

Evening Standard Country Pub of the Year - remembered

It was all down to Phyllis King, aided a little by Dick Armstrong in the garage. If she had not agreed to be the local distributor of the Evening Standard and Dick had not agreed to be the drop-off point, we never would have heard of the Evening Standard Country Pub of the Year.

But there it was one evening, an article on this new competition and a coupon for people to nominate their favourite pubs, one in London Town and one in the country. The paper's circulation lay within a line running from Bournemouth to Bedford, across to the east coast and back round to Bournemouth, so quite a lot of pubs to choose from.

I had just finished university and was helping Mum and Dad in the Hart. Here was a challenge. I rang the paper to see if we were allowed to have a supply of coupons on the bar for regulars. No problem. I spent Saturday afternoon cutting out coupons from unsold papers supplied by Phyllis. It was a busy Saturday night I remember. I went from group to group to couple to lone drinker armed with coupons and pens and blatantly asked for votes. Dad finally lost his temper and suggested in fairly colourful language that I should get behind the bar and do some work.

On Monday morning some 50 completed coupon were dropped in the post-box in the wall by the shop door, and we all forgot about Pub of the Year. Then to our amazement, one evening there was a picture of the White Hart along with 15 other pubs, eight country, eight Town, the finalists in the competition. The accompanying article said that each pub would get a surprise visit from a panel of judges made up of journalists with an interest in food and drink and a couple of restaurateurs who often featured in the paper.

Time passed. It was summer and we were busy. We all forgot about Pub of the Year.

It was a regular who had gone out to the gents who alerted us to the arrival of the judges one Saturday night around 9 o'clock. We did not see too many stretch limos in Newenden in 1967: so the one drawing up outside was a bit of a give-away.

The Hart was in full Saturday night swing with heaving bar and restaurant and a set of second sitting orders waiting in the kitchen. Then 10, or maybe it was 12, rather lovely strangers fought their way in and ordered a round of drinks, beer had to be tried, naturally, but also one or two exotic things to test the bar staff. Could they eat? Oh certainly, if they did not mind waiting. They waited. Everything on the menu was sampled. People were particular about how each steak was to be done. They ate, paid the bill and left.

Weeks passed. The paper continued to show pictures of the 16 pubs and just for fun it was decided that I would spend a day going round the opposition with Chris Veall, one of our younger customers, in his rather distinctive motor car, a two-seater Turner convertible which roared and bounced most satisfactorily in sports car fashion.

The trip was planned: an early start going north through the Dartford Tunnel to the Rose at Shenfield in Essex which we would have to reach by 10am opening time if we were going to get to all the others, bar one. There was one somewhere in the New Forest that we had to leave out. The last pub would be in the Lewes area which we would drop down to from the one close to East Grinstead. And there would be time in the afternoon, when all the pubs would be shut, for us to drop into Chris' flat in Barnes for a cup of tea. It was going to be quite a day.

Two days before the great trek a telegram was phoned through - (by the 60s telegrams were dictated over the phone unless it was a wedding and you wanted the version with the pretty pictures!) - we had won! But we were not to tell anyone. The newspaper and the brewery would sort out the arrangements for the prize giving but would we keep a particular Sunday in October clear please?

It was decided that Chris would have to be let in on the secret but I would not tell him until we were through the Dartford pipe in case he decided it was not worth going.

It was an overcast day and the garage was just about open when Chris arrived. Dad insisted on the car being filled up on his account and off we went. When I confessed that we already knew the Hart had won, my memory is that Chris roared with laughter and we had an excellent day travelling incognito and feeling more than a little smug.

Judy Vinson (To be continued)