



Features

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Is It Taps for the Traditional English Pub?

BARRY SINGER tries to soak up some authentic local atmosphere in London.



The London suburb of Horley, near Gatwick Airport, holds the Farmhouse, once a haunt of a king's mistress



As a pub, the Nags Head surely must have served a fair share of opera types throughout its one-hundred-plus-year existence in Covent Garden. But you'd never know it - and the Nags Head itself hasn't a clue. "Opera?" hollers the baby-faced day manager blithely from across the bar, over a thudding soundtrack. "Dunno."

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The Nags Head, near the Royal Opera House
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The Nags Head, near the Royal Opera House

Situated just paces down Floral Street from the Royal Opera House stage door, the turret-fronted, Victorian-inflected Nags Head is today a corporate pub asset primarily, one of 150 or so belonging to McMullen & Sons - a family-owned brewery that has preserved the classic terracotta brickwork and engraved glass window signs outside, and the pressed-tin ceiling and ornate bar fixtures (or slickly fabricated facsimiles) inside, while scattering slot machines across the sprawling premises. Published estimates place the Nags Head's value to McMullen & Sons at more than £10 million. Like most contemporary London pubs, the joint serves a lot of wine spritzers alongside its hand-pumped ales and bitters. And apparently, for better or worse, it can get quite loutish late at night, what with rowdy tourists promenading in and out on perpetual Covent Garden mall crawls.

What the Nags Head lacks is any substantive character, any subcutaneous connection to its past - particularly (though hardly exclusively) its opera association-by-proximity.

One suspects that everyone who was anyone at the Royal Opera has sipped something at the Nags Head, to say nothing of the stagehands, the camp followers, the choristers and the critics. Their presence has, however, passed unnoticed. The Nags Head is a pub with no memory at all.

Moreover, around London it is not alone. Not a fortnight passes, seemingly, without some neighborhood mainstay shuttering for good, often elbowed aside by pub conglomerates such as Pubmaster, or the wine lists and elaborate menus of so-called "gastro-pubs" - lately heralded as the saviors of London pubbery.

"I mean, we all like to eat, don't we?" acknowledges one struggling pub landlord. "As little as twenty years ago, all you could get in an English pub if you were hungry was a pickled egg and a dog biscuit. Now, because of a more discerning customer, we've all had to go the food route. 'Pub food' is the thing. Though some places go so far they've really just become restaurants."

Trotting around London with the chimera of a "traditional pub" as your destination can be vexing. Exteriors are fantastically misleading. Just across James Street from the Nags Head, for example, the White Lion possesses a striking period façade, with

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Ye Olde Fighting Cocks in Abbey Mill Lane, St.

Albans, dates its origins from the eighth century

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The Market Porter is an old-fashioned "local" in Stoney Street, Southwark

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The Market Porter is an old-fashioned "local" in Stoney Street, Southwark

vintage street signage that reads, in part: "*Rebuilt 1888.*" Within, however, is an interior so stripped and minimalist, one feels one has peeked past the false front of a movie set into the empty back lot beyond. The impenetrable Arabic accent of the cordial if clueless barkeep presiding over this utterly unpopulated shell of a pub room only adds to the surreality.

The Market Porter, on the other hand, is for real. Located in the newly fashionable district of Southwark, on the Thames's South Bank, near London Bridge, the rambling, wood-beamed Market Porter is an honest-to-god, old-fashioned "local" with an eclectic crowd of neighborhood laborers, office workers and tourists mixing in an authentically convivial pub atmosphere. The selection of beers is both wide-ranging and traditional, the food is served upstairs in a separate restaurant, and the Borough Market for which the pub is named actually still exists.

Beyond London's central precincts, the fog of chain-pub uniformity lifts even further. One straightforward example is the Farmhouse, in the tiny country suburb of Horley, no more than five minutes from Gatwick Airport and a quick half-hour to London's Victoria Station on the new bullet train. Surrounded by fields and hedgerows (though admittedly within shouting distance of some pretty substantial housing developments), the Farmhouse is just that - a seventeenth-century matrix of timbered, low-ceilinged drinking rooms, with a garden the size of a cricket pitch, nearly two and a half acres of land, full of regulars grazing at picnic tables in summer.



The Farmhouse's interior
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Of course, the Farmhouse has a history. Built in 1602, it was the original hub of a working farm, whose land was sold off over time. By the 1930s, the house was a private home belonging to a London solicitor named Theodore Goddard, who represented Edward VIII's paramour, Mrs. Wallis Simpson, during her divorce. Legend has it that the Simpson divorce papers were signed here. Though this cannot be confirmed, the infamous adulteress definitely visited for some

majestic garden parties still recollected by senior Horley residents.

Converted to a public house in 1985, the Farmhouse has, in its relatively short professional life, been passed around as a possession of many pub entities, making it a kind of contemporary-pub object lesson in microcosm.

"The fellow who bought the place in 1985 opened it as a free house, a freehold, we call it," notes Jerry Hudson, the dashing grizzled present landlord. "By 1987, the poor bastard was doing so well the breweries got greedy and decided they wanted a piece of his action, with John Courage, a very big brewing company, ultimately snapping the place up for a rather big sum. Courage then became Grand Metropolitan before ending up joined with Scottish & Newcastle, in the days when everyone was buying everyone. Mrs. Thatcher then legislated 'The Beer Orders,' which forced the breweries to sell off a lot of their pubs. Newly formed pub holding companies bought most of those. Now, the government is investigating *them* and may force *them* to sell off, because they own too many."

Hudson inhales laconically on his omnipresent cigarette. "Certainly there are still some freehold pubs in the British Isles," he acknowledges. "Maybe 75/25. Under the holding companies, at least, you take on a lease as landlord to run the pub any way you want to. It's none of their business as long as you sell their beer and pay the rent. That's what I do here. Disco, football and pool tables dominated when I took over about three years ago. I decided to take things back to what a pub once was in England," Hudson adds, with a smile that betrays itself. "Well, as much as any pub today can be."

A hand-lettered sign on the wall promises LIVE MUSIC. "Once a month," Hudson explains. "Sixties, Seventies, Eighties stuff."

Do people ever get just get up and sing anymore?

"You mean, like, around the pub piano?" The unflappable pub vet looks genuinely surprised. "They call that karaoke, today. For karaoke you need a special license. Yeah, to sing in an English pub today you got to have a license."

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