Historic pub interiors

Major survey

The CAMRA National Inventory and a joint project with English Heritage have led to a greatly increased understanding of historic pub interiors

Everyone knows that the pub is one of the great English traditions. The message is reinforced by pub signs like 'Ye Olde …', notices such as 'a traditional English inn' and reassuring pronouncements about 'home cooking' and the fact that Charles Dickens used to enjoy a pint here. Yet, despite these appeals to tradition and history, very few pub interiors have much claim to antiquity. They have, of course, been constantly changing over time but the pace of change has accelerated enormously during the past few decades.

The CAMRA National Inventory

In 1990 the Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA) embarked on a major survey to assess what was left. The objective was to discover those pubs that had remained substantially unaltered since 1945. There are some 60,000 pubs throughout Great Britain (but the number is falling) and it was thought that perhaps about 500 examples would form a National Inventory of Historic Pub Interiors, ranging from the simplest rural beerhouse to the grandest of city establishments. A decade later it was clear that the number would be only about 200, so thorough had been the recent process of refitting.

Joint historic pubs project

English Heritage was also concerned about the loss of historic interiors, usually with little or no recording having taken place. Some ground-breaking listing decisions were made to recognise that once-commonplace buildings had now become very rare examples of vanishing types. Cases in point were the listing of the Three Magpies, a plain 'Moderne' 1930s pub in Birmingham, and the basic but intact Victorian Turf Tavern, Bloxwich, West Midlands. To speed up the work and develop an overview of the pub stock, English Heritage and CAMRA funded a two-year project in 1998 for which I became the caseworker. The basis of the project was CAMRA's survey work and the chief purpose was to ensure that the National Inventory pubs were, if appropriate, listed, that they were listed at the correct grade and that list descriptions properly pointed to the significance of interiors. Inevitably new examples should, and did, come to light during the course of the work, usually in response to alerts from local people over threatened gutting. The vast majority of the pubs were in England, and it was soon apparent that inconsistencies had grown up over what was listed and at what grade.

The North Star, Steventon, Oxfordshire. A series of settles demarcates the drinking area of this now rare example of an unaltered village pub

The basic rural pub

It was also clear that not all the National Inventory pubs were *listable*. There are still a handful of pubs, privately owned by now-aged individuals, that are little more than a basic room in a private house. Two of the last survivors – the Sun at Leintwardine, Herefordshire, and the Luppitt Inn, Luppitt, Devon – are still functioning but, even during the life of the project, others were lost forever. We can scarcely protect an uneconomic way of life people no longer want to follow. Some basic rural pubs, of course, are listed for reasons that have nothing to do with their 'pubness'. The unique Cider House at Defford, Worcestershire, is listed because it is a 300-year-old half-timbered building, not because of its (no doubt ephemeral) pub qualities – stable door servery in the garden, outdoor drinking or inside a tiny room if cold or wet! Similarly the drinking arrangements at the North Star, Steventon, Oxfordshire (opposite), are paralleled only at one other British pub but, like the Cider House, the listing was originally made because of the age (17th century) of the building.

Pressures on the urban pub

From the start of the project, it was obvious that National Inventory pubs were coming under threat. Within the space of a few months, there were real or expected threats at the Painters Arms, High Town Road, Luton (1913), the Cock and Bottle, Barkerend Road, Bradford (about 1900), and the Neptune's Hall, Broadstairs (late 19th century): all three were spot-listed at grade II. At the Painters Arms, listing saved a well-appointed off-sales snug and its adjoining screens from a scheme to throw open the whole trading area into the usual one big space.

The Painters Arms case is symptomatic of the changes that have altered the urban pub in the past hundred years. At first, it was customary for most establishments to have a number of separate rooms or to have screens between separate drinking areas. In London, where compartmentalisation seems to have reached its height, it was not unknown for there to be well over half a dozen screened off compartments. There was invariably an off-sales facility too that might take the form of a small snug (as at the Painters Arms) or a hatch from the porch into the servery. Nowadays the supermarkets (often in Calais!) deal with most of the take-home trade while a more egalitarian society and the magistrates' demands that all parts of pubs should be visible have swept away the divisions in pubs. This trend, begun during the inter-war period, became a torrent in the late 20th century.

The project showed just how rare intact, compartmentalised pubs have become. A superb example, the Argyll Arms, is next door to Oxford Circus Underground Station. Dating from about 1898, this splendid pub has superbly detailed screens with etched and polished glass leading off a side corridor to the bar counter; it was upgraded to a II* listing through the work of the project. Another classic example is the Prince Alfred, Formosa Street, Maida Vale, where the screenwork also dates from about 1898. Here listing has no doubt saved the 'hardware' but a refurbishment last year involving an all-too-visible kitchen, café-style seating and a prominent restaurant area has destroyed much of historic interest. The pressures on historic pubs are enormous.

The Lion, Liverpool.
The drinking corridor and its lavish Edwardian fittings

The height of pub building

The heroic age of English pub building was, roughly, between 1895 and 1905 when the great drinking palaces were created, epitomised by the Argyll Arms and the Prince Alfred. At their most lavish they were fitted out with decorative tiling, screens, ornate bar-backs and fireplaces, though the arrangements of features and floor plans varied across the country. During the project, a good deal of time was spent studying historic interiors in Merseyside. Here there had been less extreme compartmentalisation than in London, and a characteristic feature is a lobby or corridor for standing customers, off which run other rooms – a public bar, saloon, or, a typically north-west feature, a news room. The Lion, in Moorfield, Liverpool (page 27), includes this type of drinking corridor dating from an expensive Edwardian refitting. The servery and public bar lie beyond the glazed screen, which has hatches for serving drinks. A similar pub, the Prince Arthur, Rice Lane, Walton, had even more of its historic interior intact than the Lion but had not been listed. This omission was rectified, and also the Stork, Price Street, Birkenhead, had its list description revised to reflect the exceptional nature of its interior.

The West Midlands conurbation, and Birmingham in particular, has a number of excellent interiors built about 1900. Two of the best were upgraded to II* as a result of the project – the Waterloo, Shireland Road, Smethwick, an ambitious hotel and pub of 1908, and the Bellefield, Winson Street, Birmingham, with its superb floor-to-ceiling tiling of a similar date.

Such pubs are highly appealing and their architectural interest obvious. At a humbler level there are still a number of pubs surviving intact that are representative of the many thousands that used to cater for millions of industrial working-class people. The Vine, Pitts Hill, Tunstall, is a three-room, late-Victorian pub that still serves the local community. Similarly, the Shakespeare, Stafford Street, Dudley, has remained unaltered and was one of the first pubs to be listed during the project. Another West Midland pub to have been given a grade II listing is the Olde Swan, Netherton, famous among beer enthusiasts as being one of only four long-lived home-brew pubs to have survived into the 1970s. Its listing depended, of course, not upon this worthy fact but upon the survival of the intact Victorian public bar and snug and a rare enamelled ceiling (opposite).

The plight of the inter-war pub

The information gathered in the National Inventory and the joint project may prevent decisions being made with inadequate evidence, such as the one made about 1990 on the John Bull, York. English Heritage did not recommend listing the pub – a small, multi-room pub, complete with all its fittings but conservative architecturally – because nobody knew whether the pub was an exceptional survivor or one of many of its type. If what we know now as a result of over a decade's survey work had been known then, it might still be possible to buy beer at the John Bull rather than a used car from its site! Very few inter-war pubs survive in anything like their original state. As this article is being written, E B Musman's iconic 'Moderne' Nags Head, Bishop's Stortford (about 1936), is undergoing a further set of changes that will make it even less like the original.

An early listing during the project was the plain, sub-Georgian Crystal Fountain, Cannock, Staffordshire (1937), simply fitted but conveying a good sense of what a large, ordinary suburban pub was like just before World War II. A very recent listing is the Vine, Lichfield Road, Wednesfield (1938), a small, scarcely-altered three-room pub for an industrial suburb of Wolverhampton. Ten years or so ago it would not have been considered for listing. Now we are confident that there are only two or three pubs like it left in England.

A thing of the past – the off-sales compartment of the Victoria, Hallgarth Street, Durham

The eponymous swan in the enamelled ceiling of the Olde Swan, Netherton, West Midlands

When considering larger public houses, it became clear that the Margaret Catchpole, a 1936 estate pub in Cliff Lane, Ipswich, was truly exceptional, retaining all its rooms (even its off-sales) and good quality fittings. A combination of quality and completeness, it is the best example of its type and was upgraded from a grade II to II* listing. A symptom of the lack of knowledge about the inter-war pub stock is that the Test Match, West Bridgford, Nottinghamshire (1936-7), was unlisted though it still retained its original Art Deco fittings; it is now listed at II*.

Conservation and commercialisation

The Olde Swan, Netherton (mentioned above), is a model of what to do with an historic pub. The old trading area is insufficient for modern needs and the pub has been expanded considerably to the side and rear of the building. The work has been done so that one is oblivious of it when in the historic core. A similar development has taken place at the Five Mile House, Duntisbourne Abbots, Gloucestershire, where the tiny two-room local pub has been expanded sideways into former private accommodation and downwards into the cellars – with minimum visual impact. At the Fox and Hounds, Christmas Common, Oxfordshire, the intervention has been more drastic but the new restaurant has been built in the local vernacular tradition. The historic core has been carefully retained and greatly enhances the whole development.

Some pubs will close, others will need expansion to survive and those pubs that are little more than the licensee's living room are becoming extinguished. It would be naive to suggest that every historic feature should be kept in every pub. It is equally naive to suppose that the modern generation of pub-owning companies is interested in anything more than the bottom line.

Considerable strides are being made to explore the viability of making greater use of the pub, especially in rural areas (pub, shop, post office, meeting rooms) where diversification can help arrest the decline of local services and retain a community focus.

Planning authorities are beginning to challenge applications for pub conversion to residential use in recognition of their important social role. English Heritage (with others) will be publishing guidance in due course on the adaptation of historic pubs, taking into account commercial and community interests as well as those of the historic fabric. Statutory protection, however, will remain an essential tool for tempering destructive and badly devised schemes. We are now in a better position through the work by English Heritage and CAMRA to know which pubs have important historic interiors and to be able to put them into a national context. □

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