

PUB INTERIORS – GETTING THEM RIGHT

INTRODUCTION

Since 1991, CAMRA has published its National Inventory of pubs with outstanding, unspoilt historic interiors. The list is a sadly small one, with less than 250 out of over 60000 British pubs now meeting the Inventory criteria.

Fortunately there are a good few more pub interiors which, whilst by no means as intact as those on the national list, still retain much of historic value; CAMRA is developing a set of Regional Inventories to capture this next tier of important survivals.

A third category of cherishable interiors comprises those of more recent design, including refurbishments, which have been carried out especially well and so have architectural, if not historical, merit.

Pub interiors have always been subject to change and change is by no means always a bad thing. Many renovations and restorations have been undertaken sensitively or have displayed an understanding of the elements of good design. Many others, unfortunately, have resulted in loss of character, imposition of short-term gimmickry or the arrival of the bogus and the tawdry.

This factsheet sets out CAMRA's views on how pub interiors should be treated. The best treatment might in fact be no treatment at all but this is by no means always the case. CAMRA accepts that, in some instances, an interior can be significantly improved but we do feel that there are several "golden rules" around getting this right.

THE PRESSURES FOR CHANGE

The inside of your pub is starting to look a bit tired and tatty, trade is down, competition is hot – your gut reaction may be to trash the place and instal a quick replacement. In the short term this might even be successful but experience tells us that instant makeovers invariably don't have much of a shelf-life so the cycle (and expense) soon starts again.

A popular recent approach to pub re-design has been "theming" whereby identikit internal schemes are foisted on pubs throughout the land, often on interiors which previously enjoyed at least a degree of individuality. The theory seems to be that if it works in one place, it will work everywhere. The problem with theme pubs is that they are inevitably based on a gimmick and customers soon tire of gimmicks – so, after a few years, a new "concept" must be installed.

Another regrettable trend has been that towards the opening-out of pubs, removing walls and divisions to create single barn-like expanses. Some of the pressure here has come from the licensing authorities who feel that such spaces can be more easily supervised than several smaller rooms. The

downside is that large numbers of people are brought together, often drinking vertically, creating plenty of scope for trouble to start and spread.

IS NO CHANGE THE BEST CHANGE?

The first, obvious point here is that you can change a pub without making any physical alterations whatsoever. Putting on a more interesting range of beers, launching a new menu, introducing activities or music or games – there are plenty of tried and trusted methods for drumming up trade. For a few licensees, learning to smile at the customers would work wonders! Certainly the best place to start before making any alterations is to consult the customers – assuming the licensee wants to keep them of course. CAMRA's booklet "Rural Pubs – a Route to Success" contains lots of ideas on how to increase business and reduce overheads – many of them equally applicable to urban pubs.

Turning to the physical fabric, it may well be that all it needs is a wash and brush up. A few licks of paint and varnish and a "deep clean" of carpets and seating can easily transform the dingy to the delightful. It might even be the case that some original features like fireplaces are lurking behind the plywood waiting to be rediscovered. There could be an unused room which would make a more suitable home for the pool table, creating more space. Many pubs could make much better use of what they've already got – and that's much cheaper of course than wholesale refurbishment.

Sometimes, more radical action is necessary. The pub might simply be too small to be viable or hygiene/safety regulations may require an upgrading of facilities. This can be achieved without adversely affecting the core of the pub, by judicious conversion of rooms not currently in pub use or sensitive extensions.

Appendix 1 gives some examples of pubs where the "minimal change" philosophy, as regards the existing fabric of the pub, has been successfully implemented.

IT'S NO USE – IT'S GOT TO CHANGE

As we said earlier, not every pub is an unspoilt gem which is best left alone. Previous attempts at "improvement" may have left the place character-free and deeply tedious. Something must be done.

Step one should be to identify anything worth keeping. Have any original or old features survived previous refits? Is the layout OK even if the fixtures and fittings are all naff?

Step two is to consider all the options, even radical ones. For instance, many formerly multi-roomed pubs have been reduced over the years to a couple or just a single room. The signs are that the multi-roomed pub is ripe for a comeback. They offer a choice of drinking environments. The spaces are inevitably more cosy and homely. Customers can have privacy. You can also

have separate smoking and non-smoking areas as well as keeping dining and drinking in different places. Sam Smiths, the Yorkshire brewer, has recently been busy converting quite a few of its pubs back to multi-rooms, including the award-winning Wortley Almshouses in Peterborough and The Seahorse in York. All the indications are that both customers and licensees have found many advantages.

If the existing interior is a real horror and radical surgery is the best option, CAMRA would recommend boldness and innovation rather than playing safe. The judges in our annual pub design awards always lament the pitiful lack of imagination shown in many refurbishments, with clichéd use of bogus traditional fittings and an over-reliance on the “nice” and the “tasteful”. The mock-Victorian look with its period wallpaper, random bric-a-brac, replica furniture and so forth is just as much a “theme pub” as your Walkabouts and All-Bar-Ones.

IN SUMMARY

The British pub is a unique institution and much of its attraction derives from its infinite variety. To produce a “design manual” for pubs would be to defeat the object because individuality, difference, even quirkiness are among the factors which make a great pub interior so rewarding.

CAMRA’s key messages to pub owners there are:

- make the best use of what you’ve already got
- physical change isn’t the only, or even necessarily a good, option
- if change really is needed, then go for it fearlessly.

APPENDIX ONE

The Blue Bell, Maxey, Cambridgeshire

A model example of how to convert a pub back into a genuine village local. The licensee responsible took out the pool table straight after moving in with the gaming machine following days later. More time was spent restoring original features such as the seating which is resplendent in natural wood after layers of paint were removed. In the small no-smoking front bar the real fire has been reinstated and along with a bare window seat, upholstered settle and two armchairs lends this a great “someone’s front room” feel. Elsewhere doors have been reinstated, carpets replaced by bare wood and a brass rail added around the bottom of the bar. New visitors find it difficult to believe that the pub hasn’t always looked like this – it shows you really can successfully go back to the past. More importantly the changes have been achieved largely by taking things out and by restoring original features.

The Kings Head (Low House), Laxfield, Suffolk

This fantastic pub is on CAMRA’s National Inventory of outstanding pub interiors because of its intact historic core. However, it’s not that aspect of the pub which concerns us here – other than the fact that the current owners left it all well alone. Changes have been made but they don’t impact at all adversely on the classic central warren of small rooms. A modern kitchen, new toilets and central heating have all been added in an entirely unobtrusive manner. A room not previously in pub use has been sympathetically converted for use as a dining room; however, you wouldn’t know it was there when you were in the old portion. The Kings Head successfully demonstrates that conservation doesn’t mean preservation in aspic; you can develop the business successfully by using a bit of flair and imagination.

Drewe Arms, Drewsteignton, Devon

The historic core of this pub is a village classic; however, when the long-serving landlady retired in the mid-90s, it was clear that the pub was too small to be a viable business. The property was therefore developed in such a way as to provide several other rooms (mainly for dining) whilst leaving the “tap room” intact. The development was carried out so sensitively that anyone sitting in the tap room need not be aware that there are other, newer parts to the pub elsewhere.

Other examples where a pub has been expanded in size without adverse impact on the intact historic original include the Old Swan (“Ma Pardoe’s”) Netherton West Midlands and the Trip to Jerusalem Nottingham.

Bartons Arms, Aston, Birmingham

Dating from 1901, this is amongst the finest examples of Victorian pub architecture in the land. It featured wonderful wall-to-wall tiling, mahogany woodwork, stained and engraved windows and mirrors and a sweeping wrought-iron staircase. However, the area around it went into major decline from the 1960s and by the turn of the century the pub was terribly run down and, for a while, closed. It did though retain many of those wonderful Victorian features. In 2002, Oakham Ales of Peterborough bought it and have returned it to former greatness. This was largely achieved through "deep cleaning" and sensitive renovation, the owners realising that the more they could retain of the original the better. The Bartons is now thriving thanks to a combination of a unique building and excellent ale and food.