

The London
Pub Survival Guide

for tourists and visitors

by Phil Parkin



The **Sherlock Holmes** - Northumberland Street, London WC2 - originally the Northumberland Arms Hotel, the name was changed after Arthur Conan Doyle used it in the Hound of the Baskervilles.

The **Ship and Shovell** - Craven Passage, London WC2 - a pub in two halves, it has a bar on each side of the passage.



The **Prospect of Whitby** (the Devil's inn) Wapping Wall, London E1- macabre connections with the past when one of its customers was the notorious Judge Jeffreys (the "Hanging Judge").

The Author

Phil Parkin loves pubs! - This book, whilst primarily having been written for tourists and visitors to London pubs, is really for all.

Pubs, in attitude, are much the same everywhere. And Phil really wrote it using anecdotes from his own considerable experience of pubs as a fun read rather than just a boring old document on pub etiquette.

Most of his work centres around IT and Marketing Services. But, in order to offset the ravages of his pub lifestyle, he is also interested in keeping as fit as possible without being fanatical about it - He calls this process [Easy Fitness](#).

You can find out more about all these things at www.pparkin.co.uk



Pub Survival Guide

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Contents

The Author.....	2
Introduction.....	4
What is a pub?.....	5
You have to be eighteen.....	5
When are they open?.....	6
Who can go in.....	8
Are you sure you're eighteen?.....	9
Are you under eighteen?.....	9
How to get served.....	12
They're here!.....	15
Groups in pubs.....	16
How to pay.....	17
Tipping.....	18
Taxes and receipts.....	18
Pubs galore.....	20
Coaching Inns.....	21
Pubs of Learning.....	21
Gin Palaces.....	21
"Bistro" and "Gastro" Pubs.....	22
Family Pubs.....	23
Bars.....	23
Pubs for business and leisure.....	24
Smoking.....	25
What is a local?.....	26
The landlord.....	27
I wannabe loved.....	28
A bird's eye view.....	30
The single female.....	30
Ladies en masse.....	31
Drink and be merry.....	32
Measures and prices.....	32
Types of beer.....	33
Shandy and "top".....	37
Cider.....	37
Wine.....	37
Spirits.....	38
Cocktails.....	38
Other Drinks.....	38
Food glorious food.....	39
Pub Games.....	41
Talk,talk,talk.....	43
Pubs and beer - a recent history.....	46
In conclusion.....	48

Introduction

This book is a light-hearted guide for those intrepid souls who feel that they need a little forearming before venturing into that very British of institutions – The “Pub”. Or maybe those who feel that, because of previous experience, they need to know a little more about what is going on.

Whilst I do mention a few pubs in passing, primarily, this is a guide as to what to do and what to expect in pubs in general rather than a guide to the attributes of individual pubs. There are good pub guides available both online and in printed form (see our web site at www.pubsurvivalguide.com).

I concentrate mainly on the type of pubs and pub-like bars found in London’s tourist, business and shopping areas, but the principles apply throughout the UK and I do explain a bit about other types of pub as well.

I’m not sexist, honest - I’ve really tried to use phrases like barperson or bar staff rather than barman and barmaid wherever possible. But it gets difficult saying “they” all the time when you are referring to the singular. So please accept my apologies in advance for using “he” occasionally when I could equally be referring to the female of the species. Also, I refer to the proprietors of these establishments under their traditional title of landlord or landlady – I can’t quite bring myself to use landperson.

My friends, and probably enemies too, will insist that I am very well qualified to write this sort of guide by dint of experience. I have to say that a *slightly* excessive liking for beer and wine seems to have been of some influence.

I am an enthusiastic pub goer of many years standing (or sometimes sitting, and very occasionally, prone).

I have visited pubs all over the place. In the past, I had various company

responsibilities that took me to many places throughout the UK (and France, Belgium, The Netherlands and the USA a bit too).

I’ve also seen it from the other side of the bar (albeit only for a year or so), when, in my youth, I worked as a barman in a pub in Cornwall, right on the South West tip of England.

What is a pub

A pub is a “Public House”. That is an establishment licensed by the Local Authority to provide, on their premises, intoxicating liquor to adults (humans of course, although you wouldn’t always think so).

A traditional pub will have at least one bar area, serving beer (bottled, keg and draught – see the section on beer for more information), cider, wines, spirits and soft drinks. All pubs will serve English type beer as well as lager (international type blonde beer). Most pubs will also serve food and tea, coffee etc.

Intoxicating liquor is a substance designed for drinking that has an alcohol content of more than 0.5 percent.

Who’s da boss a da joint? - the “landlord” or “landlady” (or both). Also known as the “publican or “licensee” .

Bar establishments are different, although the edges are a bit blurred in some cases. There are cocktail bars, wine bars, bistro bars, sports bars, all sorts of theme bars. But, if the bar looks and feels like a pub then treat it as such, although you may find that their draught beer offering may be nonexistent or more limited than a pub.

You have to be eighteen

People in the UK are deemed to have reached adult status at the age of eighteen years and are then freely admitted to pubs (landlord willing). I have noticed that in some parts of the world another few years running the gauntlet of being accused of underage drinking is required, whereas in others, this status is achieved more or less at the same time as being able to change your own nappy(diaper), but over here, it is over eighteen (more about who can go into pubs a bit later).



When are they open?

Since late 2005, there are no *general* restrictions on pub hours of opening. Having said that, every pub has to apply for a license from their Local Authority. In deciding this license and how the pub may operate in terms of usage and the hours they may open, the authority is supposed to take various criteria into account. Such as the position of the pub (town centre, residential area etc.), the wishes of the local residents, the opinion of the police etc. etc. The net result is that most pubs are generally not licensed to stay open much or any longer hours than they were before (on average this was around 11.00 - 23.30).

Even if a pub is licensed to stay open later, that does not mean that they have to. It's up to the individual pub to decide what is best for their business. Generally pubs in London (and in other towns, cities and tourist areas) will stay open for as long as possible, except for pubs in the City of London business area where many of them close early during the week when the workers have gone home, and may not open at all at the weekend.

Don't necessarily expect a pub in the residential areas or in the country to be open in the afternoon (particularly during the week). Many are, but some are not. Some pubs will advertise their opening hours on the door or somewhere outside the pub. This general lack of restriction was more or less how it was before the first, really strict, pub opening hours were

enforced in the in the 1914-1918 World War, when the government of the day took the view that munitions workers would produce more and be less liable to blow themselves up if they weren't drunk.

Unfortunately the law stuck (I won't bore you with all the details but pubs only opened for a few hours at lunchtime, shut in the afternoon and opened again for the evening "session"). It took until the 1980's before these draconian laws started to relax, culminating in a radical change in the law in 2005.

Slightly inebriated are we? -The Brits use the word "pissed" to denote the drunken rather than the angry state (thus "on the piss" means drinking heavily) -while the phrase "**pissed off**" denotes the fed-up or upset condition. I won't go into all of the meanings and derivatives of this versatile word. You could go to an English dictionary.

Which end of the day are you at? - Some special areas have special hours. For example, around Smithfield Market (London's famed meat market -situated near the Barbican, on the edge of the City of London) pubs are going strong at five in the morning, when the market porters are finishing their work for the day. Some of these pubs do excellent breakfasts.

The Pub Survival Guide

There was a concept under the old law called “drinking up time”. The stated closing time was the time up to which you may still have ordered a drink. Just before this time was reached, many pubs would ring a bell, shout “last orders please”, or indicate in some way that you needed to order PDQ (like now!) if you wanted another.

This was your signal to join the scrum of people at the bar getting their last shot at quenching their thirst. From the stated closing time you had twenty minutes to drink up before the pub closed.

There is no provision for “drinking up time” under the current law, so the stated closing time will be just that - the closing time. However, many places will call for last orders about 20 minutes before their closing time, so the effect will be the same.

As closing time is approaching (or passed) the landlord or bar staff may well try to chivvy you out with various encouraging statements, the politest of which is likely to be the traditional “time gentlemen please” (sorry again ladies).

Actually there are some politically correct pubs about, so you might get “time gentlemen and ladies please” (please don’t beat me up over the order of the sexes).

I seem to have heard “haven’t you got homes to go to?” used quite a bit too, or they might, quite simply, turn out most of the lights.

Bar Staff - Although it is fairly common that the landlord or landlady will be English, don’t expect that the bar staff in London (or anywhere, for that matter) will always be so. There have been a number of changes in the origin of people working the bars over the years. In London, there has been a steady reduction in English staff and now, if not a rarity, they are certainly in the minority.

When the English bar staff population first started to decline, there was an increase of Irish bar staff. This has now also declined. A few years back the airwaves behind the bar twanged with Australian and New Zealand accents brought on by antipodeans working their way round the “European Tour”. Now they have largely gone as well to be replaced by people from all over the place.

London is a very cosmopolitan city, so you will find all sorts behind the bar. It’s great.

For example, my local pub has staff from England, Brazil, Mexico and the Czech Republic. Another has staff from Spain, Sweden and Italy. My local bar has staff all from eastern Europe. However, I recently went into a pub near Drury Lane (London’s theatreland) where the staff appeared to be entirely English.

Who can go in

As previously stated, pubs are allowed to sell booze (intoxicating liquor) to adults of all sexes over eighteen years of age.

During 2005 the law changed to more accurately (we hope) reflect the suitability of individual establishments for accommodating young people on their premises.



The Landlord rules -OK
- the law may permit it, the license may permit it. But if the Landlord doesn't want it, then it won't happen.

If you are not sure what the rules are, ask.

Pubs will generally offer access to anyone (accompanied by an adult if under 16 years of age). Where a pub is not deemed suitable for young people to enter because of area, reputation or any other reason then that pub will simply not be allowed to admit them.

Although it is legal to serve alcohol to anyone over eighteen, some (but not many) pubs and bars will apply their own admittance rules, usually over twenty one years old.

This is how it is, but I am not a legal practitioner, so don't take any of my comments as full blown legal advice or we might both have to go into hiding.

The Law (allegedly)

- You must be 18 years old to buy and drink alcohol in a pub.
- If you are 16 – 17 years old you may not buy or drink alcohol.
except
- If you are 16 – 17 years old you may have beer, wine or cider with a table meal, providing the drink is purchased by and you are accompanied by an adult.
- If you are under 16 years old you may not buy or drink alcohol and must be accompanied by an adult.

Are you sure you're eighteen?

If you are over eighteen and don't look it then you may be asked how old you are.

I saw a notice in a pub the other day which read "if you look under 21 we will ask you to prove you're 18", so some do check.

In my experience, publicans or their bar staff generally look to their own judgement when deciding if you are old enough, but some will ask for ID.



So, if you are over eighteen and look about six years old and want to strut your stuff at the bar, carry something that proves your age.

One more note here is that showing ID and proving that you are over eighteen does not automatically give you the absolute right to be served. Obviously, the pub is in business and will normally serve anyone over eighteen within reason and the law, but if the bar staff do not wish to serve anyone, they do not need to state a reason.

Yes I am eighteen now - I had my 18th birthday party (the sort of party you have with your mates, not your family) in the pub that I had been frequenting for two years or so.

When the landlord found out my age, he let the party finish and then banned me from the pub for a month.

Are you under eighteen?

Landlords normally allow Young People (certainly those over about fourteen) in pubs, supposedly under the supervision of an adult and not consuming alcoholic liquor. This question of supervision is, of course, highly suspect, as the supervising adult is quite liable to become raving drunk and looking to the sober supervisee to explain where the door is and to provide assistance in negotiating it on the way out.

This brings me to the subject of Kids (aka children) in pubs.

One long summer break - when I was fifteen - I cycled all round England with a school buddy of similar age.

We got a pint of bitter in every pub we went into. I can't remember ever not getting served or refused entry.

Either we looked particularly decrepit or they felt sorry for us, I guess.

The Pub Survival Guide

I don't quite know when a Kid becomes a Young Person and vice versa, but for these purposes let's say a Young Person is someone who wants to be in the pub, generally would love to have a "proper" drink if allowed, has mastered the social graces which his supervisor left behind on the fourth drink and tends to be reasonably static in either a standing or sitting posture (prone posture is liable to be interpreted as "extremely pissed" resulting in the poser of this position to be ejected).

Kids, on the other hand, are likely to either:-

- a) Not want to be in the pub at all, or
- b) View the place as a potential playground

Subsequently they will either tend to indulge in loud and acrimonious verbal abuse or will become increasingly hyperactive as they "get their bearings".



All of this, together with the normal social graces, understanding, modesty and subtlety of action usually associated with this class of pub user can take some careful management.



If you do have kids under 14 years of age with you and the pub doesn't seem to have an area away from the bar, it is a good idea to ask if it is OK to bring them in, or if there is somewhere else in the establishment that is more suitable. Whatever the law says, it will be the landlord who will decide.

Some of the pubs, even in tourist areas will not be suitable for younger children.

If you do take your kids into the pub, one important point to remember is that no pubs should have, or want, children at the bar. You will get "brownie points" (Yes – that *is* good – trust me) if on entering the pub, you seat your children at a table and, if not exactly keeping them gagged and on a lead, at least stop them rendering high decibel replays of what they heard last time they visited the zoo and demonstrating up and down the place quite why the cheetah would stand no chance in a race.



Which brings me on to babies in pubs.

Babies are, by and large, allowed in pubs. But be aware that very few pubs have proper changing facilities for them. Although it is possible that you might see the odd baby or two (and children) in a pub during the day, it is pretty unusual to see them there chucking it back with all the other inebriates in the evening.

Some pubs will have their own rules about what time they allow children in up to (usually 21.00 max.).

The only other thing to mention is that it is possible that what was a perfectly child-friendly pub during the day may metamorphose into something resembling a scene from Dante's Inferno in the evening, so check that as well.

This brings me on to the subject of animals (pets – usually dogs, not drunken humans) in pubs.



Are you not human?



Let's stick with dogs shall we. If you really must have your boa-constrictor with you all the time, I suggest that you do some really careful research before planning your pub visit. Yes, I know your orang-utan will be looking after him, but they are unlikely to have proper changing facilities for either of them.

Many pubs will have a sign on the door in relation to dogs. Samples are:-

No Dogs

Sorry, No Dogs

Dogs on a lead please

Guide Dogs for the blind only

Dogs and Children on a leash please (*sorry about that one*)



It used to be the norm for pubs to allow dogs, but that was before the days of pub restaurants. Pubs will now take a view on it.

If you do want to take your dog into the pub and there is no clear indication of the rules, I suggest that you go in and ask first at the bar - please note that even if your dog is over eighteen years old it is unlikely that he or she will be served at the bar!

How to get served

When you enter a pub, do not sit down at a table and wait for a waiter to attend to you. It won't happen. Unfortunately, the British sense of humour being what it is, probably no one will tell you what you are doing wrong. They will delight in seeing how long it takes you to work it out.



So, just go to the bar and order – easy isn't it? - Well – not always, not if you don't know the rules!

If you are the only person waiting to be served – no problem – but what if there are a number of people waiting and harassed members of staff are "buzzing around like blue-arsed flies" (a quaint little expression that I thought I'd share with you)?

The Bar now means the area in which drinks are served – particularly the bit where drinks are slapped down in front of you when the barperson delivers them. This flat bit is really the bar counter. The bar itself was the rail above the counter where all the tankards and (later) glasses were stored.

First thing is that everybody waiting who is a regular pub goer will know precisely who is next in line (no queues in pubs - except maybe at a food counter - but people still usually get served in the right order), so do not attempt to get served out of turn (your day will be ruined). The chances are that the bartender will also know the order (more or less), but may need a little help from time to time. You may hear

them ask "who's next?" Only gesticulate or speak up if it really is you. Normally, if a bartender goes to a person and asks for their order when that person is not next, that person will nod to the person they think *is* next and say "I think that you were first" or words to that effect - OK, sometimes the system goes wrong, but quite rarely actually and usually not for long.

Any problems relating to this system are usually because somebody doesn't know the rules, or more commonly when they really just don't look thirsty enough. Let me explain:-

Some people, not used to frequenting pubs, sometimes go to the bar and just sort of "hang" there. They will not attempt to make eye contact with the bar staff and may just do nothing or get into conversation with another customer. They are waiting for the bar staff to notice them and take their order.



Again, the chances are it won't happen, because they are not doing anything to get themselves noticed.

Now, if this poor ignored soul had been sat at a table for the last ten minutes waiting for service and has now worked out that he or she has to come to the bar and is still not getting served, he or she may be losing the will to live or on the point of throwing a tantrum.

You see, there is no law against hanging out at the bar and looking at the décor or whatever. The bartender probably won't realise that you don't

Here I am - If you are in a pub where you are known and you know the bar staff's names, then it is quite reasonable (provided the pub is not very busy) for you to call them. Along the lines of "Chris, when you're ready, please" - Use this politely, quietly and sparingly though.

have a drink at a table or somewhere else in the house. You have to look as if you want a drink!

Study the regular pub goer (but don't stare too much) and you will see what I mean.

Here's how you do it - get to the bar if you can and lean slightly forward on it.

If the pub is very busy and you can't get right to the bar, get as close as possible (without climbing all over someone in the attempt), make sure you are not behind the biggest customer in the establishment and that you have a clear line of sight to the bar staff.

Hold up (chest/shoulder level will do - not right up in the air, you'll look stupid) either an empty glass or some money (notes are more visible even if you intend to actually pay with coins). Attempt to engage in eye contact with the staff (you may get an acknowledgement that you have been noticed - a quick nod of the head is rather more usual than a rendering of "Welcome to my World" - and a smile from you doesn't go amiss.

The trick is to be looking at the bar staff at the time (and every time) that they finish a serving a round. That may be when the money goes in this till (if there is no change to be given) or when they have delivered the change to the last person ordering. At this time, the barperson will almost certainly look up to see who is next. They will gauge the order from their memory from the people **looking at them**.

You are now in the system and will be served as soon as possible - but keep on the case. Don't drift off physically or mentally, or get too involved with a conversation.

Pushy or what? - A quick note here – the opposite of the “hanger” is the person that is so used to preferential service that he or she feels inclined to immediately shout for attention or bang money or a glass on the counter or other slightly over-aggressive tendencies. Needless to say, this sort of activity is treated with the same amount of scorn by customers and staff alike. You will be placed on a similar social scale to the queue dodger.

We'll deal with what to do when you are confronted with the frightening prospect of a member of staff standing the other side of the bar waiting for your order a bit later on in [They're here!](#)

The ways of ordering food in pubs varies a lot. If you are not sure of what happens, ask at the bar.

The one thing to remember is that (unless you are in a restaurant with

full waiter service) either you will order at the bar together with your drinks, or separately at a designated food area, often a counter, usually at one end of the bar or other.

You are much more likely to see a more formal queue at the food counter than at the perceived “free-for-all” of the bar.

Some pubs have numbers shown on the table and may want to take this number when you order, so you must get your table first. This is also advisable (for obvious reasons) when you are getting sandwiches, or there is a carvery or buffet where you are handed your food over the counter.

Menus etc. - some pubs will have printed menus, some will have blackboards, some will have both. There may be separate snack and main meal menus. There may be separate children's or dessert menus (there probably will be a separate wine list) - if you can't see what you want - ask. Incidentally, there should be a notice somewhere around the bar showing drinks measures and prices.

Some pubs are quite happy for people to eat at the bar. Others discourage it. In any event, it is a bit uncomfortable for most in a busy bar for more than a snack.

In many cases, your food will be served to you at the table, but don't expect further waiter service. You will almost certainly need to go to the bar to order more drinks and the bar (or counter) for more food, e.g. a dessert.

They're here!

Now you have a member of the staff in front of you panting to take your order, here's some do's and don'ts:-

- Don't panic - the bar staff might find it funny, but only in a limited way if they are busy.
- Don't forget what you are supposed to be ordering, it is very upsetting for the staff if you have to disappear for a while to refresh your memory.
- If ordering food and drink separately, order the drinks first - you can be drinking whilst waiting for your food. Unless it's a snack, you can't be eating whilst waiting for your drink. You will be at the bar, and your food might be getting cold and lonely – and if you haven't yet found a place to eat, it might be homeless.
- If you are ordering draught beer (especially Guinness) order it first. Sometimes the bartender will need to "let it settle" before completing the pouring and can be getting other drinks in the meantime (more about types of drink later).
- Make sure that you have the wherewithal to pay with you and not left your purse/wallet at the Table.
- Be attentive - in case the bartender has a question whilst getting your order, or is waiting for you to pay.

Guinness first of all - the head on a glass of Guinness is very frothy, it cannot be poured straight out in one go, it takes two passes at least.

Suspend your verbals - Conversation is what a large part of pub life is all about. But if you are one of those people who get "wrapped up" in it to the exclusion of pretty much anything else, then I suggest that you suspend your participation during the ordering process.

You will get served quicker and everyone will be happier.

Groups in pubs

When you are with a group of people, there are a few things to consider. If you don't want to be sat at a table (or tables) or there are none available, then you need to work out if the bar is big enough to accommodate you. You will find that many pubs cope with a crowded situation quite well by having various areas where you can stand and drink and have a place to rest your glass. All this, of course, may not be possible if your primary purpose is to eat and/or you have children with you.

When ordering, if at all possible, try to do it as a group rather than each individual going to the bar separately. It can get very difficult for the bar staff if they have a line of twenty people each ordering and paying for half a pint of bitter and a cheese sandwich, especially if there are other customers waiting.

"Foggy" - One day a rather elongated gentleman walked in to my local bar wearing glasses, cap, scarf, tweed jacket, baggy trousers tucked into his socks, walking boots, a rucksack and an irritating "I'm in charge" manner. I christened him "Foggy" after a television character.

He was followed by eight females all dressed for mountaineering manoeuvres.

Anyway, they all stood around in the middle of our (small) bar whilst "Foggy" organised. The bar owner (I shall call him "G"), nudged me and said under his breath, "House White" (he had the theory that people who took a long time making up their minds always ordered the cheapest "House" white wine – he was usually right).

After several minutes, "Foggy" came to the bar ("G" gave me a knowing wink) and asked for **One** bottle of house white wine and **nine** glasses. You ought to have seen "G" s face.

A couple of the ladies then produced sandwiches, which didn't improve "G" s humour.

They realised that they were not too popular (although I don't think they realised why) and left, some of them not having managed to consume their less than half a glass of wine.

I guess they were probably off to scale the heights (60 feet/20 metres or so) of Primrose Hill just to the north of the main Regent's Park by the London Zoo.

Take ins - I *have* seen food taken into and consumed in a pub. But this pub did not do any food at all, and that is rare now - It just ain't done!

How to pay

Drinking in pubs is a cash based operation. You normally pay when you buy the drinks – each time. The exception to this is if you are having a meal.

It is unusual to run tabs for drinks only unless there is a large party and everyone is “chipping in” at the end. Some pubs may not allow this, so you can revert to the other old British standby – the “whip-round”. This is where all participants are asked to put a certain amount of money into a “pot”. This pot is used to buy each round. When the pot runs out of funds, the remaining participants are asked to contribute further.

Me, me, me - When I go to a pub to drink and socialise (or what passes for that in my case) I tend to drink beer at the bar and pay cash round on round. When I go to eat, I like to accompany it with wine at a table and run a tab (if the pub allows).

My preference is to order my drink first, then find a table, then decide what I am going to eat whilst savouring my first glass of wine.

Really interesting eh?

Many pubs will let you run a tab (bill) if you are also having a meal, but they may well want to keep your credit card behind the bar in order to make sure that you don't inadvertently slope off. Some pubs will insist on payment as you order.

Most pubs will let you use credit cards for meals (maybe not always for snacks or sandwiches though) and many pubs will let you use them for drinks (especially for large rounds). They may well have a limit below which they may not accept cards. Under the latter circumstances, some will even provide “cash back” so that you achieve the limit (say, your drinks come to a total of seven pounds and their minimum is twenty pounds, they would take twenty pounds off your card and give you the thirteen back in cash from the till).

This one's on me folks - In some places, it is quite normal that after every third or fourth drink or so, you get a free drink courtesy of the bar staff.

Whilst a “drink on the house” is not entirely unknown in England, it will probably only be from the landlord (rather than the bar staff) and will only be for a special occasion, or in return for you having bought them one (if you know them that well).

Tipping

Tipping is not expected on rounds of drinks – No experienced, pub-going, Brit will do it. If you do spend a long time in the pub and chat to the bar staff or just feel like it, then offer to buy them a drink when you are ordering one for yourself. They will usually add a small glass of something inexpensive to your bill. Don't expect them to drink it then. They may not have the time and many establishments do not allow them to drink alcohol on duty. They will take their drink at the end of their shift or when the pub closes.

Again tips are not expected on bar snacks etc. but tipping on meals, where you have had the food brought to your table, may be different.

In pubs where I eat regularly I don't give a tip every meal. Just every now and then.

The price shown on the board or menu will nearly always include a service charge (I can't think of one where I have noticed that it does not), so it is not strictly necessary, but if you have had good service and want to show appreciation, then by all means give a small tip. I would suggest no more than 10% of the bill and a maximum of £5 would be reasonable. But don't worry too much, most places don't expect it.

The only other area that you might be expected to tip (and to exceed £5) is if you have arranged a special event in a pub and the staff are carrying out services beyond their normal duties. I made that sound a bit lewd, but what I meant was something like a special party where more table service was provided than normal.

Taxes and receipts

Duty on alcohol is levied by the central government and is included in all prices as a sales tax. There is no equivalent of the United States local (State) tax. Where you have a receipt for the goods that you have received, you will see the prices of the items that you have purchased inclusive of all taxes. The only clue that VAT (Value Added Tax – a sales tax) is included is that you will see that the Company VAT Registration number is on the receipt.

A note for those on expenses. You may well automatically get a receipt where you have been running a tab, say for a meal. But don't bank on it. You will, of course, get your credit card payment slip, but may have to ask for a "VAT receipt".

The Pub Survival Guide

If you are just buying drinks with cash and you want a receipt, I suggest that you let the bar staff know first. They don't normally give receipts for cash drinks. Most tills now will make it easy for them to do so, but they may prefer you to run a tab or maybe issue a single receipt when you have finished. Asking for a receipt with each round may not go down too well.

A note here about the **British Sense of Humour**. I am afraid that we Brits, particularly around London, often have a sense of humour that is perceived by others as being rather cruel. I refer to this a few times throughout the guide, so I thought I'd better talk about it now.

Please don't take offence if you think someone is poking fun at you (I don't mean outright verbal abuse, that is offensive to everybody), they wouldn't do it if they didn't like you. When you see two Brits "taking chunks out of each other" (verbally of course), they are likely to be the best of friends. You would have more cause to worry about a quiet and steely approach to an exchange of differing views.

A delight in someone else's faux pas, shortcomings and even misfortunes (providing they are of a very minor kind) is considered fair game for humorous assault. Any perpetrator of this assault must be able to take this form of attack as well as give it.

I know that many nationalities find this all a bit hard to take sometimes, but please accept that it is not meant to offend, it is just a form of banter that the participants have encountered and taken part in throughout their lives.

Pubs galore

There are so many different types of pub around. The thing about pubs, you see, is that originally, apart from the Coaching Inns on the main highways, they were for drinking and socialising with other people in the district. A lot of them didn't serve food and if they did it was fairly simple fare for workmen's lunches and other occasional snacks. This was the Great British Pub up until the 1960's when exposure to more "European" attitudes and the advent of the pop age, with London gaining global recognition as one of the places to be, started to change things.

Ale Houses were originally just for boozing ale. **Taverns** were more upmarket, providing food and drink (wine only originally). **Inns** also provided lodging.

This is all rather amalgamated now. Generally, hotels provide the lodging, but some Inns will have some rooms available (almost zero in London).

Many pubs used to have several smaller bars. Maybe a "Saloon" or "Lounge" bar, which was more genteelly furnished than the others, used by those wanting a little more comfort and peace. There was a basic "Public Bar" used for the more lively drinking sessions, sometimes having games like darts, bar billiards and dominoes and "shove ha'penny" (don't ask – I'll tell you later).

This formula does still exist in some places, but most of these have been turned, more or less, into one main bar area (you may see some evidence of this in some of the nooks and crannies of older pubs). Many have added restaurant areas where they did not previously exist.

Pubs have become much more female- and family-friendly.

Pub Names - There are books available explaining all about pub names, so I won't go into that here except to say that names like the "The Red Lion", "The Kings Head", "The Queens Head", "The Barley Mow" etc., etc. are all traditional names which you will see on many pubs. These are not chains, they are just popular pub names.

Fairly recently, there was a distressing time when some chains did start a vogue of inventing new "trendy" pseudo traditional pub names (e.g. "The Rat & Parrot").

Thankfully, this trend seems to have reversed, with several pubs reverting to either their original or more traditional type names.

Coaching Inns

Coaching Inns catered for travellers (as their name suggests) with food, drink and accommodation. They still feature in places around the country (mostly as pubs, rather than hotels), but not in London. The highways where they were placed were gradually swallowed up as London expanded and, I suspect, the buildings were too large for their now urban environment. So they were pulled down and often replaced by smaller pubs.



There is one galleried coaching Inn which survives (as a pub - there is no accommodation available). It is the George Inn which is situated in Borough High Street SE1 (near London Bridge station, on the south side of the Thames).

Pubs of Learning

Some pubs near universities and colleges get adopted by the students. These "student pubs" tend to be noisy and easygoing. Surprisingly, they can also be quite tolerant to all sorts of different type of person and can be good fun for young and old alike.

They will almost certainly have a reasonable range of food available, often at quite inexpensive prices. People allergic to loud music and intense discussions, beware.

Gin Palaces

These developed in the poor areas of Victorian London. Bear in mind that the "drink of the masses" at this time was gin (it was relatively cheap). Beer was really for the richer and country folk.

Generally very gaudy with lots of mirrors and (then) gaslights, these "gin shops" had no seating or tables and were aimed at extracting what money they could out of London's poor in exchange for "Mother's Ruin" (gin).

In central London, the best (or worst if you like) examples of this were in the area around Drury Lane, which now forms part of London's theatreland.

Pub Signs - all true pubs have a sign hanging outside the pub. With a picture and the pub name.



I don't think any examples of these are really left, but some pubs have some amazing examples of interior glasswork. I think that my favourite in this respect is the Red Lion in Duke of York Street in St. James SW1, just off Jermyn Street, south of Piccadilly. It is a small pub, so probably won't be up to a group visit at busy times - like lunchtime or just after work. It's not open on Sundays.

“Bistro” and “Gastro” Pubs

I suppose a lot of this started at the time (in the early 1990's) that the big breweries were giving up their monopoly of the ownership of retail premises (more about this later in [Pubs and beer - a recent history](#)). Smaller groups bought the pubs and sometimes changed them to their style. This new ownership was good in one sense, that where the pubs were kept traditional, the quality and choice of English beer improved. But, all too often, they were transformed into something very different.

Regrettably, the ones where I saw this happen resulted in all sorts of tragedies for the traditionalist: Beautiful woodwork being covered up by layers of pastel shaded, rag-rolled emulsion, changes of traditional pub names into something thought trendy, spotlights in ceilings and all sorts of inappropriate furniture.

The results of this seemed to me that whilst it all provided an increase in the number of bars where you went to eat a greater range of food at higher prices, much like a full restaurant, it decreased the number of traditional pubs.

Wetherspoon - An interesting development at this time, was the emergence of the Wetherspoon chain of pubs. Contrary to the norm, Wetherspoon decided that they would generally buy previously unlicensed properties (in West End London's Whitehall they bought an old bank building) and turn them into a traditional type of pub. Their theme was (and is) simply inexpensive drink, inexpensive and fairly basic food, and no music or TV.

They are all similarly themed and being relatively recent are a bit like a modern replica of a vintage car. So, although not truly traditional, they are very good value for money and you might like to give them a try.

Some sources say that the traditional pub is dying out in favour of the more trendy bistro bars. But, I cannot foresee total extinction.

There are plenty of people like CAMRA (the Campaign for Real Ale - I'll tell you about this later in [Pubs and beer - a recent history](#)) on the case, and as long as you and I support the more traditional pubs they will survive.

Family Pubs

These are pubs where there are things like play areas outside and inside; babies changing facilities, etc. Pubs where everything is geared up for families with young children. I don't really know of any in central London. But I guess there are some in the suburbs.

Although not of this type, plenty of the pubs in central London are child-friendly. If you are not sure, then ask.

Bars

There have always been a few wine bars around particularly in the cities. But the relaxation of the licensing laws during the 1970s and 80s enabled more establishments to become licensed to sell alcohol to the public. This, amongst other things, accelerated the establishment of many new bars. There had always also been "dining/drinking clubs". These (private membership - usually with no, or very little, membership qualification requirements) clubs, again mostly in the cities and towns, really provided a way of getting a drink legally (allegedly) outside normal licensing hours.

In the late 1980's, when all day opening (during weekdays), was allowed, these clubs were more or less finished and regular bars became a feature of all urban areas.

These bars, like pubs, fall into various categories. Some of them behave in exactly the same way as a pub, but most will not have the facilities (or desire) to serve real ale. They *do* make money out of selling alcohol, usually at a higher price than a pub, and many will put much more emphasis on food, and some will tend to cater more for clientele that are younger and single.

The "POW" - my own local, the **Princess of Wales** in Chalcot Street, Primrose Hill, London, is now the traditional type of pub it was always designed to be. A few years ago (before I adopted it as my local) someone took what was a traditional pub, put in modern furniture, planted a plastic tree behind the bar (its branches fanned out all over the ceiling) and renamed it "The Swans at Coole" (OK, a poem by W B Yeats, who lived nearby, but not a proper pub name - YUCK!).

Thankfully the pub has been restored to its original character and name.

Pubs for business and leisure

In London, tourist areas are also areas where there are a lot of work/business people. So some of the pubs will get extremely busy at lunchtimes and early evening.

I'm not saying that tourists aren't welcome here, but the pace might be somewhat frenetic at these times and may not be compatible with the more relaxed requirements of someone on vacation. They may also not be suitable for children.

So, if you enjoy the scrum at the bar, go for it. If you want to be sure of getting a table or plenty of "elbow room" then either go at different times, use the restaurant (if they have one), or try to see if they have other bars that are more family oriented; or choose a big pub where there is plenty of space. I suppose you could devote some effort to finding the most unpopular pubs around, but that doesn't sound a whole bundle of laughs to me.

Moving on? - one of the great things about pubs in London is that there will be more of them within a minute or two's walk from wherever you are.

There are plenty of pubs around most of the tourist areas where they provide ample seating space. These are aimed at providing for the needs of the tourist, but are not really very traditional.

You still gotta pay - despite the fact that you may see the sign "Free House" on the outside of a pub.

In the past, when the big breweries controlled the vast majority of the retail outlets, only their beer would be sold in their pubs. The term "Free House" was applied to an independent pub which could sell different beers.

It is a little more complicated than this now. For those interested there is more about this in [Pubs and beer - a recent history](#).

So, a pub's clientele is decided by its reputation and locality. Let's deal with locality first.

Apart from the extremes of, say, a pub on an industrial estate, where they will only get workers, or in the middle of a housing estate where they only expect local residents, pubs will expect a mixture of workers and residents and some "passing trade".

This will be generated from their proximity to tourist and/or shopping areas or any other areas of special interest or needs (universities, sports stadia, museums etc., etc.).

Some pubs generate their passing tourist trade by dint of reputation. An example of this is the Prospect of Whitby in London's East End (see front cover), with all its macabre connections with the past when one of its customers was the notorious Judge Jeffreys (the "Hanging Judge").

Smoking

As from July 2007 smoking is banned in all pubs, clubs, restaurants and most workplaces and public buildings in England. This joins Scotland, Wales and Ireland who had bans in place earlier.

No smoking may take place anywhere indoors on the premises of a pub. Some provide outdoor facilities for smokers. This may consist of a roof or awning and must be more than 50% open sided (open windows or doors do not count). This is obviously not fun for smokers in the winter months, so some places also provide outside heaters.

However, in a lot of places, you will just have to go out onto the street if you do want to smoke.

What is a local?

Get to know a pub goer and you may find him referring to his pub not by name, but by the title "the local".

This doesn't necessarily mean the nearest pub (although, I suppose it might have in times gone by when people didn't move around as much). It means his favourite, or one of his favourites. Some pub-goers may have several locals. One for home and one for work, for example. Now, I've got locals all over the place, but I won't bore you with that.

A **local** is both a regular inhabitant of a drinking establishment **and** the drinking establishment that is regularly inhabited.

The human version of a "local" may also be known as a "regular".

Old George - I went into a small pub for the first time a few years ago when visiting my ex "in-laws". There were three or four locals talking at the bar - they looked round as I entered and said "Mornin'" and then returned to their discussion. After I got my drink I sat in a chair near the bar - the place went quiet.

Somebody said, "I wouldn't sit there if I were you - that's Old George's chair and if he catches you sitting in it he'll knock your head off". Right as he said this "Old George" (as I deduced from the general body language around the place) walked in. BIG or what!

He walked up to me with a frown on his face as I was trying to rise and distance myself from "his" chair.

He put a huge paw on my chest and pushed me firmly back into the chair - "You sit back down there boy, or I'll knock your head off" - Life is strange sometimes.

Pubs that cater mainly for an established group (or groups) of locals can be very "cliquey". How long it will take you to break into this society (even if you wanted to) probably depends on where the pub is.

All regions of the country have areas where the inhabitants prefer to be left alone. Fair enough, let's respect that, they're entitled.

However, most places in (say) London would take you a few visits to "get in", whereas, in the country, where they might get less new faces on a daily basis, they might enrol you on the spot.

Where you do find a group of "in" locals, they will probably have all

sorts of unwritten rules, of which you will be totally unaware (not just you - me too).

They won't tell you about these rules until you have broken them (I don't mean the sort of rules that polite or reasonable behaviour normally dictates).

The first you will know about it is when you have infringed. You will probably get a barrage of advice, maybe what seems to be verbal abuse of the sarcastic and maybe, just plain rude, kind.



Don't take offence at this, it is essentially good-natured banter, and, as I have said before, the British sense of humour is not the norm.

The landlord

The landlord or landlady often form an important role in the structure of the local hierarchy. For a start, they are usually at the top of it.

They may or may not be affable outgoing personalities when dealing with non locals (personalities vary). But you may find them joining in the banter and insults of the local group with gusto, if not leading it.

This form of humorous abuse is well understood by the participants, but may look very odd indeed to people not in the know.

You remember "G" the one time bar owner. He was not always noted for having a sense of humour. Actually, he did have a good sense of humour, but didn't always show it. He was always easy to "wind up", an occupation which all the locals carried out at every available opportunity for the fun of it (the British sense of humour again).

In fact, my partner, bless her, suggested one day when he was in one of his "unamused" moods, that as he was such a miserable sod that he would cheer up if he scrapped his "happy hour" in the early evening and replaced it with a "misery hour" where he put his prices up.

He still wasn't amused.

(We found out a bit later that another bar in town had already done this - I wonder if they heard us?)

Just as with the interaction between locals, the outsider may observe a warm, friendly exchange of views one minute and think they are witnessing a slanging match the next.

Such landlords make their pubs an extension of their personality and are much treasured by their regular customers (although you wouldn't always know it).

They provide a tremendous source of delight to (most of) the gossiping bar goers and frequently provide much material for the cabaret of bar banter among locals.

I wannabe loved

If you decide that you want to become part of the scene and be a local yourself (albeit temporarily) then, here are a few guidelines:-

- Don't rush it - play it cool
- Don't butt in
- Don't sit at a table
- Stand (or sit) at the bar
- Don't announce your presence
- Be patient - it may take more visits

Lapsed local - Once you have achieved the status of "local" you will not lose it whilst there are still other locals (or landlord) around that you know.

You could come back a year later and it would be as if you never left.

Sitting at a table on your own implies that you want to be left on your own, and you probably will be (unless there is a pest around).

Attempting to sit at a table which is occupied by the existing locals will be taken as too "forward" and will probably mean that you get ignored.

It is quite likely that the locals will be standing or sitting round the bar. Don't try and join in straight away just hang around and they may well

My round, old chap – groups of locals often buy drinks for the group when they order. The system works on trust. Over a period of time, it is expected that everybody has "pulled their weight" and dipped into their pocket.

Anybody who gets a reputation as a "round dodger" tends to get sidelined by the group. That doesn't mean to say that on any particular day it has to even out, it's not that formal.

You may notice that, even within the group, there are some people who prefer to stay on their own as far as buying drinks go. That's OK.

So if you are offered a drink by one of the group, decide whether you want to participate in the round system or not. It is quite acceptable to say, "No thanks – I'll stay on my own" etc.). It is quite acceptable to have one drink at their expense and leave providing you intend to return the favour at some stage. It is not acceptable to take more drinks from the group and leave without buying a round or promising to on your next visit (providing that it is quite soon).

If you are out and about sightseeing or whatever, during the day, you won't necessarily have the opportunity to meet any locals. Pubs in non residential areas are only likely to have locals who work in the area and visit the pub at lunchtime and in the early evening.

If you would like a slice of local life, then you are probably better off looking around near where you are staying (why not ask them? They probably know some) in the evenings and at the weekend.

The exception to the "don't butt in" rule is if they are having a topic of conversation and can't get an answer from within their group (like, for example, if nobody knows what the name of the ship in "Mutiny on the Bounty" was) then, if you know what the answer is, it is acceptable for you to chip in ("The Golden Hind" I here you say!!!).

If the locals are sitting at a table, they will gradually exchange a few words with you either from there, if it is quiet, or as they come to the bar to get their drinks. Eventually a conversation will develop and you're in.

I know that there are cultural differences here, but bear with it - that's part of the fun of going somewhere different.

The same principles apply to getting to know the landlord or bar staff. Buying enough of their booze and being a nice quiet person will do it every time.

A word of caution - some pubs show a dramatic change at certain times of the day. Don't expect a previously chatty landlord or bar staff to be able to give you much time when the pub is busy.

A bird's eye view

My partner, bless her, has perforce had to spend many a cheery (or is it bleary) hour in pubs.

Sometimes, we arrange to meet at a pub and she gets there first. Here is her take on it:-

The single female

Entering a pub as a single female can be a somewhat daunting experience – whether you're there for a quiet drink on your own or waiting for a companion to join you – it's sometimes difficult to work out how to give off the signals that will result in the desired response from those people already there when you walk in. Usually you'll just want to get your drink and be left to your own devices and there are techniques to employ to help make that happen.



If it's at all busy you most likely won't even be noticed unless you do something to draw attention to yourself standing just inside the entrance with the look of a frightened rabbit will do it every time. Even worse is to stand half in and half out, especially if it's cold outside, letting gales of frosty air attack the incumbents. So walk inside and away from the doorway.

It's not a bad ploy when entering an unknown pub for the first time to make out that you're looking for a companion who may have arrived before you (whether that's true or not). That way you get to 'check out' the bar relatively discreetly. If you don't like the look of the place you can pretend to consult a note regarding the meeting place then feign having made a mistake and take your leave – that way you haven't upset anyone and can return another time if you feel like it. Alternatively, if it seems an okay place, you can just gird your loins, having clocked out available seating during your quick look around and wander up to the bar. Get out your money, make eye contact with the bar tender, and order the tipples of your choice. Many pubs serve tea and coffee nowadays but I wouldn't order either if the bar is busy – I'd go to a café instead.

Again, if it's busy, be prepared to share your table with other customers (but remember the rules about locals) – British pubs, especially those in tourist centres, often don't have the luxury of space. You can always bring out a book or magazine or use your mobile phone to text your friends if you don't want to be drawn into conversation.

To paraphrase Eleanor Roosevelt's comment, you're the only one who can make you feel inferior so, even if this isn't your natural habitat, just act normal.

If you're the more outgoing type who prefers to be in the thick of it you might rather stand or, if possible, find a vacant stool by the bar. That's where you're most likely to get drawn into conversation with one or other of the locals.

It's perfectly permissible to politely decline a drink if offered. Just state that you'd prefer to stick on you're own but are enjoying the conversation. No offence will be taken. If, on the other hand, you accept the proffered drink, make sure that you offer to buy the individual one in return.

Bear in mind too that a busy pub isn't a free haven to rest your tired feet or escape the rain. So it's pretty unreasonable to expect to occupy valuable seating space nursing one small drink for as long as you like until you are ready to move on.

Ladies en masse

If you are one of a group of females, get yourselves organised.

I know that this is referred to elsewhere in the Guide, but females in groups, not used to frequenting pubs, have an uncanny knack of faffing around, taking for ever to make their minds up as to who wants what *after* they've already started ordering, and generally making themselves unpopular.

Most women prefer to sit rather than stand in a pub, and you'll probably want to sit if you intend to eat. So sort out who "bags" the table, who else gets the drinks (check [Drink and be merry](#) for what's likely to be on offer) and who organises the food (see [Food glorious food](#)). Sort out the money between yourselves afterwards.

And enjoy!

Drink and be merry

Pubs serve all sorts of drinks, soft drinks, spirits, wines and fortified wines, ales, lagers and stout - both draught and bottled. You will also find that most pubs can manage coffee and sometimes tea. They have even got water!

Measures and prices

The measure of liquid that you get in your glass for alcoholic beverages is strictly controlled by law. So if you think the amount you received is miserly, don't necessarily blame the landlord or bar staff, blame the Government.

Unlike the rest of Europe, where spirits are frequently poured in direct from the bottle with an indeterminate, but usually generous dose, and a glass of beer can be anything from about a half to nearly full, the Brits do it differently. The spirit is measured exactly, either from a measuring cup (thimble) or an optic. The single measure is pretty small, so you will often see (or do I mean hear) people asking for a "large" or "double" (the same thing) of whatever they want.

Hotel Bars - will often serve a double spirit measure as standard. So beware of asking for a large or double, as you might just get a quadruple measure.

The Brits get rather annoyed at short measure in a beer glass and there have been attempts all through the years to legislate on what constitutes a full glass. There was a ruling, some years ago, that the head on a glass of Guinness constituted part of the drink, so that (say) a pint glass did not have to be completely filled with liquid.

In and around London, beer glasses are sized to be the exact measure that you should receive. Now, all beers have some sort of head, so some commonsense needs to prevail. Very few bar people will deliberately short measure you, so, if you feel that you have been, just politely ask them to top it up - they won't mind.

Outsize glasses for beer - In some places in the country the use of glasses larger than the measure are the norm. These glasses have a level mark on them. It is not easy or quick to manually get the right amount into them so they tend to be used with metered pumps which automatically slosh the right amount of beer into the glass.

Not so in London, where actual size glasses are generally used. However you may find *some* speciality beers poured in outsize glasses.

Pubs must (or should) publicly display their prices and the measures they are providing on or near the bar. The drinks that you get should be properly measured and the measure stamped on the equipment delivering the liquid, or the glass itself.

Thus for beer, normally your glass will be stamped as half pint or pint. Your wine glass will be stamped with the amount and a line (you would not expect a wine glass to be totally full). Your spirit glass will not be stamped, but the optic or measuring "thimble" will.

How much do I get?

- **Draught beer, lager and cider** is sold in pints or half pints (actually it could be sold in larger multiples of half pints in jugs. A third of a pint is also legal, but I have never seen this.
- **Gin, rum, whisky and vodka** in multiples of 25 millilitres (this is the norm) or 35ml, except when served as part of a cocktail
- **Glasses of wine** in multiples of 125ml or 175ml
- **Carafes of wine** in multiples of 250ml

A pint is approximately 564 ml - 20 fluid ounces

Beer

This section gives you some general information about beer to help you get what you want. If you are a real enthusiast, then check out some of the links at our website.

Types of beer

Lager is the British name for the type of bottom fermented beer, known by all international beer drinkers. It is available in bottles and on draught.

Did I really say that? - by "bottom fermented" for lager, I meant the use of a yeast which does its work at the bottom of the liquid rather than one that does its stuff at the top as in ale.

Stout is dark beer. With the exception of Guinness (and sometimes Murphy's) stout drinking has diminished in the UK. You probably won't find anything but Guinness, but it will be in every pub (that I can think of anyway). It is available in bottles and on draught (slightly chilled or extra cold).

Wheat beers are a fairly recent import from Europe and are blonde in colour and cloudy. Hoegaarden on draught appears to be the norm. But you won't find it everywhere.

Ale (English type beer) is brown or reddish brown in colour and is described in many ways. For bottles that will be light/pale, bitter, brown. With the increase in lager drinking, you tend not to see a lot of this being drunk.

Draught ales can be described as bitter or mild (mild is weaker). You won't find many milds around these days, but there are one or two. The most important distinction to make is between the gassy keg and the less gassy but frothy headed "creamflow" and "smoothflow" offerings, and the traditional "cask conditioned" real ale.

Winter ale - also known as old ale - as its name suggests, you are only likely to find in the winter. It is a strong, dark, full flavoured draught beer.

Strength

For ale, the weaker or "normal" bitters, sometimes having the letters "IPA" on the label, are generally up to about 4% alcohol by volume. Medium beers are 4% to 4.5% and strong ales above this, although you won't find many above about 5.5%.

Lagers are slightly stronger across the range, with some bottles being very strong indeed. Guinness is a medium strength beer.

Higher percentage beers are generally a bit more expensive (because of the tax levy on alcohol), but don't be fooled into thinking that high alcohol content necessarily makes the beer better. It is all a matter of taste.

Ale and beer - a really, really long time ago (or even earlier), the only brewed drink was called "ale". At about this time, somebody added hops to the brewing process and the resultant liquid was called "beer". Hops are clever plants that provide "cones" which, when used as part of the brewing process, impart bitterness, flavour and preservation characteristics. The term "ale" is used now to distinguish the English type draught and keg beer from all the others.

A note about **IPA** – you will notice quite frequently that the normal, slightly weaker bitters are denoted as IPA. This stands for India Pale Ale.

It doesn't mean that the recipe comes from India, but it was a type of beer originally developed to be able to be shipped to India (by boat) and still be drinkable. All this, of course, happened in the past when India was part of the British Empire and the ex-patriot British administration hankered after the delights of the "Old Country".

Incidentally, this was where the "gin and tonic" was born. Gin was drunk heavily by the Brits in India. Malaria was rife and quinine was prescribed in dilute doses as a preventative to malaria. Weak quinine water in gin disguised the taste of quinine and didn't do any real harm to the flavour of gin anyway and bingo, you have a gin and tonic.

In my opinion, some of the weaker beers are great, as are most of the middle range. I personally rarely like the strong ales or lagers, simply because they are normally too sweet for my taste and feel a bit syrupy on the tongue. Don't take my word for it, give them a try if you want and sort out which suits you best. A word of warning though. A difference of 1% may not sound like much, but after you have had a few pints, your legs may think differently.

Style and temperature

All the booze in the pub is generally stored in a "cellar" and pumped to the bar (you may find some pubs every now and then which will serve their real ale direct from the cask, but this is pretty rare).

Eddie baby - The Cellarman in my pub in Cornwall (the guy who makes sure all the casks in the cellar are in the right place and condition) was Eddie, the landlord's son-in-law. His work finished at about 08.00 when his final task was to wake me up to start **my** duties (bottling up and getting the bar cleaned and ready).

This he did by smashing open the door of my room and presenting me with a pint of his best bitter, served from a silver tray with a white napkin - Despite my love of the stuff, this always made me feel a bit queasy at that hour, but Eddie was a Marine and not to be trifled with.

Best bitter - you don't often hear someone asking for a pint of "best bitter" or "best" these days. Perversely, it was a phrase used when there wasn't much choice. You remember my local when I was a youngster - the pub I got barred from after my eighteenth birthday party - Well, it was owned by Charrington's Brewery and only sold one bitter. In those days I often heard people asking for a "pint of best".

Having said that, you will still see "best bitter" on the label of some brews.

The traditional idea of the cellar is to attempt to keep a constant temperature of 53 - 57 degrees Fahrenheit (12 - 14 degrees Celsius). All lagers and keg beers are pressurised with gas, which a) gives the beer some bubbles and b) forces the beer out through the pump in the bar when the tap is turned on.

These are additionally cooled when pumped. Some lagers are double cooled to make them extra cold. This is also an option with Guinness.

Real ale, on the other hand is not pressurised or cooled. The pumps are either electrical or manual (yes, when you see the bar person pulling away at the pump, he or she really is giving his or her biceps a workout). It WILL be comparatively warm (should be cellar temperature); it WILL be fairly flat (no gas bubbles – zilch!). But it should not be cloudy.

The Campaign for Real Ale CAMRA (see more in [Pubs and beer - a recent history](#)) invented the term “Real Ale” in the 1970’s.

The definition of a real ale is one that is traditionally fermented in the cask and is classed as a “live” beer. Keg beers (and lagers) are sterile in the cask and gas is added to provide the “life”

Time to choose

All draught beers except real ale are poured from taps much the same the world over. The labels on these tend just to show the name of the beer. If you want to know the strength or type of beer and a descriptive list is not easily available, you will have to ask the staff.



Real ale is pulled from pumps like those shown on the left. You may be confronted with a bewildering array of pumps sometimes showing improbable labels and beer names (you can get books on all this). Most, but not all, of these labels will give you the beer strength as well.

Some pubs will list their offerings, the characteristics and strength etc. on a board, but mostly you will have to ask. If the pub is not busy, then the bar staff may well have the time to help your decision making process (they *might* even let you have a little “taster”). If it is busy, then your easiest option (after having gleaned what you can from labels, lists, etc.) is probably to state your preference in general terms – bottle or draught –

Bitter not bitters - bitters is another little flavouring often associated with Campari.

Don’t just go into a pub and ask for a glass of beer. It’s like going into a candy store and asking for something sweet.

real ale, keg bitter or lager – medium strength, strong or weaker. This will probably return you a verbal short-list to select from or the bar staff may just get a bottle or, for draught, ask you whether you want a pint or half if you haven’t already stated the measure.

Shandy and “top”

Shandy is half and half (ish) beer and lemonade (or ginger beer instead of lemonade, if you ask for a ginger beer shandy). It is sold in pints or halves. You will need to specify whether you want a lager or a bitter shandy, otherwise you will probably get what is the more usual for that pub. The beer used will normally be the weakest and the least expensive unless you specify otherwise.

When ordering a half pint, drop the pint word and just ask for a half. Otherwise you will show as an amateur.

Asking for a small or large whatever will also get you a half or a pint respectively.

A top is a beer with just a dash of lemonade. Just ask for a lager top, bitter top or a specific beer - top - if you want.

Cider

You will normally find that there will be one draught on offer and maybe a couple of bottles. Made from fermented apples, mostly, the draught offering will be medium sweet to medium dry in flavour and on the strong side of medium in strength. Bottles can range from extremely sweet to pretty dry and some specialist ciders can be very strong indeed (8.5% or so!) - check the label!

Scrumpy - is privately produced cider. So, if you see a bottle with “Scrumpy” printed on a posh label, it may be a perfectly acceptable drink, but scrumpy it ain't!

You won't find any in pubs in London, but some villages in the rural west country of England have their own cider presses where each year the village makes its own brew. The village I was at in Cornwall had one.

The brew they made was very strong and about one year in five even drinkable. Some of this stuff found its way into the local pub (by accident of course!). It was so strong it was dispensed in wine glasses.

Wine

In the past, pubs generally had a (quite justified) reputation for selling wines that were more suited to cleaning the silverware than drinking. Not so now. Most pubs, apart from some of the boozers in residential areas, usually have quite a reasonable wine list.

Spirits

All pubs will serve a good range of spirits and occasionally you may find a pub that carries an extremely good range of a particular speciality. Say, single malt whiskies for example.

Please note that asking for a Martini in the UK will just get you a glass of Vermouth.

You could try asking for a “Gin and It” or a “Gin and French” for a sweet or dry Martini respectively, but you might well have to spell it out.

Cocktails

Whilst most pubs will carry the ingredients for many a cocktail, this type of drinking is usually more carried out in specialist or hotel bars rather than the pub. The exception to this is the “Bloody Mary”.

If you are “absolutely gagging” for a particular drink and can see that all the ingredients are there, you may well find that you will have to carry out a step by step direction of the assembly of your drink. I suggest that, if the pub is busy, you modify your short term drinking habits in the interest of good public relations.

Other Drinks

All pubs will carry a full range of fruit juices, colas (not always the brand names you might expect) and mixers. They will also probably have smallish bottles of ready to drink concoctions, like vodka diluted with fruit juice etc. Most pubs will do coffee and many tea as well.

Food glorious food

Until the 1960's you were unlikely to be able to get much more than a very basic pre-filled roll or sandwich, or maybe a cold pie or scotch egg around London or a "ploughman's" in the country. If you were very lucky, you might find some case hardened sausages, even with a dollop of mashed potatoes sometimes.

Nibbles - Every pub (but not always bars) that I know of have things like crisps (chips in US), these days in a bewildering array of flavours, peanuts and savoury biscuits etc.

So really, there is no such thing as traditional pub food. What many pubs in tourist areas try to do is to offer what is generally regarded to be traditional British food.

Dishes like fish and chips, shepherd's pie, sausage and

mash, beef in ale pie, steak and kidney pie and some more elaborate examples of English food (this varies around the place – like haggis in Scotland for example; pastie in Cornwall)

You **might** find a true "Cornish pastie" in London. They can be a very tasty assemblage of beef, potato, onion, turnip, salt and pepper in shortcrust pastry.

The idea of the pastie was developed in the old days for the Cornish tin miners. The pastry covering was to encase a complete meal that they could shove in their pockets and go off to work. Fishing was also a major industry, so the main course tended to be fish at one end and jam at the other for the dessert - I'm glad times have changed.

More modern tastes dictate that there will probably be a curry dish on the menu (would you believe, curry is the UK's most popular meal?) and a pasta and probably a vegetarian dish or two as well. Some pubs will offer roast lamb, beef or pork, particularly those open and serving food on Sunday.

In the old days a **ploughman's lunch** was a wedge of cheese with thick crusty bread, butter, sweet pickles and a pickled onion together with a pint of bitter. These days, there may be a choice of cheese, ham or even beef; different types of bread and, of course, drinking a pint of bitter is not obligatory.

On the cold food side, they may do salads and will normally offer a selection of sandwiches and maybe filled rolls and the ubiquitous "ploughman's" and possibly other cold pies, etc.

Nearly all pubs serve food and snacks from the bar area. They may also have a separate restaurant, which in some cases will have a more

extensive menu.

Snack Menu - don't think that you will necessarily be getting small amounts of anything you order from a "Snacks" or "Bar Snacks" menu.

It is called this to differentiate it from a restaurant or full meal menu and/or service.

Food franchises - Pubs do not always sell "traditional" food. Recently, there has been (in London anyway) quite a vogue for allowing the kitchen to be run as a separate operation. Thus, you may see a pub advertising it's Thai restaurant. However, all is not lost for traditionalists in that the Thai chefs are pretty good in general and frequently produce some traditional English dishes to go alongside their Thai

food menu. The ones I have been in do it very well too.

Some pub chains have pretty much standardised their food and not a lot of it is actually prepared on the premises. Whilst this is all perfectly wholesome and acceptable, it is not a patch on the variety and quality of food prepared in pubs who pride themselves on preparing their own food. You can get more information on good food pubs from the links on our website.

There are some pubs around that do not serve food at all (apart from nibbles), but these are very, very few.

Some pubs will close their kitchens and stop serving food for a while in the afternoon - some of them will continue with a snack menu during this time.

Pub games

In the old days, some London pubs might have ninepin skittles (the forerunner of the tenpin bowling) or even a snooker table. These are few and far between now, so I will comment no more, except to say that about the last pub "skittle alley" in London that I heard of was at the Freemason's Arms, Hampstead, and I understand that has gone now.



Pool is probably the most common table game these days. But you may still find some bar billiards about. Bar billiards is played on a smaller table than pool. The cue ball is always played from a small "D" at one end of the table and the object is to pot balls into holes, which are in the table rather than off the edge, without knocking over wooden "mushrooms" which protect the holes.

Darts is the most popular pub game nationally and, although not in every pub, you can usually find a pub with a dartboard about somewhere if you try. If you do want to join in, ask the form from someone hanging around the dartboard.



If you don't know darts too well it might be a good idea to watch what is going on to see how seriously they take it in that particular pub. The reason I say that is that, if they are serious, and you cannot count accurately and quickly, you would be better off to either wait until the board is available for your own private game or find a less serious venue. Bear in mind that an inter-pub match might be going on, and that is very serious indeed.

I mentioned Shove Ha'penny before and even though you will not come across it very often, I had better try to describe the principle. It consists of a tabloid newspaper(ish) sized slab of wood with lateral grooves. The object is to tap coins up the wood from one end so that they sit within the zones created by the lateral grooves. To try to explain further would only create more confusion so, as with all the games described here, you can get details from the links on our website.



Dominoes is a game that you may just see. It is often accompanied by the crashing of the woods upon the table and much cursing.

The Pub Survival Guide

Card games of various sorts may be found. Arguably, cribbage is the most likely. If you view a game, you will notice that it is almost certainly played at such a furious pace, that (unless you already know the game) you are unlikely to be able to pick up anything about it at all.

Other games - You may see many sorts of games in a pub. Some pubs organise "quiz nights" for their locals and others. Sometimes people bring in their own games. The landlord won't mind, as long as you don't take up too much space or make too much noise - oh, and keep drinking.

Recently I have seen chess, backgammon, Scrabble and Jenga (a game with wood blocks where you add blocks to a construction in turn until the loser collapses the tower).

Talk,talk,talk

The topics of conversation in pubs are varied and immense. Here is my assessment of some categories:-

The weather

One thing about the British which will absolutely amaze you is their endless capacity for talking about the weather. Frequently, this will be a whinge, will be used as part of a greeting and become the first topic of conversation. "Turned ***** cold hasn't it – hallo Fred" - "Hallo Jim – yeah, they say its going to snow tomorrow, then we won't be able to go anywhere`cos the trains won't go because of snow on the lines – I don't know what the Country is coming to".

This example also shows one of the other favourite whinge topics –

The state of the nation

Much like the weather, which always seems to be too hot, too cold, too dry or too wet for the average Brit, you will get the impression that nothing ever works properly in this country.

I find there is something highly amusing about the Brits outward pessimism (they *love* being pessimistic), but even if you feel as I do, please try not to laugh too much.

News

Be it national, international or local the British pessimistic tendency means that only bad news seems normally to qualify for discussion.

The Weather - what can I say? **The Number** One topic of conversation in the UK. It beats sport; beats sex (sort of); beats everything!

Near Reading (40 miles to the west of London) there is one of the very largest computer centres in Europe. It is dedicated to European weather forecasting. Despite this you will find all attempts at predicting what will happen in the UK is flaky, to say the least. There is the huge landmass of mainland Europe to the east (cold in winter and hot in summer, in relation to the British Isles). To the west are the warm northern extensions of the Gulf Stream oceanic current which meets the cold of the Arctic currents just to the north.

With all this, nobody can predict with any certainty (even those supercomputers) what is going to happen, even in the short term.

Work

Work issues are often discussed in pubs, either with colleagues at lunchtime or colleagues, friends or partners at the end of the day.

Politics

Is discussed in pubs, but usually pretty superficially, or as already set out in the newspapers/TV news, and without the fervour exhibited by some nationalities.

Religion

Is really what you do *not* hear at all in pubs, unless it is wrapped up as an integral part of some news story.

A **word of warning** here – there are some pubs that will be exclusively one sport orientated (usually rugby or football). They will look at you with a stony stare if you try and change the topic .

Sport

Along with the weather, this is one of the perennial pub topics and is largely a male preserve. The topics can be quite varied, but usually centre around the most popular sports, or sometimes not so popular sports if

Rugby Ray - a good friend of mine and a keen rugby (and pub) enthusiast. At one time we were offering a prize for anyone who could keep him off the subject of rugby for ten minutes. Nobody ever won.

England or the UK is doing particularly well at them for a change. So apart from special events (like the Olympic games), you probably won't hear much about athletics etc., and you won't hear much about darts despite the fact that it is the most popular pub game – the professional darts game does not really attract much pub discussion. You might hear about a big boxing match from time to time and

maybe some tennis when Wimbledon is on or there is the rare event of a Brit doing well.

So, arguably, you are most likely to hear about football, rugby and cricket (you don't stand a chance of understanding it unless you come from a cricket playing nation!), with football being by far and away the most discussed. Football (association football – soccer) is the British national sport. The football discussion is a tribal ritual, with its own language, which I won't go into in much detail here except to say that "us" and "we" means the team that I support and "you" means the team that you support. Thus "we were brilliant and you were ***** awful" might not mean what you would normally expect!

Sports discussions seem to be rather ritualistic. Each participant will tend to state their views in full even when they are in agreement with the previous talker. Sometimes this process “goes into a loop” and gets rather repetitive.

If you are fortunate(?) enough to witness the return of a group who have just been to an event (say a football match), you will probably find that they are still discussing it. Each of them in turn, will describe the events to the others as if they hadn't been to the same match. This process can continue for some time before going onto more general topics. You have been warned!

Tête-à-tête

Pubs can be an OK place to have a reasonably private conversation, but don't necessarily expect it to be quiet or even exclusive. Mostly, people will respect your privacy if you are talking one-to-one with someone (especially if they are of the opposite sex), but there are some who think that the mere act of entering a pub puts you in the public domain.

If your conversation really is private, choose your table carefully and politely reject all interlopers. NEVER have a private conversation at the bar. 1) you really are in the public domain here, and 2) you can *always* be overheard. For some strange reason bar staff are not generally considered part of the hearing population. The fact is that most conversations (even reasonably quiet ones) can be heard loud and clear behind the bar.

I know what you're saying! - In the pub where I worked in Cornwall, they took on an extra barman for the summer (I will call him “R” for these purposes).

He was overtly gay (exceedingly camp to be honest); an excellent barman, a qualified butcher and a qualified teacher - one of those blokes who seems to be able to do anything they want. At one stage of his teaching career he had worked a lot with deaf and dumb kids and had learned how to lip-read - I think you can guess what is coming.

Our party trick was, for the more distant tables outside the pub, for “R” to watch what was happening when they were deciding on the next round. As they decided, he would call the drink out and I would pour it, so that by the time they got to the bar, we had got the whole round, except for those who had their backs to us, ready and waiting.

One day we were performing this trick, but I had not realised that along with deciding their drinks they were also discussing “R”'s sexual orientation - he had! As they came to the bar to collect their drinks “R” said in a rather loud and effeminate voice “here's your eight pints of bitter and **Yes I am**” - that got everybody else discussing the same topic.

Pubs and beer - a recent history

Beer consumption is the largest financial driver of the pub business, so it is inevitable that the history of pubs and beer are entwined.

In the past, the whole brewing industry and most of the pubs were owned by extremely large, brewing businesses. In the 1960s these big breweries started to produce weak fizzy "keg" beers, much to the disgust of the seasoned beer drinkers, so in the early 1970's a revolutionary body came into existence - the Campaign for Real Ale - known as CAMRA.

CAMRA became a very powerful lobbying force (they still are!) for the preservation of traditional English beer and pubs. Their campaign became increasingly successful. Smaller breweries, offering traditional ale, were more evident. However, it was towards the end of the 1980's that the real action took place. The industry was investigated by the Monopolies and Mergers Commission, who found that a monopoly did exist in favour of the big national breweries. Six of them controlled the vast majority of the marketplace to the exclusion of the smaller regional and local brewers.

Why Keg? - because it's easier to manage and has a longer shelf life - why? - because (unlike real ale) the fermentation process is killed off at the brewery before shipping the cask to the pub, so the beer is sterile.

Gas is added at the pub give the beer "life" .

How did this happen? Well - nearly all the pubs were owned by the big breweries. Many of these were "managed" houses, where the publican and staff were employees of and paid wages by the brewer. Other brewery owned pubs were "tenancies", where independent publicans leased/rented the premises from the brewery under an exclusive supply arrangement where only that brewery's produce was supplied. These pubs were known as "tied" houses.

Where pubs were independently owned ("free" houses), the breweries wooed many of them by offering low interest loans in return for an exclusive supply deal. Thus effectively making them tied houses as well. Following all this, legislation was put in place known as the "Beer Orders". It required that brewers owing more than 2000 pubs either stop brewing or progressively release those above the 2000 mark from their exclusive supply deals. It also provided that where a pub remained tied, the landlord could select a "guest" beer from any supplier and that non or low alcohol beers or any other drinks could not be tied.

The effect was that the big national brewers divested themselves of pub ownership and these pubs are now owned and operated by independent retail pub companies that do not brew. The small breweries still own and operate much as before and there has been a slight increase in the number of free houses.

Fairly recently the Beer Orders have been revoked on the grounds that they have done their job and no monopoly exists in the supply chain. This has been a cause for concern by CAMRA who have noticed that, although most of the pubs are owned by independents, either retail companies or free houses, some of the erstwhile smaller brewery pub owners are getting bigger and that there may be opportunity for the current independent companies to buy into the brewing business.

Most of CAMRA's lobbying for the break up of the monopoly was on the basis that the breweries were supplying the aforementioned keg beers and traditional English beer was disappearing (and not down our throats). Thanks to them, you can see some real ale in many, but not all, pubs now.

So although many keg beers have been sidelined, some brewers produce "smoothflow" or "creamflow" beers. These too are a type of keg beer (nitro-keg), with a very frothy head (like Guinness). There are a few pubs in London which only serve this type of draught beer and no real ale.

If you are more interested in real ale and the more traditional pubs, please see our website for links.

In conclusion

Pubs are a wonderful institution. They cater for people of all types. Britain has a reputation for being a somewhat class conscious society, but that disappears in a pub. You will find a range of ages, professions and interests all happily gossiping and swapping views. You can eat, drink, read a newspaper or book, watch the world go by, be entertained and amused, socialise in small groups or large groups, be on your own or with another person. You can even socialise with your family. If you have the time, inclination and credentials, you can become part of the tribal group of locals.

As with all gatherings, there are sometimes some irritants. These usually are in the (human) form of a "drunk", "pest" or "bore". I say irritant because that is what it is most likely to be. Anything more than this, particularly if any aggression is involved, just distance yourself by whatever means and let the landlord/bar staff sort it out.

The mildly drunk can be quite amusing. It's when they get over-assertive or over-repetitive that it gets boring. The pest is someone who is forcing their attentions on you when you don't want it. The bore is someone who keeps telling you what you don't want to hear.

You may have noticed that the above three conditions are not mutually exclusive. It is entirely possible, if not probable, that your assailant is exhibiting at least two of these traits - so what to do about it? If you feel that you really do not like that person (or not at that time anyway) then focus your attentions elsewhere (in extremis, move physically away - go and talk to someone else). Me? I tend to be inattentive, monosyllabic and po-faced whilst thinking pure and wondrous thoughts - they get fed up after a while.

If you actually quite like the person, then you need to modify your behaviour slightly, so that you appear more attentive whilst not taking any notice. You know the sort of thing, the odd occasional grunt, "uhmmm", or "yes" (beware of inserting any questions, they will prolong the ordeal). If you are feeling really evil and have the time, money and inclination, another option is to have several more drinks and then bore the pants off *them* for a change.

A mate of mine - (I don't know if he thinks pure and wondrous thoughts or not, but I doubt it) nearly always seems to have a newspaper to hand.

He has developed the capability of studying his newspaper to the exclusion of all other earthly events.

So there you have it. My view of pub life and, I hope, some useful information to help you get the best out of your pub visits.

There is a wealth of information about pubs, pub signs, pub names, beer - you name it - from the links on our website at www.pubsurvivalguide.com.

Best wishes and enjoy yourself.

Phil Parkin

The London
Pub Survival Guide
for tourists and visitors



The Princess of Wales - Chalcot Road,