

DRINKING IN HISTORY

By Sue Jackson

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I have to confess that many of my fondest memories of my student days in the UK involve pubs. Three decades ago weekends would often find me curled up in the corner of an oak pew in one dark, low-ceilinged tavern or another, a warm beer in hand, in the convivial company of my fellow students.

When we decided recently to return for a trip down memory lane it was the charm of those old pubs that immediately sprang to mind. I knew that finding them would often involve meandering down country lanes, and that we would be able to explore the byways and skip the highways. I also hoped these age-old watering holes might be one aspect of British life that had escaped change. And because my interests nowadays extend a little beyond beer to reading and writing, I decided on a pilgrimage to pubs with literary associations.

Of course hotels and writers have a long and colourful connection - at least as far back as that great Medieval poet, Geoffrey Chaucer. The original tour guide, Chaucer chose the Tabard Inn in Southwark, London, as the starting point for his famous pilgrimage to Canterbury. As he explained in 1387:

In Southwerk at the Tabard as I lay

Redy to wenden on my pilgrymage

To Caunterbury with ful devout corage,

At nyght was come into that hostelrye

*Wel nyne and twenty in a compaignye,
Of sundry folk, by aventure yfalle
In felaweshipe, and pilgrims were they alle,
That toward Canterbury wolden ryde.*

Sadly, nothing remains of the old Tabard, but on the same site Elizabethan hoteliers erected the George Inn which, doubling as a theatre, rapidly became famous. Its wide, tiered balconies built around three sides of a courtyard provided an excellent vantage point for the plays performed below.

As it happens, William Shakespeare lived locally for a time and the Globe Theatre is nearby, so the Inn's claim that he drank there, and scribbled some of his plays at its dark tables, or even staged them on site, is not outrageous. Certainly the George's status as a National Trust pub ensures that the atmosphere is redolent with history and its narrow-boarded, buckled and tilting dark wooden floors squeak of the past.

The theatrical aspect no doubt had great appeal for Charles Dickens, a regular patron, who featured the tavern in *Little Dorrit*. Dickens, who was a keen actor, writer and director of amateur productions, would probably be thrilled to discover, as we did, that the pub still honours his memory by hosting a popular one-man show called 'The Life and Times of Charles Dickens'. As we wandered along the one remaining balcony and peered down it was easy to imagine Elizabethans and Victorians doing exactly the same.

Pilgrimage was also the motivator for a *Who's Who?* of writers who, over the last two centuries, have visited London's touristy Cheshire Cheese pub.

Carlyle, Macaulay, Tennyson, Mark Twain, Conan Doyle and Yeats all went there

to toast the memory of the famous author, Doctor Samuel Johnson, at his local. The Cheese is just inside the entrance to Wine Office Court, while the doctor's beautifully preserved house and the bronze statue of his oyster-loving cat, Hodge, are just a short stagger away.

Heading out of London, pilgrims of another hue braved the Thames in 1889 and provided the inspiration for Jerome K Jerome's *Boys' Own Annual*-type, best-selling comic novel *Three Men in a Boat*. (The pals' journey was recently re-enacted for the ABC with hilarious consequences by three anarchic British comedians.)

Jerome K Jerome had this to say about one of the pubs in Clifton Hampden, Oxfordshire, that the trio visited en route:

'The Barley Mow is, without exception, I should say, the quaintest, most old world inn up the river. Its low-pitched gables, thatched roof and latticed windows give it quite a story book appearance, while inside it is even still more once-upon-a-timeyified.'

However, there is one downside (or upside?) to all this ancient charm:

'It would not be a good place for the heroine of a modern novel to stay at. The heroine of a modern novel is always "divinely tall" and she's ever "drawing herself up to her full height". At the Barley Mow she would bump her head against the ceiling each time she did this.' This is one heroine who learned the hard way exactly what he meant – Ouch!

Over in the World Heritage City of Bath, we looked for Jane Austen's connection in every pub in town, though it wasn't easy to imagine her actually inside one. The closest we came was the Huntsman's tavern outside which it is

claimed she must have stood to be able to describe so accurately the vista of Georgian mansions opposite. Silent observation can be thirsty work, but there is no evidence that she ever set foot inside. Yet Jane did have an unconventional streak, so I never quite lost hope that one day in a dimly-lit washroom in some old pub I would find scrawled in the corner of the mirror: 'Jane Austen was here'.

But Bath was far from disappointing. We successfully located the Saracen's Head, where Dickens lodged while he put the finishing touches to *The Pickwick Papers*. Unfortunately, the pub proved to be quite as bad as the *Itchy Bath Guide* suggested: '... whatever attracted big Charlie Boy's attention is long-gone, leaving a decidedly average joint.' Wending our way between the wall-to-wall poker machines, we had to agree.

The Llandoger Trow in near-by Bristol made up for all that. It was a bonanza of literary associations. This glorious, timbered, gable-fronted pub, built in 1664, was where Daniel Defoe met Alexander Selkirk (a.k.a. Robinson Crusoe). It was also Robert Louis Stevenson's inspiration for the Admiral Benbow in *Treasure Island*. In its narrow passages you could almost feel you were brushing past slave traders or smugglers or press gangs, or the link boys ready to light the way for worse-for-wear patrons, performers or musicians to the Theatre Royal across the road.

Our next stop, Oxford, was also a gem. Confusingly, it has two ancient pubs with almost identical names – the Turl and the Turf. But activating our orienteering skills, we eventually located, just past the Bridge of Sighs, a tiny lane which led into the courtyard of the low-slung and sprawling Turf Tavern. This

beautiful old pub, festooned with hanging baskets of geraniums, featured in the Inspector Morse series and was host to both C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien.

Our time in Oxford coincided with Orientation week, so the town was abuzz. Gripping our drinks we vied for seats with gowned senior students and a 'United Nations' of wide-eyed, ever so young-looking freshers. We had no chance at all with the group of loud academics who had occupied the best seats in the house and had obviously settled in for the evening. I can only think that the creators of *Lord of the Rings* and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* knew better than to go in for a drink during Freshers' Week.

What a contrast between the privilege of the Turf Tavern and our final destination - Ian Rankin's Inspector Rebus' favourite haunt - the Oxford Bar in Edinburgh. This pub is located in the mean streets of this genteel Scottish city – yes Edinburgh does have them. As a homage to his favourite watering place, Rankin named his fictional pathologist Professor Gates after John Gates who ran the hotel until recently.

The Inspector's pub has so much the feel of a 'Men Only' venue that I didn't dare sit in the bar, so we quickly scurried into the adjoining lounge. But we tried Deuchars IPA – Rebus' favourite beer, of which he is rather too fond – and our verdict was 'soapy'.

Although we arrived in the UK with Great Expectations that our literary pilgrimage would be a first, time and again we found ourselves Pipped at the post by one of the English language's favourite sons. The George Inn, the Cheshire Cheese, the Saracen's Head, Wiltshire's Waggon and Horses – all had welcomed Charles Dickens well before our time. Perhaps Our Mutual Friend was committed

to a life-long pub crawl? Or maybe he'd simply discovered the most effective antidote to the Hard Times of his childhood was to sit beneath ancient beams, in front of an open fire, glass of beer in hand, in the company of good friends. As Oliver Twist said: 'I want some more!'

MORE

Just a few of the pubs visited:

The George Inn, 77 Borough High Street, Southwark, London

Barley Mow, Clifton Hampden, Oxfordshire

Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese, 145 Fleet Street, London

Saracen's Head, Broad Street, Bath

Llandoger Trow, King Street, Bristol

Turf Tavern, 7 Bath Place, Oxford

Oxford Bar, 8 Young Street, Edinburgh

The Wagon and Horses, Beckhampton, Marlborough, Wiltshire