VCH SHROPSHIRE

Newport

The Royal Victoria Hotel

This text has been prepared for VCH Shropshire by Richard Hoyle and Wendy Horton. Patrick Davenport drew our attention to material we might not otherwise have found.

The present text is made available to readers in advance of its full publication. We welcome suggestions for improvement, references and, of course, we invite readers to point out errors.

The illustrative images to the text follow at the end of the text.

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The Royal Victoria Hotel[1]

History

On its opening in 1830 the Royal Victoria Hotel was called The Union: it took its familiar name after the future Queen ate lunch there with her Mother, the Princess Victoria of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld on 28 October 1832.[2]

On 31 March 1829 a consortium of local figures had entered into an agreement for the purchase of an established inn called The Bear and adjacent property in St Mary's Street with the intention of creating a high-class hotel to be called The Union which would also serve as the principal posting house in Newport.[3] The scheme appears to have been led by Charles Morris of Beaumaris House. Malcolm Miles saw this as being an attempt to capture the lucrative coach and posting trade. This may well be true but it may also be suggested that the project was also an attempt to improve the facilities of the town. Certainly, some of the coaching trade moved from the Red Lion together with its landlord, William Liddle, but the Union was launched with high ambitions to be the social centre of the town, as may be seen from the facilities it contained, and in this it largely succeeded.

The whole scheme was placed on a formal footing with a trust deed of 1 January 1835. Forty-three hundred-pound shares were issued. Morris acted as manager of the enterprise. In fact there may have been insufficient shareholders to finance the project. Morris was obliged to lend the scheme £700 to ensure its completion and this became a charge on the shareholders. It has recently been discovered that the building work was done with some economy and parts of the pre-existing buildings were incorporated into the hotel.[4] Other than the splendid façade, the buildings were remodelled rather than rebuilt.

Morris had already acquired the necessary property for the shareholders before the agreement was signed in 1829. A newspaper advertisement announcing the opening of the Union Hotel appeared in September 1830 although auctions and other public occasions were being held there as early as April. The founding tenant of the Hotel was William Liddle who

[1] This account draws on Miles, *Inns and Outs*, pp. 173-86.

[2] Press accounts of the visit make it clear that the two Princesses assented to the suggestion that the hotel be named the Royal Victoria as they were leaving. *Staffs Adv.*, 3 Nov. 1832 and other newspapers.

[3] The original trust deed is SA, 1101/106/1/1. See also the abstract of title to shares in the hotel at 1101/55/1/1/9. The hotel was probably called the Union to reflect its joint ownership by shareholders.

[4] This was one of the conclusions of the assessment by Richard K. Morriss. There are several incremental versions of his reports: *The Royal Victoria Hotel, St Mary's Street, Newport: an architectural and archaeological assessment (Mercian Heritage Ser., 1312, 2018)* is the final and fullest made after the building had been stripped of fittings and the rear extensions demolished. A copy is in Shropshire HER, PRN 1259). See the comments at pp. 37-8.

moved to the Union after 23 years at the Red Lion.[5] He held his housewarming at the Union on 6 October.[6] Miles was surely correct to say that Liddle brought the Red Lion's coaching and posting trade with him but he was mistaken when he said that Liddle was a shareholder in the Union. Liddle may have wished to retire in 1831 when the Union was advertised to be let from Christmas 1831. In fact he stayed until 1838 when he was succeeded by the Misses Richards.[7]

Morris continued to manage the hotel for the trustees until his death, and then the responsibility to passed to first his brother John and by 1855 to John's son Charles John Morris.[8]

The 1831 advertisement shows that the Union had extensive public rooms.

> The premises contain a commodious bar, a magnificent ballroom 56 feet by 28, a public dining room about 36 feet in length, a commercial room 20 feet by 18, three other excellent sitting rooms and fourteen bedrooms, with all necessary offices, cellars, coach houses, stabling etc.[9]

It was therefore used for a wide range of public and private events. The most obvious were auctions, but there were also meetings of Turnpike Trusts and other semi-public bodies. There were regular balls.[10] The Royal Victoria was also used for public dinners, wedding dinners and celebrations of coming of age. A public dinner was held to celebrate the marriage of John Cotes Esq. with Lady Louisa Harriett Jenkinson in 1839, another for the marriage of R. M. Leeke of Longford Hall on 9 November 1847. Lord and Lady Blantyres' wedding was celebrated with a public ball on 20 October 1843.[11] A dinner was held to celebrate the coming of age of R. M. Leeke in September 1834, followed a few days later by a ball in his honour.[12] The coming of age ball of T. F. Boughey was held at the Royal Victoria in 1857.[13] These were occasional but highly prestigious events. From the beginning, lunch was offered on market days.

By 1835 there were coaches from the Royal Victoria Hotel every day except Sundays, to Liverpool, Birmingham, Shrewsbury, Newcastle-under-Lyme and Stafford. Long-distance

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[5] For Liddle's other interests, see the insurance policy in SA 4791/1/11, pp. 416-7.
[6] *Staffs Adv.*, 25 Sept. 1830.
[7] *SC*, 27 Apr. 1838
[8] Morris died in 1848: *Staffs. Adv.* 16, 23 Dec. 1848.
[9] *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*, 17 Oct. 1831
[10] For instance, one held on 26 Jan. 1836, *Staffs Adv.* 16, 23 Jan. 1836 or the ball on 11 Feb. 1847, where the dancing was reported to have continued to 6 am. *Staffs. Adv.* 30 Jan., 11 Feb., 20 Feb. 1847
[11] *Staffs Adv*. 7 Sept 1839; *Eddowes*, 10 Nov. 1847; *Eddowes*, 11 Oct. 1843.
[12] *SC* 29 Aug. 1834; *Staffs. Adv.* 13 Sept. 1834.
[13] Miles, *Inns and Outs*, p. 179.

coach services declined with the coming of the railway in 1849 but there was still demand for shorter journeys including to the station (Figure 1).[14]

Whether the Hotel was a commercial success might be doubted. At least some dividends were paid to its shareholders but from the examples gathered by Miles, the shares themselves were traded at far under their face value.[15] Benjamin Farnall, who took the lease in 1849, placed his affairs in the hands of trustees in 1851.[16] Harry Allen took the lease in 1855, moving to the Royal Victoria from the Crown.[17] Under his management the Royal Victoria seems to have been successful enough. Certainly Allen had flair and ran a high-quality establishment. The hotel omnibus met trains at Newport station: the hotel boasted a night porter. He also amassed shares in the Hotel, becoming its biggest shareholder. In 1861 he attempted to revive Newport Races but this petered out after a single meeting. But in 1867 he sold the lease of the hotel and his stock and the following year sold his shares in the hotel. Evidently he was in financial difficulties, but his health had also broken down. He died at Bournemouth on 3 July 1868 aged 44.[18]

Allen was followed by Benjamin Garnett who stayed until Lady Day 1876. He sold the contents of the Hotel at the end of March 1876 but his successor, one Charles Ensor, only held his house warming on 8 November. When Ensor moved on at Lady Day 1885, a different approach was taken by the major shareholders. The Royal Victoria Hotel Company was established with a capital of £1000 raised with ten £100 shares, Sir T. F. Boughey of Aqualate acted as chairman and the Newport solicitor J. S. Underhill as secretary.[19] Thereafter the operating company installed a salaried manageress, for a long period a Mrs Granger who in 1913 received a presentation recognising her 20 years at the Hotel. In 1900 the managing company became a partnership of Sir T. F. Boughey and Charles Lewis. In 1906 Lewis took a lease for 14 years from the shareholders. He died on 30 March 1915 and the hotel was offered for sale at auction but withdrawn.[20] In September 1916 Lewis's executors offered the contents for sale at auction.

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[14] Pigot's Directory, 1835
[15] Ibid., pp. 180, 181.
[16] *Staffs. Adv.*, 17 Nov. 1849; 1 Mar. 1851.
[17] For Allen, Miles, *Inns and Outs*, pp. 178-180; SA, 1101/106/1/2. For his arrival *Newport & Market Drayton Advertiser* 1 June 1855.
[18] Miles, *Inns and Outs*, p. 180: *St Adv.* 19 Oct. 1867 for an announcement of the sale. The death and burial (at Newport) is reported in *Eddowe's Shrewsbury Journal*, 15 July 1868.
[19] See the lease from the Proprietors of the Royal Victoria Hotel to the Royal Victoria Hotel Ltd., 22 May 1889. SA, 1101/106/1/8.
[20] *Staffs. Adv.*, 10 Apr. 1915.

A new company was established in 1916, the Royal Victoria Hotel, Newport, Salop, Ltd, with a share capital of £5000. This set about buying up the original shares issued in 1829, but seems to have been short lived. In 1922 the company was sold to Mrs Elizabeth Allen of the Anchor Inn in Whitchurch. It is striking that whilst the AA recommended the hotel for as a place to stay whilst touring from 1926 onwards, it was never more than a 2* establishment. At this time there were 13 rooms and spaces for 20 cars. There was also a hearse and 12 horses available for funerals (Figure 2).[21]

On Allen's death in 1940, the business passed to a daughter, Minnie Mary Allen. She sold the property to Wolverhampton and Dudley Breweries in April 1959. By this time the Hotel was in a rundown state. The brewery invested heavily in refurbishing the property. It seems likely that they made substantial internal alterations to the frontage building (including the demolition of internal walls) so that the heritage assessment of 2017 (made after the furnishings had been removed) found little surviving from the 1830 building apart from the main staircase and even that may have been remodelled.[22] It seems likely that Wolverhampton and Dudley demolished and rebuilt much of the buildings at the rear of the hotel, erecting a new ballroom on the site of the old assembly room. They purchased land to enlarge the car park. They then ran the hotel with a succession of managers. The hotel was refurbished a second time in 1988.[23]

By 2010 however the future of the hotel was in doubt. Photographs of the interior taken after its closure suggest that little had been spent on its decoration for some years: the public spaces were all tired.[24] It closed in 2014 but reopened temporarily the following year, and was then sold. Planning permission was secured in 2017 for the conversion of the front block into seven apartments. The buildings to the rear, most of them apparently Wolverhampton and Dudley's work, were to be demolished and the space released was to be redeveloped as the site for 21 terraced dwellings. These were finally built by the Wrekin Housing Trust as the Royal Victoria Mews. The development was delayed by COVID and in 2021 a new planning application was made to convert the building into a larger number of apartments. This was rejected for insufficient parking. The developer finally concluded that the only remaining option was to demolish the building whilst retaining the facade.[25] This

[21] NHS00093; NHS: Graham Talbot, 2023
[22] R. K. Morriss, *Royal Victoria Hotel*, pp. 22, 26, 38.
[23] Miles, *Inns and Outs*, pp. 185-6.
[24] Morriss, *The Royal Victoria Hotel, St Mary's St, Newport*, plates 9-12.
[25] *Shropshire Star* 24 Feb. 2017; BBC.co.uk/news/uk-england-shropshire-64718628 (21 Feb. 2023), both accessed 8 July 2024)

was opposed locally and in 2023 it was proposed that Telford and Wrekin council should purchase the property. This did not happen. In 2024, with the conversion stalled, the building was increasingly derelict and surrounded by scaffolding, and had been transformed from being Newport's prestige property to a local eyesore.

Building

The Union Hotel occupied two burgage plots. It consisted of two separate buildings unified behind a fine, classical-style façade which was designed by an unknown architect. The 3-storey 5-window front is of painted stuccoed brick, the ground floor rusticated with a wide string band. Above the parapets, a large triangular pediment surmounts the central three windows, which are slightly set forward. In the centre is an entrance portico on paired Tuscan columns, whilst over the central first floor window is a wrought iron sign in the form of a hanging bunch of grapes, denoting the vintner. All the windows are sashes, those to the upper storey within architraves and divided by pilasters with leaf and palmette capitals. The north wall is plain with paired small lights except for the continuation of the first floor string course. An open carriageway is adjacent, leading to the rear yard. During the twentieth century, the south wall was rebuilt in blockwork with a brick facing. Recent demolition of the rear ranges has exposed the rear brick wall of the main building, which retains some sash windows with plain brick heads.[26]

Architectural assessments took place from 2015 in advance of the projected redevelopment of the property. The division between the two original buildings was clear inside and they had differing floor levels. The ceilings of the south building were so low they were beneath the tops of the front sash windows. This range retained some original features, particularly in the roof, on the upper floors and cellar. This was probably the original Bear Inn. The roof over the north range was linked into the front façade of c. 1830.[27]

The hotel of *c*.1830 had an entrance vestibule with coffered ceiling and a central passage leading to the rear stair hall. Although partly altered, the imperial staircase had stick balusters spiralling out at the base, a moulded handrail and coved ceilings. Leading off to the south were two irregular rooms. The north end contained large rooms to front and rear, both heated by fireplaces in the north wall. [28]

[26] Newman & Pevsner, 443-4; HE list no. 1187980; Morriss, *Royal Victoria Hotel*, pp. 3, 17; Tithe map, 1841, app. 345, 421.
[27] Ibid., 3, 7, 14, 20, 29-33
[28] Ibid., 22, 26-7, 37; Newman & Pevsner, 444; HE list no. 1187980

Two sets of cellars were accessed by a stone stair beneath the main staircase. Those to the south were brick-vaulted, the front cellar appearing to relate to the earlier building. The northern cellars were lined in sandstone with partition walls in alignment with the spine walls located above, the front pair with flat ceilings, the rear pair brick-vaulted. [29]

In 1841, the south range had a long rear extension which included a tall 2-storey 4-window ballroom block of red brick. The ballroom on the first floor had a high ceiling and was heated by two fireplaces with corbelled chimney stacks. By the 1920s, the original front windows had been replaced by broad openings, possibly for garages. A separate, free-standing coach-house and stable block occupied the rear yard of the north plot, accessed from the north side of the hotel. [30]

In the 1990s there were 24 rooms, most en-suite. Before its closure in 2015, there were two full-length open-plan bar areas to the north and south with contemporary fittings, whilst there was a first-floor function room in the south range (Figure 3).[31] Permission was given to demolish the mainly 20th-century rear ranges and replace them with new housing. It was originally proposed to convert the main building into apartments, but this was not considered feasible due to the latter's poor condition. In this way the economies made when the Union Hotel was developed rebounded on the developers nearly two centuries later. An alternative proposal was made to retain the front façade only, with new flats constructed behind but was not approved. [32]

[29] Morriss, *Royal Victoria Hotel*, pp. 33-5
[30] Ibid., pp. 10, 42, 44; Historic England, aerial-photos, EPW005739, 1921, EPW034052, 1930
[31] These are all described (with illustrations) in Morris, *Royal Victoria Hotel*.
[32] Ibid., pp. 11-12, 24.

Royal Victoria Hotel, Figures

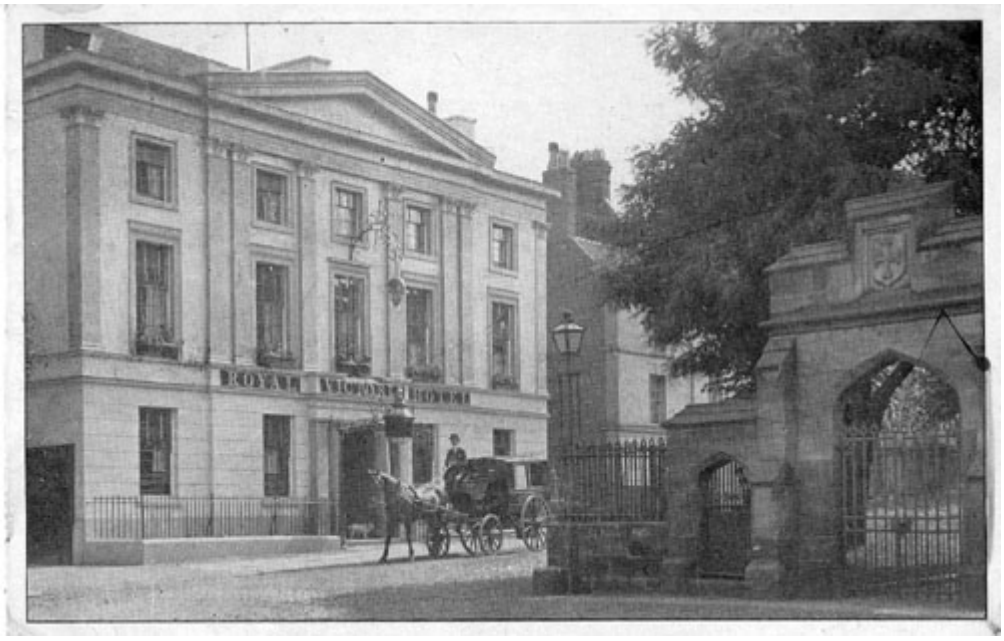

Figure 1. The Royal Victoria Hotel in 1910 with horse-drawn taxi outside (SNAP N000331)

Figure 2. A Late 20th-century view of The Royal Victoria Hotel (SNAP N001925

Figure 3. First floor function room in 2000 (SNAP N002578)