

Taverns, inns, and ale houses

...the earliest mention of an inn in Melbourn was in 1622, and in 1686 one of the inns had stabling for thirty horses and beds for seven guests



The first tavern, or public house, in Melbourn was probably built by the Romans when they set up a camp in the village. It would have been a small establishment known as a 'taberna', from which the word tavern is derived. These were commonplace along the roads of Roman Britain, providing lodgings for officials and others passing through the village. After the Romans withdrew from England the public house continued to flourish.

Grape wines were imported in vast quantities and sold alongside ales in the taberna. Although the Romans may have established some vineyards in England, it was not until the late-11th century that grapes were grown to any extent. By the 14th century, almost every large castle and monastery in East Anglia and southern England had its own vineyard. Wines continued to be produced, together with other traditional drinks including cider, ale, mead and fruit wines such as verjuice (a sour juice made from crab apples or unripened fruit). These drinks would be made from food grown locally. Vineyards declined in numbers over the centuries and eventually only small areas were cultivating grapes.

Brewsters and alewives

Simple alehouses appeared in the village and took the place of the relatively sophisticated taverns. These alehouses, run by women known as brewsters or alewives, brewed their own ale, and indicated that it was available for sale by a broom stuck out over the door.

Demand for alehouses grew rapidly and, in the early-7th century, the number of ale-sellers was restricted. Three centuries later, a decree was issued making drinking vessels in alehouses a standard size i.e. the 'pottle' (4 pints). Each pottle was to be subdivided into eight parts by means of pegs set inside the tankard. No one was to drink down further than one peg at a sitting. This, naturally, was seen as a challenge to try and drink more than one peg's worth - hence 'to take him down a peg or two'.

By the Middle Ages, many inns had become disreputable places, harbouring criminals and political malcontents. However, it was in these inns, the forerunners of modern restaurants, that the custom of providing a meal at a set time originated.

