

## George East in France Online

George East Books

### A Year Behind Bars

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#### *On Careful Cash And Credit Control:*

*The bank manager called this morning to observe that we are continuing to attract a remarkable range of international celebrities to our little pub. Quite apart from the promisory notes I found in the cash register from Messrs M. Mouse and A. Einstein, it seems Mahatma Ghandi has chosen to use the Leo as a clearing house for his personal cheques. I promised to talk to the staff again, and tore up the IOU from one Mustapha Pint that our head barmaid Twiggy Bristols accepted in good faith last night.*

#### *On Pub Entertainers:*

*What is it about pub singers? This morning at the auditions for our new cabaret act I sat through a dozen performances of well-known songs and didn't recognise one of them. All of my would-be star entertainers spoke fairly normally, and one or two could at least carry a tune, but as soon as they launched into song they became completely unintelligible. The worst offender was a little man called Eric with a limp, an all-too-obvious wig, orange make-up and a frilly shirt open to the waist. He was also wearing a huge medallion, and when he started his impression of Tom Jones, it sounded as if he had swallowed it.*

#### *On Pub Fun And Games:*

*An unpleasant end to the evening with a scuffle in the public bar. Luckily the two combatants were both well over 60, so it came to nothing. The trouble started during a pool league fixture when our captain leaned over to make the vital stroke and win the match. As he lined up for his shot, his false teeth fell out and struck the cue ball, and the opposition called a foul. After I had restored order, there was a long debate and it was finally agreed that the shot could be replayed, this time with our man's teeth safely in his back pocket.*

#### *On Pub Talk:*

*A home match for the ladies' darts team, and I continued my education in the workings of the female mind.*

*After the match and when the other customers and staff have gone, I re-open and tend the bar for a traditional afters session, and am tolerated as long as I keep the drinks coming and my male opinions to myself. I don't know whether to be pleased or hurt that the women completely ignore my presence during these sessions, but it is a unique opportunity to learn what most occupies their minds and thoughts.*

*I know that most women don't believe it, but when men gather for a session at the bar, there is relatively little talk of sex, and even less of personal performance and experiences. Work, sport, TV and cars are invariably the more important topics. With my ladies, recurring themes are the total uselessness and lack of vitality of their men, the comparative sizes and peculiarities of their sexual organs and preferences, and their universal and revolting personal habits. In a few months I have learned more about these ladies' husbands than their doctors, and perhaps even their mothers.*

*I have also learned that women are by far the most pragmatic of the sexes, especially when they have reached a certain age and situation. For my unsentimental ladies, their personal winning post will be passed when the mortgage is paid off and the husband has obligingly died and left them still young enough to enjoy being free of the unappetising and stultifying presence of men, and particularly their dirty underpants.*

#### *On Pubs And Smoking:*

*An item in the local paper reports there are moves to ban smoking in all public places, including public houses. The report said that the majority of customers do not like being in smokey pubs, and that non-smoking pubs are gaining in popularity. Staff are also said to be concerned about the danger to their health of being exposed to the deadly fumes for hours at a time.*

*I do not believe for a moment that only one third of adults smoke nowadays, as virtually all my customers do, and it is hard enough to persuade my staff not to light up while they are actually serving drinks. Out of idle curiosity, I once counted the stubs in all our ashtrays after a busy session, and the total worked out at nearly a packet for every customer we had served. Pubs and smoking have always gone together, and nicotine has become part of the décor and general ambience. Our ceilings are a fetching shade of old gold as a result of the millions of cigarettes which have been smoked on the premises since they were last painted white, and there is something homely and almost comforting about the smell of stale smoke, beer and bodies which greets me as I come down the stairs each morning. I also know of at least one pub in the city that banned smoking with disastrous effect on takings. The licensee lost so much trade in a week that he had to scrap the rule, and the experience proved so stressful that he took up smoking.*

*I must think about the publicity value of declaring the Ship Leopard a smokers-only pub for a week. It would be compulsory for all customers to light up within five minutes of arriving, and we could have happy hours with discounts on the leading brands of cigarettes, and cheap beer for anyone with two fags on the go at the same time. Anyone not smoking would be actively harrassed by other customers, or made to stand outside in the bottle yard to indulge his or her filthy non-habit.*

#### *On Staff Selection:*

*As we are to lose our voluptuous barmaid Twiggy Bristols, my self-appointed entertainments manager Skint Eastwood has also proposed a publicity stunt which will mark her departure and at the same time find someone suitable to take her place. After telling me that the local newspaper has turned down our carefully-worded advertisement for a new barperson (No experience necessary but must be young and pretty and have really big tits) as discriminatory, he suggested we issue a unique challenge to find someone who can measure up to Twiggy's stature. I have agreed to his proposals, but this time I think even he may have gone too far.*

*\*\**

*A bizarre end to another month in my apprenticeship as a future publican . Before I took over the Ship Leopard Tavern, I would not have believed that part of my duties would be conducting job interviews by asking young women to place their bosoms in a greengrocer's scale.*

*The pub was predictably packed for the weigh-in, with customers standing on seats, tables and even the bar*

to watch as a succession of contestants lined up to register their qualifications for Twiggy Bristols. I was amazed at the response to our poster campaign, and it was obvious that the applicants were enjoying the ceremony as much as spectators. After a slight altercation when one of the entrants was found to have cheated by sewing lead fishing weights into her brassiere, the winner and soon-to-be new barmaid at the Ship Leopard romped home by over half a kilo. A striking redhead called Mandy, she more than measures up to Twiggy Bristols, and I know she will be popular with the customers. Mandy has never worked behind a bar and says her adding-up skills are non-existent, but I am sure her other assets will outweigh those initial disadvantages.

It is an uncomfortable thought that male pub customers still place so much value on simple sexual characteristics rather than character, personality or efficiency of service, but it is the way things are, and I cannot afford to try and live outside the real world. And to be honest, as my greengrocer and official invigilator said after checking Mandy's contribution to the scales, you don't get too many of those to the pound.

#### On The Pub Bore:

I have struck a blow for my profession by starting a pub bore competition. The idea came to me this evening after I had to listen to the same joke for the third time in the same session. What made it worse was that, like pub singers, compulsive joke-tellers invariably have no talent for timing and delivery. Another problem is that customers can escape to another pub or at least move along the bar when the resident bore appears. The publican has no choice but to either put up with it, invent an emergency in the cellar, or, in extreme cases, feign a heart attack. In my time at the Leo, I have endured endless hours of listening to involved stories about every non-subject from faulty central heating systems to the the best way to remove caraway seeds from dentures.

Now, I am striking back with a nomination box on the counter and posters inviting entries for the Ship Leopard Bore of the Year Contest. First prize will be a weekend in Belgium for the winner, and the runner-up will also go so that the happy couple will be able to keep each other entertained. The competition has caught on, and a sneak preview at closing time revealed that the front runners are a pensioner whose main topic of conversation is the timetable of the local bus company, and a vegetarian who is trying to form an appreciation society for Brussels sprouts. It will be most suitable if he wins the trip to Belgium. Unfortunately, there are seven nominations for me in the box, but I shall remove them before judgement day.

#### On Winning Over The Customers:

The regulars have had their revenge for my pub bore competition. Today, I received a call from a Sunday newspaper to tell me I have been acclaimed The Worst Landlord in Britain. The reporter said the paper had received thousands of entries for other licensees across the country, but I had romped home by a ratio of fifteen to one votes more than my nearest rival. My alleged qualifications include boring the regulars with my bad jokes, my general stinginess, a lust for crazy stunts and self-publicity, extreme cruelty to the staff and customers, and my refusal to spend more than five minutes behind the bar. A photographer is arriving tomorrow to picture me together with the regulars who sent in the nominations, and there will be a story in the paper and a framed certificate to go on the wall. What my disloyal customers do not know is that the News of the World is also donating a barrel of free beer for those of my regulars who voted for me, and I shall take great delight in selling it to them by the glass.

#### On Customer Consumption:

An uneventful day, except for the loss of Lamp Post Alec. Alec is a small Scot with a gentle manner and a ferocious thirst. By day he works in the kitchens of an old folk's home, and he likes to spend his evenings in keen contention for a place on our Fall of the Month plaque.

When I first came to the Ship Leopard Tavern, I was alarmed at the ease and regularity with which some of the more hardened lounge bar drinkers would measure their length on the carpet, but came to accept the practice as long as my regular floor-divers did no damage to themselves or the furniture. After a while and as the Leo grew in reputation and popularity, I noticed that an air of overtly theatrical competition was creeping

*in, with the various exponents vying to outdo each other for style and general impact on the audience as well as the floor. Now, a whole variety of freestyle techniques are on show as the judging panel prepares to sit. Some more reserved contestants will go for a wilting and leisurely decline from a bar stool, arriving at the prone position in stages. Others opt for a dramatic and sudden collapse while standing at the bar, and especially when I am there to witness their performance. This can be particularly unnerving if you are on the other side of the counter and move away momentarily to serve another customer, then turn back and find the person you have been talking to has dramatically vanished.*

*After some heated disputes about who had gone missing in action with the most panache during one session, I formalised the competition by fixing a brass plaque to the counter, and inviting a panel of experts to decide whose name should be added to the roll of honour each month. Before our celebrity chef became a regular customer, Wingco had long been the undisputed floor-diving champion at the Leopard, but of late his title has been under threat. Alec's pub name came about because, rather than expiring inside the Leo, he prefers the theatre of the outdoors. Having had what he insists is his last drink of the evening, his habit is to stagger through the doors and engineer a collision with the street light immediately outside. After a suitable period for recovery on the pavement, he will weave his way back into the bar to recover by taking what he calls his ABF, or Absolutely Bloody Final drink for the night. It rarely is....*

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