

THE PACKHORSE INN – PRESTON'S LANE, COLEORTON



An etching by W. H. Pyne 1806 of a field lime kiln
with fuel (slack coal) being transported to it by Packhorse

BY SAMUEL T STEWART – MAY 2020 (Updated March 2023)

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Before the development of the turnpike roads, preventing the efficient use of wheeled vehicles, goods of every conceivable kind needed to be carried on the backs of packhorses or sumpters (horses, donkeys, ponies or mules). Heavy goods like coal were mainly carried in basket work panniers slung on either side of the horse and mounted on wooden pack frames. Packhorses were a flexible and reliable means of transport, able to carry upwards of 400 lbs each dependent on their size over long distances.

From the earliest times coal was transported from local areas to Leicester by pack horse, via Ibstock, Bagworth, Desford and Kirby Muxloe to Aylestone. Here the track crossed the Soar by means of a pack horse bridge before entering the town of Leicester and thence to Coal Hill (or Berehill), a site now occupied by the Clock Tower.

The following is taken from H. Butler Johnson's publication c.1910, when he was writing about lost industries in Coleorton:-

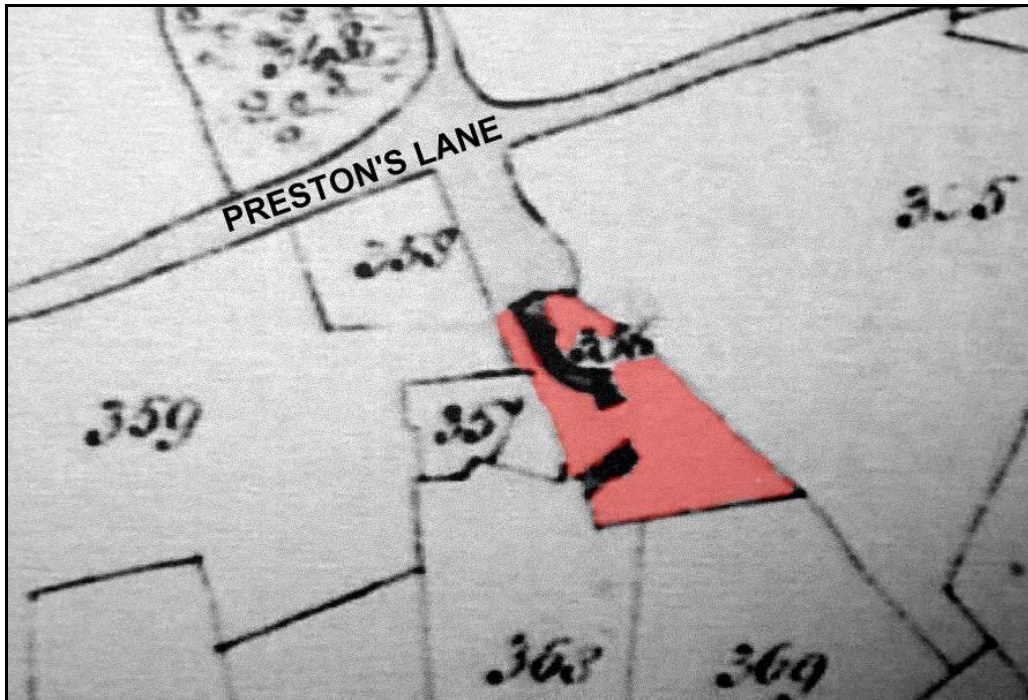
An occupation in the Cole Orton district which came to an end c.1850 was the hawking of coal carried on donkey's backs in large panniers. These donkeys were generally run in droves of fifteen or twenty, and the burdens they carried, so old residents have informed us, were almost unbelievable, as much as four hundredweight of coal being at times placed in the panniers of one of the little animals, a weight that bent it's spine into the form of an inverted arch.

The last drove, we believe, of these pack animals, nineteen donkeys and one small pony was that of William Bakewell, who lived in the lane, now named after him. Bakewell, who seems to have been the last man in Cole Orton to habitually wear a blue smock frock, was in the habit of fetching his supply of coal from the old Lount pit (presumably in the Smoile). On the way back home through the Woolrooms, the drove of burdened animals always lay down for a rest when they arrived at the bridge on Aqueduct Lane, under the Coleorton railway, and, until they had it, refused to pass the spot. Here the burdens were re-distributed, and the contents of the panniers to some extent lightened, not so much we fear for humanities sake, as for the fact that the coal was sold by the pannier, and not by weight, as the present law requires. For which relief, the donkeys, and not the customers gave much thanks.

It is not unreasonable to assume that the Packhorse Inn which formerly stood on the south side of Preston's Lane received its name from the fact that pack horses and ponies were kept near the premises. It is quite plausible that Pack Horses driven by a Hawker could have been kept here and rested in between taking coal from the many adjacent local coal pits by horses and donkeys carrying large basket work panniers on their backs to the surrounding districts.

The register for the 1842 Tithe map of Coleorton describes **Plot 356** as being **Packhorse Inn and garden - 1 rood 28 perches**, and an extract from the Tithe map on the following page shows plot 356 coloured pink in relation to Preston's Lane

The map shows a substantial building at the north end of the plot and what is assumed to be a barn at the southerly end. It cannot be an accident that the surveyor deliberately drew a distinctively arc shaped building. A suggestion and only a suggestion for this, is that it possibly indicates stabling for the horses and ponies.



The above map shows the relationship of the Packhorse Inn to Preston's Lane, Preston's Smithy and the wider area

- Plot 356 (The Packhorse) coloured red,

- Preston's Lane coloured pink
- Plot 347 (Preston's Smithy garden & house) coloured blue.
- Coleorton cross-roads coloured green.

This pre 1960's photograph of the property was thought to have encompassed at least a part of the former "Packhorse Inn", possibly to the left hand side. A modern residence, named "The Sycamores", exists on the site now and the original building has clearly seen many changes in use and style over the centuries.

The present owners of "The Sycamores" have expressed the view that the original house was built around the mid 1700's and the date "1767" is carved into a beam above one fireplace. Apparently, many beer bottles were discovered in the garden during renovations, which is not surprising, but these would have come from a later time in the Inn's history, as until the late 1800s, most beer was sold in oak barrels since bottled beer had to be consumed quickly or it would spoil.



Part of the cottage pre-1960s

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**Sycamore House in 1936 when viewed from the front
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LICENSING RECORDS

Licensing records for Ale Houses in Coleorton are available back to 1753. However, because there is no name for the *Packhorse* given in these records pre 1825 it is difficult to identify licensees prior to then. Ale Houses did not have to be given a name or erect a sign until a new licensing Act came into force in 1825 and it was only necessary to provide a village location up till then. This coincides exactly with the inn being listed as the *Packhorse* in the licensing records for the first time in 1825.

Interpretation of the Ale House licensing records pre 1825, almost certainly confirms that Jacob Webster was the licensee of the *Packhorse* for the period from 1819 through to 1827. Surety was put up by John Sharpe of Coleorton in 1819 and by William Earp in 1820 and in 1822/23/24 by Robert Kerby, all being of Coleorton.

From 1825 to 1827, Thomas Stinson (former licensee at the "Bell Inn"), William Kirby and William Stretton, all of Coleorton, provided the surety for those three years respectively. Either one or two people were required to stand surety, generally for the sum of £10 each.

There is no further mention of the *Packhorse* in the licensing records for 17 years until the Ashby Register of full licensees lists James Gough as the licensee of the *Packhorse* from 1842 to 1851. No details of the type of license was given or the owner / leaseholder, so it is assumed it was still an Alehouse. It is assumed that it was at this point that the *Packhorse* finally ceased to be used as an Inn as James Gough was at the Kings Arms from 1852 to 1858 and no further mention is made of the *Packhorse*. Enquiries into what happened to the *Packhorse* during those 17 years of not appearing in the licensing records has drawn a complete blank

Later in the 1850's, the cottage was reputedly known as "Ned Gough's Cottage". By then, Ned was an agricultural labourer, so this seems to align with the closure date suggested above when James Gough moved to the King's Arms.