

= The George Hotel , Crawley =

The George Hotel , also known as the George Inn and now marketed as the Ramada Crawley Gatwick , is a hotel and former coaching inn on the High Street in Crawley , a town and borough in West Sussex , England . The George was one of the country 's most famous and successful coaching inns , and the most important in Sussex , because of its location halfway between the capital city , London , and the fashionable seaside resort of Brighton . Cited as " Crawley 's most celebrated building " , it has Grade II * listed status .

It is known that a building called the George has existed on the site since the 16th century or earlier , and many sources date the core of the existing inn to 1615 . The George Hotel has three principal sections , facing east and running from south to north parallel with Crawley High Street . Nothing of the exterior is original , except perhaps for parts of the tiled roof . The hotel contains 84 rooms and 6 meeting rooms with a capacity of up to 150 , regularly used for conferences , weddings , exhibitions , seminars and training sessions . The present structure is made up of disparate parts of various dates : the inn expanded to take in adjacent buildings as its success grew in the 18th and 19th centuries . Major changes took place in the 1930s , and the annex was knocked down in 1933 .

The inn has been associated with royalty , bareknuckle prizefighting , smuggling among other things , and has been the subject of novels and paintings . It was central to the plot of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle 's mystery novel Rodney Stone , written in 1896 . John George Haigh , a notorious serial killer in the 1940s known for his " acid bath " murders , stayed at the hotel on numerous occasions , and dined there on the day he killed one of his victims . The hotel is also reputedly haunted by the ghost of a nightwatchman , Mark Hurston (or Hewton) and other curious figures .

= = History = =

= = = Medieval history = = =

At the time of the Domesday survey in 1086 there was no manor or village of Crawley , but the thickly forested area was gradually being cleared and settled . The land on which the village of Crawley developed ? a sloping site with higher land to the south , at the point where the Low Weald rises to become the High Weald ? was probably owned by William de Warenne , 1st Earl of Surrey as part of one of the manors to the south .

During the Norman era in the late 11th and 12th centuries , a nucleated village began to appear , prompted by the development of a north ? south " High Street " forming part of a longer route from the capital city , London , to the port of Shoreham on the English Channel coast . This replaced an earlier northeast ? southwest route linking local farms to the older settlement of West Green , about 0 @. @ 5 miles (0 @. @ 8 km) west of Crawley , because a north ? south route could take advantage of an area of drier , harder land formed by an outcrop of sandstone from the Hastings Beds that jutted into the sticky , waterlogged Weald Clay , which predominated around West Green and Crawley .

The main road quickly became established , and Crawley was a natural stopping place almost exactly halfway between the coast and London . Its development into an urban area was assured when King John granted a charter for a market in 1202 . St John the Baptist 's Church was founded a few decades later , a manor house was built in the late 14th or early 15th century , and the local iron industry brought further prosperity . Buildings appeared on both sides of the High Street , which widened significantly as it passed the manor house and church , and the market 's position on a long @- @ distance through road enabled it to thrive .

= = = 16th ? 17th century = = =

The first mention of The George appears in 1579 , when landowner Richard Covert died and passed on an area of land (a tenement) to his son . This necessitated a payment to the Lord of the

manor . The tenement bore the name of The George , and was situated in a valuable position : in the centre of Crawley , on the west side of the High Street (and just inside the parish of Ifield , a nearby village ; the boundary between Ifield and Crawley parishes ran along the middle of the High Street) . The building on the land was almost certainly an inn at that time , and many sources assert that its oldest parts date from about 1450 . Its centre section , an open hall @-@ house of a type common in the area , may be even older , possibly late 14th century .

An early remodelling came in 1615 , when a timber @-@ framed extension was built on the south side , a new jettied cross @-@ wing was added at the front and a stone fireplace was installed . This bears the date 1615 (although this may have been carved later) , and has carvings and arches . An inventory dated 1689 , carried out when the owner died , revealed that the George Hotel had 15 bedrooms , two parlours , a kitchen , a bakery , a small brewery , stables , a barn , a back yard and a cellar . Meanwhile , a gallows was erected outside the hotel , partly spanning the High Street ; one end was attached to the top floor of the building .

Until the 18th century , the narrow , waterlogged road northwards from Crawley towards Reigate and London could only be used by horses , and even then only with difficulty ; it was impassable for carriages , carts and other wheeled vehicles . Trade was being affected , demand for travel between Crawley and London was growing (by the late 17th century it was one of several towns in Sussex to be served by scheduled packhorse @-@ drawn goods wagons to and from the capital) , and the nearby market towns of Horsham and East Grinstead threatened to overtake Crawley in importance . (Like Crawley , they each had two licensed taverns in 1636 , when an inventory of Sussex 's 61 licensed premises was drawn up .) In 1696 , one of England 's first turnpike Acts was passed , which allowed tolls to be collected to pay for repairs and improvement . A tollgate was built at the north end of Crawley , which gave its name to the present neighbourhood of Northgate .

= = = 18th ? 19th century = = =

The growth of Brighton as a fashionable seaside resort from the mid @-@ 18th century was also invaluable to Crawley 's prosperity : it lay directly south of Crawley , and replaced Shoreham as the main focus of north ? south traffic . In 1770 , the section between Lowfield Heath (north of Crawley) and Brighton was turnpiked , and for the first time the full length of the London ? Brighton road was properly constructed and maintained . The journey by horse and carriage now took about eight hours , and Crawley was perfectly placed to become a daytime or overnight stopping point . Within a few years , about 60 coaches were making the journey every day , and The George ? as the town 's largest and best @-@ equipped hotel ? became " the recognised halfway house between London and Brighton " .

Artist Thomas Rowlandson 's aquatint of 1789 , An Excursion to Brighthelmstone in 1789 (the title uses Brighton 's original name) , shows The George Hotel prominently . It is the earliest artistic depiction of Crawley , and shows a riotous horse auction underneath the original gallows . The horses were reputedly seized from smugglers apprehended in the area , which was notorious for that activity at the time . Bareknuckle prizefighting was also a major local attraction from which The George benefited : nearby Crawley Down and Copthorne were " the most renowned battlefields in the south of England " , and The George itself became " the hub of the pugilistic universe " . Tens of thousands of people of all classes ? including members of the Royal Family (such as the Prince Regent) , statesmen and famous playwrights ? would visit Crawley Down or Copthorne Common to watch and bet on extremely violent contests which could last for hours ; the George was invariably used as the base from which to visit these illegal bouts . Other famous visitors of this era included Lord Nelson ? whose sister lived in the nearby village of Handcross ? Queen Victoria , who on one occasion was stranded overnight when her carriage broke down , and the Prince Regent , whose patronage of Brighton and regular travelling of the London ? Brighton road indirectly brought about the upturn in fortunes experienced by Crawley in general , and the George Hotel in particular , during the 18th century . In this era , it was one of Britain 's best @-@ known and most important coaching inns , and it held " the premier position " among Sussex 's many such establishments .

Also by this time , the former gallows had been converted into an inn sign that soon became a

landmark , and some structural and exterior alterations were made ? the first of many over the subsequent years . The earliest known photograph of the George , dated 1867 , shows a dilapidated building of several uncoordinated parts : it had expanded over the years to take in buildings on each side of the original medieval inn , and it was considered a purely functional building with no obvious architectural merit . By this time , the coaching era was in terminal decline because of the increasing popularity of rail travel ; a line was opened between London and Brighton in 1841 , with a station at Three Bridges just east of Crawley , and the town centre received its own branch line and station in 1848 . Despite this , Crawley High Street remained busy as the town continued to grow , and The George underwent more renovation and was extended further . In particular , an old (possibly 18th @-@ century) free @-@ standing building which stood in the middle of the wide High Street , and which was once used as a candle factory , was acquired by the George 's owners and became an annex . It was this building , rather than the main part of the hotel , which accommodated Queen Victoria when she was forced to stay overnight . Cycling for leisure purposes became a fad in the late 19th century , and the London ? Brighton road was a popular route ; the George became a regular stopping point for groups of cyclists .

= = = 20th century to present = = =

Major changes took place in the 1930s . The annex was knocked down in 1933 , and the site in the middle of the High Street was converted into a bus stop and a car park for the hotel (itself removed since the street 's pedestrianisation in the early 21st century) . The gallows sign was replaced with a replica , and two smaller facsimiles were added in the car park , which was also flanked by four medieval @-@ style lanterns . Meanwhile , wide @-@ ranging renovations to the hotel itself made the building look even older than it did before ; all structural changes took its medieval character into account and were made in a complementary style , making all the disparate parts of the hotel " look an integrated whole " .

Soon after World War II , Crawley was designated as England 's second New Town by the Labour government of Clement Attlee , who passed the New Towns Act 1946 . Housing , industry and offices developed rapidly around the core of the old town ; despite early fears that historic buildings (including The George Hotel) would have to be destroyed , most of the historic High Street was preserved . The growth of nearby Gatwick Airport from a little @-@ used airstrip into an international airport provided further impetus , and by the start of the 21st century Crawley had become a regional centre with 100 @,@ 000 people ? compared to a population of about 7 @,@ 000 before World War II . Demand for hotel space grew continuously , and The George was extended to the rear and began marketing itself as the Gatwick George Hotel . As of 2016 it is branded Ramada Crawley Gatwick .

The George Hotel was listed at Grade II * by English Heritage on 21 June 1948 . Such buildings are defined as " particularly important " and " of more than special interest " . As of August 2013 , it was one of 12 Grade II * structures , and 100 listed buildings and structures of all grades , in the Borough of Crawley . Since the New Town was established , Crawley has been split into 13 neighbourhoods , and all listed buildings in the borough are described on the council 's schedule of listed buildings as being in one of these neighbourhoods ; the George Hotel is classed as being in West Green , and is one of six listed buildings in that neighbourhood .

= = Architecture = =

The George Hotel has three principal sections , facing east and running from south to north parallel with Crawley High Street . Despite uncertainty over its early history , the building is generally agreed to have 15th @-@ century origins , which are most evident in the northernmost bay . This section has a much lower roofline than the rest of the hotel , although the whole building is two @-@ storey . The northern section is believed to have been a two @-@ bay open hall @-@ house with a parlour wing ; their thick wooden roof beams (in the form of crown posts) , blackened by smoke , and timber @-@ framed walls survive . The centre section was the south wing of the original building ; it

would have been the service area to the hall @-@ house , with kitchen facilities and similar , and formed a cross @-@ wing with large joists and a cellar . The rear wall has braces which suggest the former existence of a rear entrance leading to the stables behind . A stone fireplace inside may be as old as the date carved on it ? 1615 ? but the inscription is believed to be more recent .

None of the exterior is original , although parts of the tiled roof may be . It is laid with slabs of Horsham stone ? a local material commonly used on old roofs in the Crawley area . The façade is mostly tile @-@ hung to the first floor with timber framing below . The entrance is gabled and has a canted bay window of 18th @-@ century origin . The southern part of the façade is stuccoed and topped by a parapet . It is probably an 18th @-@ century refacing of an older building (or buildings) incorporated into the hotel as it grew .

The hotel , now known as Ramada Crawley Gatwick , has 84 rooms , including singles , doubles , twin rooms , family rooms and four @-@ bed rooms . Its six meeting rooms , with a capacity of up to 150 , are regularly used for conferences , weddings , exhibitions , seminars and training sessions . There is also a Thai restaurant , a Chinese buffet and a Roman Empire @-@ themed cocktail bar .

= = Notable associations = =

Mark Lemon , the first editor of the satirical magazine Punch , lived on the High Street in Crawley from 1858 until his death in 1870 . He became an important figure in Crawley society , and was generous with his time and money : for example , in 1863 , he organised and paid for festivities at The George Hotel and the nearby White Hart Inn to celebrate the wedding of Edward , Prince of Wales and Princess Alexandra of Denmark . A blue plaque outside the George commemorates his time in the town .

The hotel was central to the plot of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle 's mystery novel Rodney Stone , written in 1896 . Sussex 's bareknuckle prizefighting tradition was a central theme , and the novel described at length the build @-@ up to a fight involving the eponymous narrator 's friend Boy Jim , including the moment they arrived at " the high front door of the old George Inn , glowing from every door and pane and crevice , in honour of the noble company who were to sleep within that night " . Jem Belcher , one of several real bareknuckle fighters who featured in fictionalised form in the novel , trained Boy Jim at the hotel .

John George Haigh , a notorious serial killer in the 1940s known for his " acid bath " murders , stayed at the hotel on numerous occasions , and dined there on the day he killed one of his victims .

= = Haunting = =

The hotel is reputedly haunted by the ghost of a nightwatchman , Mark Hurston (or Hewton) , who died by drinking poisoned wine ? either planted to trap a recurring intruder to the inn , or adulterated by a guest angered at being woken by him . It has been reported that a locked broom cupboard has been found open , strange figures have been seen , and electric lights have turned on and off .