

Book Reviews

Somerset Pubs

by Andrew Swift and Kirsten Elliott

Pp. 96. Akeman Press: Bath, 2007.

£8.50.

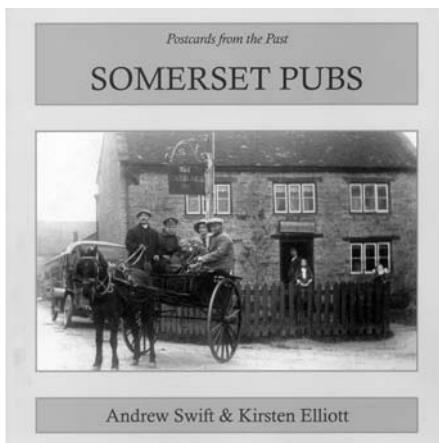
ISBN 0-9546138-6-4

Picture postcards featuring public houses in historic Somerset, and mainly dating from the First World War, form the basis of this book. They are supplemented by some photographs taken between the 1870s and 1960s, making for an engaging selection, showing pubs in varying stages of change and with much interesting detail in their surroundings. Thus included are views of the North Somerset Yeomanry, the Wedmore Band, a variety of transport such as a carrier at Merriot with his horse and cart, local hunt gatherings, and the Nether Stowey Ladies Friendly Society heading for tea at the Rose and Crown after a church service! The pictures are accompanied by short text giving eclectic information such as dates of opening/closing/rebuilds, previous names and present-day descriptions, as well as more unusual items such as visits by Cecil Sharp whilst collecting folk songs. Perhaps the most peculiar snippet is in the description of the Druid's Arms at Stanton Drew, where two standing stones in the garden form part of the second largest megalithic circle in England!

This makes for a delightful mix which keeps the readers attention engaged, though it is equally possible to dip in and out.

Most pictures are of the exteriors of the pubs, showing the general paucity of photographs taken of interiors, but where these are available they are a fascinating glimpse into a lost past. Those of the George at Wedmore (Fig. 1) and in Norton St Philip are particularly evocative.

As well as the pubs there are a few pictures of related interest. For instance there are two of the Oakhill Brewery railway, including an unusual one showing a loco and train crossing the viaduct at



Binegar Bottom. On page 82 there is a photograph of a Lamb Brewery lorry with a brewing copper made by Frome brewer's engineers Wilson & Co, on its way to a Belgian brewery destroyed in the First World War (Fig. 2). One wonders if it survived the Second? There is also a picture of Betty Bushen of Minehead, early advertising for Hancocks of Wiveliscombe. Aged 102 she claimed she had drunk a ½ pint of Wiveliscombe Old Ale every evening for 70 years, and Hancocks took the opportunity to produce her picture. Betty was rewarded for her loyalty and use of her picture by a free allowance until her death - not so fortunate was the photographer who had to chase Hancocks for payment for his services! Of particular note are two rare pictures, one of the Limpet Shell at Lilstock shows the harbour before it was abandoned in the 1920s. The other is of the Angel Inn in North Curry - although not mentioned by the authors it is the only known photograph of W.J. Temblett's dray - a two-wheeled put and horse, driven by his delivery man.

If there is one difficulty it is that the order of the pictures does not make it easy to find if a particular village or pub has been included. There is no index, and although the pictures seem to start in West Somerset and travel gradually across and up the county, this is by no means certain. Thus the Pipers Inn at Ashcott is sandwiched between Winsham and Mudford; North Curry is on page 58 while the nearby Rose & Crown at East Lyng is on page 27.

That said, the collection is a delight with much to interest the general public at whom it is undoubtedly targeted. Yet it also has much to give the local, social and brewery historian and I hope others will be produced for surrounding counties. My favourite has to be the back cover (Fig. 3), showing a group outside the Selwood Inn, - men, children and a dog, a variety of jugs, mugs and glasses, the bell on the table to summon mine host, and a barrel of beer from Frome Brewery - magic!

Mary Miles



Figure 1. The cellar bar of the George in Wedmore. Although said to date from the 1950's, this picture could easily be pre-War. It is full of delightful detail - note the bird cage hanging on the left, the jars of pickled onions and eggs on the right of the bar, and the barrels of Charlton beer on stillage behind the bar, all conjure up an era that has almost totally disappeared.



Figure 2. A Lamb Brewery lorry outside the Welshmill works in Frome, loaded with a brewing copper destined for a Belgian Brewery which had been destroyed in the First World War. The works was owned by Wilson & Co, who were a large firm of brewers engineers in the town.



Figure 3. A group of drinkers at the Selwood Inn, Frome, enjoying a barrel of Frome United Breweries beer. John Wilson, holding the tray, ran the Inn with his wife Fanny from 1890 to around 1930. Again there is a wealth of detail - the bunch of flowers and basket of fruit on the right, the bell on the table to summon further supplies.

The Local: a History of the English Pub

by Paul Jennings

Pp. 288. Tempus Publishing Ltd.:

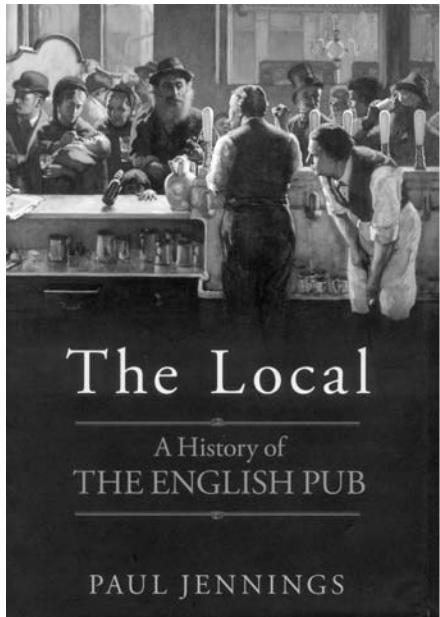
Stroud, 2007. £20.00.

ISBN 978-0-7524-3994-5

The public house has long occupied a central place in the nation's imagination; indeed over the years it has come to rank, along with cricket and queuing, as one of the distinctive defining characteristics of English cultural life. Yet, as Paul Jennings reveals in this excellent study, it has always been a very heterogeneous institution, embracing high-class inns, lavish city gin palaces, basic back street boozers and sleepy rural establishments.

Furthermore it has always been the subject to strong and varied forces bringing about change: economic, social, cultural and the fashions of architecture. There is a tendency to view the institution through nostalgic spectacles and lament the passing of a golden age. Thus, just as some people in the post-war period mourned the destruction of many Victorian pub interiors with their elaborate plate glass and mahogany furniture, so many in the nineteenth century viewed the way in which these 'gin palaces' displaced old coaching inns with equal alarm or horror.

This is a scholarly book that should nevertheless appeal to the general read-



er as well as the professional historian. It succeeds in covering a long time span of three hundred years. Jennings deftly draws upon a commendably wide range of official government papers, criminal records, pamphlets and contemporary literature as well as a comprehensive body of secondary academic literature. He provides plenty of analysis of statistical trends, but equally has a good eye for human stories and illustrative detail that make the history come to life. He relates the evolution of the pub to the broader societal forces that were affecting it, although he is stronger on the political, social and economic aspects than the effects of architectural developments and the fashions of interior designs. The book starts by piecing together a picture of the

various kinds of drinking establishment in the eighteenth century - ranging from coaching inns to taverns to alehouses - and goes on to evaluate the (complex) role that drinking establishments played in eighteenth-century society. This is followed by an assessment of the impact of industrialisation and the advent of the railways in the period after 1830, together with social changes that in some respects led to a contraction of the public house's role, as it became less frequented by the upper and professional classes.

During the Victorian period the licensing system began to impose more regulation and it was then that the 'pub' - a term which only dates from the late Victorian period - became a relatively more homogeneous an entity. Jennings then provides analytical chapters which discuss the way pubs were run, who used them, how they were policed and how, in the face of a hostile temperance movement, they became a focus for political controversy. These provide a rich picture of the varied and complex patterns of life in the pub in Victorian England which corrects some simplistic misconceptions: for example the importance of women both as customers and in running the pub is stressed.

The First World War and the efforts of the large brewers to provide improved public houses in the mid-twentieth century continued the process of change into the twentieth century. During this period Jennings perhaps could have paid more

attention to the policy aspirations of the brewers; he somewhat gives the impression that the pub just naturally evolved to meet social developments. Jennings does not deal in the same depth with the period after 1960, but does provide, by way of an epilogue, a perceptive chapter which analyses the dramatic developments that have taken place in recent decades. The pub once again has become more heterogeneous

in character, with the classic 'local' in sharp decline, whereas night clubs, pub-restaurants and themed bars have been booming. It is to be hoped that Jennings may now be inspired to turn his attention to the more contemporary period with a view to producing a further volume looking in greater depth at this process.

John Greenaway