

# BANBURY'S VICTORIAN LODGING HOUSES

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Common lodging houses were as characteristic of nineteenth century market towns as corn exchanges, carriers' carts, canalside coal wharfs or Wesleyan circuit chapels. A lodging house, however lowly the estate of its inmates, was significant in retailing, entertainment and as a refuge for the unfortunate. It provided links with distant places, particularly with London. Lodging houses were rightly regarded as problems by most social and sanitary reformers. Nevertheless they served vital functions in market towns, and deserve to be analysed as institutions that were rather more than sources of medical and moral infection.<sup>1</sup>

Banbury in the mid-nineteenth century was a market town whose significance was greater than its modest population of rather less than nine thousand in 1851 might suggest.<sup>2</sup> More carriers' carts travelled to its weekly markets than to those of some much larger county towns, more than to Northampton, Oxford or Shrewsbury, for example. The town had substantial shops that specialised in their own trades. It had numerous social institutions. The fervour of its dissenting congregations and the skills of its craftsmen, expressed in patents, were notorious. It is not surprising therefore that Banbury was well-provided with common lodging houses, two of which are notable for their longevity, and will form the principal focus of this article.

## **Lodging Houses: Contexts**

There was no commonly-accepted definition of a lodging house in the nineteenth century. Some establishments so-named were small households in fashionable areas of provincial towns where a lady, living partly on investments or on the profits of a shop, might supplement her income by providing, with the aid of resident domestic servants, accommodation for two or three fairly wealthy people. In High Street, Chipping Norton, in 1861, Sarah Hopkins, a 52-year-old spinster, sold

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of lodging houses in a wider context see B. Trinder, *The Market Town Lodging House in Victorian England* (2001), Leicester: Friends of the Centre for English Local History.

<sup>2</sup> B. Trinder, *Victorian Banbury* (1982), B.H.S. 19, and Chichester: Phillimore, pp.2-3, 77, 162-64.