

**From the pages
Of that respected & weighty Tome
The Guardian**

Are pubs finally becoming hubs?

Pub landlords are diversifying into weird and wonderful new areas. From takeaway chips to live theatre, is this the end of the boozier as we know it?



A Pub sign in Wickham, Hampshire

Post Office and pub signs in Wickham, Hampshire, England.

Photograph: Coyote-Photography.co.uk/ Alamy

Pubs ain't what they used to be. Despite the large profits reported by Fullers' this morning, the nation's boozers **are still shutting at a rate of 52 a week**, and for those still in business diversification is the current buzzword.

This month a major industry review, Licensed Hospitality 2009, reiterated the point that if pubs are to survive they need to sell much more than just beer.

The future, suggest People 1st and the British Institute of Innkeeping, is in pubs morphing into multifunctional social hubs, which offer a variety of

attractions from high-end food shopping to live comedy.

Judging from an Pub industry survey concerned, this is by no means a mainstream trend, as yet.

Its headline figure that 94% of pubs have tried new business initiatives in the last year, refers to survey responses from a group of just 60 BII members pubs. Some of the those have indeed introduced novel attractions - for instance, **Cardiff's Flying Angel**, which counts many foreign seamen and lorry drivers among its regulars, has opened a bureau de change - but, equally, many have turned to standard sidelines: quiz nights, food, bedrooms.



The Seaman's Mission –Cardiff

Dig around, however, and you will find plenty of evidence that a significant minority of Britain's 58,000 pubs are embracing radical change. One thousand pubs, for instance, have signed up to the Scottish & Newcastle-backed useyourlocal.com, which encourages people to have packages picked-up from, and delivered to, the local pub.

Since 2001, meanwhile, advisory body, **Pub Is The Hub**, have been helping numerous rural pubs open village shops, butchers and Post Offices on their premises.

Poke your head out of the snug, and you will invariably find a pub, near you, doing something 'different'.

In Saddleworth, the Ram's Head is now half-pub, half deli-cafe. Down in Cornwall, the Innis Inn runs a campsite.

In Nottingham, Larwood & Voce is selling takeaway coffees and chips.

In Hampshire, near the River Test, the Peat Spade Inn runs a fishing tackle shop, and a drop-off / pick-up fish smoking service.

In Salford, the King's Arms is home to a traditional pub, theatre space and several artists' studios. Elsewhere, pubs are hosting night classes and book clubs, and offering beauty therapy services. At a national level, Wetherspoons has successfully ridden out the smoking ban and the credit crunch, in large part by growing breakfast trade. Interestingly, research shows that people now rank food as a bigger attraction in pubs than beer and sociability.

But, you might ask, isn't this what the best pubs have always done? Traditionally, pubs ran (and many still do) darts and bowls teams, held quizzes and karaoke nights, and put on cabaret acts.

This pub has a skittle alley that dates to the 14th century.

Likewise, no-one bats an eye at the city-centre bar that books bands and DJs, shows live football, or exhibits local art on the walls. The best pub landlords and bar owners have always made their premises hubs of the local community, in all manner of ways.

They have always been about more than just beer.

The only people who should feel threatened by this upsurge of activity are those landlords - recently hauled over the coals on this who take your trade for granted.
Those Life On Mars boozers that have, somehow, kept trading despite zero customer service, eggy beer, worn pool tables and peeling wallpaper are now on their way out, and not before time.

However, there are already murmurings of disquiet as to the changing nature of pubs.

Real ale enthusiasts will point to the relative buoyancy of that product (sales are up 1% this year and 3000 new pubs have started serving it in the last 12 months) and argue that great beer should be the cornerstone of any pub. The no-kids-no-dogs-no-music brigade, meanwhile, who crave open fires, convivial background chatter and a quiet corner in which to read the Guardian (and doesn't that sound like bliss?), will hardly want their favourite pubs turned into community centres.

My advice? Just chill out. The debate about the future of pubs is too often turned into a straight choice between solution X or Y.

It isn't. There is room and need for a broad spectrum of boozers with different functions. I might like noise and bustle on a Friday night, but love this on a Sunday afternoon. The important point is for pubs do whatever it is they do well, differentiate themselves from the competition and stay open.

Posted by

Tony Naylor Friday 20 November 2009 guardian.co.uk

Comment from your Editor

(A Piss Pot if there ever was one)

I found it was a painful experience to go back to ones first Pub that held a prominent place in your memory. When I was home from sea as a pre married Teenager I used to go with my Dad to his local-The Springbank Hotel, An old coaching Inn with big double gates for the coach and horses to drive through to a large inner yard area that in my day held two bowling greens.

The Pub had small rooms, a snug, a tap room, a ladies lounge, plus a couple more that I can't recall the name of now, scrubbed wooden tables, a fug of pipe & cigarette smoke, cosy and warm from the open coal fires in each room.

I used to play Dominoes in the Tap room with my Dad and a group of friends, most of whom where older than him, I could hardly understand a word they said, their accents were so broad and their words so old. I loved it, thought it magic. Wish now that I had made some record of the old dialect because now it has vanished for ever.

On my first visit back to UK in 1993 - 28 years after migrating to Oz I went back to the Springbank-

From the outside it looked as I remembered it

But the inside! It had been gutted, all the small rooms and woodwork gone, just one big room painted PINK With an enormous Juke Box standing in one corner of the room full of plastic chairs & tables.

It was a Friday night about 7pm -the place was empty.

I left without even buying a beer with a lump in my throat and a tear in my eye.