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# THE GREAT BRITISH SALOON SERIES

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## CHARLES DICKENS GOT CROCKED HERE

by Stephen V. Gold

Let me tell you about The Spotted Cow. I met her on a muggy summer night in the heart of the English Midlands, after a hard day's march through two battlefields, a castle, and a cathedral. Reason enough to drop my gear in a guest room and head for the bar downstairs, where a gregarious member of Maggie Thatcher's proletariat, sporting a Peters jacket and traditional county cap, offered to buy a weary traveler a pint. I accepted and, per custom, returned the favor.

One Thwaites Best Bitter later, my friend and I were deep into the more arcane aspects of cricket and baseball. Two rounds of Mild Ale and we were comparing notes on the domestic problems of the House of Windsor. A smooth pint of Theakston Old Peculiar brought us to the Battle of Britain, which led, with what at the time seemed perfect logic, to a pejorative judgment of French cuisine. A few more rounds, a few more topics, and we parted, never to see each other again but nonetheless lifelong buddies.

The Spotted Cow: it was there that I discovered not only a new methodology in the study of English history but the secret that official tour guides in the U.K. keep to themselves; namely, that an American visitor can learn more about England in three hours spent in a public house than he can in three weeks' hard-marching through battlefields, castles, and cathedrals.

Thousands of Americans will travel to the British Isles this summer in search of the culture their ancestors fled. Force-fed the standard tourist fare of battlefields, castles, and cathedrals, they will come away, at best, with a superficial understanding of British history. At worst, after a few days of castle-hopping, their brains will simply short out. There was the occasion, before my visit to The Spotted Cow, when I stood on York's medieval wall, admiring the city's famed minster, only to have my reverie broken by the sound of two American accents in a deep rap

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about Black & Decker power tools. And the misty morning I climbed Arthur's Seat, the rugged cliff overlooking Edinburgh, and came face-to-face with a fellow Yank who wanted to relive that year's American League Championship Series.

Not to draw from these examples any sweeping conclusion about the ugly American abroad. On the contrary, my experience has been that, on the whole, we're fairly decent tourists—friendly, inquisitive, capable of digesting nearly anything. But after an extended tour of Victorian mansions, especially during England's rainy season, many of us grow weary, even homesick. Nothing, however, that a pub can't cure.

Of all Britain's higher educational institutions, none can match the cultural significance of the public house. It's a fact, easily proven: Brits may toast the Queen three times a year and attend church twice, but the pub is the Establishment that truly holds their hearts. It defines the national culture in ways not to be found in any comparable American, German, or French institution. To create a similar environment this side of the Atlantic, we would have to combine our pizza parlors, pool halls, social clubs, bars, and nightclubs, keeping only their finer qualities (and improving their beer). German beer is certainly good enough, but the German beer *hall* is large, loud, and better suited for spectator sport than a friendly conversation. French bistros? They're refined little places where, depending on the neighborhood, one can join or overhear subdued conversations on surrealism, cheese, and the future of Eurocommunism.

American and continental drinking spots lack the simple warmth of the British public house. That's because the pub neither has nor encourages pretense. Walk into an American disco, for example, and you're apt to think (or feel you ought to think) you're John Travolta or Patrick Swayze. But enter a British pub and it's as if you've found a home, a place where you can be yourself.

Roughly estimated, there are 70,000 public houses in Britain, at least one for every village and hamlet. More than half are "tied" to a major brewery, meaning that they sell only the beer their owners offer—a practice the Thatcher government's Monopolies and Mergers Commission, over raucous protest from the breweries, is trying to change. Independent pubs, called "free-houses," sell any and all brands and brews, from pale yellow lagers and golden bitters to rich brown ales and thick black stouts. Many houses, both tied and free, have excellent kitchens that offer the visitor a generous assortment of snacks and meals; not just the hearty ploughman's lunch or traditional cottage pie and chips, but regional specialties that will come as a pleasant surprise to American tourists brainwashed by horror stories about British gastronomy.

Not to say that all pubs, any more than all restaurants or hotels, offer their clientele equal value in victuals and atmosphere. There are memorable pubs and pubs of a lower order, but absent a Michelin, Mobilguide, or Duncan Hines, I've worked up my own rating system, one that operates on a scale of one to five. A four-star pub—more aptly, four-pint—should, in addition to a wide variety of beers and ales, offer the visitor character and conviviality. Look for oak-beamed ceilings, Windsor chairs, inglenooks, a dartboard (in use, not just for show), and animals. The best pubs have a dog sleeping by the bar and a cat on the windowsill—sanitation sticklers and customers' allergies be damned.

As for conviviality, if when you walk in the place goes silent and you think you hear a murmur of "bloody Yank," don't even stick around to ask directions. High-rated pubs, on the other hand, feature patrons too busy enjoying themselves to care whether you're a regular or a tourist, along with bartenders who seem to go out of their way to make outsiders feel welcome.

Which brings us to the special ingredient that makes for a five-pint pub—all of the above, plus the added element of history.

Brits have been gathering in ale-houses and inns for a drink and friendly chat for more than two millennia, pre-dating the Roman invasion. Indeed, by the time Caesar landed, the British taste for beer and ale was so ingrained that Roman efforts to convert the natives into wine-lovers failed miserably. Still, Caesar's legions did leave their mark on the countryside in the custom of hanging bunches of ivy (symbol of the Bacchanalia) outside wine shops. Thus did the ubiquitous signboard of the public house become part of the British landscape.

By the Middle Ages, alehouses were being used by the Saxons for council meetings and legal tribunals. Though the original building is long gone, Ye Olde Ferry Boat Inn at Holywell, Cambridgeshire—a certified five-pint establishment—carries on the proud tradition of a sixth-century alehouse. And while William the Conqueror co-opted much of the Saxon culture, the pub, rather than the continental sidewalk cafe, held its own as the center of British social, political, and literary life; though the early Norman influence can still be found in pubs that were licensed in the days when the royal court spoke only French.

Other pubs that trace their origin to the Middle Ages are steeped in battle lore. The Whittington Inn at Kinver, Staffordshire, began selling ale four years before Robert the Bruce made a fool of poor Edward II at Bannockburn (1314), while patrons of The Bells of Peover at Lower Peover, Cheshire, were spiritual witness to England's conquest of the neighboring Welsh (1282). Crusaders on their way to the Holy Land became regular customers of Ye Olde Trip to Jerusalem Inn at Nottingham after that five-pint pub opened its doors in 1189.

Many public houses are tied by history to England's Civil War. Picture Oliver Cromwell, the ultimate Puritan, using The Bull's Head in London as his headquarters, or holding a Roundhead council of war at The Reindeer in Banbury, Oxfordshire. Nor was the Lord Protector-to-be beyond using a five-pint inn named The Royal Oak in

Whatcote, Warwickshire as a hiding place. His nemesis, Charles I, surrendered to Scottish commissioners at The Saracen's Head in Southwell, Nottinghamshire; and his royal successor, Charles II, in flight after a trouncing at the Battle of Worcester, stopped for a pint or two at The George & Dragon in Houghton, West Sussex, then took shelter at the aptly named Royal Standard of England in Forty Green, Buckinghamshire.

Other famed island warriors known to have spent their idle hours in pubs include Francis Drake and Walter Raleigh (The Exeter Inn, Ashburton, Devon), and Lord Nelson (The Angel Hotel, Ludlow, Shropshire). As for the Battle of Waterloo having been won on the playing fields at Eton, a more likely site was The Grenadier in Knightsbridge, London, where Arthur Wellesley spent a fair bit of time.

British literary history is also rich in pub lore, with many (if not most) of the island's writers as notable for their proclivity to drink as their ability to put words on parchment. Dr. Johnson's favorite was, of course, Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese on Fleet Street, London; Robert Louis Stevenson took his pints in the comfort of The Cramond Inn, Edinburgh; while Scotland's Burns did his ruminating about bonnie lassies, mice and men, at The Black Bull in the lowland village of Moffat. Then there was the special case of the visiting economist, Karl Marx, who contemplated Hegel and the mysteries of Spencerian philosophy at London's Bloomsbury Museum Tavern.

As for Charles Dickens, American visitors could map out an interesting tour of London and England based on his pub travels alone. While living in the Bloomsbury area, Dickens frequented The Lamb; but he was also known to stop off at Fleet Street's Ye Olde Cock Tavern, the East End's Prospect of Whitby (also a favorite of Turner and Whistler), Jack Straw's Castle in Hampstead, and the bar at the Morrith Arms Hotel, near Barnard Castle in Durham, where Dickens wrote his classic *Nicholas Nickleby*.

Before we closed The Spotted Cow that evening a few summers back, my new-found English friend in the Peters jacket and county cap passed along a personal experience that captured, in a memorable vignette, the close attachment the British people feel to their country's past.

We were talking about Coventry's fate during World War II. The city was my drinking companion's home, and it had been his family's home for centuries. Few cities on the island, he said, could claim Coventry's rich heritage. It

had been founded in Saxon times and a Benedictine monastery was built there in the eleventh century. Coventry was the place where Lady Godiva took her famous ride, watched by the original "Peeping Tom." The town's majestic cathedral was admired worldwide, as were its other fine medieval buildings.

Then, he told me, on the night of November 14, 1940, German bombers wiped out the center of town and 1500 years of history, including the great

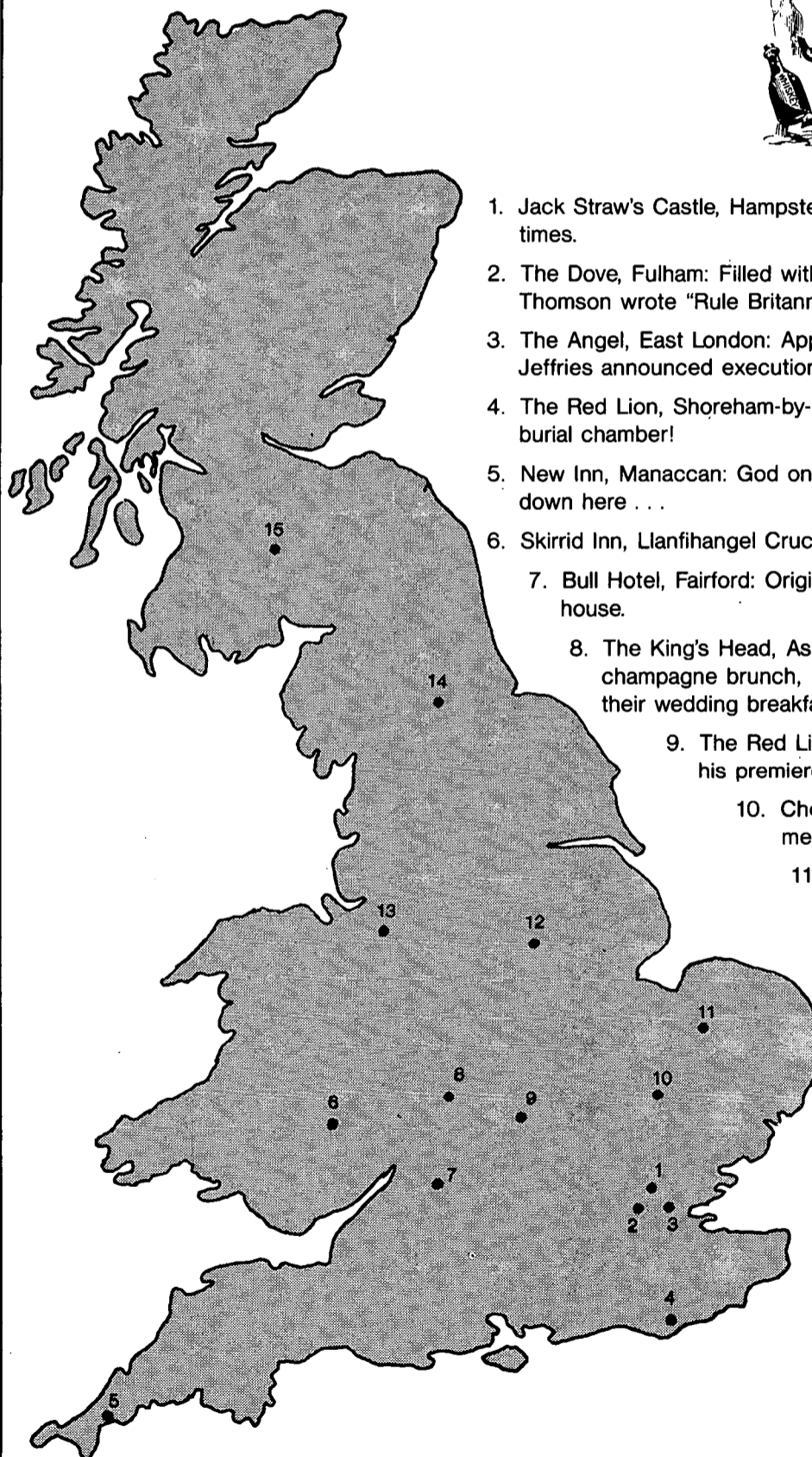
cathedral. My companion was five years old at the time. His father's business was destroyed; so was his uncle's.

No speeches were made the following morning. No grand rhetoric, no civic assemblies. His family and their neighbors simply went to work rebuilding their homes and their lives. As he grew up, he watched the people of Coventry construct a new cathedral next to the charred ruins of the old one, then fashion a cross

from the timbers of the old burnt roof and place it on the original altar. On the back of the cross they carved two words: *Father Forgive*.

When my companion finished his story we sat silent for awhile. We had had our evening at The Spotted Cow and there seemed nothing left to say. All that remained was for the two of us, the gregarious midlander and the visiting Yank, to raise our empty mugs to the good people of Coventry. □

## A PUB TOUR OF BRITAIN



1. Jack Straw's Castle, Hampstead: Dickens slept here—several times.
2. The Dove, Fulham: Filled with inspiration—and beer. James Thomson wrote "Rule Britannia" here.
3. The Angel, East London: Appropriately named—"Hanging" Judge Jeffries announced executions here.
4. The Red Lion, Shoreham-by-the-Sea: Drink in a former Saxon burial chamber!
5. New Inn, Manaccan: God only knows what Cromwell was doing down here . . .
6. Skirrid Inn, Llanfihangel Crucorney: A spirited pub—it's haunted!
7. Bull Hotel, Fairford: Originally a medieval monks' chanting house.
8. The King's Head, Aston Cantlow: It doesn't offer a champagne brunch, but Shakespeare's parents still held their wedding breakfast here.
9. The Red Lion, High Wycombe: Disraeli made his premiere political speech from the roof.
10. Chequers Inn, Fowlmere: A favorite meeting spot of Samuel Pepys.
11. Historic Thomas Paine Hotel, Thetford: Terrible Tom was born here.
12. The Saracen's Head, Southwell: Charles I's Last Stand—he surrendered here.
13. Corbet Arms Hotel, Market Drayton: Ask for the lady ghost.
14. Morrith Arms Hotel, Greta Bridge: Dickens penned *Nicholas Nickleby* here.
15. The Black Bull, Moffat: Robbie Burns ate haggis here.

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# AMONG THE INTELLECTUALOIDS

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## AGENTS OF THE NEW AGE

by Martin Morse Wooster

The New Age movement in America is hardly new. As the journalist Jay Kinney notes in an entertaining anthology, *The Fringes of Reason* (a "Whole Earth Catalog" to New Age practices), "nearly every spiritual or cultural phenomenon associated with the term dates back at least several centuries." The first channelers, for example, were members of the Fox family of Hydesville, New York, who in 1848 achieved national renown by communicating with the dead (most notably with a "Mr. Splitfoot"). The first Indian gurus came to the U.S. in 1893 as part of the Chicago World's Fair. And the first journal to identify itself with the New Age—the *New Age Magazine*—published its premiere issue in 1914.

But it was not until the rise of the counterculture in the 1960s that the New Age movement took an interest in politics, although it adopted a slightly different attitude from that of its half-brothers and -sisters on the New Left. For the New Left, politics was life. For the New Agers, politics is therapy. It is their quest to connect with "the newly rediscovered spiritual side of things," as one New Ager puts it, that has brought them flocking to environmental, feminist, and peace groups.

Which greet them, not surprisingly, with open arms. Fully a third of the listings in the 1989 *Guide to New Age Living* are political, including twenty-five environmental groups, twenty-four peace outfits, thirty-five "social justice" organizations (among them the Institute for Policy Studies, self-described in the *Guide* as an "unbiased center for scholars and activists"), twenty-three antihunger groups, and five animal-rights groups. (By way of comparison, the *Guide* lists thirty-nine spas and ashrams and a mere fourteen suppliers of vegetarian pet food.) And at the "Heart-to-Heart Festival," which I recently attended in Washington, there

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was likewise a heavy proportion of left-wing groups with their own display booths: the National Peace Institute, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, the Christic Institute, and many more.

Other booths at the festival were harder to characterize. One woman offered proof that AIDS could be cured by ingesting large quantities of water-cress; the New Vrindaban Community of West Virginia sold *The Joy of No Sex* ("50,000 copies in print"); the Global Cooperation Project, combining the intellectual candlepower of Jimmy Carter, Peter Gabriel, Barbara Jordan, Ken Kesey, and Ben Kingsley, asked those attending the festival to organize "creative groups" to "brainstorm positive ideas about a better world." (Among the positive ideas *already submitted* by previous creative groups: "Harmony, trust, respect, understanding, cooperation, and ice cream every day." These ideas, the project guaranteed, would be donated to the United Nations. I can't think of a more worthy depository.)

Rama Vernon, director of the Center for Soviet-American Dialogue, was the featured speaker at the first "Heart-to-Heart" session I attended. At one time, Vernon led a typical New Age life, meditating daily, avoiding the world. But then in 1984 she went to the Soviet Union. She was standing in Red Square, she said, watching Soviet soldiers do the goosestep, when "I came face to face with my programmed preconceptions of the Evil Empire. As I watched the soldiers marching, my knees trembled with fear. And I asked: 'Where is this fear coming from?' . . . I saw that my fear was primordial, rooted in the inner society."

Returning to the U.S., Vernon set herself up in business as a New Age travel agent, taking nearly a thousand truth-seekers on twenty-nine missions to the Soviet Union over the past five years. On her tours she has met with "healers, psychics, underwater communicators, refuseniks, and dissidents." In Russian schools she has sung works

by Joan Baez and Pete Seeger—"the Soviets' great heroes," she called them—and her two-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Mira, has been interviewed on Soviet television.

But the high point of her life, she said, was when she met with Mikhail Gorbachev at a "worldwide ceremony of peace" in 1987. Franciscan and Buddhist monks chanted; American Indians presented a peace pipe. And Gorbachev spoke. "There was a space between his thoughts," she said. "And those spaces filled the room, so that there was a tide of consciousness sweeping the room." She even held Gorbachev's hand; and as she did so, "I could feel that there is a great light in the world—and it's coming out of Russia!"

Vernon invited us to become "citizen diplomats" by signing up for her next "transformational journey" to "bond" with the "truly kind, giving, loving, zestful, warm-hearted, spiritual" Soviets. All of the arrangements inside the Soviet Union—visits with healers, psychics, "mystical artists," and people who swim in Gorky Park in January, along with a tour of the Kiev-Pechery monastery (which holds "the remains of monks whose mummies still emanate spiritual energy")—would be handled by Intourist. Cost: less than \$3,000 (\$2,995).

Vernon was followed by Marilyn Ferguson, a perky pixie mysteriously encased in what seemed to be a baby-blue quilt. Author of the New Age blockbuster *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, Ferguson has for the past six years been working on a new book she calls *The New Common Sense: Secrets of the Visionary Life*. She wouldn't explain what her book is about, but through her research she has compiled a large number of uplifting quotations, most of which she read to the audience. She cited Thoreau, Emerson (a New Age favorite), Thomas Paine, William James, Thomas Edison, Paul Newman, her cleaning lady, and inspirational passages from *Reader's Digest*. "I seem to be quoting a lot today," she said. "I can't help myself."

Stripped of its New Age rhetoric,

much of Ferguson's talk was quite reasonable: "The next level of joy" after personal fulfillment, she said, could best be reached by people working together to perform charitable acts, and she denied that Washington had all the answers to America's problems. "Although it's important to have responsible government, it really truly is the reaching out of all of us that makes a difference. . . . There are going to be hundreds of thousands of solutions, not one solution."

As she spoke, her phrases began to mingle with others in my mind: "The reaching out of all of us . . . a kinder, gentler nation . . . thousands of solutions . . . a thousand points of light . . ." Was Marilyn Ferguson a Republican, I wondered, or was George Bush a New Ager?

"He sounds very New Age to me," Ferguson said cheerfully.

The next morning, I attended a session featuring Ed Winchester, who has spent most of his life as an accountant for the Pentagon. A few years ago, he enrolled in a course on New Age ideas, sponsored by the Air Force. He was quickly converted, and committed himself to solving the problems of national defense through yoga. He enlisted several of his co-workers to create, by means of meditation, a "Peace Shield" that would eventually convert hawks through a "Spiritual Defense Initiative."

Winchester has become something of a New Age megastar. Dozens of newspapers, including the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, have made him the subject of profiles ("PENTAGON PSYCHICS BUILDING PEACE SHIELD AROUND USA," screamed the tabloid *National Examiner*). Swamis and gurus from all over have made Winchester's office a regular stop on their worldwide tours. Sri Chimnoy, a Bangladeshi best known for his annual peace meditations at the UN, visited Winchester and composed a ballad in his honor.

Pentagon! Pentagon! Pentagon!