preserved a strictly passive attitude.'





The scene was captured by local photographer J R Clarke, whose shots included the one above showing the crowds gathered around the rally cars in front of Hall's Fleece Hotel.



## A NEW ERA DAWNS – ADAPTING TO THE AGE OF THE MOTOR CAR



A view from the top of Sutton Bank.

"The sale brought to an end 108 years of one family's control..."

**William Welbank and Louisa Anne Hall had three children, but apparently had no plans to pass the business on to the next generation. Their eldest child was still only 18 when in 1918 William reached the age of 60 and decided to sell-up and retire.**

The business and freehold premises were sold at auction in November 1918 for £4,000 to Mrs Ellen Lee, whose husband James ran the Red Bear Hotel in Thirsk. The sale brought to an end 108 years of one family's control of the former coaching inn, which henceforth would revert to its original name of The Golden Fleece.

The early post-war years saw the introduction of mass-production techniques in the motor-car industry, with the result that car ownership became much more popular among the wealthier classes. Touring by motor-car through the countryside to visit historic sights and enjoy the scenery became very popular, especially when combined with breaks for meals or overnight stays at interesting hotels. At around this time, some of the stables at The Golden Fleece were converted to garages, two of them with pits for mechanics to do running repairs on visitors' cars. The Golden Fleece also had a large garage in Chapel Street, Thirsk.

After just 10 years at The Golden Fleece, Ellen Lee, aged 56, decided to retire. In September 1928 she put the business and premises up for sale by auction. The sale advertisement boasted that the hotel was 'well-known and greatly patronised by motorists from all over England and abroad.' A report of the sale in the Yorkshire Post noted that whereas in years past the hotel had been the bustling scene of arriving and departing coaches and horses, it was now common, on a fine summer's afternoon, to see 40 or 50 motor cars parked outside.

Unfortunately the hotel did not sell. It was withdrawn from auction at £8,750. Any early attempt at a repeat sale was made impossible by the Great Depression of 1929 to 1932, and so Ellen Lee carried on running the business.





The Golden Fleece's restaurant.





The welcoming exterior of The Golden Fleece.



## ANOTHER LINK TO THE ENGLAND CRICKET TEAM

An interesting attraction for visitors to The Golden Fleece from the early 1920s was that Ellen Lee, whose previous married name was Macaulay, was the mother of the Yorkshire and England cricketer, George Gibson Macaulay.

Born in Thirsk, he made his first-class debut for Yorkshire in 1920 at the age of 23. He was a medium-fast bowler who turned to off-spin bowling, and once took 200 wickets in a season for Yorkshire. He went on to play eight test matches for England between 1922 and 1933, and was Wisden Cricketer of the Year in 1924. No doubt he used his fame to aid his mother's business whenever he could.



George Gibson Macaulay © Yorkshire County Cricket Club.

## THE TRUST HOUSE ERA

The Golden Fleece was finally bought, for an unknown sum, in January 1936 by Trust Houses Ltd, as part of the company's expansion in northern England.

The management team appointed to run The Golden Fleece was husband and wife, Arthur and Winifred Hollington. Photographs of them and their staff taken in the early 1940s can be seen on the walls of the Writing Room lounge today. Other photographs of the porter, known only as Carlton, were taken in 1945 and are also displayed in the hotel today. They were originally used in publicity material produced by Trust Houses Ltd.

The Golden Fleece remained within Trust Houses, later Trusthouse Forte, until 1990, since when it has changed hands a few times until coming into the ownership of The Coaching Inn Group in 2015.



Carlton, the porter, 1945.



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The Golden Fleece Hotel, Thirsk, is part of The Coaching Inn Group Ltd. The group has a particular passion for lovely old historic inns and is fortunate enough now to have fifteen of these iconic buildings in our collection, several of them former coaching inns. We have established a reputation for refurbishing, revitalising and breathing life back into these inns, creating elegant, comfortable and well-priced accommodation, tempting menus, relaxed and stylish bars and coffee lounges where friends, families and business people can relax and enjoy everything we have on offer.

Our vision for the future is based around our core value of 'Unlocking Potential'. From our properties to our people and everything in between, we take every opportunity to invest in developing all aspects of our business to give our guests the best possible experience.

As a company we are rapidly expanding and bringing new hotels into the Coaching Inn Group. You can see the latest additions to our group by visiting [www.coachinginngroup.co.uk](http://www.coachinginngroup.co.uk).

We hope you've enjoyed your visit to The Golden Fleece Hotel, Thirsk, and would love to invite you to try our other venues, nationwide. For full details please visit [www.coachinginngroup.co.uk](http://www.coachinginngroup.co.uk).



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