

The First Non-Smoking Pub

Lest we forget tobacco's unknown fallen

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This true story recounts a serendipitous encounter with the publican of Britain's first non-smoking pub at Easter, 1979.

It was the mid-1970s and the world was still going up in smoking. I was living in England on the Welsh border and it was everywhere. You could smoke at work, whether it was in the office, managing a bank, driving a lorry, an ambulance or flying Concord. It was the no-holds-barred world of tolerance and there was little dissent. Few dared object. There was just a whiff of resentment about, a murmur of disquiet, a whiff of change in the wind, but little more, and any disgruntlement you encountered you just swatted aside, snarled and lit up another. Although the evidence was beginning to mount, and a whisper was gathering in the corridors of power, we didn't really give a stuff, other than to protest with the thin argument that our freedom could be threatened. Give up smoking? Over my dead body. It was strange, because deep down, and even not so deep, you knew it had to be killing you, but you couldn't stop yourself because you kept telling yourself you loved it and Great Aunt Prudence had smoked every day of her life and lived to 100.

You smoked everywhere. In the post office, in restaurants, between courses, during courses, and when coffee came around you'd probably prefer to suck your way through a couple more rather than risking a heart-threatening dessert. You smoked in the doctor's surgery. Sometimes you shared an ashtray with your GP. You smoked in bed and sex wouldn't have been the same without a post-coital puff to cap off your orgasm. You smoked on buses, on trains, boats and planes. Andy Capp, the Daily Mirror working-class cartoon hero, would have been naked without a wisp of smoke wafting from the fag glued to his bottom lip. Talk-show guests smoked on television and in the commercial breaks we were topped up with a reminder that it was time to light up again. They'd banned TV cigarette advertising in Britain in 1965, but cigars and loose tobacco were still allowed and the advertisers seemed as reluctant to kick the habit as their victims. The only place you didn't smoke was under water, unless you were in a submarine or in the shower. But you smoked in the bath, even if it was like sucking on a soggy sponge.

Me, I caught the whiff of change early in 1979. I was working at a local newspaper where a revolving door of smokers replenished the ashtrays as they came and went. A string of winter colds had left me hocking up balls of phlegm big enough to plug a drain and gummed up with catarrh thicker than a London fog. My wife didn't smoke, but she didn't mind that I did, which was probably a help when it came to the crunch because smokers can be a perverse lot, and sometimes the more they're pressured to quit, the more they resist. And she was pregnant, up the spout as my mother put it, and so the time seemed right. She already had a child, Oliver, a brown-eyed handsome boy just two years old who'd called me The Man in the early days, and that settled it. I had something to live up to.

I didn't find it too hard. I simply told myself I could have one whenever I *really* wanted one, and I was learning to stretch that to the limit. Within a week I was down to five a day, two a day a week later and one a day by the third week.

It was Easter and we decided on the spur of the moment to drive over the Pennines and spend the weekend in Bronte country on the Yorkshire Dales. We'd left a bit late in the day, as you tend to do when you've small children. The bonnet flying open on the motorway wasn't

helpful, but by late afternoon the old Humber was purring along beside a picture-perfect crystal stream tumbling down from rolling moorlands carpeted purple with heather.

Leaving as we had, we'd given scant thought to the logistical practicalities of finding accommodation on a public holiday. Long weekend though it may have been, it seemed inconceivable that there wouldn't be an abundance of empty beds for the asking in the assortment of hostelrys of one kind or another that peppered the unfolding landscape.

Spoilt for choice, or so we thought, we had time to luxuriate in the beauty of it all, putting off a decision until the sun drifted low. At last, as dusk began to wrap the dales in a mauve blanket, the Humber breasted a sandstone bridge that straddled a foaming stream and crunched to a halt on the gravel forecourt of the most perfect hotel imaginable. It was prettiness from a bygone age frozen in time as if risen from the mists of Brigadoon that very evening. All that remained to do was check in and put our feet up.

But there was no room at the inn, and after making a dozen or more phone calls, the gracious maître d'hôtel gave us the bad news: there was none to be had within miles. Everywhere was chocka, booked out, full to the scuppers. Then she paused wistfully for a moment and said, 'There is just one possibility, but there could be a problem. Are you smokers?' What a joy it was to be able to tell her that we weren't, even though I had still to take that final step. It was the tiniest of white lies.

She made another call and confirmed that there were plenty of rooms available at a pub just up the road, but it was Britain's first and, at that time, only non-smoking pub. With hindsight, it seems so ironic that a non-smoking pub could be such a turn off, that even in peak season, the masses viewed it as the last resort. 'The publican is a bit of a crusty old bugger,' she warned, 'a bit cantankerous.'

A ten-minute drive away, Appletreewick, like its name, was yet another spirit risen afresh from a forgotten world. The New Inn was cut from the same traditional stone as the many historic buildings that typify the dales, a thicket of ivy clambering up a whitewashed exterior, paint peeling from an old wooden sign that swung rustily in the wind. It should have been brimming with visitors that holiday weekend, but instead we found ourselves in a slate-floored public bar with barely a heartbeat to be heard in the emptiness of its silence. Before us was the raw evidence that the New Inn was spurned by a discerning clientele for whom a pint separated from its cigarette was not a pint.

Jack Showers, the publican, didn't seem at all concerned to be viewed as something of an eccentric, even quixotic, crusader, charging at the multinational money mills as his profits crashed through the floor, down by as much as 50 per cent according to some reports. Up the road, business at the Craven Arms was booming. 'I hope Jack lives forever,' the publican's wife had told the local paper. Far from thinking himself a lone fool ready to alienate the mob over a principle, Jack, fast approaching 80, saw himself as a visionary, a trailblazer, a pioneer and harbinger of things to come. 'I'm years ahead of my time,' he boasted prophetically. 'I may be in a minority of one today, but mark my words, the day will come when you won't find a smoking pub the length and breadth of Christendom.' Try as I might, seeing him there

atop his little molehill in the middle of nowhere commanding the mountain to move, I wasn't at all sure that he was in full possession of his wits. It seemed inconceivable that his vision would ever bear fruit.

What spurred him on was the loss of a lover who'd died horribly from lung cancer some years earlier. 'When that happens to someone you love, you owe it to them to do all you can to stop others following them into the grave.' He didn't give a name he said because she was like the Unknown Soldier; she was everyone who'd ever died from smoking.

Jack, was indeed a rough diamond with a chequered past in occupations as diverse as banana planting and owning a Chinese restaurant. The word was that since taking up arms against tobacco eight years earlier, he'd sharpened his tongue to a rough edge and become renowned throughout the dales as the smoker's scourge. He claimed to have once called a pregnant woman a 'silly bitch' for trying to light up. When the woman's husband sprang to her defence, he called him a 'knave' for not trying to stop her. 'I convinced them in the end,' he'd recounted to a reporter. 'The woman kissed me when they left.'

Pouring me a pint, he asked at last whether I was a smoker. 'I'm giving it up by littles,' I told him, 'down to one a day.'

'Then it's time for your last gasper,' he said. 'I make one exception to the rule, and that's to allow someone to smoke their last cigarette. But there's one condition. While they smoke, I recite a poem I wrote about my friend's dreadful death. And there's this.' From beneath the bar, he retrieved a large jar half-filled with cigarette butts. 'When they're finished, the dog-end goes in here. I've emptied this jar a dozen times since I came here and there will always be room for more.'

He offered me a cigarette from a pack he kept for moments like this and lit me up. And then he cut loose with his bizarre homage. His poem was personal, confronting, graphic, excruciating and excoriating. To say the picture he painted was not pretty would have seriously understated its effect. Somehow we expect poetry to have rhythm, grace and beauty, but this was as jagged and eviscerating as a wall of breaking glass. It could have been a description of a post-mortem, a dismemberment or grotesque dissection; it was an account of the desecration and trashing of life itself that is cancer, that is smoking. If it wasn't poetry as we know it, it was a blunt eulogy told in disjointed, clumsy rhyme with the brute force of a wrecking ball. No wonder smokers gave the pub such a wide berth.

By the time Jack had finished his poem and consigned the corpse of my last cigarette to its glass tomb where others lay like so many dead flies, I was cured. Or so it seemed. The months rolled into years and eventually I rested on my laurels, certain that I'd kicked the habit for life. We returned to Australia and our three children grew straight, true and healthy in the clean southern air.

But 17 years after my 'last' gasper, my work took me to an endless succession of evening meetings in clubs and pubs in rural NSW and Queensland. By that time the tobacco companies were footing the bill for hotels and bars to install high-volume filters that were

supposed to scrub up the smoke and protect the clean-air rights and health of passive, non-smokers like me. Despite their best efforts to sanitise my personal space, within a year, unremitting exposure to the old addiction had split my brain with a nail of nicotine. It was like that line from the Godfather: 'Just when you think you're out, they pull you back in.'

But soft targets like me are easy pickings and although Jack's vision of a world of smoke-free pubs at that time was still more than a decade away, forces were being marshalled on a much broader front. Febrile with blind panic in the face of this groundswell of shifting public opinion the magnates responded by screaming foul ever louder.

Still, like a ghoulish Pied Piper they try to flute our young away, still they fight tooth and nail for every inch they stand to lose, for the life of every dying ember that burns and falls from the stubs of their burnt-out brands. Feigning a mortal wound for their industry, they argue for their rights, their brands, their packets, their intellectual property and their profits. Inch by inch, they are being driven out like snake-oil sellers, like false prophets and thieves, rounding and snapping at every step as they go.

Here, their brands will soon be stripped of their face, all to be stamped with the sexless sameness of plain packaging. Who's to say whether it will work, but their global battle to defeat the strategy provides some measure of the depth of their fear.

Now as their addictive stranglehold on our wallets and health is weakened, their attention turns to the unregulated possibilities of the softer markets of the third world. There in the corners of the globe furthest from our minds, they free prey on the young, the poor and the impressionable for whom the stylish image of a smouldering cigarette and a flashy packet still imparts the illusion of status and success. Yet in truth, the tobacco magnates are little different from the purveyors of war whose legacy of land mines continues to cripple and maim the young in the many countries where the proxy battles of another kind of expedience are fought. Indeed, cigarettes are the fragmentation bombs, the commercial munitions of an insidious conflict whose numberless casualties and amputees will continue to mount long after our own war with tobacco is won. Like Jack Showers' sweetheart, each of the fallen deserves to be counted as an Unknown Soldier.

Jack's tenure at the New Inn at Appletreewick ended long ago, evidently disappearing from public life without a trace, but his bold prophecy has come true. For his part, Andy Capp still wanders the pages of the Daily Mirror, his comic strip antics seldom taking him far from the pub. But the durry that once smouldered perpetually from his bottom lip burnt out long ago. Like Jack, he too is no less of a working class hero for its absence.