

Evolution of Historical Pubs in London: George Inn, Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese, Ye Olde Mitre

By Isabel and Liz



George Inn

This pub is famous for being the only surviving galleried coaching inn in all of London. During the 1600s, the pub was a popular stop along coaching routes from south London. It was strategically located near the London Bridge. The galleries that run along the front of the building were common in 17th-century inns, but many of these buildings were destroyed during World War II. The first floor is a bar, which originally acted as a waiting room for passengers on coaches. The upstairs is a restaurant but originally functioned as bedrooms. The building was constructed around 1542, but the original George Inn was destroyed by a fire in 1676. It was rebuilt in 1677.



George Inn

In the 17th and 18th centuries, many famous British authors frequented the George Inn. In fact, Charles Dickens mentioned the George Inn in his novel *Little Dorrit*. He used to visit the inn on his way to see his father in Marshalsea Prison. It has been suggested that Shakespeare used to visit the George Inn when it was still in its early stages. The George Inn was a popular meeting spot for businessmen, including a group of men called “The Four O’Clockers” who met at the inn every day at 4 o’clock.



George Inn

In the 21st century, the George Inn has become primarily a tourist destination. Some locals visit the bar to grab a drink, but it is renowned for its historical significance which causes tourists to travel to the pub in an attempt to experience 16th-century London. The inn is situated in a hidden courtyard that is tucked away from the busy streets of London. Today, the George Inn is owned by the National Trust. The National Trust leases it to a private company, Flower's Breweries Ltd, which converted the inn into a pub and restaurant.



Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese

This pub is one of the oldest in London. It was most likely established around 1538 and was rebuilt just after the Great Fire of 1666. However, the cellar goes back to the 1300s and the pub acquired it as their own addition at one point. This pub is famous because many of the great writers and journalists would come to Fleet Street and spend their time in this pub. Charles Dickens mentioned the Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese in his writings and was known to frequent there. Additionally, the man who wrote the first dictionary, Dr. Samuel Johnson, also occupied Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese often and his chair still remains inside today.

Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese is also famously known for owning Polly the Parrot, who was famous around the world during the 1920s and made international headlines in its death. Polly was a parrot that would mimic and imitate what people taught it. All of the journalists used to enjoy teaching it phrases, and it was able to learn several different languages. Polly's taxidermy can be found above the bar today.

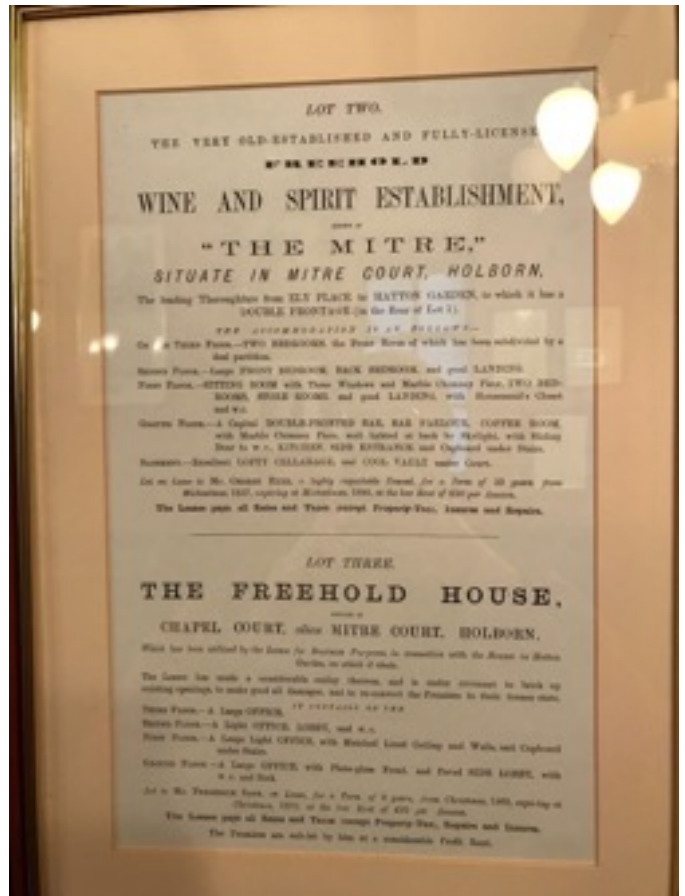


Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese

In an upper room of the pub, there used to be tiles on the walls that displayed erotic images. This suggests that the space may have been used as a brothel at some point. Like the George Inn, Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese is known for its historical significance, which makes it a popular tourist destination. It is currently operated by Samuel Smith Brewery, an independent British brewery. The windows outside of the pub resemble windows found all over London, with the bullseye symbol in the center. We saw some of these windows on our tour of Covent Garden. These windows are examples of extremely old glassmaking and can be found on historical buildings.



Ye Olde Mitre



Ye Olde Mitre

The Ye Old Mitre was built in 1546 by Bishop Goodrich and was for the servants of the Bishops of Ely. The Ye Old Mitre is very close to the oldest Catholic church in England, St Etheldreda's Church (also known as Ely Chapel). However, the modern version of the Mitre was actually built around 1772, soon after the demolition of the nearby palace of the Bishops of Ely. This pub is famous for having a cherry tree, (which is now supporting the front) that Queen Elizabeth once danced around with Sir Christopher Hatton. The tree is said to mark the boundary between the Bishop's Garden and the area leased to Sir Christopher Hatton.



Ye Olde Mitre

This pub is currently operated by Fuller's Brewery. The tree that Queen Elizabeth danced around is still preserved in the corner of one of the rooms of the pub. When the pub was first established, it was only open during the week for feasts. Today, the pub is still closed on Saturday and Sundays. It only opens one weekend a year, which corresponds with the British Beer Festival in August. Due to the age of the pub, the space is very small and it is not an ideal location for large or rowdy groups to visit. Ye Olde Mitre acts as a popular tourist destination or a cozy spot for locals to enjoy a beer. This pub is known for being tough to find and very hidden, which is why more locals enjoy spending time there.



Summary

Pubs are an integral part of British culture. As Jennings explains, “More people spend more time in public houses than they do in any other buildings except private houses and work-places.’ As a social institution, the pub was more important than the church, cinema, dance hall and political organization put together” (211). People spent so much of their daily life at pubs, socializing, drinking, and eating. One can say that the lives of British people were revolved around pubs at certain pints in history. At the birth of pub culture, pubs were mostly for the lower class as drinking was seen as a major social problem (87). However, pubs have evolved to include the middle class as well. In our outings to these three pubs, we have noticed that the atmosphere has been relatively quiet and calm. It was on a Thursday afternoon and we acknowledge that their ambiance might feel different at different times.

Although these pubs are rich with history, they are not “touristy” in the slightest. Most people could easily walk right past any of the three pubs without realizing it. Even to notice the historical significance would mean reading small signs that are not necessarily attention-grabbing as many of them were small in muted colors. That aesthetic can be found in the internal and external appearances and decor of all of the pubs. We would describe the appearance of the pubs to blend in very easily to their surroundings. The pubs did not appear to be tourist destinations and did not advertise themselves as such.

The pubs use of only small signs and plaques that mentioned their historical significance may be in an attempt to maintain the appearance the pubs would have had back in the 1500s or 1600s. None of the pubs had music playing or big televisions to entertain visitors. By keeping the pub the same as it always has been, visitors can truly feel like they are experiencing an authentic historical site and are being transported back in time. In addition, the Ye Olde Mitre has maintained the tradition of being closed on weekends, despite the fact that they could bring in a large crowd on weekends. Today, the pub is not as central to drinking culture because people can drink in clubs, restaurants, or easily pick up alcohol at a local supermarket.

Key Quotes - *The Local* by Paul Jennings

“Part of the difficulty in pinning down the use of pub is that so much of our knowledge comes via the literate and respectable in society” (88).

“The State was concerned with the threats which drink and public houses might pose to public order and morality” (165).

“In some ways [industrialization] worked to reduce drunkenness: employers in the new factories wanted sober workpeople, for example. In others it made it more attractive: the escape route from the harsh life in the new industrial towns” (143).

“The pub today plays a smaller part in the life of the town than it ever did” (211).

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