

LOCAL LEGENDS
THE HIDDEN PUBS OF LONDON

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you,
you nice!



Suggs — The French House, 2023

FOREWORD BY SUGGS

I love April Fool's Day. You'll find me pouring the first 568 millilitres of the day behind the bar of The French House. Every other day of the year, it's half pints only in this bohemian boozier frequented by the likes of Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud. But for one day only, we get to pull the pints. Auctioning them off for good causes, we then run for the hills, as the pints can be not just beer, but wine and even gin.

My Mum was a singer in the pubs and clubs, including The French, so Soho became our home. After being greeted by the benevolent witch Muriel Belcher at the door of The Colony Club as "Little Cunt", I would pluck my way across the sticky carpet, passing rows of fishnet-clad knees – and that was just the fellas. Soho and its pubs and clubs were a magnet for all sorts of misfits: jazz musicians, painters, writers, poets, strippers, prostitutes, coppers and toffs, plain old deviants and transvestites. From "good time" George Melly to Jeffrey Bernard being unwell, you could be anything – the only house rule was that you just couldn't be boring.

I wouldn't have had a career without pubs. I would have been a busker or butcher's boy to eternity. Pubs were the firmament of our culture. The pubs gave us a platform. They gave us a place to hone our performance, and they gave us a fanbase. Without our ancestral home at The Dublin Castle in Camden, it's quite possible that the nascent Nutty Boys would never have left NW1.

London has been my life, my love, and my muse. It evolves continually, and the pubs shapeshift to mirror the moving sands of society around them. They offer the perfect houses of fun to chew the cud, debate the dream back four line-up at my beloved Chelsea FC, or simply get pissed with your mates. Now whose round is it?

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'SUGGS', is centered at the bottom of the page. The signature is stylized and cursive.

“There’s a pub in London that I really adore, but I won’t say what it is. It’s divided into a lounge and a public bar and it’s small and obscure. Hardly anyone goes there. I’m bracing myself against the thought that someone will soon take it over and rip it up. Although in a way I can understand people doing that, if it means they end up making more money. I suppose if I was a publican wanting to make a living, then I would probably do the same. That’s just the way the world is going, I suppose. It’s a case of: what can anyone do about it?”

Bill Bryson, *The Times*

A LOVE STORY

London is full of iconic alehouses. These timeless taverns are the perfect portal to the past. The cultural conduits through which to conjure history. Visitors can pop for a pint in the pubs where Shakespeare once performed in the courtyard or Dickens penned *A Tale of Two Cities*. These are the legendary pubs where you really should enjoy at least one pint in your life.

But are these the ones that linger longest in the memory? Great as they are, there is a different breed of pub with its own reverential following. It is special breed of pub that informed our alcoholic odyssey across The Big Smoke and inspired us to capture their idiosyncratic qualities and share their richly woven histories through the evocative images captured here.

It's always worth noting the name of the gaffer above the door as you enter. They are usually quite the character, with a reputation that precedes them by a country mile.

Discreetly located far from maddening tourist crowds and noisy out-of-towners, these hubris-free charmers are worth seeking out; side-street specials where eccentric landlords attract an equally characterful clientele. The welcome is warmer, the beer better kept, and a carefully curated ambience keeps the “rowdies” at arm’s length.

These hidden gems are happy to live in the shadow of the easily found, modern-misery chain pubs hoovering up the occasional drinker. Visiting these more elusive pubs takes you out of your natural way, through less familiar parts of town, but suddenly you’ll duck through an archway or turn a corner, and then! Alcoholic Xanadu! The hand-painted sign, the proudly polished brass and the light burble of chit-chat give you a feeling of warm contentment before you’ve even set foot inside.

It’s always worth noting the name of the gaffer above the door as you enter. They are usually quite the character, with a reputation that

precedes them by a mile. The walls and ceiling are regularly adorned with vintage ephemera and there's often a house pet somewhere too. As forces of nature, battling the bland by the hour, these landlords can of course be polarising, with 1★ reviews as likely as 5★. But it's their eccentric way or the homogenised highway, and I've seen a few people told to "bugger off down to Wetherspoons" if they can't respect the house rules. These landlords often see themselves merely as the caretaker of these fine pubs, ready to hand the keys on to the next generation when the time is right.

Eating can be viewed as cheating in these wet-led boozers, and why waste valuable stomach space when there's more wonderful cask ale to fill your belly with? Patrons are connoisseurs of the carb. From crisps to scratchings, pork pies, toasties or cling-filmed rolls, it's all up for grabs. When you see the bar staff nonchalantly dropping a pickled egg into a bag of ready salted crisps, then you know that you've found yourself a proper fucking boozier.

Long before the advent of GPS, these were pubs of legend and lore. Locations shared by word of mouth or ringed on a well-thumbed copy of the *London A-Z*. Even to this day, they rarely feature in lists of the most famous or must-visit pubs of London, and they certainly don't seek such accolades. Most don't even have a website and, with almost zero social media presence, you'll soon realise that the pubs themselves are the social network.

Shakespeare, Dickens, Freud or Bacon are unlikely to have drunk in any of these pubs. In fact, it's you, the drinker, that makes the story as soon as you enter stage right. Patronise these establishments regularly and you're likely to find your own tankard or brass plaque above the bar. These pubs invite the locals to curate the jukebox playlist, suggest a new ale or trial a case of wine they've stumbled on during their recent travels. Each pub has an area or run of bar stools where the hardcore locals find their place. These are the pubs that both serve and support the local community, for business or leisure. You'll find charity tins, quirky quiz nights and perhaps an order of service for a local wedding or funeral

behind the bar. Local cricket or special interest groups host their monthly meets here, and that's when the ominous hanging yard-of-ale glass might see some serious action.

The more time you spend in these pubs, the more addicted you become. No longer content with catching up in your tried-and-tested classic corner pubs, you'll seek these out. Perhaps the best thing about these discoveries is imagining what other beauties might be hiding across the capital. With 3,500 pubs still pulling pints, the thought that there might be 30 or 40 drinking diamonds in the rough, ready to be unearthed, is a thrilling prospect. The Hope in Carshalton, The Eagle Ale House in Battersea, The Warwick Castle in Maida Vale, The Ship in Fitzrovia, The Victoria in Bermondsey, The Anchor & Hope in Clapton: all mouth-watering prospects for the avid pint-chaser and easily enough to fill another book... if only our livers could keep up.

But this rare breed of pub is possibly the one most at risk of extinction. Will the new work-from-home ways allow these rare face-to-face forums a viable future? With past performance being no guarantee of future survival, please consider this book a call to arms to spread the love around and spend your pounds in the fabulous freehouses listed and photographed so richly within these pages.

The baton now passes to you, the reader. It's time to push open the brass-handled pub door, pull up a bar stool, order a pint 'n pickled egg and join us on our trundle through the glorious world of London's finest backstreet boozers. Just remember not to sit on the cat.

Cheers!

John & Horst



YE OLDE MITRE

THE DIAMOND DISTRICT'S HIDDEN GEM

1 ELY CT, ELY PL, HATTON GARDEN EC1N 6SJ

Being touted as the hardest-to-find pub in London certainly keeps the hoi polloi at arm's length, and not opening on the weekend often catches out the uninitiated. Simply finding the pub for the first time can evoke a small euphoric glow. It's possible for the first-timer to wander past Hatton Garden's diamond dealers several times before noticing the uniquely handsome bishop's mitre pub sign and squeezing through the shady archway to a very fine pub indeed.

You certainly can visit for the history, dating back to 1546, and many do indeed come to seek out the fossilised ancient cherry tree that Elizabeth I allegedly once danced around on May Day. You will also no doubt listen to the legend of the pub being legally assigned as part of Cambridge under the Bishop of Ely.

And whilst all this legend and lore certainly has merit, at the heart lies a truly cracking pub. A place where connoisseurs of the cask congregate, with the Society for the Preservation of Beers from the Wood designating The Mitre as its hallowed headquarters. Campaigning since 1963 against the rise of the fizzy filth dispensed from "sealed dustbins", members have their own tankards shelved behind the bar, and revel in The Mitre's very own wooden beer casks filled regularly with gravity-fed devil juice.

This is the kind of magical spot that, once discovered, makes it hard to return to the real world

Ship brokers holding court over lunchtime pints give way to an after-work throng filling this urban crevice with full-throttle beery burble. Suitable sustenance is found in the finest pork pies from Mr Barrick's in Yorkshire, which are, in addition to the toasties, the Platonic ideal of bar snacks. Heaven can indeed wait. Living above the shop after ten years is the ever-welcoming landlady, Judith Norman. This is the kind of magical spot that, once discovered, makes it hard to return to the real world.

The newest recruit to the team asked for a job on his very first visit to the pub. When asked "Why the enthusiasm?", he simply replied: "Because I love great beer!" Quite.





Traditional pork pies and hand-pulled pints make for perfect bedfellows







Head upstairs to escape the post-work-pint hubbub





THE COCKPIT

OLD-SCHOOL BLACKFRIARS BATTLE CRUISER

7 ST ANDREW'S HILL, BLACKFRIARS EC4V 5BY

Sheltering in the shadow of St Paul's Cathedral, this is a pub with traditional East End hospitality running through its veins at the beating heart of the moral-munching Square Mile.

The signage recalls the pub's bloody cock-fighting history, when cocks would scrap to the death whilst the booze and bets flowed freely all around. The keeper of the losing bird would find themselves hoisted up by bucket into the gallery and pelted with glass bottles, often full of bodily fluids supplied by the baying crowds.

The current clientele are rather more genteel, with the Cathedral bell-ringers often seen indulging in post-peal refreshments. There's usually a gaggle of regular bar-huggers in situ, but with almost no one living in the Square Mile they must travel a long way to call this their "local".

Mr Cook – Dave, or Cookie to his friends – has run this pub with his wife for over thirty years, and it feels that little has been touched for a decade or two. The place is a rich whirl of colourful carpets, natty upholstery, burnished wood and rudimentary bogs. A vintage Shove Ha'penny board acts as a reminder of simpler times. The perfect template for a backstreet boozier? Quite possibly.

The doors open here nearly every day of the year, making it a treasured anomaly in the deserted weekend City streets. It is a fine antidote to modern capitalism; when you sit sheltered inside its opaque windows, you forget that you're in one of the pre-eminent financial centres of the world.

Enveloped by historic mercantile exchanges, investment banks and insurance multinationals, the real estate here is amongst the most expensive on the planet. Buildings rarely last long in the City, with Great Fires, Great Wars and even greater financial pressures ripping through it. The corporate world has little time for architectural nostalgia, but this pub is a place of constant and quiet refuge.

But when the captain of this Cockpit rings his own last orders and throws in the (beer) towel, what comes next? Who knows what will become of such old-world boozers cast adrift in the new age of digital finance, when the days of long liquid lunches are fast disappearing?

Perhaps the hand-painted word "Courage" over the exquisite curving front doors is a call to arms rather than a reference to the once-famous brewery. The Cockpit has seen plenty of bloodshed over the centuries, but, with Cookie at the helm, this good ship shall sail on.



TIMOTHY TAYLOR'S
CHAMPIONSHIP BEER
EST. 1858
LANDLORD



TRIBUTE
TAYLOR
DALLAS





Cookie ruling his roost



Courage

Cockpit



Courage







Old-school charm in the heart of the City



A carpeted cocoon apart from the modern world

