

TENBY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Cobourg Hotel is the subject of this month's feature. Opened in 1816 the hotel is probably unique among Tenby hotels as it remained in the same family for over 150 years until its closure in 1982. At the time of opening it was Tenby's premier hotel and remained unchallenged in this respect until the opening of the Royal Gatehouse Hotel. The former High Street hotel can be identified today as the pink building housing a branch of T. P. Hughes and Tenovus.

The Cobourg Hotel, The Crème de la Crème of Tenby Hotels by Neil Westerman.

The early nineteenth century was a time of great change in Tenby. A spirit of improvement was sweeping the town as it began to develop into an important bathing resort. It had found a benefactor in the person of Sir William Paxton, a wealthy banker. Sir William financed the construction of the sea water baths and assembly rooms near the harbour and was one of the supporters of a theatre built in Frog Street. He also involved himself in efforts to improve the town's water supply. It was in this climate of improvement that Mr. George Hughes opened the Cobourg Hotel.

Situated in the High Street the Cobourg Hotel was built in 1815 / 1816 on the site of the Anchor Inn by local builder William Maddox. The hotel featured 'every requisite convenience for the accommodation of visitors in the bathing season and travelers in general' according to a notice placed in the *Carmarthen Journal* newspaper in June 1816. The landlord of the Cobourg Mr. George Hughes had previously been landlord of the Anchor Inn.

The name 'Cobourg' probably derives from the family name Saxe-Coburg. On the 2nd May 1816 King George IV's daughter Princess Charlotte married Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg. It was an established practice to name hotels, inns and streets after royalty, nobility and national heroes. The marriage and the opening of the Cobourg hotel occurred within weeks of each other. It is therefore the most likely explanation for the 'Cobourg' name.

George Hughes died on the 18th December 1821 and the hotel was then operated by his widow Elizabeth Hughes. At the time of Elizabeth's death in July 1835 the *Carmarthen Journal* stated that 'Her loss will be long felt by her family and numerous circle of friends, whom were attached to her from the many amiable and generous qualities which she possessed'. Her son James Hughes then became landlord and together with his wife Maria consolidated the high reputation in which the hotel was held. Mr Hughes was chief magistrate of Tenby 1840 – 41 and was also the shipping agent for steamship services between Bristol and Tenby.

An advertisement in Mary Anne Bourne's Guide to Tenby published in 1843 mentions barouches, flies and post horses being available from the livery stables of the Cobourg Hotel. With the opening of the railway to Haverfordwest in 1854 a coach was operated from the hotel to Narberth Road station (now re-named Clunderwen). The naturalist Phillip Henry Gosse provides us with an account of the scene encountered at Narberth Road station on his journey in 'Tenby: A Seaside Holiday' published in 1856:

‘Narberth Road and Tenby! Shouts the guard as he runs along the train... Cobourg, sir?, White Lion, sir? This is the coach for Tenby, sir; the Cobourg sir! Here you are sir!, for Tenby sir!, the White Lion sir!...Perhaps, as a naturalist, I ought to have given the preference to so unique a zoological curiosity as the White Lion; but I am a loyal man, and so I chose the Cobourg. And so we started; about a dozen of us outside, and half as many within...Off we dashed, four in hand, four capital horses as ever drew a vehicle...’

Following the opening of the Pembroke and Tenby Railway the Cobourg operated a coach to meet every train at Tenby station. This horse drawn bus service survived until June 1922.

James Hughes died in September 1857 and the hotel was then run by his widow Maria until her death in August 1883. The *Tenby Observer* reported that Maria, ‘landlady of the Cobourg Hotel for nearly fifty years... was known by a wide circle of friends not only in this and the adjoining counties but elsewhere who will remember her for her kindly disposition and quite unassuming manners’. Her youngest son, John Bilbie Hughes succeeded her as landlord.

John together with his wife Joyce farmed Park House before taking over the running of the hotel. John was a keen sportsman and was Hon. Secretary of the Tenby Hunt Steeple-chase and a director of the Tenby Marine Baths Company. He served as Captain of the local volunteer Fire Brigade and was a member of Tenby Corporation. He died in December 1889 at the early age of 45 following an attack of gout. His funeral was a grand affair with the mayor and corporation together with the mace bearers heading the procession followed by the Tenby Volunteer Fire Brigade who acted as bearers. The coffin draped with the deceased’s coat and helmet was carried on the Fire Engine that was drawn by two horses.

John’s widow Joyce continued to run the Cobourg Hotel together with the Royal Station Hotel in Bath until her death in March 1923. Both hotels then passed to her eldest daughter Gladys Joyce Hughes (born Tenby 1883) who had married Alfred Lionel Horner in 1919.

Mrs. Horner lived in India for many years where her husband Major Alfred Horner was serving with the Royal Army Veterinary Corps. After his death she returned to Britain and resided at Combe Down, Bath and ran the Royal Station Hotel. Following the sale of the Royal Station Hotel she returned to Tenby and resided at Wood Park Farm, New Hedges. Mrs. Horner, a generous supporter of local charities and organizations, was president of the local Association of the Tenby Boy Scouts and served on the committee of the local girl guides and Tenby sea cadets.

While resident in Tenby Mrs. Horner was instrumental in forming a Tenby branch of the ‘British Israel World Federation’. Meetings were held at the Cobourg and Mrs. Horner served as President of the local branch. She contributed a number of letters and short articles concerning the work of the federation to the *Tenby Observer* newspaper. Her son, John Alexander Horner, became proprietor of the hotel after her death in December 1954.

The Cobourg continued to operate until the end of the summer season in 1982 when it was announced that Mr. John Horner and his wife Shelia May Horner were retiring from the hotel business. An auction of the contents of the hotel took place over two days in November 1982. A separate auction was held on the 13th November of the contents of the Cobourg Hotel’s wine cellar. In December 1982 an application

by Rural and Coastal Developments of Coventry to convert the Cobourg into four shop units and 15 self contained flats was approved. Five flats with spacious living rooms, double bedrooms, fitted kitchens and bathrooms were located on each floor. Access to the flats, named Ashley House, was provided from Upper Frog Street. The estate agent advertisement stated that the flats were 'specially designed for retired gentlemen'. The hotel had served the crème de la crème and the flats were clearly designed to do the same!

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