

The Salisbury - A Legendary London Pub

Written by Andy Owen



The Salisbury, in St Martin's Lane, is my favourite London pub.

It has been, for as long as I can remember.

Many wonderful times have been had in there, with wonderful people. I hope there will be a many more, before I have to swop my allegiance for the agency bar in the sky.

The Salisbury isn't what it was, of course. Nothing is anymore.

The evaporation of standards has affected this once legendary hostelry, as it has affected everything else. But, it is still probably London's most magnificently preserved historic drinking house.

It was majestic in its day. Now, it's just OK.

Which is very sad - but shit happens.

Even to legends.

Let me tell you about The Salisbury.

It's quite a tale...

You'll find it at 91–93 St Martin's Lane, Covent Garden. And, believe it or not, there has been a pub on this site since 1694.

In the 1700's, the pub was known as The Coach and Horses. The five floors above the pub were used as a coaching inn for weary travellers to stay and rest.

Around 1855 a new landlord took over. His name was Ben Caunt.



Ben was originally from Lancashire - and he was the bare-knuckle fighting champion of London - and later to become the heavyweight champion of England, after a savage fight lasting 35 rounds.

Ben went on to be to be the manager of the pub for a good few years, until tragedy struck. There was a fire in 1862 in which he lost two of his children.

Legend has it, that Big Ben was named as a tribute to Ben Caunt.

After the fire, the pub was left empty for over twenty years until Lord Salisbury bought it. He spent a large sum of money on it - and 'The Salisbury's Stores' opened in 1892 as a traditional Gin Palace.

You can see two 'S' letters dating from 1892 engraved on the facade.

It was refurbished again in 1899 and turned into a Victorian pub - and named The Salisbury, after the Third Marquis of Salisbury, who was said to have been Queen Victoria's favourite Prime Minister.



At her peak, Marianne Faithfull was probably the most beautiful woman in the world.

She was certainly the sexiest.

Here she is, photographed in The Salisbury in 1964, by Gered Mankowitz.

"I am a fabulous beast -and, as such, I should only be glimpsed very rarely" Marianne Faithfull

The Salisbury is a Grade II listed building, with an impressive and particularly fine late Victorian interior, complete with extravagant art nouveau elements.

This includes bronze nymphs holding long-stemmed flowers with light bulbs in the middle - and large mirrors and statues of the goddess Diana.

A lot of the original bar still remains today. The marble top is over a hundred years old and was used because it is cold. The idea was, that your drinks would remain cold on the stone, even in summer.



The mirrors behind the bar came from other old pubs that had closed down - and are over 150 years old. CAMRA's National Inventory calls it "an historic pub interior of national importance".

The Cecil family still owns the building's freehold and the Cecil family coat of arms lies between two angels supporting a canopy above the door on the corner.

Nearby Cecil Court is also named after the family.

Interesting as all that is, it's people that make a pub.

Real people.

Great people.

Characters.



And The Salisbury has seen more of those, than any pub anywhere in the world.

Let's fast forward to the 50's and 60's, when the pub's popularity soared - and a host of famous people were regular visitors to the pub.

Individuals the like of which you will never see again. Because they don't make them like that anymore...

Let's start with a few names:

Richard Burton, Peter O'Toole, Richard Harris, Oliver Reed, Terence Stamp, Albert Finney, Michael Caine, Roger Moore. Keith Waterhouse and many, many more...

Harris, if he was in London, was nearly always the first on the doorstep when the pub opened up every day.

He was regularly joined by Burton, O'Toole and Moore, plus others.

In Johnny Briggs' (Mike Baldwin in Coronation Street) autobiography, he tells this story:

"There was a whole gang of us – Richard Burton, Roger Moore, Peter O'Toole and Richard Harris – and we used to meet in the Salisbury if we weren't working.

If you had a job, you put a quid in the kitty and if you were on the dole, you put in ten bob (50p) and we'd regularly party through Friday to Saturday breakfast.

Roger was always working, such a good-looking swine. But he would always send himself up and get the drinks in. Meanwhile, when Peter O'Toole came back from filming Lawrence of Arabia, he swept into the Salisbury with its mirrored walls, wearing his full Lawrence kit for a laugh.



He yelled: 'I'm home from the desert, dears!'

To which I promptly called out,

"Never mind the desert; have you got your bloody handbag so you can buy the beers?"

Because of its popularity in the theatrical industry, The Salisbury was well known as a gay-friendly pub.

The 1961 British suspense film 'Victim', directed by Basil Dearden and starring Dirk Bogarde and Sylvia Syms, included scenes inside and outside The Salisbury - and was the first English language film to use the word "homosexual".

In 1972, *'Travels With My Aunt'*, directed by George Cukor and starring Maggie Smith, Alec McCowen and Louis Gossett Jr., also had scenes shot in and around the pub. As did *'Goodbye, Mr. Chips'* directed by Herbert Ross - and starring Salisbury regular Peter O'Toole, with Petula Clark, Michael Redgrave and George Baker.

Two other films in more recent times - *'The Boat That Rocked'* and *'Schindler's List'* also had scenes shot in and around the pub.

Richard Burton loved The Salisbury dearly.

While he was filming the studio scenes of *Where Eagles Dare* at MGM in 1968, he regularly visited - and, on a couple of occasions, brought Clint Eastwood along.



They stood at the bar, clearly enjoying each other's company and the liquid refreshment on offer.

Eastwood became a barman's favourite, as he hated coins and refused to take any change after buying his rounds, telling the staff to 'keep it'.

When Burton married Elizabeth Taylor for the second time in 1975, they celebrated with a reception at the pub.

The guest list was a who's who of the film and entertainment industry.

Burton's bust-ups with Taylor are the stuff of legend, but many of his drinking friends claimed to have never seen his boisterous side.

As Johnny Briggs remembered:

"He was extremely pleasant. He used to sit agonising over lines. He'd clutch his head and boom in full theatrical splendour, "The agony of it all!"

We thought it was a laugh, but never laughed when he brought Liz along. She was an Oscar winner and expected to be treated like one.

Not that Richard was putting up with any of that nonsense.

On one occasion, Liz - with her mesmerising violet eyes - foolishly asked if the pub did Martinis. In those days we had a rule: we all drink beer.

Richard boomed: "Look, woman, you'll have a bloody pint or a bloody half-pint.

So whaddya want?" Liz had a half-pint".

When Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh were having their affair, they were often seen walking into the pub and going up the magnificent staircase to the private rooms on the first floor.



That staircase is still there, in all its glory.

O'Toole also had some colourful episodes in The Salisbury.

In 1959, following a successful run at the Royal Court, the play '*The Long and The Short and the Tall*' was transferred to the New Theatre - (now the Noel Coward Theatre) - literally a few paces across the alley from the Salisbury.

It was written by Willis Hall and centred on a squad of British soldiers nervously patrolling the Malayan jungle while the Japanese advanced towards Singapore. It was made into a film starring Laurence Harvey a few years later.



Robert Shaw was in the play, as was Ronald Fraser. Who was the lead?

Peter O'Toole.

He must have thought his boat had come in, working just a few yards from his favourite pub. Very often, he was seen in the pub before the show. Sometimes accompanied by other members of the cast.

It was so easy to slip out the back of the theatre and into the Salisbury's side door - which is still there, by the way.



On one occasion, while frequenting the company of a group of very agreeable friends, his usual timing discipline got a bit lost.

Over at the theatre, there was 5 minutes to go before curtain up - and O'Toole was nowhere to be seen.

People were really panicking.

None more so, than O'Toole's understudy - who was Michael Caine.



The stage director rushed into his dressing room and told him to get his uniform on.

Michael was trembling.

There were mumblings everywhere and someone whispered, "Christ, is he going to cope with this?"

Then, suddenly, the Stage Door burst open and O'Toole breezed in, shouting, "No you don't, Michael." They grabbed O'Toole and put his outfit on in record time.

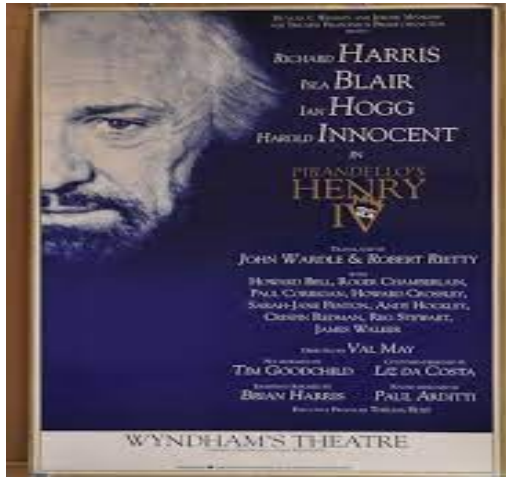
Within 2 minutes, the curtain went up and he was on stage.

Caine, sweating profusely, collapsed into a chair.

Once on stage, O'Toole moved towards one of the windows at the back of the set and threw up. The audience thought it was all part of the play.

O'Toole's performance that night, was described as 'flawless'.

Another regular at the Salisbury - Richard Harris - also played at a theatre a minute or two from the legendary delights of The Salisbury.



In 1990, he played Henry IV at the Wyndham Theatre. He had just turned 60 and it had been 26 years since he was last on stage.

So when he announced plans to return to the stage in a serious drama, the gossip vultures gathered in waiting.

He did, after all, have a well-established reputation as a hell-raiser.

It all kicked off rather quickly. Leading lady Sarah Miles quit in a glare of publicity. Three directors and two designers went too.

But, replacements were found - and the show went on.

On the first night, Harris threw up, just like O'Toole. Whether he'd been down the alley to The Salisbury before the show, I don't know. But, I wouldn't bet against it.

Despite all that, by curtain call, he knew they'd pulled it off.

Henry IV turned out to be a *triumph*.

Of 25 London theatre critics, 23 gave the production rave reviews.

My wife and I saw the show. Harris was magnificent.

So, Richard Harris was back. And King of the West End again.

And where did he celebrated his success? Just down the alley to The Salisbury, going in that side door to be welcomed by his old friends in the back room.

The guest list was never made public.

But, I would like to speculate on some, who just *might* have been there...

Peter O'Toole, Albert Finney, Terence Stamp, Richard Burton, Michael Caine, Robert Shaw, Ronald Fraser, Oliver Reed, Keith Waterhouse, Laurence Harvey, Kenneth Griffith, Trevor Howard, Richard Attenborough - and, if they were in the country at the time - Robert Mitchum, Peter Finch and Lee Marvin.

All part of the 'clan' at some time or other.

What a party *that* would have been!

Yes, some very famous and infamous people have called The Salisbury home.

Believe me, they are still there.

All of them.

You can feel them around you, encouraging you to enjoy yourself - and 'have another one'.

As they regularly did...

The marble bar that you will rest your glass on, is their bar.

And, they are in there, watching you.

If only that bar could talk. What tales it would tell.

The mirrors, too, hold the secrets of a million conversations and will have witnessed the start of thousands of affairs.

Next time you are in London, you must go there.

There are some very special people waiting to see you...

