

THE UNICORN INN AND THE GREAT FIRE OF BUCKINGHAM, 1725

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This article, prompted by the tercentenary of the Great Fire of Buckingham, confirms that the Unicorn Inn, where the fire started, was on the south side of Market Hill, occupying the sites now numbered as Nos 5–8, Market Square.

The article also reviews the history of the timber-framed house on the site of Nos 1–2 Market Hill, demolished in 1967, and demonstrates that the building was not owned by the Fowler family. There is thus no need to suppose that painted initials I. L., interpreted as those of John Lambert, Bailiff of Buckingham in 1582, are subsequent additions to an earlier scheme of mural decoration commissioned by the Fowlers.

INTRODUCTION

As 2025 was the 300th anniversary of the Great Fire of Buckingham, there was a series of events in the town to celebrate (or at least to mark) the occasion. A paving stone recording the date of the fire was placed outside the elegant 4-storey terrace of shops numbered 5–8, Market Square,

the site of the former *Unicorn Inn*, where the fire broke out on 15 March 1725. The Buckinghamshire Local History Network (BLHN) conference was held at Buckingham University on 4 October 2025 with the theme of ‘Buckinghamshire on Fire.’ Amongst the displays was a detailed model of the town as it was in 1725, made by Chris Wardale.



FIGURE 1 Nos 3–8 Market Square, 1992 (photo: the author)

THE UNICORN INN

When the Post Office numbered the streets of Buckingham in the late 19th century, the houses and shops on the south-west side of the Market Square, with outhouses, yards and gardens running down to the River Ouse, were numbered 1–10 Market Square and 1–6 Market Hill. The island of shops, houses and workshops in the middle of the square became 11–19 Market Square, whilst the buildings on the north side of the Market Square, including the Chantry Chapel, were denominated 7–23 Market Hill. These numbers are still in use today and will be used to identify individual properties mentioned in this article.

Some Buckingham historians had suggested that the *Unicorn Inn*, where the fire started, may have been in Castle Street, where many of the houses were rebuilt after the 1725 fire. Its real location on the south side of the Market Square was pinpointed in 2006 by Paul Poornan, whose article, 'The Great Fire of Buckingham,' used deeds in Buckinghamshire Archives to establish the ownership, back to 1725 and beyond, of most of the properties on the south side of the Market Square.¹ He pointed out that there was a row of inns extending north-east from the *Three Cups* (belonging to Christ's Hospital Charity), including the *Angel* and the *Cock* (both later absorbed into the *White Hart Hotel*), as far as the *Unicorn*, which closed as an inn c. 1750. He studied the remarkably complete sequence of deeds to the *Cock Inn*, a building which in 1725 was a grocer's shop occupied by John Butterfield. This house was destroyed by the fire but was rebuilt and occupied by Butterfield until his bankruptcy in 1737.² It was later owned by William Goode, grocer and tallow chandler, who died in 1780 and whose family were responsible for many improvements in the Market Square at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries. The former *Cock Inn* is now part of the *White Hart Hotel* and is numbered 3–4 Market Square. Poornan found that the *Cock Inn* deeds gave the names of the owners and occupiers of the neighbouring houses to the south-west and north-east from the early 16th century right up until the Victorian period.

The earliest deed to the *Cock Inn* dates from 1508 and is preserved at the National Archives, Kew.³ It describes the premises as:

A messuage called 'le Cock,' in Buckingham, with a croft and garden adjoining, between the messuage of Richard Fowler, knight, and the messuage called 'le Angel' between the high road and the River Owse, and of a croft called 'le Tempull Lond' adjoining a lane called 'the Watur Lane'.

A deed of 1584 at Buckinghamshire Archives gives similar boundaries:

All that their Messuage in Buckingham afore-said called the Cock with a close and garden or orchard adjoining to the same with the appurtenances situate lying and being between the Messuage of Richard Fowler Esq now in the tenure of Thomas More gent on the east part and the Messuage of the said Paul [Miller] called the Angell House on the South part whereof one head extendeth or abutteth upon the Queens Highway called the Market Place on the west part and the other head ... extendeth downward unto a river or water called Ouse towards east and south And all houses edifices buildings chambers hall kitchen shop lofts solars cellars barns stables ...⁴

The Fowlers were the leading family in Buckingham in the 15th and 16th centuries. Sir Richard Fowler was Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster under Henry VII. His principal residence in Buckingham was known as Fowler's Farm, situated on the north side of West Street, then known as Fowler's Street or Horn Street. In 1590, Sir Richard's descendant, Richard Fowler of Lincoln's Inn, sold to Raphael Moore of Buckingham, woollen draper, and Silvester Stuttesburie of Buckingham, mercer:

All those burgages messuages tenements shops cellars courtyards gardens arable land and commodities profits and hereditaments lying and being in Buckingham and Maids Moreton

This conveyance has not been traced but it is recited in a 1591 deed whereby Richard Fowler sold the remainder of his property in Buckingham, including his mansion called Fowler's Farm, in the occupation of Raphael Moore, to Francis Dayrell of Lamport near Stowe.⁵ Fowler's tenant in both properties was Raphael Moore, who was Bailiff of Buckingham in 1588 and 1614. Fowler's Farm

was later to be renamed Castle House and was rebuilt in 1708 by Matthias Rogers. It is not to be confused with Castle Hill (now occupied by the parish church) or with Castle Farm, the range of stone buildings on the south side of West Street, now called the Corner House and numbered 16 West Street. This substantial stone-built house was the home farm of the Manor of Buckingham, with over 300 acres of arable land in strips scattered in the open fields running up to Chackmore to the north and Maids Moreton to the north-east.

By 1667, Richard Fowler's house in the Market Square had become an inn called the *Unicorn*, occupied by Elizabeth Coles, widow, with the house of John Holton, cutler, to the north.⁶ A 1718 deed to the *Unicorn Inn* locates it as next door to the former *Cock Inn*:

All that Burgage Messuage or Tenement with the appurtenances then in the tenure or occupation of William Egerton and called or known by the name of the Unicorn Inn situate standing and being in Buckingham aforesaid in a street there called the High Street between a tenement then or late in the occupation of Thomas Holton north and a tenement of John Butterfield lately known by the name of the Cock on the south side thereof.⁷

The Northampton Mercury, 1 August 1724, carried an advertisement for the *Unicorn Inn*, parts of which seemed to be leased to other tradesmen:

To be let, the Unicorn Inn, Buckingham, an ancient and well-accustomed Inn, fronting the Market Place, good cellars, brewhouse, gardens, orchard, stables, a pigstie, two tenements both tenanted and stalls adjacent to the house for tradesmen.

Only one of the newspaper reports of the 1725 fire mentions the owner of the *Unicorn*:

On Monday last, a terrible fire broke out at the Town of Buckingham, which has destroyed upwards of 140 houses. It began in a yard belonging to one Mr. Hederton [Egerton] and was occasioned by a maid and two boys putting a lighted coal to a stack of furze. There were also two horses and five or six hogs burnt.⁸

A year after the fire, William Egerton of the parish of St Paul's, Covent Garden, cheesemonger, sold what remained of the *Unicorn Inn* to Francis Baxter of Buckingham, innholder, for £300.⁹ Baxter may have repaired parts of the inn, but his 1730 insurance policy with the Sun Fire Office mentions only the outbuildings at the rear:

Francis Baxter of the Unicorn Inn in the Town of Buckingham innholder

On the Back Buildings and Outhouses of the Inn aforesaid stone timber and most part thatched

	£
A back kitchen only	30
A Brewhouse only	30
3 Stables only	30 each
1 Stable only	60
Stable and hovel only adjoining	60
Gatehouse and Stable only adjoining	30
	300 ¹⁰

Francis Baxter was one of a family of innkeepers who were at various times owners or tenants of the *Woolpack* in Well Street, the *Cobham Arms* in West Street and the *New Inn* at Stowe. At least part of the *Unicorn* must have been repaired by 1736, for in that year Joseph Harris of Buckingham, mercer, was renting a shop and warehouse there. He insured the highly valuable contents of his premises with the Sun Fire Office in 1736:

Joseph Harris of the Town of Buckingham mercer on his stock in trade in his dwelling house shop & warehouse all under one roof situate in the Market Place in the Town aforesaid part stone part timber ... and tiled not exceeding eight hundred pounds.¹¹

This policy shows that the *Unicorn* was partially stone built and partially timber framed. There is still a substantial amount of stone in the back wall of Nos 5–7 Market Square.

In 1755, Baxter's family sold the messuage 'lately known or called by the name or sign of the *Unicorn* and now in the possession of Mr Baker,' to John Holton of St Andrew, Holborn, Co. Middlesex, grocer.¹² In 1762, his son, Wade Holton, insured the premises, now divided into three, with the Sun Fire Office.¹³



FIGURE 2 Rear of Nos 5–7 Market Square, 2025 (photo: the author)

Wade Holton of the Three Sugar Loaves on
Holborn Hill grocer
On a house only in three tenements
timber & tiled late in the tenure of
John Baker shopkeeper £300
Stables and offices only adjoining each
other thatched separate from the aforesaid 60
One house only brick & tiled in the tenure
of Benton Seeley bookseller 00
Barn and stables only adjoining each
other separate from the house thatched 40
All situate in the Town of Buckingham 600

In 1768, Wade Holton sold the former *Unicorn Inn* to Thomas Wright of Buckingham, dealer in lace.¹⁴ When Thomas Wright insured this prop-

erty with the Sun Fire Office in 1779, the buildings were still stone plaster and tiled:

Thomas Wright of Buckingham linen draper	
On his now dwellinghouse and two	
tenements under one roof situate as	
aforesaid stone plaster and tiled	£500
On his household goods therein	100
On his utensils and stock therein only	300
China and glass	50
Three stables adjoining not	
communicating with the above stone	
wall between tiled and thatched Brewhouse	
and offices adjoining each other brick	
and tiled	20
	£1000 ¹⁵

Thomas Wright held on to the three tenements until 1784 when he sold them to Francis Goode of Buckingham, grocer, for £900:

All that Burgage Messuage or Tenement situate standing and being in the Market Place of the Town of Buckingham in the County of Bucks heretofore in the tenure or occupation of Joseph Harris mercer and afterwards of John Baker since of James Bradford and [blank] Herbert or one of them and now of the said Thomas Wright and Thomas Potter their undertenants or assigns heretofore commonly called or known by the name or sign of the Unicorn and afterwards divided into three messuages or tenements ...

Francis Goode was the son of William Goode of Buckingham, grocer, and had already inherited the former *Cock Inn* on his father's death in 1780. He now owned Nos 3–7 Market Square as well as other shops in the centre of the square. Francis Goode of Buckingham, grocer, made his will 5 September 1818 leaving his property to trustees:

I give and devise unto my friends the Rev David Watson Aston Mr Richard Rogers and Mr Philip Bartlett all of Buckingham aforesaid all that and those the messuage or tenement shop warehouses outbuildings gardens and premises in Buckingham aforesaid now in my own occupation and with all fixtures and all implements and utensils of trade in and about the same ... upon trust for my great nephew Francis Goode eldest son of my nephew William Goode deceased and his heirs and assigns for ever.¹⁶

One of Francis Goode's trustees was the Rev David Watson Aston, minister of the New Meeting in Buckingham. The main beneficiary of the will was Francis Goode, once of 143 Regent Street, London, architect. His possible involvement may explain how Nos 5–8 Market Square came to be refronted in the early 19th century with a four-storey façade unequalled in style and proportion by any other terrace of shops in Buckinghamshire. He is probably responsible for rebuilding the row of four shops on the opposite side of the square, owned by his aunt, Martha Goode, and numbered 12–15 Market Square. No. 12 was unfortunately demolished in the 1960s to extend Barclay's Bank. The remaining three shops have sash windows on the

first floor and slate roofs hidden behind an ornamental frieze. Goode may also have been behind the refurbishment of the former *Cock Inn*, Nos 3–4 Market Square, which according to an advertisement of 1843, had been entirely rebuilt within the last 6 years, at an outlay of £1,400.¹⁷

NOS 1–2, MARKET HILL

Three doors down from the *Unicorn Inn* was an ancient timber-framed house, numbered 1–2 Market Hill, whose elaborate wall paintings were exposed during demolition of the building in 1967 to make way for a branch of the Westminster Bank. The decorations were examined by Clive Rouse of the Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society who suggested that they dated from the 16th century. The perceived history of the building was written up for *Records of Buckinghamshire* by Elizabeth Elvey, wife of its editor Gerald Elvey.¹⁸ The most impressive wall paintings were in the ground floor room to the right of the central archway to the rear yard. In the frieze below the ceiling were circular medallions containing various initials, the most prominent being 'I.L.' which Mrs Elvey identified as those of John Lambert, Bailiff of Buckingham in 1582.

The Lamberts were highly successful graziers and butchers in Buckingham, who may well have lived at 1–2 Market Hill. Their upward mobility enabled John Lambert in 1591 to buy Fowler's Farm, West Street, from Francis Dayrell of Lamport, who had earlier that year bought the property from Richard Fowler of Lincoln's Inn. Mrs Elvey wrongly assumed that John Lambert's purchase had included the Fowler family's property on the south side of Buckingham's Market Square, often mentioned in the deeds to the *Cock Inn* as situated to the north-east of the inn. Had she examined the 1591 conveyance from Dayrell to Lambert more carefully, she would have seen that Richard Fowler's Market Square property had in fact been sold in 1590 to the tenant, Raphael Moore, and was not subject to certain payments chargeable to Fowler's Farm. Raphael Moore's purchase was later to become the *Unicorn Inn* and was burnt down in the fire in 1725.

Mrs Elvey supposed that John Lambert had added his initials to an existing decorative scheme devised by the Fowler family, basing her supposition that the Fowlers owned 1–2 Market Hill



FIGURE 3 Nos 1–2 Market Hill, 1967 (photo © Buckinghamshire Archives, ph Buckingham 43)

entirely on the early deeds to the *Cock Inn*. The *Cock* was in fact several doors away along the Market Square and near to the then Town Hall, as evidenced by a 1677 deed relating to the *White Hart*. Here the property is described as:

... situate lying and being in the Town of Buckingham aforesaid in a street there called the Market Street over against the Town Hall between a common Inn called the Cock towards the north and the messuage then or late in the tenure or occupation of Christopher Linney and Peter Fowkes towards the south.¹⁹

The Town Hall survived the fire of 1725 and is clearly marked on Thomas Jefferys's plan of Buckingham (an inset on his 1770 map of Buckinghamshire) at the south-west corner of the Market Square. Mrs Elvey's assumption that the Fowlers had lived at 1–2 Market Hill and even entertained royalty there, has misled Buckingham historians for the last 50 years. Even Paul Poornan in 2006 failed to point out Mrs Elvey's mistake and on his

plan of the Market Square captioned 1–2 Market Hill as "formerly Fowlers."

It is not certain who lived at Nos 1–2 Market Hill in 1725, but the timber-framed house was not affected by the fire. It was probably owned by John Land of Buckingham, attorney, who made his will 10 August 1754, leaving his nephew, John Miller, £100 and all his law books. Miller succeeded to the law practice and to 1–2 Market Hill and died in 1772. His successor, Robert Miller, attorney, is shown as the owner on the land taxes of 1783, 1795 and 1817. Robert died in 1817 when the property was described as:

Two valuable Houses, with extensive Buildings, Yards, excellent walled Gardens, well stocked with choice Espalier, standard, and wall fruit Trees, and Paddock, in which is a walled fish Pond, most eligibly situate on the Market Hill, in the Borough of Buckingham, late the Property and Residence of R. Miller, Esq. Attorney at Law, deceased. The Whole of these truly desirable Premises having been occupied by

Mr. Miller, a Communication has been opened between the Houses, which only requires the Stoppage of two doorways to make them again separate Houses, each comprising dining and drawing Rooms, with suitable sleeping Rooms, excellent Cellarage, Kitchens, Brewhouse, Washhouse, Stabling with Lofts, Gig House, and every necessary out Building. The Situation and Conveniences are admirably calculated for a Professional Gentleman, any Trade requiring Room and public Shew, or for two pleasant and respectable private dwelling Houses, having a Frontage of upwards of 53 Feet to the Market Place, and a Depth of nearly 600 Feet from thence to the River Ouse.²⁰

Nos 1–2 Market Hill were purchased by the Rev. J. L. Long, Rector of Maids Moreton. He resided next door at the White House (No. 3 Market Hill) and laid out The Avenue from Stratford Road to the village of Maids Moreton. He did what the auctioneer had suggested and divided Nos 1–2 Market Hill into two. No. 1 became a jeweller's run by John Cette and later a butcher's shop run by the French and then the Dudley families until 1939. No. 2 was occupied by John Harris, a boot maker, and later became a fish shop occupied by the Carey family from 1891 to 1939. It is ironic that a house on the Market Square bearing the initials of John Lambert, a wealthy butcher of the 16th century, should again become a butcher's shop in the 19th and 20th centuries. The branch of the Westminster Bank which replaced 1–2 Market Hill in the 1960s was comparatively short-lived. In recent years, it too has been demolished and replaced by a 3-storey building more in keeping with the architectural character of Buckingham's Market Square.

CONCLUSION

The definitive identification of the site where the 1725 fire started clarifies our understanding of the origins of the fire, and will make it easier to analyse the fire's subsequent impact. It has also been possible to clarify the ownership of the adjacent area in the sixteenth century, and this may lead to a greater understanding of the development history of the area as a whole.

ENDNOTES

1. *Recs Bucks* **46** (2006), 19–51.
2. *London Gazette*, 31 May 1737.
3. The National Archives C 146/5804.
4. Buckinghamshire Archives (BA) B-BUC/8/8/1.
5. BA D/C/4/100.
6. BA D-BAS/38/1354.
7. BA D 180/1/1/2.
8. *Stamford Mercury*, 25 March 1725.
9. Conveyance, March 1725/6, BA D/180/1/1/2 23.
10. London Archives (LA) Sun Insurance, 3 July 1730, Ms 11936/31/346.
11. LA Sun Insurance, 28 July, Ms 11936/044/71055.
12. Will of John Holton, proved PCC 1 July 1755.
13. LA Sun Insurance, 29 September 1762, Ms11936/184114.
14. Lease & Release, 13 & 14 July 1768, BA D 180/1/2.
15. LA Ms11936/276/417336.
16. Will of Francis Goode of Buckingham, grocer, proved PCC 3 December 1824.
17. *Bucks Herald*, 27 May 1843.
18. *Recs Bucks* **20** (1975), 301–7.
19. BA D\X\1281\8.
20. *Northampton Mercury*, 4 October 1817.