



THE LONGEST CRAWL

I GREW RESTLESS, AND WALKED THROUGH THE LANES by starlight for a drink in the next village with my friend Bob. I wanted to buy him a drink, as he has had a heart attack recently. He is my age and a smoker, similar socio-economic group, almost the same postcode, and his heart attack lowered the statistical likelihood of my having a heart attack all of my own in the near future by a sizeable percentage. An actuary told me this, and I believe it. I felt I owed Bob one.

I like walking on clear moonless nights, but it's difficult to see by starlight, until your eyes adjust. As I came to the first bend in the road after the last houses in the village, I walked straight ahead, and up a field track, until I felt the surface change under my feet, and I knew I had gone wrong. When I found my way back to the road, it was hard to tell which side I was on, and I blundered along, occasionally scraping the hedge. A little further, under the trees, over the haunted bridge, it was darker yet, and only the flap of the flooding river to my left helped me stay on course. But as the road rises over a treeless down from the valley bottom, I came out into the stars, and I could see the way ahead.

In town, on a clear night, you are lucky if you can pick out Orion, or the Plough, because of the light from the streets. But out here, they're difficult to pick out

Which two UK pubs have the greatest distance between them? For writer Ian Marchant, it wasn't enough to answer the question – he decided to walk from one pub to the other, stopping for a pint or two on the way. In this extract from his new book, he describes the start of his beer-fuelled odyssey

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because of the light from other stars. So many stars, and the constellations lose definition. It's almost vulgar, the night sky, like a child's home-made Christmas card, glitter glued to a piece of black card, the Milky Way a smear of PVA, Venus an acid bead, too big, too bright, looking as if it might come unstuck.

And then, the brow of the hill, and the next village bright in thecombe.

This is no man's land; this is deer and fox and otter land, these rolling hills that billow between the Torridge and the Taw. This is Ted Hughes country, the Devon of the *Moortown Diary*. By day, it's the kind of idealised English landscape that men died for in wars, even if they were only familiar with it from chocolate boxes. By night, nothing is familiar, and the only humans on foot are poachers and drunks. A badger skittered past, and made my heart pick up a beat. I walked faster down the hill, back into the safety of real artificial light, past the church, past the shop, and into the pub.

Three pints later, there was no question of walking the couple of miles home. Are you mad? If I'd wobbled about so much sober, what would I be like trying to find my way through the darkened lanes having taken strong drink? So I got a lift, from one of Bob's pals who had drunk almost as much as me. Drinking and driving is endemic in the countryside. Devon and Cornwall police only have two cars, one for Devon and one for Cornwall.

In my youth, I cheerfully hiked the six miles there and back to the nearest pub, most nights of the week, through much wilder countryside than this, in the foothills of the Cambrians. It's shameful that these days I don't feel up to it in the same way; a sign that I am getting older, and that the self-abuse is starting to take its toll. If all the exercise you get is walking to the pub and nipping over to the shop for some fags, I suppose something has to give, actuarial calculations notwithstanding. The drink driving is shameful, too, but we all do it out here from time to time, seduced by the ease of the car. If there had been no lift, and if I had more moral fibre, and had drunk less, I like to think I would have walked home from the pub. If it wasn't so far. Or dark.

People always walk home from the pub in towns. We follow soon-to-be lovers, arm in arm, sliding on icy pavements; laughing friends, strolling home as the nights get shorter; stumbling p*ssheads in rancid August. Before the car, everyone did it in the countryside too. You can still see the footpaths through the meadow, given over now to rambblers.

I lived in a cottage in the Radnorshire hills for several years in the late 1980s. Every evening, at seven, the eightysomething farmer from the last smallholding in the valley would walk past our house, on his way to the Eagle in New Radnor, five miles away. I would often be chopping wood, or working in the garden when he came by, and I would wish him a good evening.

"Aika taylor yife uppa lorngraaass," he would reply, and I would smile and nod. He had what can only be described as a broad accent; not Welsh that close to the border, but more like Herefordshire with a dash of

Xhosa. I didn't understand a thing he said. Sometime after midnight, he would come singing and shouting up the hill. At first he would wake the baby. But that old man never missed a night in the pub, come rain, hail or snow, and eventually the baby became used to him, and would sleep through his ululations. We could never make out what he was shouting, or gargling. But he was expressing himself, and that's supposed to be a good thing.

Over a few months, though, I became attuned to what he was saying to me on the way to the pub.

"I'd loikta take yer woife upp a lorngrass."

"I'd like to take your wife up into the long grass."

I still smiled, but I stopped nodding my agreement. In the country, you'd do almost anything to get in with the locals, but here I drew the line.

According to GK Chesterton, in the poem *The Rolling English Road*, this act of getting to and from the pub is central to an understanding of English topography, as well as English life. Maybe he was right, and the road was plotted by drunks, and maybe the flowers in the ancient hedgerows do follow in their path.

I said earlier that I live in Ted Hughes country. There is more Ted Hughes country in West Yorkshire, right next to Brontë country. In fact, our Ted Hughes ►



◀ country is locked in a bitter dispute with their Ted Hughes country, as to whose country was really Ted's. A short drive away from here is Betjeman's Cornwall. On this side of the Bristol Channel we have Lorna Doone's Exmoor, and on the opposite shore Dylan Thomas's Wales. An hour's drive east, and we're in Hardy's Wessex. Once again, and with all due respect to my publishers, I would like to advocate the designation of the valley of the River Sussex Ouse as Bloomsbury Country. We like our landscape mediated by fiction and poetry.

The history of roads and the history of pubs are inseparably bound together. I'd like to think of this road/pub continuum as Chesterton Country. It's a conservative territory, resistant to change, natural meeting place of Chesterton's *Secret People*, who in the poem suspect that, after all, beer is best. It is not only unfashionable ideas which still have a foothold in Chesterton Country; certain unfashionable emotions have their last strongholds in the pubs of Britain, and these emotions are the ones which are exaggerated by drinking. Pubs are sentimental. Pubs are hearty, pumped up with hail-fellow-well-met back-slapping self-congratulation; they are also hotbeds of nostalgia,

The landscape is as intoxicated as the people who made it. Drunkenness is built in

and a theatre for expressions of maudlin regret. The authors who write well about pubs are often those who we now regard as over-sentimental, or bumptious and hearty; like Chesterton.

I'd like to map the British landscape in drink, formed as it is by drunken roads along field and parish boundaries, drawn between village pubs and inns by travellers. There are barley fields and hop yards, vineyards and cider orchards. The red-brick chimneys of breweries rise on the horizon; distilleries bubble beside peaty lochs; oast-houses, now made over into commuter homes, peep shyly over yew hedges. In cities and towns, we can navigate by pubs, left at the Star, right at the Sun. Dray horses stamp up the South Circular; the Black Country sizzles with pork scratchings; Islay has whisky on its breath, Plymouth gin, Burton light ale. By taking Chesterton's rolling road, maybe we can see that the landscape is as intoxicated as the people who made it. Drunkenness is built in.

If you're British, to help you climb the slopes, and smooth the slide into valleys, there's booze. Per capita, we drink more alcohol than anywhere else, except in the Republic of Ireland, God bless them. We drink champagne at a wedding breakfast, we wet the baby's head at a christening, and when you are called off to the bar of the "decent inn of death", your loved ones will be drowning their sorrows in your old local. I'm only here at all because my dad got my mum tiddly on Babycham at Margate one Whitsun bank holiday Monday.

TWO YEARS AGO TODAY, I went to St Agnes, in the Scilly Isles, the most south-westerly inhabited island in the UK. There are Neolithic graves and ancient mazes, empty beaches Dysoned white by the wind. At low tide, you can walk over the causeway to the island of Gugh, and climb its hill, and look north and east, and imagine

that you are looking back at the whole of Britain, island after island, strung like beads almost to the Arctic Circle. And if you look down, you can see the fishing boat which brought you over to the island moored alone by the jetty. And up from the jetty, there's the Turk's Head. The first pub in Britain. Good pub, too.

When I got home, I thought about St Agnes, about the tiny high-walled fields, ideal for spring flowers and autumn skunk. And I thought about that first pub. By vocation, I'm a pub quizzer. I have a pub-quiz mind.

"If the Turk's Head is the first pub, then where," I wondered, "is the last pub?"

The last place in Britain is the island of Unst, the most northerly of the Shetlands, home to the only working talc mine in Britain. I needed to know how many pubs the last place has, and which is the most north-easterly. It must have a few, I thought, as talc-mining is probably quite thirsty work. I turned to the internet for guidance. Unst has just one pub. The most north-easterly, the furthest you can go for a drink if you're going on from the Turk's Head on St Agnes, is the public bar of the Baltasound Hotel, in Baltasound, on Unst.

What if, of a Friday night, you didn't find a place you liked after leaving the Turk's Head, and just kept going until you got to the Baltasound Hotel? Now, that's interesting, I thought. That could come up as a question one time. The longest possible pub crawl in the British Isles. I put it away. But this little scrap of trivia nagged away at me, and the more I thought about it, and what beer and wine and gin and whisky and pork scratchings and pickled eggs and crisps have meant both to the British people and to the British landscape, the more I knew that I would have to do the trip. That I would follow in the footsteps of Chesterton, and stagger across the intoxicated landscape, and take the drunken English road between the two most distant pubs.

And I would go with my good friend, photographer and counsellor for people with alcohol problems, Perry Venus. We would set out from St Agnes on the first of April, and hopefully arrive a month later on Unst.

THE FIELDS IN THE SCILLIES ARE TINY and have high hedges, to protect them from the wind, and this can make it hard to find your way about.

"We're lost, aren't we?" said Perry.

"Of course we're not lost. I've got the map, look."

"According to you, the journey was to start in the middle of the Troy Town maze. Why, I can't work out..."

"Oh, it's like a journey through Britain. An ancient and profound symbol, following a route that has been followed countless times before for no better purpose than to follow it."

"Yes, all right. Whatever the point, we exit the maze, and then go to our first pub, for our first drink, yes?"

"Yes."

"And now, 10 minutes after starting, we're lost."

Perry was right. The hedges were six feet tall, and a track ran around each of them. St Agnes is the size of a postage stamp, and we had managed to lose ourselves. But after 20 minutes of seemingly aimless wandering, we found the track that leads around the island.

"It's bloody cold to be wandering about on a wind-swept island," said Perry. ▶

◀ "You're not wrong, friend," I said. "Fancy a pint?"

Two good-looking lads were serving behind the bar of the Turk's Head. By now it was 11.30, and the pub was starting to fill; trippers all, as it was clearly a bit early for the 50 or so souls who live on St Agnes. We ordered pasties, which had travelled over on the boat with us from St Mary's, and two pints of Turk's Ale.

I told the lads behind the bar what we were up to; that we were going on the longest pub crawl in the British Isles, between the two most distant pubs. The landlady brought out our pasties, and this gave her the opportunity to recommend places that we should visit. We were not to know at the time that everyone, in every pub, is a living, breathing authority on drink, and that, wherever we went, people would tell us where to go, what to see, and what to do. Above all, they would tell us to go to Eli's, in Huish Episcopi. The landlady of the Turk's Head had the distinction of being first.

"I tell you where you should go. You should go to Eli's, in Huish Episcopi."

I made a note; it's not often you get told to go to Huish Episcopi, or so I naively thought.

WE DECIDED THAT WE NEEDED TO BUILD UP OUR STAMINA for this trip. There was one more pub to try locally, before we headed off back on the road; the Duke of York's, in Iddesleigh, Devon. I wish I lived nearer, and then it would be my local. I wish you lived nearer, then it would be yours, and you could stand me a pint for recommending it. Any Americans reading this, who are wanting to find the perfect English country pub,

It's a superb piece of sleight of hand on Jamie's part, who ought to be Minister for Pubs

should look no further. There we were, only day three of the trip, and I knew I'd be hard pressed to find a pub I like more. Me and Perry took my girlfriend and an artist pal called Rachel Hazell out to dinner there that Saturday evening. Rachel was in the area setting up an exhibition of her work; she's a bookbinder, and a book artist, and a good egg.

The Duke of York's is up a back lane next to the church, like country pubs should be. A huge pile of firewood stands outside the front door and the sign is battered and unobtrusive, the Duke still looks like a house. Inside, it is dark by the bar, which is good and brown, with curling newspaper stories about the village, dating back to the Thirties, pinned to the wall. There are notices about cricket practice, jumble sales, church events. There is a large inglenook fireplace, with blazing logs and a rocking chair either side of it.

If you don't like dogs, don't bother going; there are always three or four sitting under tables and drinking beer from bowls. There are a couple of cheerful Airedales who hang out there quite a bit; their owners always buy them a bag of crisps each, which they throw, unopened on to the floor. Before the dogs can eat the crisps, they have to open the bags, at which they are rubbish. I'm afraid I find this endlessly funny.

The beer is kept in barrels, from which your pint is tapped directly; the Duke of York's is one of those pubs

that appear year after year in the *Good Beer Guide*. You may meet a short, scruffy-looking grey-haired gentleman, sitting at the bar, a pint in his hand, a twinkle in his eye, mud on his wellies, dispensing good cheer and wisdom. This is Jamie Stewart, the landlord.

When he's not landlording, he's also a farmer, and much of the produce used in the kitchen comes from his farm. He's been keeping pubs for most of his life, and he has it down to a fine art. He trains all his bar staff in how to be naturally friendly, which sounds impossible, but he pulls it off. They always seem pleased to see you.

The kitchen is open all day, and yet the Duke does not stand in danger of becoming a gastro-pub. I had hogs pudding, the Devon version of haggis. Perry had a Barnsley chop, my girlfriend had devils on horseback, and Rachel had sea bass. That's just the bar menu. There is a restaurant, but it's tucked out of the way and does not affect the atmosphere of the place, which remains that of a lively friendly local Devon pub. People go there to drink, and to eat, without each affecting the other. It's a superb piece of sleight of hand on Jamie's part, who should be Minister for Pubs.

We talked about the trip, and about where we were going. Rachel dropped a bombshell. As a bookbinder, she runs workshops in out-of-the-way places, including the Scillies and Shetland. Nobody else I'd talked to about the trip knew what the two most distant pubs were; they would always mention Land's End and John o'Groat's. But Rachel knew.

"The Turk's Head on St Agnes, and the Baltasound Hotel on Unst. Know 'em well. I run workshops in Scilly, and one of my friends lives in one of the two houses on Gugh."

"How come you've been to Unst?"

"Same as ever. Running workshops. Islands are great; everyone is looking for something new to do. In fact, I'm up there at the end of the month."

"That's when we'll be there."

"Give me a ring; we'll meet up. I'll leave you a message at the Wind Dog Café, on Yell, next to where you catch the ferry for Unst."

At first, this annoyed me a bit. It's a bit galling when on day three of your trip, not only are you sitting in what you already know to be the best pub in England, just 20 minutes' drive from where you live, but you're sitting with someone who's already been lots of times to the utterly obscure places where you are going. But then I realised that this simply reinforces my point, one which I'd thought about: that in these islands, we are all locals.

Jamie gave me a tip, too.

"Where are you going next?" he said,

"Back on the road tomorrow. We're going to a cider-tasting, in Somerset."

"Somerset, hey? Well, if you get the chance, you should go to Eli's."

"That's in Huish Episcopi, isn't it?" said Rachel, "I know it well..." ■

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