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Take Me to English Pubs

by James Francis Cahillane

Mid-winter blahs have their uses. Light the fire, dust off that Homer's *Odyssey* you always intended to read, pull up a chair, good reading light and a wooly throw: let Spring come in its own good time. Alternatively, there's the cellar to clear of stuff moved in years ago. Or, you could tackle that geometric puzzle a masochistic friend presented to you last Christmas. All cracking good ideas that suddenly pale when compared with, "going down the pub."

When I first went to England in 1952 I didn't spend much time in pubs.

RAF Fairford was miles from the town of Fairford itself, and without a car or bus service there was no easy way to get there. It's just as well.

I'm sure the welcome mat wasn't out for raw un-traveled young Americans asking for an ice cold lager and stupidly griping about being stationed in "this godforsaken place" i.e. on the borders of a fabled tourist destination called *The Cotswolds*. What did we know? Anglophiles spend their savings and many years yearning to visit what we had for free outside our door. Decades later, my good Wiltshire wife repaired most of the provincial gaps in my tastes and education.

The airbase's nearest pub was a den called the Troglodyte, "The Trog" for short, and guys I knew, knew it well. True to its name the ceiling was covered in ancient asbestos foam spread over chicken wire to replicate a cave. The regulars had puffed away until the interior was black. Alas, The Trog is no more. The Landlord and regulars most likely were killed by the residual asbestos fumes, if not side-stream smoke.

Better Cotswold pubs are built of the local honey-colored stone; many look like they grew straight out of the ground because tree-sized hundred-year-old honeysuckle and clematis vines cover them. The Lamb at Great Rissington features a color picture of a B-17 in remembrance of the workhorse World War II bomber that crashed into its back garden. Signatures of U.S. Army Air Force crews who made The Lamb their Local still decorate its low ceiling. The pub sits atop a small hill outside the market town of Burford; we ordered our pints inside, then left the dark bar to lunch on picnic tables set on its tilted lawn. Familiar jet aircraft noises echoed in the distance from the lost B-17's RAF base destination visible just two hills away from where we lunched.

Writers hung around in pubs before there were airmen, Icarus excepted. Public Houses, as the name implies, serve (at the Landlord's pleasure) everyone who comes in the door, pretenders all.

One Oxford group of friends called themselves The Inklings: C.S. Lewis, C. W. Williams, and J. R. R. Tolkien. Tolkien wrote *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*. A recent reader's survey named him England's most popular author of the 20th century. From the 1930s into the 1960s the Inklings met and read new work to each other at their favorite city pub: The Eagle and Child. To them, "The Bird and Baby." It's still there, serving friendly meals and "well-pulled" pints to this day.

Fyfield's cathedral-roofed White Hart village pub belongs to St. John's College, Oxford. Once an almshouse, this five hundred year old building has tales to tell. Its lease says it's to be a school again, "if plague be at Oxford." It features a fine menu, vegetarian choices, and a wide selection of ales thanks to being a Free House, i.e. not owned by a brewer.

Good pubs have personalities. A Member of Parliament has requested that it be made illegal for public houses to change their names willy-nilly without planning board approval. He began his campaign because of a threat to change the Bull's Head, his local watering place in Cheshire, to the Pig and Truffle. Outraged, MP Nicholas Winterton said the pub "is a point of identity and has been known by its existing name for hundreds of years." The big brewer owner responded, "We have to keep up with the times." Clientele and location form a pub's character. Nature, nurture and landlord comprise the whole.

The worst of modern pubs offer video games, loud music, television, and plasticene wood decor, and all abominations to true pub lovers.

CAMRA (Campaign for Real Ale) is an association of real ale boosters who promote quality pubs and pub microbreweries. Thousands attend their annual ale tasting event in Bristol.

Not long ago we stayed one night at the Cott Inn in Dartington, Devon. Continually licensed since 1320, the building boasts an 183 foot long thatched roof, seven rooms to let, a restaurant and large bar. We ate our supper in front of a blazing fire. Our dessert course also came with a bellowing voice, "Tonight is Quiz Night at The Cott." Challenged, we ponied up an entry fee; our table of four was in the hunt for cash prizes and local fame.

It wasn't to be. One of us knew that a group of whales was a pod, but, "Where in Devon is depicted an elephant with cattle-like hooves?" The answer was a carving in thousand-year old Exeter Cathedral—one made via a sailor's sketchy description to the artist. The friendly couple at an adjoining table shared their ideas with us, suggesting the name of a nearby pub—The Elephant's Foot. Wrong! We, and more ale, survived round after

round of questions, learning our limitations. It was a lesson that we relearned years later when cruising on the QEII. The English are trivia professionals!

Many of Dr. Johnson's works, and Boswell's, rely on taverns as meeting places and scene setters. It's popular to wander through London listening to lectures by paid "London Walks" guides telling trivial tales from its colorful literary past. I may have over identified at The Cheshire Cheese. Lamplights, cheerful chatter, busy barmaids, food cooking, smoke, pints of dark ale being pulled into tall glasses, hustle, bustle: life and escape from life in the exact same instant. In my reverie I transformed a pudgy ruddy fellow, half glasses, spotty vest, into the old ruminator himself; or was he crafty barrister Horace Rumpole's creator, John Mortimer? Ah! Give me the writing life.

"I rose politely at the club
And said 'I feel a little bored:
Will some one take me to a pub?'"

G.K. Chesterton

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