The Valiant Soldier

The pub at Buckfastleigh where 'last orders' were never called!

Churches are our great historic monuments, but the humble English pub plays as significant a part in our cultural heritage.

It's true to say that ale houses existed at least in the times when our earliest churches had been built and possibly before. The actual consumption of alcohol in its many forms would have occurred way back in time and ale was certainly consumed during the Romano British period, although the Romans themselves considered it an inferior drink of Celtic barbarians, preferring their wine.

Roll forward to the current day, the public house as a drinking institution is on the endangered

Good health to you too Mrs Roberts, you'd be delighted to know The Valiant Soldier has been pickled in aspic - forever!

list, proper drink-only pubs these days are as rare as hen's teeth. Visiting *The Valiant Soldier* was a nostalgic experience, my father had been a stalwart visitor to public houses, it was often I'd nip round to the back of the pub to use the toilet, stealing glimpses of stark, smoky and austere drinking dens before returning to the Ford Cortina to finish my cider and crisps. Later, imbibing myself at pubs in the seventies, I'd occasionally glimpse a pub that had the austere and spartan appearance akin to that of The Valiant Soldier, if could feel like walking into the set of an old British black and white film - fantastic!

The Valiant Soldier is a glorious time capsule, akin to stepping out of the Tardis, you emerge right back into a 50s pub environment. An extremely evocative and almost metaphysical experience for those that have distant memories of that former time. How did this all happen you may ask? Well, it appears that Mr and Mrs Roberts took over the tenancy of the pub in 1938. We

If only I could have bought a bottle of beer and sat in the corner

mustn't forget that Buckfastleigh was a major centre for the wool industry, with many large mills operating in the town employing many people, as a result, the town supported some fourteen inns and taverns. Interesting times were to come, 1938 was just a year off the momentus appearance of the Second World War.

A game of darts, indeed why not old chap. Local Devonshire dialect can be heard through speakers, a nice touch

The hallway and bar side window where orders would be placed by lounge occupants

Whiteways, what a company they were, their marketing ploys and antics were innovative to say the least

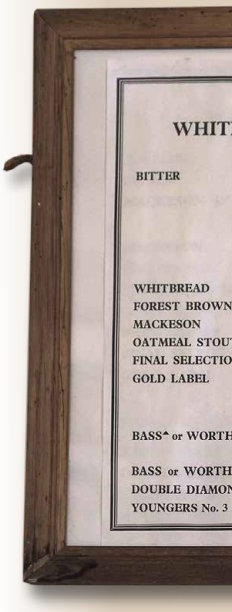
The Public Bar - no easy seats here, it's all wooden and hard. Mind you, people were a little thinner in those days, don't forget rationing and post war austerity - now that really was 'austerity'!

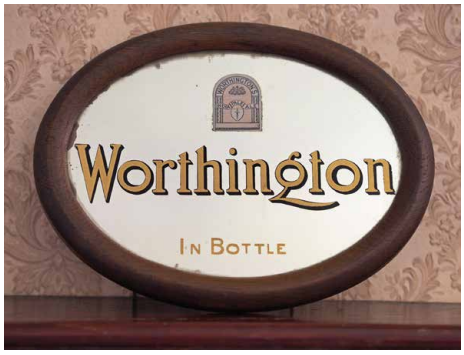
The Lounge - the perfect place for ladies and courting couples - it just wasn't done for ladies to drink in the public bar
A Babycham was the perfect ladies drink, or failing that, perhaps a sweet sherry

By the early 1960s the pub trade had continued to decline and the owners, Norman & Pring informed Mr and Mrs Roberts of their decision to suspend financial assistance that they'd given to the pub, and that they were not going to re-let The Valiant Solider as a licensed premises, probably because it was unviable. So the pub was closed in 1964, leaving Mr and Mrs Roberts aghast. Eventually, the property was sold to the Roberts for £1,800. A condition of the sale was that a covenant had been placed on the pub, which forbade the sale or manufacture of alcoholic liquid, so the building could no longer function as a public house.

At this point you'd expect that the Roberts would strip out the bar and lounge and turn the property into a comfortable home, but incredibly, it was just left intact, gathering dust.

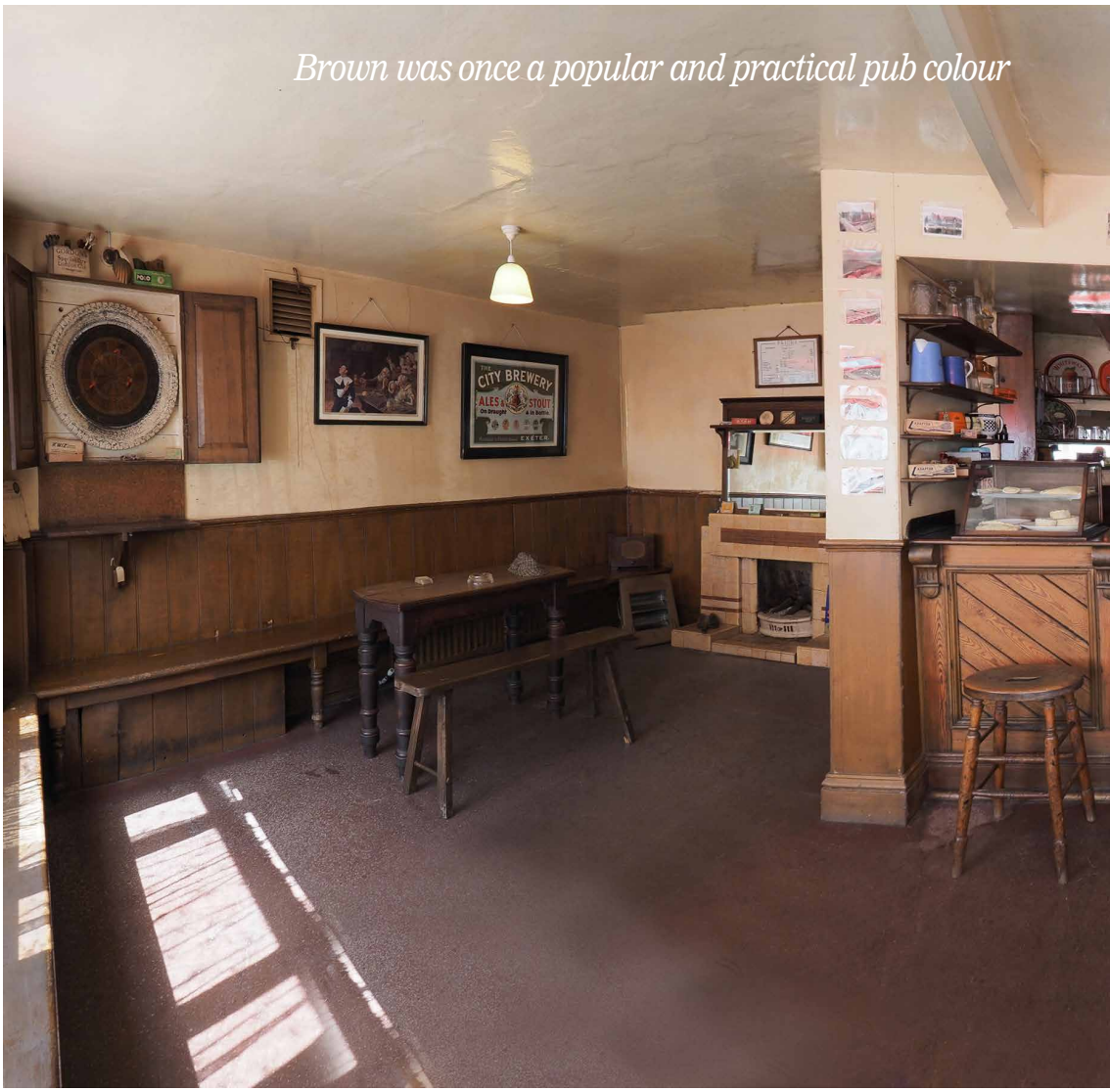
Who knows why it was left in this state? Mark Roberts died in June 1969, just five years later. Alice Roberts continued living there until 1996, when she was moved to a nursing home.



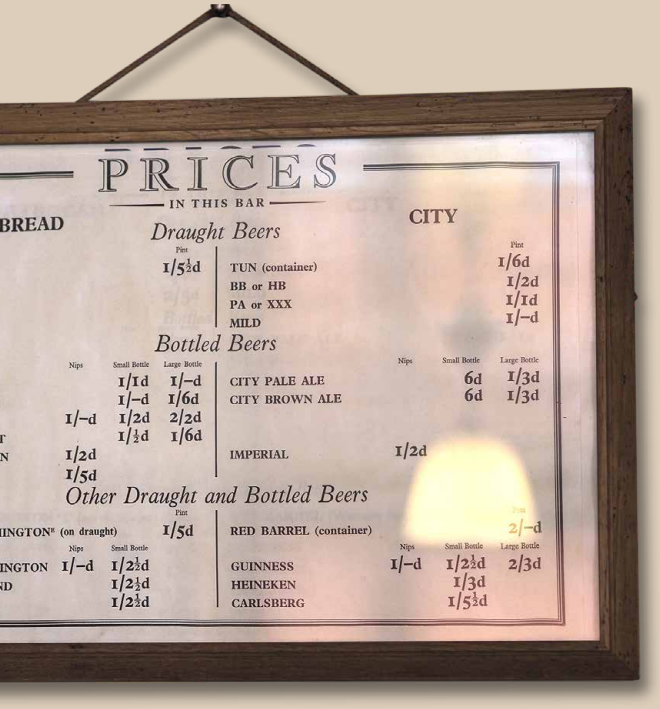


Worthington, founded in Burton on Trent by William Worthington in 1761. Their IPA has continued to be brewed since 1829

Can you smell the stale beer and tobacco smoke, it's a nostalgia trip that will evoke many memories? Was dad or grandad a keen pub goer? Back in the 50s and 60s the pub was very much the province of the male of the species. In the 70s, the appearance of the female increased, Babycham being a popular beverage partaken - it just wasn't done for the female to sup a pint of beer - just not 'ladylike'.



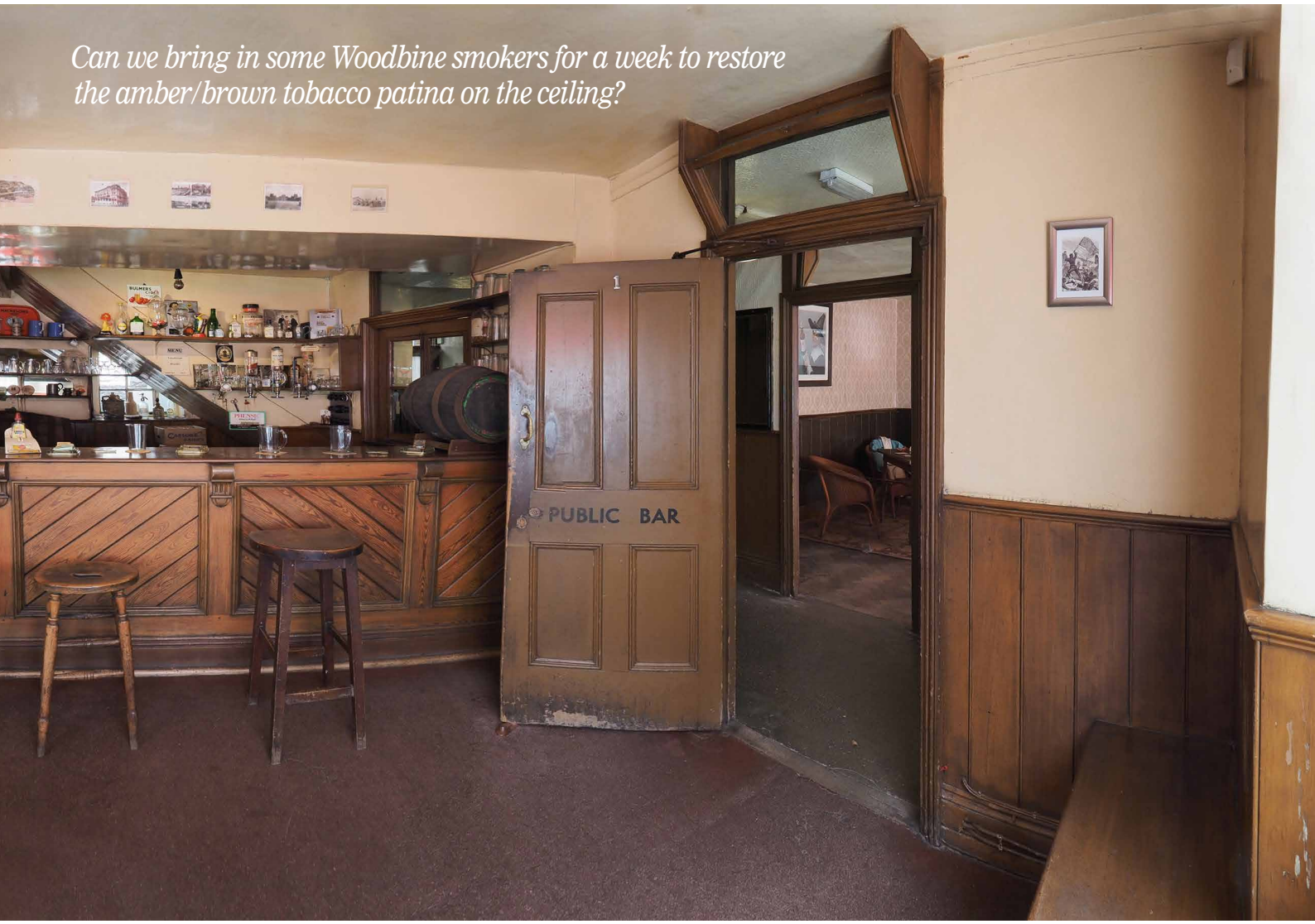
Brown was once a popular and practical pub colour



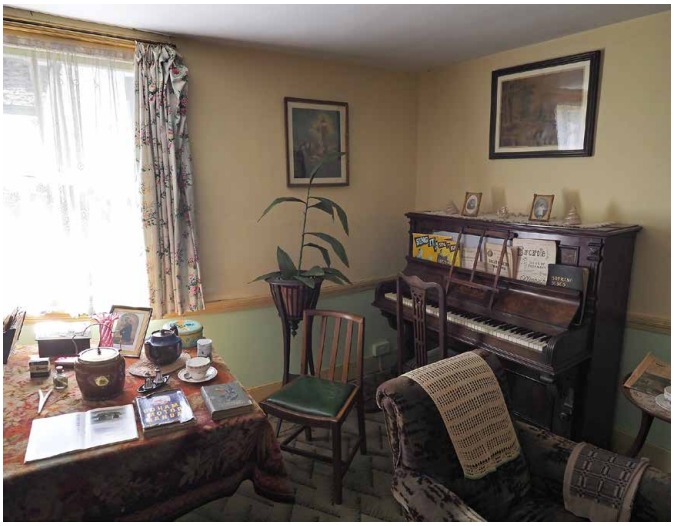
Babycham - clever marketing, seizing a big part of the market at the time. It's a sparkling perry drink still available to buy today

Anyone for a pickled onion - you could also buy pickled eggs, not sure how those tasted. No fridge needed for pickled produce, it could sit there in the jar indefinitely

Can we bring in some Woodbine smokers for a week to restore the amber/brown tobacco patina on the ceiling?



Upstairs, fairly comfortable accommodation, here the bathroom and the landing hallway



The upstairs lounge for the Landlord's family, it's fairly cosy

I suppose the enforced closure as a pub was a devastating event for the Roberts. When they took on the tenancy, the pub would have been an exciting and busy place, situated as it was close to the then cinema (*now a car park*), it was close enough to pop into during the intermission for a drink. And then another year onwards from taking over the pub and WWII comes along. Imagine the hustle and bustle, mill workers popping in on the way home for a pint and some news on the war, or lorry drivers nipping in for a pint whilst taking skins from the tannery to the station. At the time, films from the cinema were show seven days a week, there were dances at the Town Hall two or three times a week and then with the arrival of locally barracked American infantrymen and British troops also stationed nearby, the town must have positively buzzed with activity and news.

Running The Valiant Soldier must have been entertaining and exciting, being at the centre of it all I suppose. Perhaps the Roberts couldn't bring themselves to convert the bar and lounge because of all the happy memories they possessed, the pub had also been home to their two children. Whatever their mindset, the Roberts left something totally unique. What's exceptional about The Valiant Soldier is that it's a fairly unexceptional pub, it's all very plain and conventional, but it's just this that makes it a true historic pearl. If you wish to savour a most enjoyable half day, a trip over to Buckfastleigh for a lunch and visit to The Valiant Solider make for a most memorable outing!

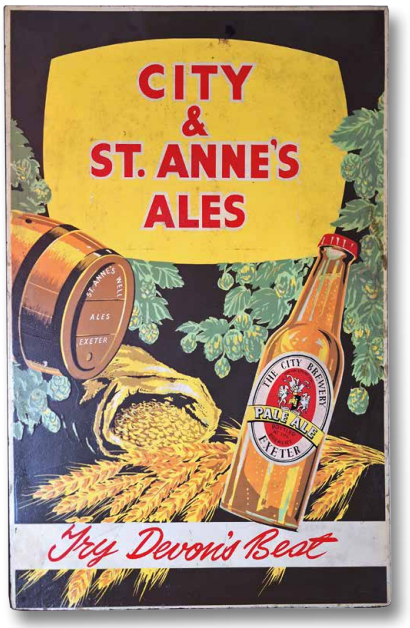
Editor

From the photographs you can see that the bar in an English pub of the 40s and 50s was a fairly uncomfortable place, no easy chairs, just wooden seating. Brown and cream were the commonest colours, because with constant smoking of cigarettes and pipes, the decor would eventually end up assuming those hues. I did suspect that someone had cleaned the ceilings, which in those days were always gloss painted, for wiping down, or glossed anaglypta.

Music and sound plays in the pub's rooms, old Devonshire accents add to the nostalgia.

I only wish that I could have sampled a drink of bottled beer in the pub, and sat for a while to savour the atmosphere.

The kitchen where meals were prepared and possibly sandwiches for customers?



St Anne's Well Brewery's Exeter site was closed in 1966, having merged with Norman & Pring in 1943