

# Ales, tales, and bar brawls: a brief and tipsy history of the English pub

*Now featuring Ron 'the Thong', flat beer, and the sticky floors of salvation.*

Walk into a real English pub. Not one of those sterilised gastro-pub nightmares with grey walls, £14 cocktails, and olives that have been “curated” by someone called Jasper. I mean a proper boozery. Low ceiling. Sticky floor. Wobbly stools. A fruit machine blinking in the corner like it knows too much. A landlord who has mastered the ancient art of pouring a pint while saying absolutely nothing. That is not just a building. That is a time machine with pumps.

The English pub has been around longer than most governments, most marriages, and nearly every bad idea involving laminated menus. It came out of alehouses, coaching inns, roadside stops, farm tracks, market towns, and the basic human need to get indoors, get warm, get fed, get drunk, and talk

bollocks with other people doing exactly the same thing.

Before there were apps, comment sections, parish Facebook groups, and blokes in Range Rovers shouting about potholes online, there was the pub. It was where news travelled, lies improved, grudges fermented, romances started badly, and somebody's uncle claimed he once punched a horse and lived to tell the tale.

The beer was not good. Let's get that out of the way. Nobody was discussing citrus notes or mouth-feel. Nobody was holding anything up to the light and saying, “Lovely hazy body on that.” The beer was warm, brown, and frequently suspicious. It tasted like something not

unlike rotten banana - yeasty, dirty, claggy - filtered through a used nappy (diaper). You drank it because



the water might kill you, the winter was long, and your neighbour had just told you a story about his cousin being chased by a goose through a graveyard. It was not craft... but somehow, that made it better.

Every proper pub has its legends. Not customers, exactly. Not staff, either. Something in between. Men and women who become part of the furniture, absorbed into the grain of the bar until you half expect to find their names listed under fixtures and fittings. Ours was Ron 'the Thong'. And frankly, the name does not do him justice.

Ron used to run the pub back in the day. His day, according to Ron, was the last proper age of civilisation. Men were men, beer was bitter, nobody asked for oat milk, and pubs did not serve "fancy bloody hummus." He carried this information around like a war medal. Every sweet cider, vegan sausage roll, and gluten-free request was, to Ron, further evidence that the country had gone soft in the trousers.

He told stories with the authority of a man who had seen everything, forgotten half of it, and improved the rest. Ron could silence a room with a pause. He could start an argument with an eyebrow. He could make the past sound glorious, even when the past clearly involved damp carpets, ashtrays, and customer service practices that would now require a public apology and possibly a hazmat suit.

His pub management techniques were, shall we say, rustic. He was especially proud of one tradition that made my liver flinch. Back in his day, he said, they used to save the spillages from the drip trays. Yes, those drip trays. The grey, greasy runoff from under the pumps. The liquid graveyard of overspill, fingerprints, cigarette ash, old mild, and whatever had fallen off the bar towel. They would pour it back into the mild ale barrel. Not metaphorically. Not as a joke. Actually pour it back in.

"Bit of tonic water," Ron said, grinning like a fox in a henhouse with a pension plan, "and no one knew the difference."

I stared at him. He looked proud. Not ashamed. Not

sheepish. Proud. In Ron's mind, this was not a hygiene violation. It was efficiency. Waste reduction. Old-school pubcraft. He was basically an eco-warrior, if eco-warriors wore nicotine-stained shirts and treated hepatitis as a character-building exercise. I gagged. He beamed. That was Ron all over. The modern world saw a crime scene. Ron saw tradition.

But the thong part did not come from the bar. Oh no. The thong part came from home. The legend was born the day Ron opened his front door to the postman wearing nothing but a faded leopard-print thong and bright yellow Marigold gloves. No robe. No slippers. No shame. Just Ron. One bollock hovering dangerously close to a public decency incident, a cigarette stuck to his lip, and those rubber gloves pulled up like he was about to perform surgery on a drain.

The gloves, he explained, were for hygiene. The thong? "For comfort." That was it. No further statement. No defensive argument. No attempt to soften the image for the traumatised postal worker now standing on the step reconsidering every career choice that had brought him to that moment.

And yet, here is the annoying thing. The beautiful thing. The thing that makes pubs impossible to explain to people who only want clean lines, QR codes, and chairs chosen by a designer who has never been trapped in a lock-in with a retired plumber. Ron was the soul of the place... although I do know I never sat on his barstool again.

Not because he was sensible. He wasn't. Not because he was refined. He absolutely fucking wasn't. Because pubs need people like Ron. They need the old guard. The bullshitters. The tragic romantics. The barstool philosophers. The men who stare into a pint like it contains classified information. The women who know everyone's business but call it "being observant." The quiet ones. The loud ones. The ones who arrive at eleven in the morning and say, "Just the one," with the doomed optimism of a man entering battle armed with a teaspoon.

Historically, pubs were not just places to get

smashed. They were where workers gathered, travelers rested, lonely people found company, and entire communities decided what they thought before pretending they had always thought it. The church had sermons. The pub had Stan in the corner explaining why the council was corrupt because they moved a bin. Both offered a version of faith.

These places have survived plague, war, taxation, licensing laws, temperance movements, brewery buyouts, health inspectors, bad karaoke, and men who believe they become better singers after six pints of bitter. They have hosted wakes, weddings, first dates, last chances, darts finals, affairs, reconciliations, betrayals, and arguments over whether roast potatoes should be fluffy or crispy. Crispy, obviously. Anyone who disagrees should be watched.

And now, the pub is hanging on by its fingernails. Some have gone full gentrified horror show. Menus describing chips as “triple-cooked potato batons.” Staff asking if you’ve “dined with us before” when you only came in for a pint and somewhere to hide from your family.

But the real ones are still out there. The darts board is slightly wonky. The ceiling leaks when it rains. The old boys have unofficial assigned seats and react to strangers like meerkats spotting a hawk. The landlord has opinions on Churchill, glassware, football managers, cyclists, parking restrictions, and the correct way to stack pint glasses. Base to base, obviously. We are not animals.

You do not go to a pub just to drink. You go to witness something. You go for the noise, the gossip, the stories, the rumours, the regulars, the bad decisions, and the comforting knowledge that whatever is wrong with the world, somebody at the bar has a completely deranged theory about it.

You go because somewhere, in the long and sticky history of English pub life, a man called Ron once sold people back their own beer with a splash of tonic and called it tradition. And, God help me, that is exactly why I love it.

## FISH AND CHIPS WITH HARVEY'S BEST - A LOVE LETTER TO FRYING, REGRET, AND THE KIND OF PUB FOOD THAT DOES NOT NEED A MISSION STATEMENT

*You cannot write about the English pub and then serve something delicate. No towers. No smears. If your food arrives looking like it has unresolved childhood trauma, you have wandered into the wrong establishment.*

*A proper pub feeds people properly. And nothing says proper pub like fish and chips. Golden batter. Thick chips. Malt vinegar. Salt. Steam. Grease. The sharp crackle of something fried correctly. The kind of meal that makes a table go quiet for thirty seconds because everyone is too busy burning their fingers and pretending they are fine.*

*This is not fancy. It is better than fancy. It is the food equivalent of a well-poured pint, a good barstool, and someone at the next table telling a story that is almost certainly not true but absolutely deserves to be. Use good fish. Use good beer. Fry it hot. Drain it properly. Do not murder it with soggy paper towels. And for the love of all things holy, do not serve it in a miniature shopping trolley, slate tile, plant pot, novelty bucket, or anything else that makes people want to punch the menu.*

*This is fish and chips. Treat it with some bloody respect.*

*Serves 4*

## THE FISH

### INGREDIENTS

- 4 thick fillets of cod or haddock, about 170g / 6 oz each
- Salt and black pepper

- 65g plain flour, about ½ cup, for dusting
- Oil for deep frying

You want firm, fresh fish. If it smells like the back of a trawler after a divorce hearing, walk away.

## THE BATTER THAT DRINKS BETTER THAN MOST CUSTOMERS

### INGREDIENTS

- 180g self-raising flour, about 1½ cups
- ½ tsp salt
- 1 tsp baking powder, only if using plain flour instead of self-raising
- 375ml Harvey's Best Sussex Ale, about 1½ cups
- 125ml soda water, about ½ cup
- Optional: pinch of cayenne or white pepper
- Optional: 1 tsp turmeric for colour

Buy more Harvey's than the recipe needs. One bottle for the batter. One for the cook. Possibly one for emotional support.

### METHOD

Put the flour and salt into a large bowl. Add the baking powder if you are using plain flour. Slowly whisk in the Harvey's Best until you have a thick, smooth batter that smells faintly of beer, poor judgement, and excellent decisions.

Add the soda water bit by bit until the batter loosens. You want it thick enough to cling to the fish, but not so thick it looks like wallpaper paste from a condemned B&B. Let it rest for 15 to 30 minutes. Batter needs a moment. So do you. Have a sip of the beer and contemplate every bad choice that led you to owning catering equipment. At this point, start on the chips...otherwise you'll be eating cold fish!

## FRYING THE FISH

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Heat the oil to 190°C / 375°F. Pat the fish dry. This matters. Wet fish makes batter slide off like a drunk off a barstool. Season the fillets with salt and pepper, then dust them lightly with flour. Shake off the excess.

Dip each fillet into the batter and coat it properly. Do not be timid. This is not a spa treatment. Lower the fish carefully into the hot oil and fry for 6 to 8 minutes, turning once, until the batter is golden, puffed, crisp, and making the kind of noise that tells you life is briefly worth living.

Drain on a wire rack. Not kitchen roll. A wire rack. Kitchen roll traps steam and turns your beautiful crisp batter into a damp apology. You did not come this far to serve a damp apology.

## THE CHIPS

### INGREDIENTS

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- 4 to 5 large Maris Piper potatoes, or Yukon Gold potatoes, peeled and cut into proper chunky chips
- Oil for frying
- Salt

Maris Piper is ideal. Yukon Gold will do if you're cooking somewhere that thinks British potatoes are an exotic import.

### METHOD

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Heat the oil to 150°C / 300°F. Blanch the chips for 4 to 5 minutes. You are not browning them yet. You are just softening the inside so they become fluffy instead of sad.

Lift them out and drain them. Let them cool. Turn the oil up to 190°C / 375°F. Fry the chips again until golden, crisp, and loud when they hit the plate. Salt immediately. Chips

need salt while they are hot, otherwise the salt just sits there like a useless committee member.

### TO SERVE

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Pile the chips high and crown them with the fish. Hit the whole thing with sea salt and malt vinegar. Add a lemon wedge if you want to look like you made an effort.

Serve with mushy peas if you like them, tartare sauce if you have sense, and a cold Harvey's Best in a proper glass. Not a jam jar. Not a handled novelty mug. A proper glass.

Then eat it while it is hot, while the batter still crackles, while the chips still steam, and while someone nearby tells you that pubs were better in the old days. They might be right. But only if Ron kept his trousers on.



## TARTARE SAUCE FOR PEOPLE WHO KNOW BETTER

*This is not the watery little ramekin of sadness you get beside frozen fish in a pub that has given up. This is tartare sauce with a spine. Briny. Sharp. Creamy. Loud enough to hold its own against hot batter, malt vinegar, and a table full of people arguing about whether Ron should have been barred, sectioned, or made mayor.*

### INGREDIENTS

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- 125ml real mayonnaise — about ½ cup
- 20g gherkins, finely chopped — about 2 tbsp
- 10g capers, finely chopped — about 1 tbsp
- 10g sweet white onion, finely chopped — about 1 tbsp
- 7.5ml white wine vinegar — about 1½ tsp
- Black pepper, to taste

Use proper mayonnaise. Not light. Not diet. Not something pretending to be mayonnaise while quietly hating eggs.

### METHOD

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Stir everything together in a bowl. Taste it. If it needs more bite, add a little more vinegar. If it needs more attitude, add more capers. If it tastes too polite, you have done something wrong.

Cover and chill for at least an hour. Let the flavours have a fight in private before they meet the fish.