

‘Get Younger here’ . . .

# Market Hotel, Wigan, 1931-1976

Dear Sir,

YOUR many excellent articles on various aspects of social life in Wigan in the 20th century have prompted me to write about one very important part of the Wigan scene, namely the public house or, as it is more commonly known, t’pub.

Born and bred in Mesnes Street (you can’t get more central Wigan than that), and the son and grandson of the licensees of the Market Hotel for nearly 46 years (1931-1976), I feel I may be one of a few who have experienced at first hand, all that went into keeping a ‘pub’ in the centre of Wigan.

In my opinion there are four essential features that make a pub special and I believe the Market Hotel had them all.

## 1. The Environment

Situated in the centre of the town, adjacent to the old Market Square and Bus Station (convenient for all except the customer who left the Market Hotel to take the single decker to Shevington and finished up in the all night coach to London with the first stop Birmingham!) and back-to-back with the Park Hotel, the Market Hotel began its existence as a coaching inn, providing stabling for the market traders. With the demise of horses the garage was always known as the stables because it retained most of the features associated with its original use. These included a cobbled floor, hayracks and a loft above which was loaned out to Warburtons the Furnishers as a

renovation and restoration room. The whole complex had a unique atmosphere and was a place of welcome to all.

## 2. The Product

Initially the Market Hotel sold Younger’s beers and, after an amalgamation, Scottish Brewers beers. What an incredible range of dark and light ales! How many Wiganers can remember Younger’s No. 3, I.P.A., Double Century, King of Ales, Tartan, Newcastle Brown and the legendary Younger’s No. 1? No.1 was a dark beer of exceptional strength, hence the reason it was usually consumed in ‘gills’ (1/4 pint) and, as I recall, cost 3s. 10d. (about 19p) a pint in 1960. My father only purchased it in firkins (9 gallon barrels) because it was so expensive. What would it cost now?

There was, of course, one exception to drinking No. 1 in gills and that was a certain gentleman who, from his seat in the ‘Gentlemen Only’ room consumed 5 to 6 pints every night! The stories about his journeys home to Newtown are legendary and are still recalled wherever Wigan drinkers meet! The Market also had a brew of its own. This was known as ‘Bright Eye’. It was a mixture of 2 light beers.

## 3. The Clientele

This was an incredible, cosmopolitan mixture of every strand of Wigan society. Most were the ‘salt of the earth’. The Market was an old fashioned pub with many separate rooms, none of the modern, open-plan design. Because of this you could range from a room containing the Town Clerk and his entourage, through the News room with a group led by a retired R.S.M. of the Guards, past the two lounges which, in the 1950’s and ‘60s, would act as Labour Exchanges for the many itinerant Irish construction workers employed



*The Market Hotel, Mesnes Street, Wigan (c.1950). For many years it was the venue for a “cosmopolitan mixture of every strand of Wigan society.”*



firstly in open cast coal mining and then motorway construction, through the Gentlemen Only room (would this be allowed today?) with its wonderful mixture of wholesale and retail market traders, finally finishing up in the Vault in the company of Micky Dalton, Granville, Clapper and Gordon the wholesale fruit porter. All these mentioned were legendary characters in Wigan's past.

The Market Hotel was a meeting place for many organisations. The Old England Club, The Burma Star Association, Manchester Regiment and Comrades, The R.A.F. Association, Wigan Hockey Club, Wigan Rugby Union Club and The Magic Circle, to name but a few. Members of the Amalgamated Engineers Union would call into the Market every Friday night to pay their Union subscriptions. The one meeting that for many weeks would cause me the greatest mystery was the Wigan Mountaineering Club. I would see them all arrive and go upstairs but seldom saw many leave until the answer was revealed – they were abseiling from the upstairs window!

The Market Hotel was as busy at lunchtime as some pubs could only wish for on a Friday night. The employees of Great Universal Stores, based in Rylands Mill, would use it as their canteen and on market day it would be full of farmers. The lunchtime trade would also include the many shoppers from out of town (Leigh, St. Helens, Warrington) who would come to Wigan to shop. What would the retailers of Wigan give now for that volume of custom?

#### 4. The Licensee

In this case, Colin Cook, a man who loved his job, his place of work and most of all his customers, the perfect role model for any pub landlord. The Market Hotel opened at lunchtime and evening time, seven days a week, every week of the year. Apart from his annual holiday and his one night a week off, Colin would be at the pumps. One of his many skills, which I often observed, would be his ability to get two complete strangers, who had usually just called in for one drink, engaged in conversation and then proceeding to buy each other one or more drinks whilst Colin would move on to two more unsuspecting customers!



*Colin Cook, Licensee of the Market Hotel.*

Perhaps the changing face of the Wigan pub scene is best illustrated to me when I go into Wigan at noon on a Sunday. The town centre is dead; the desecrated King Street (the new pub scene) with its accompanying vandalism is plain for all to see. Yet 40 years ago Sunday lunchtime, initially noon to 2 pm then 12.30 to 2.30 pm (to fall in line with other local authorities) was a time of good humour. Wigan men would don a suit, collar and tie and clean shoes, and go for a pint before their traditional Sunday lunch. One little known fact was that Colin always insisted on having freshly tapped ale in all pumps at Sunday lunchtime. You could certainly guarantee the quality of your pint.

One other noticeable feature of modern town centre pubs is the need to employ security staff to keep unwelcome drinkers out. In the past, it was the opposite – you would endeavour to keep customers in. Wigan had an exceptional group of policemen and women who kept the town centre safe, and Colin would never close the gates into the pub yard until bedtime. Many Wigan Bobbies would call for a glass of lemonade and one of the Market's meat and potato pies smothered in gravy. The recipe for this gravy was a guarded secret, and may I take this opportunity to quash one local myth; the gravy did not double up as chicken soup – it was oxtail!!

L.M. Cook  
Standish  
Wigan

## STOP PRESS

### George Lyon *Up Holland Highwayman?*

Just in time for Christmas! Dr. Allan Miller's latest book is about George Lyon, who was executed at Lancaster in 1815, aged 54 years. The village of Up Holland, near Wigan, is synonymous with Lyon and some details about him are recorded in the letters and journals of Ellen Weeton.

Watched by a crowd of thousands, Lyon, together with two accomplices, was "turned off" by 'Owd Ned' Barlow, hangman at Lancaster Castle. After the execution Lyon's body was handed over to the landlord of The Old Dog Inn, Up Holland. His burial, in the parish churchyard of Up Holland the following day, was 'amidst a concourse of several thousand spectators'.

The book explores the cult of George Lyon and his legendary status as a highwayman and Robin Hood figure. But the real George Lyon was responsible for a great number of serious crimes. As a young man he was sentenced to transportation, and on his return continued his life of crime for another 30 years.

**George Lyon, Up Holland Highwayman?** Dr. Allan Miller. Published by European Library, price £9.95 including postage and packing (U.K. only). Available direct from the author at 8 Holgate Drive, Orrell, Wigan WN5 8SL. Tel: (01695) 625370. (Cheques payable to Dr. A. Miller). All author's proceeds donated to local churches and Cancer Relief.

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