

## Introduction

Around 4% to 5% of pubs have closed in this last year. Though this is grim news, it isn't in fact far out of line with the 3% rate of job losses in the private sector as a whole - bearing in mind that a failing pub is likely to have had fewer staff than a thriving one. And the closure rate certainly doesn't compare badly with the 6% closure rate of urban shops, or the 5-6% contraction in the national economy. Indeed, faced with the recent smoking ban, with above-inflation increases in beer duty, with high fuel prices stopping people driving far for a pub meal, and with the credit crunch bringing heavily indebted pub companies to their knees, it's remarkable that so many pubs are thriving.

This edition of the *Guide* has 132 new main entries, and nearly 1,500 new small-print entries, all showing that there's plenty of life yet in the British Pub. Particular highlights are the Queens Arms at East Garston (Berkshire), Victoria at Perranuthnoe (Cornwall), Yew Tree at Clifford's Mesne and Fossebridge Inn (Gloucestershire), Eagle at Barrow and Clog & Billycock at Pleasington (Lancashire), Crown at East Rudham and Dabbling Duck at Great Massingham (Norfolk), Plough at Kingham (Oxfordshire), Red Barn at Blindley Heath (Surrey), Holly Bush in Alcester (Warwickshire), and Potting Shed at Crudwell and Outside Chance at Manton (Wiltshire). Several of these are pubs which had previously closed and now been reopened after careful transformation by new owners. Among them, the Potting Shed at Crudwell is **New Pub of the Year 2010**.

Three or four years ago a young couple took over a near-derelict pub, closed for some time, in a remote village on the Hampshire/Wiltshire border - the sort of place which is at the heart of these statistics. They have put in the single magic ingredient that makes the difference between a failing local and

a thriving and profitable pub - the enthusiastic, energetic and imaginative commitment with which thousands of other landlords and landladies across the country are ensuring the survival of their pubs. George and Sonia Humphrey have made their pub a welcoming and relaxing proper country pub, with well liked unpretentious food, good drinks and a fine log fire. Their Cross Keys at Upper Chute (Wiltshire) is **Country Pub of the Year 2010**.

In Scotland, a higher proportion of pubs have been closing than in the South. Here again, good landlords and landladies make all the difference. As in the countryside, good publicans can transform many town and city pubs. However handsome the building, however ornate the décor, the pub will fail unless it's well run. It's the publican that makes the difference between a tired and doomed mausoleum and a bustling success. An extreme case in point is the Café Royal in Edinburgh, a splendid building owned by Punch, the UK's biggest pubco. Its welcoming manageress Valerie Graham ensures good food and drink, helpful staff and a thriving atmosphere. The Café Royal in Edinburgh (Scotland) is **Town Pub of the Year 2010**.

Surrey breaks the £3 a pint barrier

In the country as a whole, the average pub price of a pint of beer is £2.68. This marks a 10p increase since last year. The pub and beer industry blames tax increases (conveniently forgetting about the 2.5% VAT reduction - which should have allowed a 5p price cut). Many pubs hiked their prices by 5p or 10p this last April, blaming the Budget's 2% beer duty increase. But this duty is levied on the price at the brewery, making the increase equivalent to only around 1p a pint. At a time of very low retail price inflation, and given people's increasing tendency to drink much cheaper supermarket beer at home instead of paying high pub prices, the 10p increase in pub prices strikes us as foolhardy.

Surrey is now Britain's costliest area for pub-goers. The price of a pint there averages £3.01 - substantially more even than London's average of around £2.90 a pint. Bad news too for drinkers in Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Sussex, who now have to pay around £2.85. Averaging around £2.80 a pint, Hertfordshire, the Isle of Wight, Kent, Scotland and Suffolk are little better.

The West Midlands, Nottinghamshire and Staffordshire are best value for beer, averaging around £2.40 a pint. Cheshire, Cumbria, Derbyshire, Lancashire, Shropshire and Worcestershire are also reasonable, at around £2.50 a pint.

Pubs brewing their own beer - over 40 of the main entries do so - offer big savings, averaging 33p a pint cheaper than comparable pubs selling branded beers. Price champion among them is the Church Inn at Uppermill near Oldham in Lancashire, selling good pints for £1.50 - for that, you'd get only half a pint in Surrey. If the spring they use for brewing water is flowing well you may find nearly a dozen of its own good beers to choose from at the Church House. You might not get so many in a dry summer, though, for instance at the lively August bank holiday Rush Cart Festival when they hold their annual face-pulling competition. For its fine range at such exemplary bargain prices, the Church Inn at Uppermill (Lancashire) is **Own Brew Pub of the Year 2010**.

Some individual breweries actually beat the bargain prices of the own-brew pubs. Beers which we found at such low prices in several of our main entries are (starting with the cheapest) Sam Smiths, Hydes, Castle Rock, Lees and Donnington. Special praise to Donnington which operates in Gloucestershire, not a particularly cheap area, and which has some delightful pubs (no less than ten of them in this edition, including two splendid main entries).

Donnington, based at a picturesque ancient watermill, is **Brewery of the Year 2010**.

In Norwich Colin Keatley runs the Fat Cat with tremendous enthusiasm and energy, bringing happy streams of customers from far and wide to this town pub. For £2 a pint (the lowest price of any of the Norfolk main entries) he sells his own good beer brewed in a nearby sister pub, the Cidershed, stocks a remarkable range of quickly changing real ales from around the country, has a row of pumps dispensing exotic beers from the Continent, and dozens of interesting bottled beers on sale. The Fat Cat in Norwich (Norfolk) is **Beer Pub of the Year 2010**.

New trends in pub wine

After over 20 years of working towards higher standards in pub wine, we can now say that quality is at least reasonable in almost all good pubs, and that many now take a serious and rewarding interest in it. Some pub-owning firms such as Adnams, Wadworths and on a much smaller scale Brunning & Price can be relied on to supply all their pubs with enjoyable wines. Many individual pubs have a great range, by the glass and/or bottle - more than one-third of our main entries now qualify for a Wine Award.

A small but increasing number of pubs now go beyond simply serving a good choice. Several such as the Red Lion at Sibbertoft (Northamptonshire) and Vine Tree at Norton (Wiltshire) run tutored tastings. Some like the Culm Valley at Culmstock (Devon) import wine direct from small vineyards; others such as the Rose at Peldon (Essex) and Inn at West End (Surrey) are run by wine merchants. The Harris Arms at Portgate (Devon) and Anchor at Nayland (Suffolk) are the first we know of to grow their own vines. Quite a few now have their own wine shop: good examples are the Old Bridge in Huntingdon (Cambridgeshire), Yew Tree at Clifford's Mesne and White Hart at Winchcombe

(Gloucestershire), Inn at Whitewell (Lancashire) and Vine Tree at Norton (Wiltshire). The Yew Tree and White Hart both have an excellent scheme where you can have a bottle with your meal for just its shop price plus £5. This is much lower than the usual mark-up, and as mark-ups are normally a straight multiple (say, three times the cost price) the saving increases greatly as the price of the wine increases. The Yew Tree, with its charmingly informal 'shop', is **Wine Pub of the Year 2010**.

Bury in Lancashire - whisky capital of the world?

We were surprised this year to find a pub selling over 500 whiskies - not some tavern in Scotland, but tucked away on the edge of Bury in Lancashire. The pub is the Fishermans Retreat in Ramsbottom, owned by Hervey Magnall. It was his father who started the collection, for fun, adding a new one each week. The Fishermans Retreat in Ramsbottom (Lancashire) is **Whisky Pub of the Year 2010**.

Many pubs now cutting food prices

In this recession, we are all cutting down on eating out. The silver lining is that well run pubs are holding food prices steady, in spite of rising costs. In a detailed comparison of prices each of our main entries charge for snacks and starters, main dishes and puddings, compared with what they were charging last year, we found that prices have on average stayed virtually unchanged. Even more encouragingly, we found that 30% of pubs now sell some food more cheaply than last year. Sometimes this is by adding more economical dishes to the menu. Sometimes this is simply by cutting costs - finding more economical supplies or ingredients, often locally. And there are now significantly more special offers and bargains, with enterprising publicans coming up with appealing variations on two-course and three-course lunches,

early-evening specials, theme nights, a meal with a free drink, and two-for-one bargains.

All this has meant that more pubs now qualify for our Bargain Award than ever before - one in 11 main entries, up from one in 12 last year. What works brilliantly for both pub and customers is when a pub succeeds not only in keeping prices down, but also in offering good food that's interesting as well as good value. Using organic local produce, the Lewes Arms in Lewes might typically serve grilled goats cheese salad with beetroot, watercress and shallots, a good steak and kidney pie, fresh local-landed fish, a proper paella, and also gobi curry with all the works, all around the £6 or £7 mark - that's to say, around £5 less than other good pubs in that part of the country typically charge for their most popular dishes. The Lewes Arms in Lewes (Sussex) is **Bargain Pub of the Year 2010**.

Faddy trends or honest character?

In our nearly 30 years of producing this *Guide*, we have seen all sorts of passing fads in pub décor come and go, from the acres of red plush banquettes, leatherette stools and wall-to-wall turkey carpeting of the early 1980s to today's influx of high-backed dining chairs in brown or black leather on blonde woodstrip flooring. What the pub designers can't buy in, though, is the deep-down appeal of genuine character, as in hundreds of our listed pubs. From three dozen or so favourite unspoilt pubs, our choice as **Unspoilt Pub of the Year 2010** is the White Lion in Barthomley (Cheshire). This ancient thatched tavern, delightfully unchanging, and with good value bar lunches, is run really well by its welcoming landlady Laura Condliffe.

Pub weekends away - now better value than going abroad

Among the 214 main entries which have earned our Place to Stay Award, you can pay as little as £55 for bed and breakfast for two, or - in a couple of places - right up to £200 or more. By and large you get what you pay for - all the hi-tech mod cons at the top end, just simple comfort, decent food and a warm welcome at the cheapest. A typical price, in a comfortably smart inn, is around £90. Recent changes in the £/€ exchange rate make that compare more favourably than ever before with places to stay in continental Europe. It represents great value - especially if you are prepared to bargain and hold out for their best possible rate.

The very best inns give you the comfort of a decent hotel, but add the friendly informality of a thriving bar, and often a big dose of real character, making for a memorable stay. Currently top among them, backed by warm endorsements from many happy readers, the Bear in Crickhowell (Wales) is **Inn of the Year 2010**.

First catch your pig...

The big recent move to using local produce in pub food has developed a very enterprising new twist. A small but significant and rapidly growing number of good pubs are now growing more than just small back-yard quantities of salads, vegetables and fruit for their own kitchens, and/or raising their own free-range chickens, ducks, pigs and even cattle and sheep. Prime examples are the George & Dragon at Clifton (Cumbria), on the Lowther Estate which owns and supplies it; Brown Horse, Winster (Cumbria), with meat, poultry and produce from their own estate; European at Piddletrenthide (Dorset), lamb from the family farm - and like several other pubs it swaps drinks or meals for customers' produce and catches; Wheatsheaf at Braishfield (Hampshire), their own rare-breed pigs, poultry, fruit and veg; Stag at Titley (Herefordshire), their own pigs, chickens and vegetables; Mill Race at

Walford (Herefordshire), produce from their own farm; Fishermans Retreat in Ramsbottom (Lancashire), their own beef, venison and trout; Cook & Barker Arms at Newton on the Moor (Northumbria), their own farm produce; Half Moon at Cuxham (Oxfordshire), their own pigs and chickens; White Hart, Fyfield (Oxfordshire), their own veg, fruit and herbs; Nut Tree, Murcott (Oxfordshire), their own pigs and veg; Lamb, Satwell (Oxfordshire), their own chickens; Anchor at Nayland (Suffolk), produce from their adjacent farm, traditionally worked by heavy horses; Golden Key at Snape (Suffolk), their own bees, chickens, pigs, sheep and beef; Jolly Farmers at Buckland (Surrey), their own farm shop and Saturday market; Parrot at Forest Green (Surrey), their own farm; Potting Shed at Crudwell (Wiltshire), their own fruit and veg, more from allotments they loan to villagers; Butchers Arms at Eldersfield (Worcestershire), their own cattle; Star at Harome (Yorkshire), splendid kitchen garden.

These are all extreme examples of the great care which good pub chefs now put into getting superb ingredients for their cooking. Hundreds of pubs which don't have their own farms or kitchen gardens are now bringing the same sharp focus to bear on the quality of their ingredients. This often pays off in raising the standard of their food to a memorable level.

The pubs and inns which stand out nationally as favourites for a special meal out are the Hinds Head in Bray (Berkshire), Cock at Hemingford Grey (Cambridgeshire), Bell at Sapperton (Gloucestershire), Stag at Titley (Herefordshire), Olive Branch at Clipsham (Leicestershire and Rutland), Woods in Dulverton (Somerset), Compasses at Chicksgrove (Wiltshire), Bell & Cross at Holy Cross (Worcestershire), Star at Harome (Yorkshire), Hardwick near Abergavenny (Wales) and - a newcomer to the *Guide* - Gun in East London. All these are civilised dining pubs specialising in imaginative meals, ideal for

a memorable treat. But all except the Bell are also perfectly happy to do just a sandwich - and the Bell will do you a good ploughman's instead.

With the recession breathing down our necks, the appealing pricing of their imaginative set lunches makes the Cock at Hemingford Grey **Dining Pub of the Year 2010**.

The top pubs and publicans

*Hours:* 15 daily, half an hour less on Sunday. *Duties* including but certainly not limited to: staff admin and training (must be able to deal with difficult and unreliable employees), catering and cellar management, supplies procurement, ad hoc emergency relief work (could be anything from broken lavatories to fist fights), customer relations (facing extremes of rude and unreasonable behaviour), endless paperwork and bureaucratic red tape.

*Rewards:* usually under £15,000 a year. Tempted by that job description? It's a fair account of a publican's working life; and earlier this year a survey commissioned by the House of Commons Business and Enterprise Committee showed that 67% of pub lessees earn under £15,000 a year.

This makes clear what a very special breed good publicans are: they seem to thrive on all of that, with smiles on their faces, and with enough good spirits left over to make all their customers happy too.

From among the thousands of good landlords and landladies who run pubs in this *Guide*, a handful stand out as exemplary. They are Suzy Turner of the Red Lion at Litton (Derbyshire), André and Adrian Large of the Cross House at Doynton and Jo and Jon Carrier of the Five Mile House at Duntisbourne Abbots (Gloucestershire), Tim Gray of the Yew Tree at Lower Wield and Hassan Matini of the Trooper near Petersfield (Hampshire), Peter and Assumpta Golding of the Chequers at Churchill (Oxfordshire), Simon and Catherine Davy of the

Jackston Stops at Stretton (Leicestershire and Rutland), Maggie Chandler of the George in Kilsby (Northamptonshire), and Peter and Veryan Graham of the George at Croscombe (Somerset).

Tim Gray has made the Yew Tree a warm-hearted proper country pub. He has held down the price of his good local beer so that you save nearly 60p a pint compared with what the average pub in his county charges. His interesting wines are great value, and his food is most enjoyable. Above all, he's the sort of landlord you remember as rather special. Tim Gray of the Yew Tree at Lower Wield is **Landlord of the Year 2010**.

Eight interesting and appealing pubs on top form this year are the Bell at Aldworth (Berkshire), Five Mile House at Duntisbourne Abbots (Gloucestershire), Highwayman at Nether Burrow (Lancashire), Woods in Dulverton (Somerset), Bell & Cross at Holy Cross and Nags Head in Malvern (Worcestershire), Blue Lion at East Witton and Crown at Roecliffe (Yorkshire). With its charming small rooms, helpful welcoming staff, good food and drinks, strong sense of individuality and must-come-again appeal, the Bell & Cross at Holy Cross is **Pub of the Year 2010**.