

Our Wonderful Marsh Pubs *by Mark Kimpton November 2021*

I took a ride down to Romney Marsh earlier this week on the motorcycle to photograph some of the excellent hostelrys on this unique tract of land. I couldn't visit every one due to a tight schedule and I've included a couple of images taken on previous trips. In every pub I visited I was given a warm welcome by both the staff and customers as has always been the case. I've been meaning to write a piece about pubs in general and their history. We need to support our local pubs if they are to survive and thrive. Romney Marsh is indeed an awesome place and is blessed with many a cracking pub - this is rather a long piece so you might like to enjoy your favourite tippie or a mug of tea/coffee if you decide to read on!

Pubs are part of our national heritage and have withstood the test of time, many have interesting histories going back hundreds of years but now after the restrictions of the pandemic the hospitality industry really does need our help to give it the best chance of a bright and sustainable future.

There are an amazing variety of pubs both the very old and those that are a good deal younger, some serve only beer, spirits, soft drinks and coffee whilst others offer first class food from an extensive menu prepared by an excellent chef. Some of us like themed pubs, others like a hostelry that is quiet with the old world atmosphere of yesteryear, some customers prefer a pub that has a more diverse offering with live entertainment nights featuring live bands, solo performers, and karaoke with other evenings dedicated to a quiz or traditional games like dominoes, darts, skittles, shove-halfpenny bar billiards, cribbage and more. Whatever type of pub it is that you call your local it now needs your support like never before.

Our pubs are right at the heart of the communities they serve and during the recent difficult times they have stepped up to the mark offering take away food and drink and in many cases also delivering it to local residents. Publicans have responded magnificently whether they run a free house or operate their pub for a brewery or a company that owns a chain of licensed premises. Over the years they have run events supporting both local and national charities.

There are town pubs and village pubs each with their own characteristic ambiance. There's nothing quite like walking into a hostelry and receiving a greeting and a welcoming smile from the staff who work there; it matters not whether you are a regular or a new visitor. During the summer months you can relax in the cool interior and enjoy a refreshing cold drink or if there's a beer garden you can sit outside in a convenient spot and enjoy the warm sunshine. In

the cold days and evenings of winter that beaming smile and the heat and warm glow emanating from an open fire or stove is something really special for many of us. You feel better and it can seem like a real home from home.

We go to pubs for all sorts of reasons some of those include: to talk, enjoying a bit of banter and a relaxing chat or participate in more deep and thoughtful conversation; think about our hobbies and pastimes, weigh up our options with respect to issues we encounter in life or indulge and stretch our imaginations; meet friends and make new friends or meet new people that we may form deeper relationships with; escape from the pressures of work and home; participate in traditional pub games; enjoy a snack or a good meal; to be entertained by talented artists be they singers, musicians or both; and of course drink, whether it be your favourite ale, lager, cider or some other tipple.

A Little History

The consumption of alcohol goes back to prehistoric times and when the Romans arrived they found the Britons enjoying ale made without hops thus it was much sweeter than the beer we consume today whilst some wealthy natives imported wine from Europe.

As the Romans became more established here they brought with them their wine shops or taberna from which the word tavern was derived. As they built their impressive Roman road network inns sprang up where travellers could get a meal and a bed for the night. More sophisticated inns evolved that were frequented by important officials and wealthy traders where they could stay in greater comfort with high quality food, stable their horses and seek the services of a blacksmith if required. There were even lists of inns detailing their locations with symbols showing the facilities available and the distances between them. Travel became less sophisticated after the Romans left and during Saxon times the English drank mostly ale and mead, which was made from fermented honey and water.

During the middle ages three types of drinking premises evolved - the inn, the tavern and the ale house. The inn was the preserve of wealthy travellers who could afford the higher cost of these establishments that offered quality lodging facilities for the time, food and drink. The tavern did not normally offer a bed for the night it was more the medieval equivalent of the modern wine bar selling wine and some of them offering food to those who were able to pay the price. You needed to be reasonably prosperous to frequent these places. Alehouses were far less sophisticated and the preserve of the ordinary person. They were people's houses where ale was brewed and offered for sale; they were mostly one room wattle and daub structures that offered a take away service.

There was no bar and customers and the seller completed the transaction with animals including pigs and chickens being permitted to wander in and out! The hygiene and cleanliness would appear absolutely shocking to us today, however, the quality of the alcoholic drink on offer was checked by an official known as an ale-corner. Potential customers could recognise an alehouse as it displayed a pole with leaves at the end outside the premises, it was known as an alestake and was the forerunner of the pub sign.

By the time of the reign of Elizabeth 1st prosperity and travel increased, more inns sprang up and they became commercial hubs for merchants. Brewing with hops was introduced in the 15th century which gave ale a more bitter taste that was initially resisted by the established sweet toothed consumers but it caught on and became more acceptable and had the advantage that it kept better and for longer. This led to the evolution of larger breweries with the result that inns and alehouses stopped brewing their own. Alehouses developed and became somewhat less primitive; simple furniture such as tables, chairs and stools began to appear and some of these establishments started to offer a bed for the night. Games such as skittles and bowls were played outside.

The classic English inn reached its heady heights during the 18th century when those who needed to make a journey between towns and cities travelled by stagecoach. Generally a substantial building able to accommodate a considerable number of guests, it is in these places that you were most likely to find the red cheeked jovial and welcoming landlord that we associate with our nostalgia for the colourful Georgian period.

Coaches pulled in to change horses and the passengers went inside to warm themselves from the flames of a roaring fire set in a large inglenook fireplace, which crackled and popped sending its heat throughout the room on moving currents of air that also carried with it the characteristic aroma of burning logs. Our travellers would have the opportunity to refresh themselves and enjoy a meal and drink before setting out again on their arduous journey for indeed this would not have been a comfortable way to get from one place to another. Affluent local people frequented the finest inns and they developed into social centres for the exchange of news and gossip of the time. Elegant furniture characteristic of the time together with a quality chiming clock would be found in the rooms where the gentry and ladies relaxed and exchanged pleasantries and social discourse. In the latter part of the eighteenth century the owners of premier establishments began to refer to them as hotels.

The old style taverns were going out of fashion and all but disappeared whilst alehouses were becoming increasingly more comfortable and for the most part

moving more upmarket by the standards of the time. The owners of some of these more comfortable drinking places began to call them taverns. Some were built specifically for the hospitality business instead of being ordinary homes that had been somewhat adapted for the purpose of selling alcohol.

The more progressive and forward thinking establishments had two floors with rooms available for overnight stays and with the increase in the numbers of those whose business required more frequent travel offering lodging facilities became more profitable. They were generally well furnished as the paying guest expected to relax in surroundings of reasonable quality. They also provided games rooms for such activities as bagatelle, billiards and shove-halfpenny. You could also buy basic food items like bread, butter, buns, cheese and pies. Traders offered a variety of everyday items for sale from pens to gloves. Towards the end of the 18th century they began to be known as public houses. The country's canal network expanded with the industrial revolution as transportation of large quantities of goods was cheaper by barge and pubs began to appear alongside waterways to provide a service to those who earned their living on the canals. With the rapid growth of railways from the 1840s onward more purpose built inns began to appear alongside the more popular routes near the stations to meet the needs of those travelling by train.

Coming Up To Date

The 20th century brought with it a revolution in personal transport with the development, mass production and sale of the private car. The hospitality industry again proved its ability to adapt to the needs of its customers and with the rapid improvement in the quality of road surfaces and the growth of the road network, new pubs were built in an altogether different style to meet the needs of the motorist and growing communities in leafy suburbs.

The traditional pub had for many years a public bar to cater for the needs of the regular working man and a saloon bar for use by the middle classes. A smart standard of dress was expected in the saloon bar and it was better furnished with carpets and soft seating; the publican charged a little more for drinks served in this bar. However as time moved on and more customers became more affluent the owners of pubs soon realised that if they removed the dividing walls and had just one bar area there would be more room to serve more customers with the resultant increase in profits, although the separate bar areas still remain in some pubs.

In more recent years there has been a decline in the number of pubs and this has been put down to the increasing cost of living, increased duty on alcoholic

drinks and the cheap alcohol being readily available from supermarkets; there's the reported change in culture with more people drinking at home, the increased popularity of wine and more individuals socialising on-line with the proliferation of smart phones and social media platforms.

Owners of pubs have seen their revenues fall and in some cases it has been more cost effective to close their pubs and sell them off to developers. In 2019 according to figures released by the British Beer and Pub Association there were 47, 200 pubs in the UK, 23,400 of these were independent, 13,900 owned by pub companies and 9,900 owned by breweries. Ten years earlier there were 52, 500. Figures released in May show that the impact of COVID-19 had resulted in the closure of 435 high street pubs.

The Current Scene

We are still fortunate enough to have thousands of pubs in towns and villages across the country some are newer and others have stood the test of time for hundreds of years and are steeped in history. As we have seen the hospitality industry has been innovative over time in adapting to the needs of its customers. Some establishments have become niche and targeted a certain type of customer, others have specialised in offering first class food and dining facilities whilst some have remained 'wet' led and serve the needs of the traditional pub customer who appreciates a good selection of ales and larger that can be consumed in relaxed comfortable surroundings.

In more recent years we have seen the growth of the 'micro pub' which is a small one roomed drinking establishment that serves customers who want good real ale and enjoy a convivial chat with some lively banter in pleasant relaxed surroundings.

The Future

We should cherish our pubs, they have been an integral part of our communities for hundreds of years, they have responded to our changing needs and have been there for us when we have needed them. Our pubs also need us for we are the reason that they are here. If we have learned one thing as a result of the issues that currently face us from the pandemic to climate change, it is that we are all interconnected. Lets support our pubs as much as we can; if we all pop in for a now and again or a bite to eat or both, we can make a difference. We need to support them with our custom to ensure that these wonderful places will remain in our towns and villages in the years to come.