

## We love pubs and churches, but don't want to use them

We love to complain about the decline of our institutions, but want someone else to do our praying and drinking

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When did you last sink a pint at your local? If you live or work near a bustling inn that has plenty of passing trade and dedicated punters, then the answer may well be "last night". But if, like me, you're no longer sure which boozier counts as "local", let alone if you'd feel welcome at the bar, the findings are far vaguer.

When I first moved to north Cambridge there was a traditional boozier called The Cow and Calf five minutes' walk away, but it was demolished 14 years ago to make way for housing.

The other nearby pub, The British Queen, had a reputation for trouble and changed hands several times. An optimistic landlord rebranded it as "The Ranch", but few drinkers seemed convinced by

Texan bonhomie on the windswept Histon Road, despite the tumbleweed in the car park. The venture failed and a planning application for blocks of student accommodation was duly passed. That leaves me with The Grapes, which fails my personal prejudice test by hosting a weekly “steak nite”.

So when the Campaign for Real Ale (Camra) announced yesterday that two out of five adults “never go to the pub”, the news seemed a little beside the point. It’s people like me the beer trade should worry about, those who think of themselves as “regulars”, who can easily go two months without ordering a pint.

The pub refuseniks are not to blame: after all, I’d be pretty certain that two-fifths of adult Britons didn’t sit at the bar 40 years ago. Women drinkers were rare in many pubs until the great rebranding exercises of the Eighties, when nicotine-pits became wine bars. And there’s always been a mystifying breed of human being who declares, “I don’t like pubs”, the way some people announce that they don’t like children, dogs or pop music, as if every single specimen were identical and incapable of surprising their lofty detractors.

Indeed, it struck me while watching the BBC comedy *Rev* on Mondaynight that the problems our pubs face are similar to those faced by the CofE. Most Brits think of themselves as Christians (59 per cent of the population at the time of the 2011 census), but only a third go to church at Christmas, and for many that will be their sole visit. This is eerily similar to your average UK drinker, who professes love for the Great British pub in a Betjeman-esque tide of nostalgia, but rarely visits one. Quite likely because, as in my case, decent locals have disappeared. Or because our tastes have evolved beyond a simple pint near the village green. We want posh Tyrrells crisps, a decent glass of wine and pub grub that threatens a Michelin star.

The Pellings are guiltier than most. My four siblings and I were raised in a village inn, but only one of us is a regular pub-goer, while another is teetotal. This has much to do with the recent evolution in parenting. My grandfather spent most weekday evenings unwinding in The Woodman at Otford. Now, the father who misses bath and bedtime while he tends to pub philosophy is frowned upon. Couples spend more time together and the chosen opiate of the masses is no longer a cheering pint, but a box set. Few pub conversations can out-thrill *Game of Thrones*, while the price of a pint can’t compete with Tesco online.

So what can landlords do? Camra says they “need to engage more with their local community”. Precisely the advice extended to the Reverend Adam Smallbone in *Rev*, whose inner-city church is in near-terminal decline. But it’s hard to engage with neighbours if they’re stuck behind picket fences, logging on to Facebook and watching *Breaking Bad*. We British middle classes love to beat our breasts about the decline of our favourite institutions, but we want someone else to do our praying and drinking – and to carry the blame when the landscape changes forever.

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