

Evening Standard Country Pub of the Year – remembered – Part 2

When we received the news that we had won the Country Pub of the Year we thought the brewery might supply some barrels for a bit of a party.

Leafing through dad's files I found a cutting from the Evening Standard from September 5th announcing our win. Across the top someone from South Harrow has written: 'Congratulations to Mr and Mrs Vinson. I wish the pubs in my district were like yours. Cheers and Good Luck!'

The Hart is described as a small, quiet country pub. 'The regulars still play push penny as opposed to shove ha'penny. It has always been so at the White Hart and they aren't devaluing for anyone. There is no juke box, no one-armed bandit, no piped music, certainly no pop group'. Mum was asked how pub life compared to farming, which is what the family had been doing just three years previously. 'It's far harder work than farming ever was. Or anyway it certainly is for me.'

Friends and complete strangers sent cards, notes, telegrams and letters full of congratulations. There is also a letter from someone in Cooden booking a table for lunch for four and asking that the chauffeur be accommodated somewhere whilst they dine. The pub was obviously moving up in the world!

On October 9th life in this country changed for ever. The breathalyser was introduced. And when Phyllis King delivered that night's copy of the Evening Standard we all had a chuckle at the JAK cartoon. Picture two Rollers and two Minis parked outside a pub. Two mature women in dressing gowns and slippers, hair in rollers, each have a city gent slung over a shoulder, umbrellas and briefcases dangling. The caption reads 'First time my old man's been pleased to see me at closing time for a good while!' Look carefully and you can see the pub sign shows the outline of a hart and the pair of windows are unmistakably the windows in what was then the Public Bar.

Presentation day was set for Sunday October 22nd – the festivities to be across the two hour Sunday lunch time which were the normal pub hours back then. Dad was dressed in his interview suit and ready for his moment of glory when, 15 minutes before the off, a brewery manager appeared quivering with indignation about the state of the brass sparge pipe in the gents. It must be polished forthwith Mr Vinson. And such was the relationship of brewery to tenant that off dad went with brasso and rag.

On the typed foolscap sheets of paper detailing all the arrangements there are just two references to the general public, firstly parking would be in Bourne's yard, the one the other side of the river, as the pub car park was for official cars only and secondly that very few people would be able to watch the unveiling of the plaque because of the road. In the event everyone just piled out of the pub on to the road and the three policemen on duty coped with the traffic as best they could.

The rest of the arrangements cover the VIPs, the arrival of the helicopter with Jimmy Edwards, the big name for the day, the names of the other 80 people who were to sit down to a buffet lunch with champagne in the marquee erected next to the car park. There were to be a series of presentations: a painting of the pub from the brewery, a number of useful items from companies looking for publicity: a glass washer, useful, a dehumidifier, useless, a giant bottle of Asbach brandy and a not very pretty painting of the Cutty Sark. The best item was the original of the JAK cartoon given pride of place in the public bar.

Whilst mum and dad were engaged with the official party out in the marquee, I was part of the team behind the bar with the regular female bar staff and additional help hired from a London agency: three tall, busty girls, I seem to recall, with big hair in hot pants, cheese cloth blouses and long suede boots. The one thing all us girls had to be good at was adding up. No money came across the bar but every round had to be rung into the till for claiming back from the brewery. Most of the people who came were regulars. We did have a lot of regulars. And the brewery was awfully surprised when they got the bill!

Judy Vinson