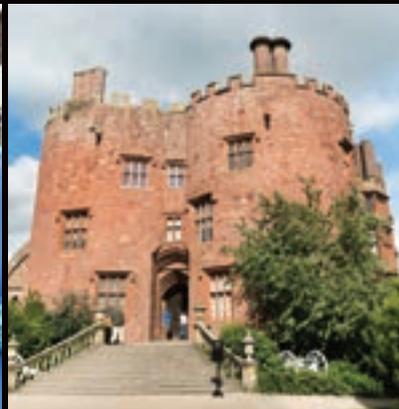




HOTEL, EATERY
& COFFEE HOUSE

A BRIEF HISTORY

BY WILL SWALES



WELCOME

Welcome to a brief history of The Royal Oak Hotel, Welshpool, Wales. 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 Royal Oak Hotel.

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 Royal Oak Hotel. We are now busy researching the other inns we own and operate within our group and hope that eventually we will have all our inns within one publication, but until then please feel free to take this copy with you.

Kevin Charity
Managing Director
The Coaching Inn Group

www.coachinginngroup.co.uk





“WELL-AIRED BEDS, WINES OF THE BEST VINTAGE, LIQUEURS GENUINE AS IMPORTED, WITH THE GREATEST CIVILITY AND ATTENTION”



POOL, WELSHPOOL AND THE EARLY ROYAL OAK BUILDING



Medieval stonework exposed in the dining room.
Photo courtesy Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust,
ref. 4416-001.

"...the stone was
within the timber
framework of a
Tudor structure..."

The Royal Oak Hotel stands at the centre of the town of Welshpool, now in Powys but formerly in the old county of Montgomeryshire.

As far back as records go, and until the 1920s, the hotel was part of the ancient manor of Pool; the name being a translation of the Welsh, Y Trallwng. The manor was in turn part of the estate of Powis Castle, which stands just outside the town, and was the centre of political power in the area from at least the 1200s.

The town was originally known as Pool, after the manor, but in the 1400s English administrators renamed it Welch Pool; the spelling later changing to Welsh Pool and then Welshpool. However, local folk continued to call it Pool for centuries afterwards. Although not the county town, Welshpool developed as Montgomeryshire's main commercial centre because of its location at the meeting of three important roads from Chester, Shrewsbury and Ludlow, making it the gateway to mid-Wales, and because it was just three miles away from the highest navigable point on the River Severn, at Pool Quay.

Elements of The Royal Oak building point to there being an important property on the site as far back as the 1500s or earlier. Renovation work in the 1990s exposed a small section of medieval stonework behind the plaster of the wall dividing the dining room from the lounge. The large, well-dressed stones were indicative of belonging to a substantial, high-status building.

A report from the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust noted that the stone was within the timber framework of a Tudor structure, and speculated that it was recycled, possibly from the nearby abbey site of Strata Marcella, which was demolished sometime after 1536 at the dissolution of the monasteries. The stonework has since been covered over again, but a section of timber framing from an adjoining partition wall in the dining room has been left exposed as a feature.





The exposed timber-frame partition in the dining room.



PROMOTION OF THE ROYAL-OAK METAPHOR



Charles Stuart asleep in the oak tree at Boscobel Wood, by Isaac Fuller, circa 1660s. © National Portrait Gallery.

"...he [Charles Stuart] and a lone protector were forced to hide in the upper branches of an oak tree at Boscobel Wood..."

The term 'royal oak' is a metaphor for the strength and stability of the monarchy. No-one knows its origin but the most significant early record of it was in a political pamphlet, 'Anarchia Anglicana', printed in 1649 during the Civil War.

The timing was shortly after the execution of Charles I and at the start of Oliver Cromwell's parliamentary republic. The publisher sought to warn against a godless anarchy to follow, and emphasised the point with an elaborate drawing of Cromwell overseeing the felling of 'The Royall Oake of Brittainy', depicted as a mighty oak tree with the royal crown in its branches.

The later, widespread popularisation of 'royal oak' as a symbol of the monarchy was inspired by a famous event that followed the last battle of the Civil War, at Worcester in 1651. The army of the late king's 21-year-old son and heir, known to parliamentarians as plain Charles Stuart, suffered a humiliating defeat at Cromwell's hands. Charles fled the battle, chased by parliamentary soldiers. He reached 50 miles north of Worcester when he and a lone protector were forced to hide in the upper branches of an oak tree at Boscobel Wood while their pursuers searched below in vain. The tree, just 45 miles east of Welshpool, became known as the Royal Oak and the event was later generally, but incorrectly, regarded as the origin of the term.

After Cromwell's death, Charles, who among royalists had always been considered the king, was 'restored' to the throne as Charles II on 29 May 1660, his 30th birthday. In commemoration of his escape at Boscobel Wood, he decreed that the day of his restoration and birthday should henceforth be observed by church and state as Oak Apple Day. It also became known as Royal Oak Day or Restoration Day. Throughout the land it was marked as a public holiday, much celebrated by loyal citizens dressing buildings with boughs of oak, and wearing oak-apple sprigs in their clothing.



THE ORIGIN OF THE WELSHPOOL INN—NAME THE ROYAL OAK

The earliest record of any inn called The Royal Oak is of one in London, which was mentioned in the diary of Samuel Pepys in the year 1663. Thereafter it quickly caught-on and became one of the nation's most popular inn-names.

Opinions by local historians on the origin of the name of Welshpool's Royal Oak Inn have varied. Some have suggested that it was first named The Oak Inn, and that its 'royal' upgrade occurred in the early 1800s. This booklet collates the more-recently found, incontrovertible evidence that earlier references to the name Oak Inn were merely short forms, and that the inn's full name has been The Royal Oak since at least 1724.

And there were good reasons for the inn being named The Royal Oak, which must have happened during the 64 years between 1660 and 1724. The building was owned by successive masters of Powis Castle, the Herbert family, who were loyal supporters of the two kings most associated with the royal-oak metaphor. In 1629 William Herbert was created Baron Powis by Charles I, and he supported the king during the Civil War, much to his personal loss. In 1644 Powis Castle was captured by parliamentary troops, and Lord Powis and his son and heir, Percy, were imprisoned.

William Herbert died while still under house-arrest in London in 1656. Percy, the 2nd Baron Powis, recovered his family's castle and estates after the Restoration of Charles II in 1660. Therefore it could have been the grateful Percy Herbert who named The Royal Oak as a simple expression of his loyalty to the throne. Or, after his death in 1667, it could have been either his son or grandson.



Powis Castle.



Percy Herbert, 2nd Baron Powis (1598–1667), who could have named The Royal Oak Inn. Possibly by Paul van Somer, early 17th century. © National Trust Images/Clare Bates.



THE HERBERT FAMILY AND THE JACOBITE CONTROVERSIES



William Herbert 1st Duke of Powis (c.1626–1696), by Francois de Troy. © National Trust Images/John Hammond.



William Herbert 2nd Duke of Powis (c.1660–1745), attrib. Francois de Troy. © National Trust Images.

On Percy Herbert's death in 1667 the barony of Powis passed to his son William, who in 1674 was elevated by Charles II to the title Earl of Powis – perhaps another opportunity for the naming of The Royal Oak Inn.

However, only four years later the earl was among many Catholic members of the nobility and gentry who were falsely accused of plotting to kill Charles II. It was a time when Protestant zealots imagined widespread conspiracies to replace Charles, who was a lukewarm Protestant, with his younger brother James, a declared Catholic. Those who sympathised with James's religious views were termed Jacobites. William Herbert was among them, for which he was imprisoned in the Tower of London for five years. On the death of Charles II in 1685, the throne passed to James, as James II, by right of succession, creating great conflict with the mainly Protestant establishment.

The freed William Herbert became a close and favoured supporter of the new king, who in 1687 elevated him to the title of Marquess of Powis. However, the struggle against the Protestants was lost in 1688 when James II was deposed and replaced by the fiercely Protestant William of Orange, a grandson of the late Charles I. William Herbert accompanied James to France and became a member of the exiled king's Jacobite royal court. Herbert was further rewarded with the title Duke of Powis, while his estates back at home were all confiscated. He died in exile in 1696.

His son William was acknowledged in his courtesy title of Viscount Montgomery, but inherited nothing and was at one time jailed as a Jacobite. However, in 1703 he regained possession of Powis Castle and estate, and in 1722, after a long battle in the courts, he was acknowledged as the 2nd Marquess of Powis. Keeping true to his Jacobite sympathies, he styled himself privately as the 2nd Duke of Powis, which was at least recognised by the staff and tenants of the estate.



A QUAKER'S DIARY AND THE REBUILDING OF THE ROYAL OAK

The earliest-known reference to The Royal Oak in Welshpool appears in a 1724 entry in a diary, now preserved at the Society of Friends in London, of a local gentleman and Quaker minister, John Kelsall. This was during the ownership of the inn by William Herbert, 2nd Duke of Powis.

Kelsall lived with his family at the Friends Meeting House on the Dolobran Hall estate, about eight miles north-west of Welshpool, and was a frequent visitor to the town, especially on market days and fair days. On four occasions he reported visiting The Royal Oak, which he identified each time by its full name. He took meals with friends there on 2 September 1724, 26 February 1726, and 29 October 1733. On 14 September 1733 he lodged at the inn on the first night of a horse-back journey to visit friends in Birmingham, Wolverhampton and Stourbridge.

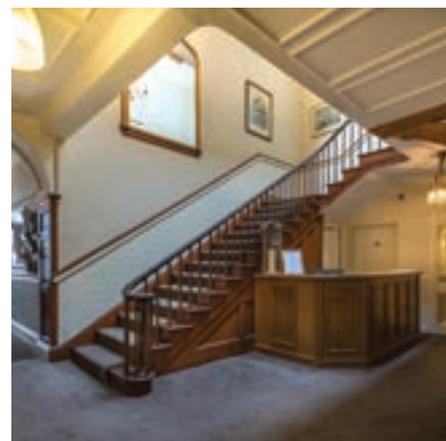
Among the many local people named in Kelsall's diaries was Humphrey Parry, a future innkeeper at The Royal Oak, whose manner at a meeting of local gentlemen was described by Kelsall as 'uncharitable in discourse'. It transpires that Parry was responsible the rebuilding of The Royal Oak in around 1741–42. Among Powis Castle records, now held at the National Library for Wales at Aberystwyth, is an invoice dated November 1741 for three pounds seventeen shillings for the carriage of building materials.

It is a composite bill for charges levied by three different contractors, and was submitted by Humphrey Parry to the Duke of Powis. It itemised scores of loads of timber, sand, scaffold poles and paving stones, all recorded as delivered to The Royal Oak, once again named in full. A note written on the bill by the duke's agent, James Baker, returned it to Parry with the instruction: 'Pray pay this bill, which shall be allowed you in part [payment.] of rent'.

The date of the bill supports expert opinion on the period of the main building of The Royal Oak. Although it has since been subject to numerous alterations, some important detailed elements of Georgian styling of the mid-1700s remain today, including the fine central staircase and a superbly crafted wrought-iron hanging sign depicting the emblems of the oak tree and crown.



The wrought-iron hanging sign.



The central staircase.



CHANGES AT POWIS CASTLE DURING THE 1700S



George Herbert 2nd Earl of Powis (1755–1801), by Pompeo Batoni 1776. © National Trust Images/John Hammond.

William Herbert, the 2nd Duke of Powis, died in 1745, followed in 1748 by his son, William, the 3rd duke, who was unmarried and left no heir.

His estate passed to a niece's husband, Henry Herbert, who was a distant blood relation of the late duke. On inheriting the property but not the titles, Henry Herbert was granted the title Earl of Powis of the second creation. After his death in 1772 the title and estate passed to his son George Herbert, 2nd Earl of Powis.

EDWARD BAYLEY'S TENURE AT THE ROYAL OAK

During the time of George Herbert, 2nd Earl of Powis, the tenant of The Royal Oak from March 1785 was Edward Bayley, whose rental accounts for the period up to 1791 have survived in the Powis Castle archives.

These records consistently identify The Royal Oak by its short form, The Oak Inn. They show that Edward Bayley was an important tenant who at various times had multiple property holdings on the estate. He routinely off-set his rent by providing services to the estate, so that he usually had very little to pay. For example, his gross rent for the inn was £40 per annum, but it was reduced by his provision of the twice-yearly dinner that was given for the estate tenants when they attended at the inn to pay their rents.

A billhead from the period of Edward Bayley's tenure has survived and is held at the Powysland Museum in Welshpool. It is a very small document with a highly detailed and intricate pictorial header that when enlarged, as shown opposite, helps to resolve past misunderstandings over the name of the inn.



NAME CLUES IN EDWARD BAYLEY'S OAK-INN BILLHEAD

The wording of the title banner 'Edwd. Bayley – Oak-Inn, Pool' is a fairly typical style of the period when many innkeepers liked to include their personal name in the name of their establishment, and for the sake of brevity dropped any adjectival word from the traditional inn-name.

In this case we can be assured that the correct, traditional name of the inn was The Royal Oak, as revealed in the pictorial scene below the banner. Here we can clearly see the oak tree with the royal crown in its central branches, located above an image of Charles Stuart hiding in the tree, while below are mounted parliamentary soldiers.

'Neat Post Chaises' refers to four-wheeled carriages drawn by two or four horses and driven by a postilion mounted on one of the horses. Inns traditionally provided these chaises and drivers, effectively as the taxi service of the period.



NEW ROADS AND MIGHTY OAKS FOR WARSHIPS



Rodney's Pillar on Breidden Hill. © David Lea.

"...local landowners were proud of their contribution to the Royal Navy's repeated successes in battle."

The Royal Oak was clearly named as an expression of loyalty to the throne, but it was also extremely apposite in relation to Montgomeryshire's renowned extensive oak woodlands. They were famed for containing exceptionally large trees, and Powis Castle Park was especially noted for having some of the largest specimen oak trees in Britain.

Montgomeryshire oak timber was ideal for shipbuilding, which required massive single beams for structures such as rudder-bearing sternposts and the so-called keelsons, the central struts running the length of the base of the vessel. Difficulties in getting the timbers to Pool Quay were eased enormously between 1756 and 1768 when all the main roads coming into Welshpool were reconstructed and became properly maintained toll-roads, known as turnpikes.

The timber trade took off; the greatest demand coming from the Royal Navy, which during the late 1700s was engaged in a succession of wars requiring constant replenishment and expansion of the fleet. Specialist auctions of timber were held at the county's most important inns, including at The Royal Oak, which in March 1773 hosted one of the largest timber sales of the period. Five lots comprised 4,556 oak trees and 429 ash trees, described in the pre-sale press advertisements as being: 'near to a good turnpike road leading to Pool Quay where the Severn is navigable.'

Montgomeryshire oak was often advertised as 'navy timber', and local landowners were proud of their contribution to the Royal Navy's repeated successes in battle. Their attentions focused on the serial victories of Admiral George Rodney, who reached the height of his fame during the American War of Independence (1775–83). In 1781 the gentry of Montgomeryshire honoured their hero by building a monument to him. The 16-metre-tall Rodney's Pillar was erected at the top of Breidden Hill near Welshpool.

Rodney's most famous victory came in 1782 at the Battle of the Saintes, near the island of Dominica in the Caribbean. Afterwards he was celebrated throughout the country, including by having hundreds of inns named after him. One of them, The Admiral Rodney, in Horncastle, Lincolnshire, is another of The Coaching Inn Group's hotels.



THE COMING OF THE MONTGOMERYSHIRE CANAL

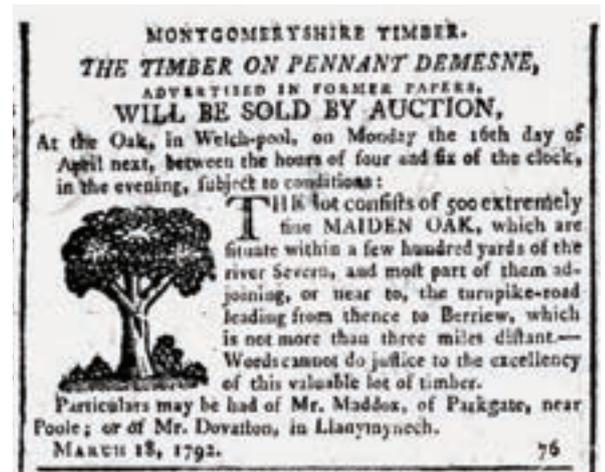
Sales of the much-sought-after Montgomeryshire oak-timber continued throughout the 1780s and 90s, with some of the most important auctions continuing to be held at The Royal Oak, or The Oak as it was then more generally known.

The press notice of a sale held at the inn in April 1792 stressed the usual benefits of the turnpike roads and the proximity of the River Severn. However, at this time there was an increasing clamour among the local gentry to improve the transport infrastructure still further by connecting the district to the growing national network of canals.

And so a committee appointed to draw up plans for a canal through Montgomeryshire held its first meeting on 7 November 1792 at The Royal Oak. The new waterway would run parallel with the River Severn, from the Ellesmere Canal in the north, heading southwards past Pool Quay, skirting Welshpool, and on to other strategic points higher up the Severn valley as far as Newtown.

Work started on the new Montgomeryshire Canal in early 1795, and by February 1796 parts were completed as far as Welshpool, where the canal's first boat, Royal Montgomery, was launched near the town amidst great celebrations.

In March 1796 The Royal Oak hosted another notably large timber auction, of 1,437 oak and 279 Ash and Elm trees located in woods in and around Vaynor Park, near Berriew. The sale notice advised potential buyers that the trees were within half a mile of the new canal, which was expected to be navigable to Berriew by October.



Chester Chronicle 23 March 1792. © The British Library Board. All rights reserved. With thanks to the British Newspaper Archive. www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.



JOHN KEATE – INNKEEPER AND COACH PROPRIETOR

CONSIDERABLE AND EASY TRAVELLING
FROM
SHREWSBURY TO ABERYSTWITH,
Through Welshpool, Newtown, Llanidloes, and over
THE DEVIL'S BRIDGE,
(Which is so much the object of Curiosity and
Wonder to Travellers.)
LADIES and GENTLEMEN, and
the Public in general, are respectfully in-
formed, that
A NEW AND ELEGANT
POST COACH,
CALLED
THE PRINCE OF WALES,
To carry Six Insides and Three Outrides; will
set out from the ELEPHANT-AND-CASTLE INN,
Mardol, Shrewsbury, on Monday, the Fourth
of June next, at Five o'clock in the morning.
Breakfast at the Oak Inn, Welshpool. Dine at the
New Inn, Llanidloes, and arrive at Aberystwith about
half past Nine o'clock in the evening; returns
from the Talbot Inn, in Aberystwith, at Five o'clock
next morning, Breakfast at the Herod Arms,
Droo's Bridge, Dine at Newtown, and arrive in
Shrewsbury about half past Nine o'clock in the
evening.
Every exertion will be used to render this un-
dertaking worthy the countenance and encourage-
ment of the Public.
This Coach will continue to run once a Week,
till the Fourth of October next.
FARE, Inside 1l. 10s—Outside 18s.
14lb. weight of luggage allowed; and all above
to be paid for.
The Proprietors will not be answerable for
Parcels, &c. above the value of Five Pounds,
unless entered as such and paid for accordingly.
Performed by the Public's most obedient hum-
ble Servants,
JOHN HILL and SONS, Shrewsbury,
JOHN KEATE, Welshpool,
THOMAS ASHFORD, Newtown,
THOMAS HUGHES, Llanidloes,
JACOB JONES, Aberystwith.
Places taken for the above Coach at John
Hill and Sons, Kin-lane, Shrewsbury; and at
the Talbot Inn, in Aberystwith.
Shrewsbury, May 4, 1798.

A newspaper advertisement in February 1795 invited applications for the tenancy of the Welshpool inn named as The Oak. It described the accommodation as comprising: on the ground floor 'three good parlours, a large bar, a convenient kitchen and other offices'; on the first floor 'two spacious dining rooms (which are occasionally laid into one for a ballroom), and five bed chambers'; and in the attic 'seven good lodging rooms, besides garrets'.

From clues to follow, it might have been John Keate who became the new innkeeper that year. He was named in a press advertisement of May 1798 as one of the proprietors of a new weekly coach service, The Prince of Wales, scheduled to run for the summer season between Shrewsbury and Aberystwyth.

It was a tourist coach, probably taking advantage of the growing fashion for sea bathing at Aberystwyth. The schedule offered comfortable meal breaks at inns along the way, beginning with 'breakfast at the Oak Inn'. The return trip included a visit to the popular Devil's Bridge waterfalls at Pontarfynach, near Aberystwyth.

The Postmaster General's first national road survey was published in 1798 as 'Cary's New Itinerary of the Great Roads throughout England and Wales'. The only inn listed for travellers to Welshpool was The Royal Oak, recorded by its full name.

In June 1801 John Keate announced in the press, presumably after some improvements at the inn, that he offered his patrons at The Royal Oak: 'well-aired beds, wines of the best vintage, liqueurs genuine as imported, with the greatest civility and attention. NB: Neat chaises, able horses, sober and careful drivers'.

Hereford Journal, 9 May 1798. © The British Library Board.
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Archive. www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.



MARY COLLEY'S SERVICES TO THE NOBILITY AND GENTRY

In April 1802 a press notice declared that Thomas Colley had: 'entered upon The Oak Inn, which he intends fitting up in a style of accommodation for the reception of the nobility and gentry, as well as travellers'. But in November the same year he died, leaving his wife Mary to carry on running the inn with her son James.

In February 1807 Mary was a founder member of the Welshpool Association for the Prosecution of Felons. In this time before the introduction of state-funded police and prosecution services, traders and property owners formed associations to fund rewards for information about offenders and to pay lawyers to bring the accused to court. By a strict rule of the Welshpool association, its annual meeting and dinner were held at The Royal Oak, and each member was obliged to pay Mrs Colley two shillings for the dinner, whether they attended or not.

Correspondence preserved in the Powis Castle archives gives a fascinating insight into the role of The Royal Oak in the business communications of the estate during this period. Many letters were addressed to important individuals at the inn rather than at their homes, presumably because it was a convenient meeting place and because it was a collection and delivery point for the Royal Mail postmen riding to and from Chester and Shrewsbury. One gentleman who was regularly found at the inn was John Lloyd Jones, a major landowner and a deputy steward of the Powis Castle estate. His great house of Maesmawr Hall was 20 miles away, near Newtown.

Two letters demonstrate that his movements created work for the innkeeper. One sent to him at 'The Oak inn' dated 1808 had a cover-note addressed to Mrs Colley asking her to send it on to Maesmawr in the event that Mr Lloyd Jones was not present at the inn. Another note from 1808 was written by Mary Colley's son James and was addressed to Mr Lloyd Jones at Maesmawr Hall. It advised that a Powis Castle official had: 'called here this morning and informed my mother that Lord Powis wishes to see you'.



Edward (Clive) Herbert, Viscount Clive (1785–1848), by Francis Grant. © National Trust Images/John Hammond.

VISCOUNT CLIVE INHERITS ESTATE

In 1808, the Lord Powis mentioned on this page was Edward Clive, who had been created 1st Earl of Powis of the third creation in 1804 following the death in 1801 of his unmarried brother-in-law George Herbert, 2nd Earl of Powis of the second creation. Although Clive lived at Powis Castle, he didn't own it or the estate. Instead they had been left to his son, also Edward Clive, who had inherited them in 1807 on reaching the age of 21 and on abiding by the late earl's stipulation that he should change his surname to Herbert. He retained his courtesy title of Viscount Clive.



WELSHPOOL COACH SERVICES EXPAND

"The Royal Oak received the new twice-weekly Royal Mail from Shrewsbury..."

Coach services through Welshpool, and specifically those calling at The Royal Oak, expanded considerably during the 1810s.

Starting from 1811, The Royal Oak received the new twice-weekly Royal Mail from Shrewsbury, which arrived on Wednesday and Friday evenings, and returned each following day. Another Royal Mail service from Shrewsbury called at an unknown inn in Welshpool on Wednesdays and Fridays on its way to Newtown and then Aberystwyth; and a third Royal Mail called at Welshpool on Sundays, heading for Newtown, and returning by the same route every Monday.

Private-enterprise coach services through Welshpool were also increasing at this time. In 1818 a new six-days-a-week service was launched from Chester, running south through Wrexham, Oswestry and Welshpool, and then on to Newtown and Llanidloes. The owners announced that the new service would spare passengers having to travel via Shrewsbury.

VIOLENT DEATH OF JAMES COLLEY

In August 1820 a man named Simon Evans was working on a chimney at The Royal Oak when it was alleged that he threw a brick at the innkeeper's son, James Colley, striking the 31-year-old on the head.

Two months later Colley died of his injuries, and Evans was charged with manslaughter. The incident probably contributed to Mary Colley's decision to retire from The Royal Oak early in April 1821, when she was aged 66. Later the same month Evans was tried, and was acquitted for lack of evidence.



WELL-CONNECTED JOHN AND SARAH WHITEHALL

The new tenants of The Royal Oak from April 1821 were John Whitehall and his wife Sarah, both aged 48, and both well-connected at Powis Castle.

According to the memories of an elderly Welshpool citizen recorded in 1881, John had previously been the master of horse at the castle, and Sarah had been a lady's maid. Their eldest daughter's godparents were the two distinguished sisters of Edward Herbert, Viscount Clive, the owner of the castle and its estate. The sisters had both married in 1817; Charlotte to become the Duchess of Northumberland, and Henrietta to become Lady Williams-Wynn, the wife of a baronet said to be the largest landowner in North Wales.

A STAG-HUNT DINNER AND A CORONATION BALL

With such connections, John and Sarah Whitehall would never be short of support from their landlord.

This was the case with one of their early initiatives, the establishment in 1821 of an annual town stag-hunt. On the appointed morning, a stag donated by the Powis Castle estate was released near the town, and was hunted by the townsfolk with dogs. It became known as the Welshpool Stag Hunt or the Oak Stag Hunt, and it always concluded with dinner at The Royal Oak.

Also in 1821, John and Sarah Whitehall hosted a grand public ball, held on 19 July, the day of the coronation of George IV. It was the highlight of the town's numerous coronation celebrations. An advertisement stated that the ball would be held at the inn's first-floor rooms, 'which will be splendidly lighted up'.



Charlotte Florentia Percy, Duchess of Northumberland.
Mezzotint by William Oakley Burgess, after Sir Thomas Lawrence. © National Portrait Gallery.



JOHN WHITEHALL AND THE EXPANDING COACH TRADE



A typical coachman, by Cecil Aldin (1870–1935).

Innkeeper John Whitehall took full advantage of the expanding trade in coach services passing through Welshpool in the 1820s.

A daily service from Chester called The High Flyer was launched in 1823, arriving at The Royal Oak at 6pm and departing for the return journey the following day at 4am. Just over a year later a service called The Oswestry Prince Regent followed the same route and timings, either as a direct competitor or a replacement for The High Flyer.

In February 1826, John Whitehall became a partner in a new Royal Mail service setting off from The Royal Oak at 5am every day and heading for Ludlow, where it connected to the Worcester Royal Mail to London. Other coaches passing through Welshpool at around this time included The Union and The Wellington (both running between Shrewsbury and Aberystwyth), and The Thorn (between Chester and Newtown). The latter was later replaced by The Oswestry and Welshpool Nettle, which ran from Chester as far as The Royal Oak, Welshpool, where it connected with another coach to Newtown.

John Whitehall died in August 1828, aged 55, leaving his widow Sarah to carry on the business, which the records show she did to great acclaim.

A COACH SERVICE NAMED AFTER THE ROYAL OAK

Sometime during the early-to-mid-1830s a daily coach service named The Royal Oak was launched by Richard Smith of Chester, one of the city's leading coaching operators, to run between Chester and Newtown. It called at The Royal Oak, Welshpool, in both directions, and was almost certainly named after the inn, which by this time was the most renowned coaching inn on the route.



CELEBRATING PRINCESS VICTORIA'S VISIT TO WELSHPOOL

During the summer of 1832 the heir-presumptive to the throne, the 13-year-old Princess Victoria, together with her mother, the Duchess of Kent, conducted several visits in Wales, including one to Welshpool that included an overnight stay at Powis Castle.

The entourage at Welshpool included the princess's governess, the Duchess of Northumberland, who as we have seen was a godmother to the daughter of Royal Oak innkeeper Sarah Whitehall. When the royal party arrived in the town it was reported that they were: 'received with great enthusiasm, the whole town being hung with festoons of oak, and numberless triumphal arches being erected'.

While the royals dined at the castle, about 90 gentlemen of the county attended at The Royal Oak for a celebratory dinner, which a press report noted was: 'provided by Mrs Whitehall in her usual good style'. Past speculation that this was the occasion on which the inn first became known as The Royal Oak is now confirmed as incorrect.

THE EARL OF POWIS DIES AFTER BEING SHOT BY HIS SON

Edward (Clive) Herbert, Viscount Clive, the owner of Powis Castle and its estate, including The Royal Oak, became the 2nd Earl of Powis on the death of his father in 1839. During a pheasant shoot in 1848 the 2nd earl was accidentally shot in the thigh by one of his younger sons, and 10 days later, to everyone's surprise, he died of the injury. He was 62. His eldest son, Edward James Herbert, became the 3rd Earl of Powis and the new owner of the castle and estate.



One of The Royal Oak's reception rooms.

"...about 90 gentlemen of the county attended at The Royal Oak for a celebratory dinner.."



SARAH WHITEHALL'S CELEBRATED COACHING INN

An article published in 1878 recalled events at The Royal Oak during the 1840s when Sarah Whitehall was in her 70s and still going strong as the mistress of one the area's most important coaching inns.

In the Licensed Victuallers' Gazette, in a series headed 'Celebrated coaching inns', an article described a time when The Royal Oak at Welshpool was so busy with coaches that the stables were nearly always full. From this and other records we learn that the regular driver of the Shrewsbury and Aberystwyth Royal Mail was the highly regarded coachman Charles Tustin, who was accompanied by a guard called Thomas Berridge. The following is extracted from the article:

'The time from Shrewsbury to Welshpool was about two hours, and it was a rarity if Tustin ever varied three minutes in his arrival at The Royal Oak, into the forecourt of which he dexterously piloted his four spanking browns. In the summer mornings there was always a number of people up to see the mail arrive. The cordial and cheery welcome given to those passengers who alighted to partake of breakfast at the hotel by the buxom and genial landlady, Mrs Whitehall, was a thing to be remembered and talked about.

'She was the pink of what such a woman should be, and the fame of her cuisine reached very far beyond the county in which she lived. In fact it was common thinking in her day for commercial travellers from a wide district around to assemble at The Royal Oak to spend their Sundays there, so capital was the provision made for their comfort and convenience. In short, she made The Royal Oak famous, and she had her reward.'

Sarah Whitehall died in December 1851, aged 79, after 30 years at The Royal Oak. Her executors sold the entire contents of the inn – every piece of furniture in every room and the entire stock of wines, beers and spirits. It was a mammoth auction that was scheduled to take place over seven days.



'Arriving at the inn', from a series of drawings by Herbert Railton and Hugh Thomson, c.1893.



THE ROYAL OAK COACH AND A NEW COACH OFFICE

The developing national railway network was edging closer to Welshpool by 1852 when the tenancy of The Royal Oak was taken on by leading local coach operators W and G Smith.

Significant alterations and additions to the inn were completed early in 1853, at which time the coach service named The Royal Oak was in the process of switching from the firm of Smiths, Edwards and Lloyd, to Smith, Taylor and Co., later to become just W and G Smith. The coach northwards now ran only as far as Oswestry, where passengers transferred to the new train service connecting to Chester.

Smith, Taylor and Co. also operated the Royal Mail coach between Shrewsbury and Aberystwyth, changing horses at The Royal Oak in Welshpool. From 1853 the altered Royal Oak Inn became one of the firm's two coach offices; the other being The Lion Inn at Shrewsbury.



THE ROYAL OAK COACH.

THE Public are respectfully informed that the ROYAL OAK COACH leaves every day (Sundays excepted) the under-mentioned places, as follows:—

Leaves Bear's Head Hotel, Newtown	7 10 a.m.
.. Abermule	7 50 "
.. Garthmill	8 25 "
.. Royal Oak Hotel, Welshpool	9 10 "
.. Llanymynech	10 15 "
Arrives at the Wynnstay Arms and Queen's Head Hotels, Oswestry	11 0 "
Leaves Oswestry, by Train	11 15 "
.. Chester do.	12 30 p.m.
Arrives at Liverpool do.	1 35 "
.. Shrewsbury do.	12 59 "
Leaves Liverpool do.	12 15 a.m.
.. Chester do.	1 30 p.m.
.. Shrewsbury do.	12 40 "
.. Oswestry, by Coach	3 0 "
.. Welshpool do.	5 0 "
Arrives at Newtown do.	7 0 "

**Messrs. SMITHS, EDWARDS, AND LLOYD,
Proprietors.**

The Chester Chronicle, 8 October 1853. © The British Library Board. All rights reserved. With thanks to the British Newspaper Archive. www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.

ADAPTING TO THE RAILWAY AGE

In 1859 work started on the new Oswestry-to-Newtown line of the London and North Western Railway.

It heralded the end of coaching on the route, and it was the year in which W and G Smith quit The Royal Oak. The new tenant innkeepers were William and Sarah Rowland, who must have adapted the inn successfully to meet the new requirements of the railway age because they remained in charge for 24 years until 1883.



NEW INNKEEPERS – AND A TWIST OF FATE



The Castle Hotel, Conwy.

The new innkeepers of The Royal Oak from 1883 were David Richards, who came from a Shrewsbury brewing family, and his wife Emma, who was a sister of Sarah Dutton, the highly regarded owner of The Castle Hotel, Conwy – coincidentally also now part of the Coaching Inn Group.

During their tenure at the inn, David Richards was a Welshpool councillor and served a term as the town mayor. The couple left Welshpool in 1899 to run a hotel in Bangor, North Wales.

Afterwards The Royal Oak was leased to the Church Stretton Hotel Company. Major alterations were completed in April 1901, just one month before the start of construction work on the Welshpool-to-Llanfair Light Railway. This should have been good for The Royal Oak, which hosted the formal dinner after the official opening of the line in 1903. But unfortunately the Church Stretton Hotel Company went bust in 1909.



David Lloyd George (1863–1945), photographed in 1917 by Olive Edis. © National Portrait Gallery.

PRIME MINISTER DAVID LLOYD GEORGE CALLS IN

In February 1918, a Mrs McClelland was in charge at The Royal Oak. If she was still around in August that year she would have got a big surprise one day when Prime Minister David Lloyd George unexpectedly dropped in for lunch.

Accompanied by his war-cabinet colleague Lord Alfred Milner and two others, Lloyd George stopped-off in Welshpool while on a journey by motor-car from his North-Wales family home at Criccieth. It was reported in the press that on their way into the hotel the party spoke with wounded soldiers from the Clive Hospital, who happened to be assembled outside. By the time the party emerged from their lunch, a large crowd had gathered to cheer the premier on his way to London.



THE 74-YEAR ERA OF THE PRICE FAMILY

The 4th Earl of Powis, George Charles Herbert, sold The Royal Oak sometime during the 1920s. The exact year of the sale and the identity of the buyer are not known, but the sale was probably related to a general post-war slump in returns from major landed holdings.

One cold December evening in the late 1920s the now-forgotten owner of The Royal Oak revealed to a guest that she was keen to sell it. The guest was Harry Price, who had sought food and warmth after a day out shooting in the area. He owned a garage and a portfolio of 16 pubs and hotels in his home town of Builth Wells, 50 miles south of Welshpool. On a whim he decided to buy The Royal Oak. The deal was done in 1930, beginning a family association with the hotel that was to last 74 years.

Harry Price installed a succession of managers to run his Welshpool property until 1955 when his son and daughter-in-law Henry and Sally Price moved in for two years while the hotel underwent a programme of modernisation. The deaths of Harry in 1963 and of his son Henry in 1965 left Sally in charge of all the family businesses. She sold the properties in Builth Wells, and in 1967 moved to a house in Welshpool in order to focus on ownership of The Royal Oak.

A major improvement in 1980 involved converting the first-floor ballroom into additional bedrooms, while the coach house and stables were developed as new function rooms, and named the Powis Suite. Sally Price died in 1991, after which the hotel was overseen by her daughter Margaret Landgrebe.* The hotel was refurbished in 1998, and then sold in 2004 to a local couple, Emma and Malcolm Bebb.



Sally Price. Photo courtesy Margaret Landgrebe.

* Thanks to Margaret Landgrebe for the story of her family's ownership of The Royal Oak.





The Powis Suite, The Royal Oak's events space.



A VISIT BY THE QUEEN AND DUKE OF EDINBURGH

The staff of The Royal Oak earned an unparalleled royal accolade in April 2010 when they were called upon to provide lunch for the Queen and Duke of Edinburgh during a two-day visit to Wales.

The royal couple came to Welshpool to be shown the town's new £13 million livestock market and the refurbished Farmers' Market at the Town Hall. Afterwards, crowds of well-wishers cheered as the Queen and Duke of Edinburgh walked through the town on their way to The Royal Oak, where they were joined by a party of 30 for a lunch hosted by the Lord Lieutenant of Powys, Shân Legge-Bourke.



The Mayor of Welshpool, Miss Ann Holloway, bidding farewell to the Queen as she left The Royal Oak after a private lunch. Photo by Phil Blagg, County Times.

THE COACHING INN GROUP

In April 2015 The Royal Oak was acquired by the Coaching Inn Group, which immediately carried out a major refurbishment of the public areas and bedrooms. The alterations were designed to meet modern customer needs while preserving and keeping faith with the heritage and unique characteristics of the historic building.



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The Royal Oak Hotel, Welshpool, 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 fourteen 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.

We hope you've enjoyed your visit to The Royal Oak Hotel, Welshpool, and would love to invite you to try our other venues, nationwide. For full details please visit www.coachinginngroup.co.uk.



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