
In search of the perfect pub

They're under threat – but they're fighting back. **Andrew Anthony** goes on a crawl of famous London pubs to find out how a British institution is adapting to a changing world

Milky tea, fish and chips, the local pub: these were once the enticing mainstays of British life. They're all still there, of course, but outside the home we drink far more coffee than tea, and on the high street the curry house and chicken takeaway long ago supplanted the deep-fried attractions of the fish and chip shop. Of the traditional triumvirate only the public house remains in a primary position, but that too is under threat.

It is estimated that Britain has lost 25% of its pubs in the last 20 years. There were around 60,000 in 2000 and now the figure is about 45,000. Closing time has taken on a new meaning, with on average one pub closing down every 12 hours. Of those that remain, many are unrecognisable from the locals of the past, having been re-themed as chain bars or gastropubs.

Is this a loss to the British way of life? Has some vital part of the social fabric been neglected and left to slowly fall apart? Listen to the doomsayers, like the Campaign for Real Ale (Camra), and that's certainly the impression. Last year it described

Continued overleaf



RIGHT
The George, in Southwark, is London's last surviving galleried coaching inn and dates from 1543. Alamy



LEFT
Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese, haunt of many of Fleet Street's finest, traces its history back to 1538. Alamy

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the situation as "dismal". Almost on cue, Soho's celebrated Coach & Horses closed its doors last week after its freeholder, Fuller's Brewery, took back possession from the leaseholder, Alastair Choat. The pub has been a Soho institution for many decades, with the previous landlord, Norman Balon, famed for his rudeness and, paradoxically, the permissive atmosphere he fostered.

It was the scene of *Private Eye* lunches and the base, as it were, of the notoriously unsober *Spectator* columnist Jeffrey Bernard. Choat tried to maintain its idiosyncratic spirit, by turning it into what he called London's first vegetarian and vegan pub and getting a licence to serve naked guests.

He made a desperate campaign to keep hold of the pub, even staging a shortened version of the play Jeffrey Bernard is *Unwell* with *Cold Feet*'s Robert Bathurst in the lead role, and organising a 12,000-signature petition to halt Fuller's. But all to no avail. Fuller's moved back with a promise to restore the pub to its "former glory".

Given that its former glory was all about its inimitable ambience, it is not clear how that restoration is going to be achieved. What is significant, though, is that Fuller's is appealing to a vanished heyday as the vision of its future. But heydays are accidental or inspired and certainly can't be recaptured through corporate planning.

In truth the Soho that the Coach and Horses epitomised – bohemian, transgressive, hopelessly drunk – no longer exists, and any attempt to

return to the "features that have made it such a famous pub", as Fuller's pledges to do, are doomed to be an exercise in museum curation. What we most love about the past is that is no longer here.

Yearning for the idealised pub of yore is not, however, a new pastime. It's probably almost as old as pubs themselves. Indeed, reminiscing about how a given pub used to be is a staple of pub conversation. The nostalgic lament is, after all, practically a symptom of inebriation.

Seventy-three years ago George Orwell wrote his famous essay about his favourite public house, the Moon Under Water. He listed 10 qualities possessed by this pub, only to reveal at the end that no such pub existed. It was an ideal he'd wished into being.

Ironically, many of the things he desired – Victorian fittings, cast-iron fireplaces, food, garden, family-friendly – have become fashionable in recent years. Orwell wanted more women and children to be able to visit pubs, and perhaps the most important change in pub culture is that they are no longer a dimly lit masculine preserve. In a survey a few years ago, more than 50% of female respondents said they regularly visited pubs.

Of the pubs that have closed, the majority have been small, and therefore perhaps the kind that struggled to attract women. At the same time, micropubs that, with a nod to Orwell, prioritise authenticity, good beer, and abjure games and machines, have flourished in recent years. Turnover across the pub business has actually remained the same, which suggests that things are not as bad as the closures suggest.

Other elements of Orwell's checklist – that the pub be tobacco-smoke stained and that motherly barmaids should address customers as "dear" ("pubs where the barmaids call you 'ducky' always have a disagreeable raffish atmosphere") – have not aged so well.

Orwell's biographer DJ Taylor has noted that pubs were "a symbol of working-class life that [Orwell] tended to sentimentalise". But in a sense pubs are a symbol of whatever community it is we tend to sentimentalise. And when in multicultural Britain they are not able to facilitate that symbolism – the Muslim pub, for example, is almost an oxymoron – then they can also represent division and exclusion.

For pubs are seldom just pubs. They are not just somewhere you buy alcoholic drinks. They reflect the tastes, interests and prejudices of their owners and customers. You don't like that place with nonstop Sky Sports, St George's flags and a carpet that



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makes you want to throw up the bland lager you've had little choice but to drink? Well, perhaps not everyone's a great fan of that precious polished wood, real ale and toasted-ciabatta haven that you like to frequent.

Viewed from abroad, of course, these differences dissolve into a wholesome image. It's notable that the only British selection in TripAdvisor's annual Travellers' Choice awards list of the top 25 travel experiences was, at number 18, Liquid History Tours' not Shakespeare or the royal palaces or the Lake District, but a pub crawl. In the words of the late Derek Jameson, do they mean us?

Last Thursday evening in Southwark, I joined John Warland, who set up Liquid History Tours eight years ago, and a Californian cou-

ple, John Rae and his wife Colleen, who had arranged their own private pub tour. Rae has already twice been on the main tour that made the Travellers' Choice awards list, which he describes as the best he has ever experienced.

"I like learning about history while getting a little bit drunk," he explains, not unreasonably. We started at the George, off Borough High Street, the last surviving galleried coaching inn. It dates to at least 1543, and quite possibly back to Chaucer's days – *The Canterbury Tales* (written in the late 14th century) begins at a similar nearby inn, the Tabard, which has not survived.

As Warland reminded us, Dickens mentions the George in *Little Dorrit*, and was a frequent visitor to the pub himself. But then he was a frequent

visitor to many pubs around London and Kent. Any serious study of the subject will sooner or later come back to literature, which has enjoyed a long and fruitfully symbiotic relationship with pubs.

If you want to know about the London demi-monde in the 1930s and 1940s, for instance, then there is no more vividly informative place to turn than the novels of Patrick Hamilton. His prose hits you with the smell of beer and cigarettes as if you'd opened a saloon bar door from that period. Hamilton, it should be noted, died of cirrhosis of the liver.

Warland is a font of major and minor cultural knowledge, as he leads us through Borough Market, with two

Pubs with a literary link

The Oxford Bar, Edinburgh

Largely, and surprisingly, tourist-free, the pub is the local of Ian Rankin's fictional detective Inspector Rebus. The Ox retains the authenticity of an old-school hostelry.

The Newman Arms, London

Dating back to 1730, the former brothel appears in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* where it was

the model for the "Proles" pub, the down-at-heel drinking den of the mistreated underclasses in his dystopian work.

Davy Byrne's, Dublin

Famous for its appearance in James Joyce's 1922 novel *Ulysses*. The pub is an essential stop for fans of the book whose main character drops into the pub for a lunchtime gorgonzola

cheese sandwich and a glass of burgundy while wandering through Dublin.

The Grapes, London

Originally The Bunch of Grapes, a pub has stood on pebbled Limehouse beach in east London for nearly 500 years. Charles Dickens described the pub in the opening chapter of *Our Mutual Friend* after first visiting it as

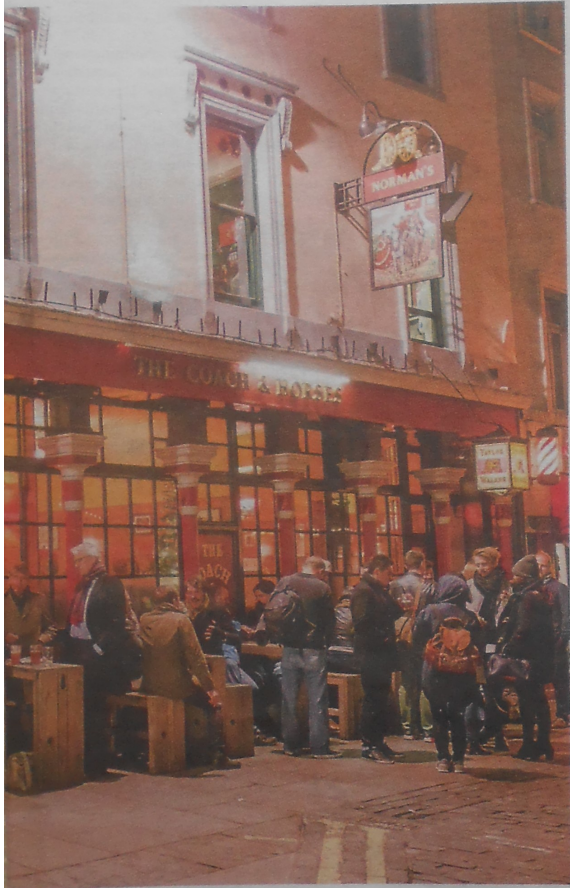
a child in 1820. Actor Sir Ian McKellen is one of the current co-owners.

Jamaica Inn, Launceston

Built as a coaching inn in 1750 and atmospherically sited on Cornwall's Bodmin Moor it's the setting for Daphne du Maurier's 1936 novel. It is believed the inn takes its name from the smugglers bringing rum from Jamaica.

The Spaniards Inn, London

This atmospheric inn in Hampstead, north London, first opened in 1545. Dick Turpin is thought to have been a regular – the pub lies on the route plundered by the highwayman. The inn has some significant literary connections, appearing in Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers* and then, above all else, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.



LEFT
The Coach & Horses, a Soho institution for decades, closed last week.
Photograph by Alex Segre/Rex

RIGHT
Ye Olde Fighting Cocks in St Albans is said to be the UK's oldest pub.
Alamy



It was apparently first established in 793AD (although its licence only goes back to the 17th century). What's the secret of its success? Location, location, location.

It sits a short walk from St Albans cathedral, handy for pilgrims and tourists alike. At its lovely oak bar I find Tony Breeze, nursing a non-alcoholic lager. Now retired, he comes here most lunchtimes from Hemel Hempstead because he enjoys the "friendly atmosphere".

It is certainly cosy, with the wooden-beamed ceiling just a couple of inches above my head and a sturdy carpet beneath my feet, all within a hexagonal-shaped building that has several discrete bars.

Breeze used to run a pub in the 1970s, which he describes as "a bit stressful". It used to serve food – far from standard in those days. He recommends the lunch at the Ye Olde Fighting Cocks, and says there are completely different gastronomic demands these days compared with when he was a landlord. "Now people have travelled some distance," he says, "and they expect the food to be very good."

Yes, we have come a long way from the terror of the steak and kidney pie. Across the bar Lawrence and Grace Mungai are enjoying a refreshing pint with a visiting friend from Kenya. The Mungais are big fans of the pub.

"I love the way it has conserved its heritage, the way it's kept its original structure," says Grace. "You walk in here and the history comes back."

The couple live in Dunstable, where they frequent a friendly local. "When we lived in London," says her husband, "some pubs we could not go in. We knew we were



LEFT
Alastair Choat, who had the leasehold of the Coach & Horses until last week, with his daughter Hollie.

All we long for is somewhere to have a relaxing drink in a convivial atmosphere and to meet others with a similar aim

BELOW
George Orwell described his perfect pub in the 1946 essay Moon Under Water.



brief pale ale pit-stops, and past the Globe theatre, with full Shakespeare digression, over the Millennium bridge, where he points out the artist Ben Wilson's micro-works on flattened chewing gum, to two pubs, the Cockpit and the art nouveau wonder the Black Friar, that, coincidentally, were past watering holes for the *Observer's* ever-thirsty staff.

We move on to Fleet Street, where the word and the wine once lived in productive if unruly union. Nowadays newspapers, following Rupert Murdoch's lead, have long since departed the area, journalism runs on sparkling water, and newspaper offices are about as wild and hectic as those of your average accountancy firm.

At the Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese, dating from 1538, I leave the tour,

and in a parting comment Warland observes that, in his experience, good pubs tend to survive. No doubt he's right, although it does raise the question again of what makes a good pub. Seeking more objective criteria, I went in search of Britain's oldest pub. It turns out that this is a fool's errand, so rich in complexity that it could turn you to drink. Oldest can refer to the actual building, the site, or the longest continuing licence, and each of those categories is fiercely disputed, with competing claims coming from as far a field as the Clachan near Loch Lomond, the Adam and Eve in Norwich, Ye Olde Trip to Jerusalem in Nottingham and the Skirrid Inn in Abergavenny.

According to *Guinness World Records*, the oldest pub in the UK is Ye Olde Fighting Cocks in St Albans.

not welcome. They wouldn't tell you to leave, they just wouldn't serve you."

But he says one of his favourite experiences of recent years was meeting his cousin in a pub in Elephant and Castle that was full of people from all over the world. "There were all these different cultures, all getting along. It was such a beautiful evening."

In the end, that's what all of us long for in a pub: somewhere to go in which we can have a relaxing drink in a convivial atmosphere and perhaps meet others with a similar aim. When it's done well then it can feel like you're in the only place you want to be in the world at that moment. And the very best pubs are timeless places in which that moment seems like it could last forever.

No pub visit is complete without a visit to the toilet – a neglected but essential part of any pub. On the door of the gents is a sign, "By the gracious ordinance of the Honourable lords of the royal courts of justice" states in large lettering "No cock fighting".

Despite all the commercial pressures and competing attractions, the changing population and social habits, it's a sign that the British pub, like its humour, is in rude health.