

## THE LIFE AND DEATH OF THE INTERWAR ROADHOUSE

DAVID W. GUTZKE

In the 1930s, the roadhouse was closely associated with driving an automobile, just as in previous generations roadside inns and tea rooms were associated with bicyclists. Interwar roadhouses were developed specifically to service the ever-increasing numbers of car drivers in Britain; it is no coincidence that most roadhouses were to be found in the Home Counties, the part of the country where car usage was at its highest.

Motoring culture changed dramatically in Britain between the wars as cars became more numerous and were adopted by wider social groups.

During the 1920s, new business opportunities emerged primarily in the south, which only heightened differences in regional incomes. As the outer regions of Britain stagnated and many of their families experienced extreme poverty, London's new suburbs and its Home Counties grew in wealth and in car acquisition.

Interwar London underwent massive suburbanisation that resulted in the formation of a new layer of lower middle-class residents. In the 1930s, many of them became car owners for the first time. 1.9 million people moved to suburban London in the period between 1921 and 1938, which amounted to a growth of 52%, but some boroughs more than doubled in size during this period.<sup>1</sup> Many of these suburbanites would become roadhouse customers.

While car ownership in central London increased slowly after the initial boom in the 1920s, suburban car ownership grew as rapidly as its population. This is a

surprising thought as in many accounts London's suburbs in the 1930s were considered to be highly dependent on public transport. In reality, car usage varied greatly from suburb to suburb. Predictably, the old established suburbs, with many wealthy residents, were likely to own cars. In Esher, for example, home to the Gay Adventure roadhouse, almost one household in two owned a car by the end of the 1930s. The next group down likely to buy cars were residents of newly established suburbs like Hendon, who were a short run from the Thatched Barn and the Spider's Web. In boroughs like this, display and status were very important, and if cars could not be purchased with cash then they could be bought using instalment credit 'hire-purchase'. Some thought this shameful, but social embarrassment could be avoided if one bought a car at an anonymous car dealer in central London.<sup>2</sup>

In the late 1920s and 1930s, the British Government established a new network of arterial and bypass roads around Britain's major cities, with a special emphasis on London. 'Arterial' roads were those that led from London as the 'heart' of the country to outlying cities. Bypasses, designed to avoid or bypass busy towns that had formed around eighteenth-century arterial roads, were the location of some of Britain's most important roadhouses, such as the Ace of Spades and the Thatched Barn.

New arterial roads were very different from their pre-war antecedents, allowing in their early years for modern high-speed motoring. Each mile of new road cost the government £60,000.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to the old trunk roads that followed ancient routes and field boundaries with consequent tight and dangerous bends, the new roads were planned by engineers and mostly

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\* This article has undergone peer review.

ran in straight lines with carefully designed gentle bends. The new roads, formed in either concrete or asphalt, provided consistent, predictable driving, a welcome change to the wooden blocks, setts or cobbles of their predecessors.<sup>4</sup> These roads were planned so as to bypass town centres and employed roundabouts and full width bridges, which allowed for a more consistent and much less dangerous drive.

Some smaller roadhouses developed from tea rooms, blacksmiths and garages located on busy country roads. Their rural location was part of their attraction and this tied into the early exploratory culture of driving that was such a feature of the 1920s.<sup>5</sup> This was emphasised in country roadhouses by, what seems now, an excessive quaintness and use of twee ornamentation. They were at the centre of what elite commentators saw as a despicable ‘ye olde England’ commercialisation of the countryside that ran in parallel with ugly advertising hoardings, tatty petrol stations, charabanc parties and vulgar *arriviste* drivers. One of the elite commentators was Clough Williams-Ellis who identified much of this in his campaigning book, *England and the Octopus* in 1928. He was prepared to do something about the propensity of roadhouses to be converted from old barns and filled with horse brasses, ‘Tudor’ furniture and electric lights designed to look like candles. His modernist roadhouse, Laughing Water, at Cobham in Kent was the antithesis of most rural establishments and met the exacting standards of *Country Life*.<sup>6</sup>

As a new, stylish icon of the 1930s, roadhouses have aroused remarkably little historical scrutiny.<sup>7</sup> Misconceptions naturally abound. Osbert Lancaster in his satirical work published in 1936 was most responsible for inaugurating what became a stereotypic image with enduring influence. For him, the roadhouse was the product of a three-stage evolutionary process best witnessed in the south-east’s coastal development. His *Progress at Pelvis Bay* depicted roadhouses as starting as tea houses, then becoming brewers’ improved public houses built in a Tudorbethan style and finally culminating in roadhouses. He dubbed his fictitious roadhouse the Hearts are Trumps.<sup>8</sup>

This view has had a long history, uncritically accepted by many, even scholars. Clive Aslet, an architectural historian, asserts that roadhouses ‘were the improved public house at its most typical and best’.<sup>9</sup> Brewers’

Road	Roadhouses
Western Avenue	Mylett Arms
Watford Bypass	Spider’s Web
Barnet Bypass	Thatched Barn
North Circular Road	Kingfisher’s Pool
Great Cambridge Road	Spinning Wheel
Sutton Bypass	Galleon
Kingston Bypass	Ace of Spades (2)
Great North Road	Clock
Great West Road	Ace of Spades (1), The Berkeley Arms
Glasgow to Edinburgh Road	Maybury

Table 1. Major Arterial and Bypass Roadhouses.

interwar improved or reformed pubs had readily identifiable features: a lounge for gender neutral drinking, food delivered to tables[,] with chairs, carpeting, waiter service (summoned with a bell pull), small service bars and unpartitioned drinking areas. Other amenities - bowling greens, gardens, newspapers, books and games - likewise became standard features.

Like any stereotype, the fictional one inaugurated in *Pelvis Bay* had some basis in reality. Lancaster was certainly correct in portraying roadhouses as the product sometimes of an evolutionary process based on catering to tea-drinking travellers in the southeast.

In the same year as his *Pelvis Bay* appeared, Elsa Dundas, formerly a secretary, for instance, invested an inheritance of £700 in a modest Kentish roadhouse. Though ignorant of catering, she experienced steady success so that her popular tearoom funded building of a swimming pool.<sup>10</sup> Tea also proved a draw for Miss M.J. Fisher-Brown, a recognized authority on Angora rabbits. She first opened a Surrey farm of some 7,000 Angora rabbits that created demand for a tearoom as a fitting conclusion to the tourist experience. With capital from 80 friends and customers, she formed a private

club, which soon swelled to some 1000, enabling members alone to enjoy the restaurant, cocktail bar and horse-back riding. As the enterprise evolved, Fisher-Brown rejected the predictable swimming pool and opted instead to incorporate tennis courts and a miniature golf course, transforming her farm into the White Rabbit Roadhouse.<sup>11</sup>

Likewise, Commander A.W. Tomlinson had no interest in running a roadhouse. He retired from the Navy to the bucolic sedentary life of his Hildenborough farm. Tourists marvelled at his old barn, pleading for 'a real old fashioned farmer's tea'. Curiously, the ancient past meeting the modern present proved decisive: a film company, wanting to photograph some scenes, visited Tomlinson and convinced him an opportunity awaited the ambitious entrepreneur. Afterwards visitors flocked to the Old Barn, where they savoured the 'oceans of cream' promised in his advertisement. Others enjoyed the modern swimming pool, observed exotic animals in his garden, or watched airplanes land on his private landing field. Nearby, the Tudor House, planned by aircraft designer Eustace Short as a Kentish roadhouse, came on the market, and Tomlinson promptly acquired it. Building a superb ballroom with a maple sprung floor, Tomlinson created 'a ballroom second to none in the country', thought McMinnies. Dancing and tennis afforded guests ample exercise; superb food fed the inner man and woman.<sup>12</sup>

Tomlinson's entry into the roadhouse business was striking but not unique, especially for those without vast capital. 'Road houses and country inns have created in the public a definite demand for out-of-door refreshment facilities', commented a catering newspaper in 1935. Travellers undertook long journeys simply to sup tea beside 'a rhododendron bush' or underneath a tree. Based on these observations, a shrewd reporter concluded: 'There is money in tea-gardens'.<sup>13</sup> That same year Lancaster published his pamphlet. Tomlinson typified one type of investor who became roadhouse proprietors.

Notwithstanding these exceptions, the roadhouse more commonly emerged from the need for motorists to service their automobiles and be entertained or fed while waiting. In this form, the service station established dominance over other activities. Monica Ewer's novel, *Roadhouse*, expresses this relationship in depicting the Harbour Bar, located on a By-pass near London, with

'rows of petrol pumps and the garage for repairs and the great carpark'.<sup>14</sup> But during the early stages the roadhouse premises continued to reflect their plebeian origins. One unimpressed reporter noted that 'the visitor has to pick his way through oil-drums, derelict cars, repair jobs in full swing, parked caravans, and an all-pervading smell of petrol'.<sup>15</sup> Yet, inside the roadhouse the chief purpose of the petrol station was temporarily forgotten. 'While your car is being valeted by experts', assured McMinnies, 'you can dance to a radiogram any evening or take dinner'.<sup>16</sup>

Three of the earliest and most famous roadhouses - the Clock (Welwyn By-pass) and the twin Ace of Spades (Great West Road and at the Kingston By-pass) - began as inconspicuous petrol and service stations late in the 1920s.<sup>17</sup> Brothers Walter and Frederick Waters ran the Clock House Service Station exclusively as a petrol and repair shop. The next step involved taking on new partners, the Kennedys, who helped bankroll the building of an adjoining café, serving superb but inexpensive meals and specializing in teas and cakes, which one well-travelled motorists thought 'cannot be beaten anywhere'. Further expansion came soon with a ballroom, filtered swimming pool and finally Wendover Lodge, a group of 'small, chic bungalows' placed well back from the by-pass, in a rustic setting rented unfurnished to motorists annually between £75 and £200.<sup>18</sup> Of the twin Ace of Spades, the second one completed in 1927 was more innovative and influential, aggressively exploiting the potential of the Kingston By-pass which opened that same year. Two Hersey brothers, both engineers, purchased land initially to store their equipment, and introduced petrol pumps with a garage to defray costs of the site. Unplanned, the enterprise developed and thrived; lock-up garages, washing facilities, a tea room and a liquor licence soon followed. Eventually the Ace stayed open twenty-four hours, with a staff of some 200. The brothers then built a huge ballroom for 350, a cavernous restaurant (capable of seating 700-800), a swimming pool and, for the exotic, a polo ground. Few roadhouses could boast of one final amenity, a landing ground for planes, which, remarked proprietor George Hersey, 'has been used by many customers who fly their own planes'.<sup>19</sup>

The Ace never truly escaped its origins as a workshop. George Hersey stressed that three pillars - catering, entertainment and a flourishing motor business - sustained the

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Figure 1. An automobile advertisement in 1937, with the Showboat roadhouse (Bray, Maidenhead), shown in the background. Source: Kelley's Directory of Hertfordshire, 1937.

business. 'We have', he related in an interview, 'never allowed our catering and entertainment side-extensive though it has become-to be top heavy'.<sup>20</sup>

For some leading roadhouses, the link with automobiles persisted in part as a deliberate marketing strategy. The Spider's Web, Clock and Ace of Spades (Great West Road) served as the start or finish of chief motor sporting events, a key factor in establishing their 'reputations'. Outside London's orbit, both the Rob Roy and the Mile Three held driving tests and car trails.<sup>21</sup>

Roadhouses had first appeared in England in the mid-1920s when the Ace of Spades opened on the Great West Road (1926), followed by its twin on the Kingston Bypass (1927). W.G. McMinnies' motorist guide, *Signpost*, directed readers to numerous amenities, which included 'meals at any hour of the day or night, fine swimming pool, dancing till 3 a.m. ... and complete service for cars'.<sup>22</sup> Three more roadhouses emerged late in the 1920s: Wookey Hole Caves (Somersetshire,

1927), the Clock (Hertfordshire, 1929) and the Galleon (Surrey, 1929).

Common to them, as to the first two pioneers, was the outdoor swimming pool, the quintessential feature of the super roadhouse wholly unknown to public houses. Competition in the southeast had already elevated standards, with the Wookey Hole boasting warmed and heated water, 'foot and shower baths and a special paddle pool for children'. The Wookey Hole's pool impressed McMinnies as 'one of the most lovely swimming and sunbathing places I have ever seen in this country or abroad'. Two years later in 1929, the opening of the Clock signalled still higher standards: swimmers frolicked in filtered water (and enjoyed flood lighting at night), surrounded with a spectators' gallery.<sup>23</sup>

One catalyst for the roadhouse's emergence was the automobile. With roadhouses located outside urban areas and often inaccessible by mass transit, the automobile proved essential. This had important

implications. Just 2.3% of the population owned automobiles late in the 1920s, sharply restricting potential patrons to what historian Pamela Horn has called the 'smart set'. Initially, in the first phase of development (1929-33), an elite metropolitan group of highly mobile people frequented the new leisure oases, free from concerns about rubbing elbows with those lower down the social spectrum.<sup>24</sup>

Popular newspaper commentaries left readers in no doubt about who frequented roadhouses in their exclusive fashionable years. 'When the [West-End] theatres close', wrote the *Daily Mail* in 1931, 'the arterial roads are ablaze with the headlights of cars containing merry parties of fashionably dressed women and their escorts, eager to listen [at roadhouses] to music and to dance in the open air'.<sup>25</sup> One of the most popular roadhouses, the Ace of Spades (Kingston By-pass), gained cachet when the Prince of Wales visited it.<sup>26</sup> W.G. McMinnies, author of what became the best-selling annual motorist guides for recreation, described customers at the Ace of Spades as 'the young and beauty of London and its suburbs', while the 'brighter people of Bristol' visited the Crib for teas, suppers or dancing.<sup>27</sup>

This is one crucial way in which roadhouses differed from their chief interwar rivals, brewers' interwar improved public houses. The targeted clientele loomed large as a defining feature of roadhouses. In introducing reformed public houses in the interwar years, brewers certainly wanted an expanded clientèle, but were interested neither in selling cocktails instead of beer nor in replacing traditional working- and lower-middle class drinkers with a social elite of rich motorists. Moreover, improved pubs could be found throughout the country, in urban, suburban and rural areas, accessible by charabancs or within walking distance, whereas roadhouses were geographically confined to specific places, primarily in the southeast, the most prosperous part of the country in the depressed 1930s.<sup>28</sup>

The cocktail, roadhouse and female short hair - the 'bob', modelled after the page-boy haircut - arrived almost together. Hostess Madame Alfredo de Peña inaugurated the cocktail party into London in 1922, characterized by late night revelry and attendance chiefly of the young. American songwriter Cole Porter had popularized cocktail culture with a series of songs: 'Cocktail Time' (1922) and later with 'Say It with Gin' (1930),

among others. The Ace of Spades (Great West Road) opened in 1926, the year after Frederick Lonsdale's *Spring Cleaning* first featured cocktails as part of a play. Florence, in Noel Coward's play, *The Vortex* (1926), declares 'It's never too early for a cocktail', the same year in which the low-cut cocktail dress became fashionable. The cocktail craze 'swept the country', wine merchant Harry Caplan recollected, and the cocktail bar 'became the resort of the elite'. For ladies, cocktails quickly displaced champagne.<sup>29</sup> So popular was the cocktail that homes without a cocktail cabinet as part of the standard furnishings were regarded as old-fashioned. According to McMinnies, the cocktail bar at Woodside Hotel and Country Club on the main London Eastbourne Road 'might have been transferred lock, stock and barrel from one of the smarter resorts in London'. He regarded the cocktail bar at Kingfishers' Pool as in no way inferior to London standards.<sup>30</sup> Thomas Warrington decorated the walls of his Kentish roadhouse with pictures of cocktails. Cocktail culture too played a critical role in fostering Americanization: 'Mayfair and Manhattan were the twin centres of the universe, and the activities of the "fast set" were eagerly reported by the Press'.<sup>31</sup>

The cocktail added immensely to the attractions of roadhouses. By the mid-1930s, without either a cocktail bar or lounge a roadhouse's claim to sophistication seemed questionable. Projecting the appropriate image, the Monkey Puzzle advertised its dancing and dining facilities, with pictures of well-dressed, elite patrons drinking cocktails. Cocktail mixing acquired its own mystique, worthy of special recognition. When the Hilden Manor Roadhouse advertised in the *Bartender* in 1938, for instance, the cocktail mixer, J. Baverstock, received as much attention as the restaurant ('first class'), squash courts (unusual as an amenity) and swimming pool ('one of the finest ... in England').<sup>32</sup> At the Nautical William, patrons could request cocktails from a list featuring names of over eighty different mixtures, while at the Spider's Web a house cocktail gave it cachet. Roadhouse bartenders and old-style publicans, in fact, had little in common. No publican would go so far as to name a cocktail (or beer as an equivalent in the different context) after a favoured customer, or send a patron on holiday a letter wishing him an enjoyable time. Yet, this is precisely what one experienced bartender recommended as part of a barman's 'sociability'. Though knowing virtually nothing about serving beer, bar-



Figure 2. Thatched Barn Frontage. Source: Author's collection.

tenders had vast expertise in mixing cocktails. To draw eager explorers of suburban nightlife, the Mylett Arms advertised an unbeatable cocktail bar, offering 'every known drink under the sun'.<sup>33</sup>

Cost, popularity, hot summers and a 'swimming craze' made the swimming pool the defining feature of elite roadhouses, and no establishment aspiring to exalted status entered the roadhouse market without a purpose-built one or plans underway to construct one once business generated the necessary funds for the cost.

As a building type, roadhouses were physically imposing, surrounded by much land needed for recreational activities. Gigantic features extended to car parks, which sometimes accommodated hundreds of vehicles. The Orchard Hotel, three miles from Uxbridge, had room for 400; the Thatched Barn dwarfed this with 1,000; but preeminent was the Spider's Web with an astonishing capacity of 2,000.<sup>34</sup> Restaurants could seat several hundred, and dance floors had no trouble with similar numbers.

Shrewd promoters selected roadhouse sites only after considerable forethought. Though motorists making unplanned discoveries of them became customers, the

mainstay of the business derived from planned outings of those living in nearby urban areas that used motorist guides which began appearing from 1934. Ringing London, visible from trunk roads and strategically placed often at By-passes, roadhouses were overwhelmingly concentrated within 35 miles of suburbia, so that the journey took at most slightly over an hour.<sup>35</sup> Closest to London's Hyde Park Corner, for example, were the Ace of Spades (Great West Road, 9 miles), followed by its namesake (Kingston By-Pass, 12 miles) and the Barn (Barnet By-Pass, 12 miles). Proximity to large urban areas drew custom, but so did attractive rural settings.

Of the first five roadhouses, the Clock undoubtedly embodied the archetypal traits of such elite interwar establishments. Part of its appeal lay in its 'peculiar' atmosphere, enticing patrons with teas - 'their wealth of really good cakes ... cannot be beaten anywhere' - a Tudor-styled restaurant, and exhibition room displaying arts, crafts and toys. Superb but modestly priced meals and ballrooms for private dances and receptions earned McMinnies' rating as the roadhouse possessing the 'highest standard'. Behind the roadhouse, providing letting flats and bungalows, stood Wendover Lodge, where overnight guests might turn into weekly, even annual, stayers.<sup>36</sup>



Figure 3. The Thatched Barn Swimming Pool. Source: Author's Collection.

As the number of roadhouses grew to some 200 and automobile ownership became more dispersed in the following decade, competition intensified and fostered innovation, luxury and escalating cost. Swimming pools became larger, their surroundings and amenities more palatial, and outdoor athletic attractions more exotic. Two years later in 1929, the opening of the Clock signalled still higher standards that the Thatched Barn, Orchard Hotel and Galleon Roadhouse soon met.<sup>37</sup>

Of the most imaginative, roadhouses such as the Tudor House laid out landing fields for pilots and still others lured guests with cinemas and exhibitions of rare animals, such as white rabbits. Detective fiction had already incorporated airplanes into a plot. Margery Allingham's heroine, Betty Connolly, uses her flying skills to gain revenge against a crooked businessman in a short story published in 1930 in *Weekly Welcome*, a periodical with a largely female readership.<sup>38</sup>

Tourism became a catalyst for transforming other phenomenally popular tourist sites into roadhouses. When it opened in 1927, Wookey Hole Cave, a natural geo-

graphic site, catered to 16,000 visitors, but numbers soon quadrupled. By 1936, visitors reached a staggering 150,000, and then one year later skyrocketed to 250,000. This astonishing demand reflected in part the additions of a swimming pool, restaurant and liquor licence. To accommodate these ever-expanding crowds, Captain Hodgkinson, its owner, rebuilt the premises nearby, again with a swimming pool, but this time included a huge restaurant with 300-400 seats. As the Cave assumed the guise of a characteristic roadhouse, it also boasted a lounge, mock Elizabethan fireplace and a dancing room. Completing this metamorphosis, the Wookey Hole Cave Restaurant became a roadhouse, the Swimming Pool Restaurant.<sup>39</sup>

'Swim-Dine-Dance' constituted the motto of tier 1 and 2 roadhouses. For tier one establishments, entry required £20,000 at least, but costs ascended sharply, reaching £80,000 (see Table 2). Of the nine most expensive roadhouses for which figures are known, the group averaged almost £50,000. Here, promoters promised patrons not only the latest in swimming pool technology, but scrumptious food (overseen by a French chef) and live

Name	Location	Opening date	Cost (£)
Thatched Barn	Barnet Bypass	1933	80,000
Havering Court	Havering, Kent	1934	60,000
Mylett Arms	Perivale, Middlesex	1936	60,000
Stewpony Hotel	Stourton, Staffordshire	1936	60,000
Pity Me	Durham	[1930s]	50,000
Barn	Bayfordbury, Hertfordshire	1934	30,000
Finchdale Abbey House	Finchdale Priory, Durham	1936	30,000
Berkely Arms Hotel	Cranford, Berkshire	1931	25,000
Hendon Way	Hendon, Middlesex	1934	25,000

*Table 2. Cost of Super Roadhouses, 1930s. Source: Gutzke, D.W. and Law, J.M. (2017) The Roadhouse Comes to Britain: Drinking, Driving and Dancing, 1925-55. London: Bloomsbury Academic, Appendix: Catalogue of Interwar British Roadhouses.*

entertainment with a well-known band. Virtually any possible sport served as an attraction, from tennis, bowling and golf to badminton, lawn croquet, baseball, miniature golf and lawn croquet. Indoors, some roadhouses featured shooting galleries, gymnasiums, squash and skittles. Tier two roadhouses ranged between £10,000 and £20,000. The Maybury, located in suburban Edinburgh, economized as a far northern establishment in not building a swimming pool but offering numerous leisure diversions-parvo tennis, skittles, chucker, darts and parvo as recreational amenities on its huge flat roof. All this and a sumptuously decorated interior were to be had for £12,000.<sup>40</sup>

Tier three roadhouses averaged around £5000-9000. These less palatial establishments not surprisingly attracted less publicity. On the main Brighton Road, west of Worthing, the Willow Barn Roadhouse opened in 1939, following conversion of a 350 year-old barn. For £5,600, proprietor H. Kent created a modest establishment, featuring a large dining room, ample car park (75 cars), ballroom, nightly dancing and splendid view of the Channel. Booming business justified, he thought, applying for a liquor licence.<sup>41</sup>

Notwithstanding Lancaster's stereotype, diversity remained the hallmark of roadhouse promoters' back-

grounds throughout the 1930s, with a willingness to risk money the chief prerequisite for opening one. During the first stage, guest house proprietors, building contractors, service station operators, cinema chain owners, peers primarily became investors. Just three had roots in the retailing of alcohol. London brewers Barclay Perkins rebuilt the Five Bells (St. Mary Cray, Kent) in 1933, spending lavishly to transform a run-of-the-mill pub into the Bridge House Hotel, which boasted a swimming pool and dance hall.<sup>42</sup> Another brewer, A.C. Reavenall, invested in Rural Restaurants, Ltd., which ran Spider's Web.<sup>43</sup>

Aristocrats, motor car agents, engineers, swimming pool builders, nightclub proprietors, an aircraft designer, a dairy owner, an Angora rabbit farmer, retired military officers and enlisted men, a solicitor's typist, and members of a Canadian syndicate - all these joined the ranks of roadhouse promoters in stage two, which began 1934. Now, too, people with liquor interests (8) outnumbered petrol station owners (6). Overall, however, the 11 roadhouses promoted by those with drink ties still represented no more than one out of ten of the total, by any yardstick a relatively modest number.

Aristocrats such as Lord Weymouth, owner of the Caveman Restaurant in Somerset, had a hand in



designing the roadhouse, a logical commercial extension of the nearby caves which some 250,000 people visited annually.<sup>44</sup> Monica Ewer in *Roadhouse*, published in 1935, thus added authenticity to her novel in having the financial backing for the Harbour Bar come from an old and quite rich Scottish gentry family.<sup>45</sup>

Careers of some promoters underlined not just their unorthodox entry into the roadhouse business, but often limited prior experience. For Humphrey L. Richardson, running the Silver Slipper (Herne) followed stints as a club proprietor and tea shop owner, enterprises which incurred losses. Wiped out by a devastating fire at the Silver Slipper, he proved no more successful in working as a waste paper and metal dealer. Unable to pay off creditors owed £1663, he declared bankruptcy. Coming further downmarket, he worked as a cinema manager, with £7 weekly wages.<sup>46</sup> The proprietor of Asker's Roadhouse in Dorset received glowing reviews in McMinnies' inaugural 1935 motorist guide, *Signpost*, but not even this could ensure survival. More astute was his successor, a sailor who on leaving the service dedicated himself to learning the basics of hotel keeping before buying the roadhouse. McMinnies thought highly enough of the new owner to continue listing Askers in his select guide.<sup>47</sup>

Not all such entrepreneurs bereft of catering experience failed. Undoubtedly the Hersey brothers, the most famous exception, had no prior contact with roadhouses. In fact, they had visited just one before opening the Ace of Spades. Nor did their training and background as engineers offer any insights into running what became a quite complex business with a huge staff and two geographically separated sites. These brothers sensed intuitively as much as another entrepreneur what the market demanded for success. Employed in various capacities with twelve different shops as a semi-skilled labourer who worked his way up to manager over a quarter of a century, W.R. Clarke retired in 1932 to achieve his life-long goal, the building of an 'ultra-modern' roadhouse. Some 1,000 customers celebrated the opening week of his Popular Road & Guest House at Easter, drawn not only by tastefully presented food, but a bowling green, tennis court, riding school, even a sports' field. Clarke clearly appreciated the value of being on the cutting edge of technological change: his roadhouse boasted of being the first one in England entirely electrically wired.<sup>48</sup>

Capital, not prior experience, constituted the decisive factor in establishing a roadhouse. Some imaginative entrepreneurs generated money from unrelated businesses. Observing growing week-end tourist trade in western Scotland, Charles Ross, owner of Ross's Dairies, financed the Rob Roy Roadhouse near Aberfoyle. On five acres of land, he offered patrons a golf course, dance hall and spacious restaurant accommodating 200.<sup>49</sup> Given propitious circumstances, the gentry invested money. Dame Clara Butt's sister ran the Crib, near Bristol, with teas, dining and dancing aimed at drawing the nearby select set.<sup>50</sup> In some instances, a landowner sought an investor with £2,500 to erect a 'first-class roadhouse'.<sup>51</sup>

Capital for financing speculative ventures came most often from private funds or speculators. Long-established acquaintances, however, proved equally supportive. Miss M.J. Fisher-Brown solicited funds from close friends and customers who formed the private White Rabbit Club (Newchapel) as a prelude to her applying for a club liquor licence. Once the coveted licence (and respectability) had been achieved, she turned the club into a hybrid club/roadhouse. This was a classic example of exploiting ties with intimate contacts, whose money buttressed a strategy for justifying her application for a liquor licence.<sup>52</sup>

The roadhouse thus originated neither as a brewer's improved pub, nor did its gestation involve, however short, a period as a mere drinking establishment. Brewers built miniscule numbers of roadhouses, and converted just several inns. Whatever Lancaster asserted, the Boat Inn seldom evolved into the Show Boat Roadhouse. No one agency accounted for most of the money fuelling the explosion of roadhouse establishments; brewers came late into the field and spent quite modest amounts. Brewers were just as likely to purchase existing roadhouses as to build the premises themselves.

Roadhouse popularity as the resort of the 'smart set' was over quickly, its peak in fashionably coming in 1933, with the social elite moving onto other exclusive venues for entertainment. Confronted with the exodus of its customer base, the roadhouse moved downmarket, a shift which the spread of automobiles into the middle classes greatly facilitated. Lancaster's pamphlet appeared in 1936, two years after the roadhouse had begun losing its lustre as a watering hole of the social

elite. Establishments cited at the beginning of this article-Dundas' unnamed Kentish tea room, the Old Barn and the White Rabbit-all emerged as the roadhouse repositioned itself lower down the social spectrum.

Stage two in the roadhouse's history commenced in 1934, the first year that the number of roadhouse openings declined and the last year in which a roadhouse newsreel was broadcast. Worst came quickly, underlining the roadhouse market's fragility. Having opening in 1934, the Barn (Bayfordbury), its first-rate teas, country cooking, diverse attractions, unofficial headquarters for the social functions of the landed classes and publicity earning two pages of accolades in McMinnies' guide the next year, was put up for sale for the quite modest price of £2,500 (including freehold).<sup>53</sup>

It was during these years, too, that the roadhouse acquired a sleazy reputation as a resort of transgressive sexual liaisons. Critical fictional portrayals insinuated in the public mind an image of the British roadhouse as obviously popular but distinctly sordid. In *Thou Shall of Death*, mystery writer Nicholas Blake creates the imaginary Fizz-and-Frolic Club, near the Kingston-on-Thames By-pass, site of the real-life Ace of Spades, the archetypal roadhouse, which Lord Marlinworth describes as 'very posh and popular'. He derides its owner, Cyril Knott-Sloman, however, 'as just the sort of dago to make a success of a thing like that'. Lady Marlinworth, who lives with her husband at his family's country house, dismisses Cyril Knott-Sloman, as 'proprietor of a brothel'. One of Knott-Sloman's female associates, Lucilla, is described by another character euphemistically as a 'sort of high-class decoy' for the roadhouse. Philip Starling, an Oxford Don, shares this loathing. The club owner, he observes, 'was a brass-hat in the war and runs a road-house in the peace, and if you can tell me a more nauseating combination of activities I'll eat my hat'. Both the Frolic and its proprietor evidently justify this prejudice: the roadhouse barely escaped police prosecution on several occasions, and rumour has it that both Knott-Sloman and his companion, Lucilla, are blackmailers. Befittingly, the cigar smoking, female-bottom slapping, silken roadhouse owner gets murdered for conniving at blackmail.<sup>54</sup>

The following year another mystery writer Margery Allingham reinforced this unsavoury image in *The Case of the Late Pig* (1937). R.I.P. Peters, nicknamed

'Pig' by those who knew him well, is universally loathed. Having made money, he uses underhanded tactics to buy a beloved country club, Halt Knight, as well as several contiguous East Anglian country estates (near Tethering). He then proposes to despoil the picturesque setting with a roadhouse, featuring a swimming pool, dog-racing track, cinema and dance hall. Appalled local residents are up in arms, and the much detested Pig meets an abrupt end, murdered by a hefty geranium urn dropped from a nearby roof on his head.<sup>55</sup>

In that same year, the roadhouse's alleged reputation for unlicensed drinking, sexual escapades and uninhibited partying acquired more scandalous connections-prostitution, sleazy Soho nightclubs, dope peddling and white-slave trafficking. In mystery writer Valentine Williams' short story, 'The Dot-and-Carry Case', two people are found dead, apparent suicides - married stockbroker Dudley Frohawk and his amour, Leila Trent - at a car park of a disreputable roadhouse on the Great North Road. She had performed as an entertainer at the roadhouse, has numerous 'gentlemen friends', and is described as a 'little guttersnipe ... picking a precarious livelihood between her "gentlemen friends" and the lower class of Soho nightclubs'. Her close associate, 'Malay Joe' Long Brady, is involved with a 'dope-peddling crowd', often frequenters of roadhouses. Born in Malta in 1899 and known as a jewel thief and himself a morphine addict, Brady had served time in French prisons for dope selling, and is a 'white-slave trafficker, narcotic smuggler'. Manderton, the detective, suspects Trent of distributing narcotics at the roadhouse and elsewhere. The case climaxes with the respectable stockbroker acquitted of wrongdoing, having been impersonated by Malay Joe. In the tradition of gangland killings in Chicago so well publicized in Britain, an interloper from a Belgian syndicate wanting to muscle-in on Malay Joe's activities is ultimately found dead outside London, 'his smart clothes smeared with mud and blood, his hands tied behind him, three bullets in his head'.<sup>56</sup>

One year later, in *Brighton Rock*, Graham Greene uses the Queen of Hearts roadhouse on the London to Brighton road as a suitable night out for his anti-hero Pinky and his racecourse gang. Here they enjoy the usual roadhouse facilities with the addition of sex in the car park with a roadhouse good-time girl.<sup>57</sup>

Given sensitivity about illicit sex at roadhouses, general English reticence about discussing sex and legal issues of libel, roadhouse critics often retreated discreetly into innuendo. H.W. Dawson, representative of William Whittaker & Co., brewers, disclosed to the *Yorkshire Evening Post* that ‘there has been a great deal of talk ... about roadhouses that have fallen into a considerable amount of disrepute, especially in this district [Otley, Yorkshire]’. In their interwar survey written at the outset of World War II, *The Long Week-End*, Robert Graves and Alan Hodge remarked that roadhouses ‘provided ... a night’s lodging and no awkward questions asked’. On the Great West Road, they added, ‘one or two of them had a reputation of being ‘bagnios’ in the Italian sense’.<sup>58</sup>

The response of the Spider’s Web to an offensive drawing, published in *Men Only* in 1952, is highly suggestive. On entering the Web’s cocktail bar, a patron is introduced to an outlandish woman, wearing heavy makeup and lewdly dressed. In suing *Men Only* for libel, the Spider’s Web contended that the picture insinuated that the roadhouse ‘employed women of loose morals to frequent their premises, that male customers visiting the premises were introduced to such women by the management for immoral purposes, and the premises were a bawdy lair and a place of resort of prostitutes’. Concluding that the drawing misrepresented the Web’s respectable clientele, the Court fined the periodical £500 in damages.<sup>59</sup>

Of the unaddressed questions one in particular provokes interest: What motivated the Web’s complaint? Winning what can only be regarded as a nominal sum was really a pyrrhic victory. If the Web really possessed an irreproachably unblemished reputation, the lawsuit was wholly unnecessary. In fact, *Men Only*’s picture satirizing the Web’s problematic morals inevitably raised questions about what actually transpired at this private, exclusive venue on a regular basis. Was this challenge to a pornographic magazine deliberately intended to publicize to its readers what they might well expect when frequenting the Web’s cocktail bar but could not, for reasons of libel, say in print? Certainly, those familiar with the Web’s early history in which it circumvented liquor laws by arranging for alcohol to be supplied to patrons, despite the roadhouse’s lack of a licence, indicated how the roadhouse saw itself as occupying a borderland between legal and illegal behaviour.<sup>60</sup>

One can only speculate whether roadhouses sometimes also served other purposes. English divorce laws might have led to collusive divorces in which (usually) the husband went to a hotel and provided plausible evidence of adultery to enable his wife to sue. Roadhouses certainly were preferable to questionable hotels, but the overwhelming desire to suppress undesirable publicity would explain why newspapers published no sensational stories.

No wonder then that the roadhouse morphed in the public imagination from being naughty but not shady into a *déclassé* leisure venue, some of whose patrons engaged in questionable, even illegal, activities unacceptable to the ‘smart set.’ Culmination of this downward slide came in the early 1950s when the Ace of Spades came to be seen locally as a rather plebeian hotel with a swimming pool open to the general public.<sup>61</sup>

Distancing themselves from pubs, however expensive or well-equipped with unusual amenities, roadhouses shrewdly became positioned as an alluring attraction along England’s newest motorways. Their architecture, layout and siting not only catered to those seeking recreation and leisure, but provided essential services for motorists—petrol, tune-ups, tire changes, food and something entertaining to occupy attention while awaiting their car’s servicing. In combining the two dissimilar spheres, roadhouses adroitly filled a niche between pubs and inns, on one hand, and hotels and country clubs, on the other.<sup>62</sup> That roadhouses had few brewers as financial backers reassured patrons they were visiting premises not artfully disguised as pubs gone upmarket. Image, closely associated with films, expensive and exclusive West End clubs, public schools and class, captivated the interests of the ‘smart set’ owing to roadhouses’ select clientèle, at least until 1934. Thereafter, the roadhouse increasingly lost such patrons, causing a downhill slide socially to attract a wider customer base to avert financial disaster.

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