

The Claude Duval sign at Hopcroft Holt

I was interested to read the article in last month's SAL on Claude Duval and the new brightly-coloured sign at Hopcroft Holt. In April 2014 Claude disappeared and - anxious that he was lost forever - I occasionally called in to the hotel for updates, announcing myself as a member of SAVA. I was met either by blank faces or vague assurances that the matter was in hand. However as months passed I became increasingly sceptical. Eventually I was told Claude had been returned and was lurking in the cupboard under the stairs awaiting a central rod to keep him safely in place. After another long wait, suddenly, last August, he was back! I was so excited to see him that I nearly missed the green light. There has been some controversy in the village about whether the old sign was restored or was replaced by a new sign. The answer is that the rotted oak box Claude was mounted on was replaced with a new box (which announces the name change from Hopcroft's Holt to The Holt Hotel). But the sign above the box is indeed the original, which has been restored faithfully. I have tried in vain to find out how long the sign has been there. Hazel remembers it in the mid 1930s and photographs back up this claim. Sadly there appears to be no record of its maker.

In the past, the Hopcroft Holt was considered a Steeple Aston pub and many would go there for a drink and a game of dominoes in the Farmer's Bar. This was at the front of the building with the entrance at centre front. In those days, entering the hotel through the present-day entrance was somewhat disturbing. Back in the 1960s a human-sized iron cage hung from a heavy iron chain in the reception area, earliest recollections recall a skeleton inside! It would previously have been sited at the cross roads and used for gibbeting. This involved exhibiting dead or dying criminals as a warning to all passing wayfarers. Other unpleasant artefacts were also displayed in the pub, but all disappeared in the 1980s. No wonder the hotel is haunted!

Note: SAVA keeps an eye on village objects of historical interest, including those too large to store in the archive.

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