



## Taken by Surprise: Inside the re-opening of everyone's favourite neighbourhood pub

A genuine institution and a piece of Chelsea history: The Surprise is back — and not a moment too soon...

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**T**his funny old age has served up plenty of curious new phrases. But my favourite, perhaps, is one I heard just last week: “vertical drinking.” The term does what it says on the pint glass, really: sipping a drink while in an upright position in a hospitality setting. Funny that something so simple, so banal, so once-ordinary can take on such a frisson and thrill after you’ve been without it for long enough. But we’ve all been through a collective sensory deprivation since March 2020, and it’s clear now that the sixth sense isn’t heat, or clairvoyance, or seeing dead people: it’s pubs. I still haven’t quite put my finger on just why I’ve missed the pub so much — it seems big and deep but inexpressible, almost chemical, like nicotine cravings or teenage unrequited love. Nor do I know precisely why there is sometimes an odd catch in the throat when my friends and I talk about fizzy 5% ABV continental draught lagers, sipped on some imagined Friday at 6pm. (After all, you can achieve something similar from a park bench, given the right tog of North Face and a decent tote bag.)



But when Jack Greenall — the new proprietor of The Surprise in Chelsea, and a man who understands these things to their very marrow — told me recently, with a wry smile, that he was looking forward to the return of “vertical drinking”, the blood began to rush in my ears once again. Strip away the health-and-safety patois and you’ve got it all, right there. It’s almost poetry. That air of serendipity and happenstance; the absence of booking forms or QR codes; the casual, lean-on-the-bar chumminess of the early evening; the *what’ll we have sir* welcome of the beaming publican. *Vertical drinking*. No hovering on the threshold and digging around for a paper mask. No acrid sanitizer or two-hour constraints. Walk right in and make your choice and pay your money and stand and sip and talk. Pubs like they are on soap operas; pubs as you imagined them, dreamt of them, yearned for them when you were 14. Pubs as they were and pubs as they should be. When I interviewed Jack last week — ostensibly on neutral journalistic grounds, but really just to chum up to the future proprietor of my favourite venue — the word that kept popping up was ‘proper.’ Proper proper proper. It is the perfect adjective to put before ‘pub’. The highest praise you can give to one. If an American used it, you’d cringe. When your dad uses it, you listen. And when Jack uses it, you believe him.



The Surprise, old and new, is proper in every sense. It has been open, with a few hiatuses and the odd fallow year, since 1853. It’s named after the French corvette warship *Unité*, which was re-christened *The Surprise* when it was captured by the British and subsumed into the Royal Navy in 1796. Chelsea, always a land of admirals and tradition, honoured it with a drinking spot a few decades later, and there’s something of the stately galleon to the building even now: high ceilings on a room wrapped by broad, tall windows; dark oak frames and pewter piping on the glass. It has changed hands dozens of times in its 170-odd years, bouncing between breweries and independents. There’s a photo of it from the early twentieth century, painted black and sombre, promising Toby Ale and pints of Mild.

## “ONE OLDER ACQUAINTANCE HALF RECALLS A PET LION LIVING IN THE APARTMENTS ABOVE THE PUB...”

In the autumn of 1940, bombs and a landmine destroyed part of Christchurch Terrace (which still flanks the pub), taking a good chunk of The Surprise out with it. In the 1960s, the establishment took on the complexion of bohemian, art school Chelsea — people of a certain age remember it fuzzily as a grand, raucous party pub, filled with London’s great and good and not-so-good; a place for Lords and lock-ins. One older acquaintance half recalls a pet lion living in the apartments above it. Another asked Jack, during recent renovations, whether he would re-install the ‘stripper’s pole’ that used to inhabit the private dining room, apparently, in the 1970s.



The Surprise in the early Twentieth Century. In 1940, it was partially destroyed by a bomb



A younger crowd recalls it fondly as one of the first proper places they drank after moving to London: the first pub away from the high street drinking holes, the graduate spots; a venue above the Clapham-Battersea-Fulham nexus that only the more seasoned pubman would know about. When I posted on Instagram asking for memories of the place, I got a deluge of responses, many prefaced by a 'please don't print this, but...' warning. A couple of trends, though, emerged from the throng: that this has always been a place for very long afternoons with close friends; and that it is a particularly convincing spot for dates — relaxed but never shabby; just the right amount of effort. (And just a short trot down to Cheyne Walk/ Albert Bridge afterwards, should you want something romantic and twinkly.) One friend tells me it was always catnip to Americans: "it feels like a tiny, old, hidden village pub, in the middle of London." The position and aspect is also rated highly: there is something solid, permanent, baked-in about a pub set into a terraced corner. It feels as if the pub sprung up first, and the houses came next. And it means the Surprise is filled with a lovely light. But most of the feedback is intangible and wistful. "it is my favourite pub because it has always been my favourite pub", says one friend, which sort of sums it up. In short: no pressure.



"We seem to have stumbled upon an amazing landmark with an incredible history," says Jack. "So many people say it's their favourite pub, whether they have memories from their early twenties or from special occasions. I think it's a fantastic location, surrounded by beautiful parks. It's a beautiful building."



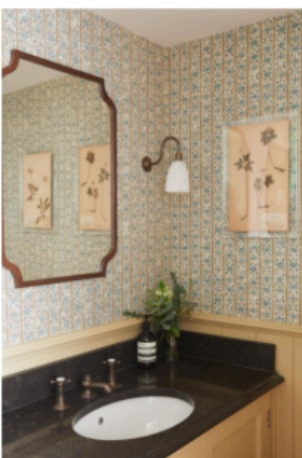
There can be few men better suited to this daunting task. Jack is a descendant of the Greenall-Whitley brewing dynasty, which has been overseeing pubs since the mid eighteenth century. He worked in hospitality all his career, before taking over the Pheasant Inn near Lambourn, Berkshire — another pub with a set of adoring global disciples. But for The Surprise, the most important critics are closer to home. The neighbours on Christchurch Street and Christchurch Terrace have been keeping a close eye on proceedings and eyeing up the new landlords. “So many people have stuck their head around the door to introduce themselves,” Jack says. “The local advice was simple: don’t overcomplicate things. Good food, friendly, well-maintained.” But mostly the residents seem excited. “We have had such a wave of enthusiasm and encouragement,” Jack says. “There’s a lovely old tradition where everyone on the street has one of their own silver mugs to use at the pub, which we’re hoping to reinstate,” he explains. “So they can pour a pint into their house mug, which is fun.”



When he first arrived, Jack sat outside the front of the pub for two days “watching the world go by,”, learning the ebb and flow of the street. “The houses have families in them, and this square really does feel like a village — we’ve got the church, school children coming down the road, Battersea Park just across the bridge. I’m sure we’ll get a few thirsty teachers in here. When you take on a pub like this, it’s very much about taking on its next chapter, and a new stage for such a historic business.”

**“THE HOUSES HAVE FAMILIES IN THEM, AND THIS SQUARE REALLY DOES FEEL LIKE A VILLAGE...”**

A big part of that, of course, is the look and feel. A great deal of smarter pubs have drifted towards a restaurant aesthetic over the past decade. Gastro, they once called it, when they just meant more expensive. Even pre-Covid, several in this neck-of-the-woods would ask you not to hover with your pint, and tell you that you had to sit down to drink. (Vertical drinkers were an eyesore and a fire hazard.) Others would gently press the menu on you, and huff if you shunned the small plates in favour of a bag of salt and vinegar. But the Surprise is proper, as we know. Enter Isabella Worsley, the much-praised interior design who has taken on the daunting revamp — and whose main task, really, “was to try not to reinvent the wheel.”



"Everyone is very much craving community, having had quite a quiet year," she begins. "And so in terms of interior, we wanted to play on that – keeping quite natural earthy tones to it, and at the same time having a subtle nod to old England, using the hessian olive sacking for the cafe curtains, for example." It looks the part: traditional but modern at once; the dark green exterior bouncing around with those splendid butcher's-stripe awnings, and the olive banquettes, and the traditional bottle-green glass accents of the windows. There is reclaimed pub furniture in dark woods, and nods to the pub's naval heritage on the walls. Rule Britannia, but have a Timothy Taylor first.



There are screens to play the racing, and corners to sink into on a Sunday afternoon (horizontal drinking?) and a little table in a nook halfway up the stairs, laid out with the day's papers. When I am there, for a brief hour, there is an expectant thrill in the air, which, having never opened a hospitality venue, I can only compare to the dress rehearsal excitement of some half-forgotten school play. Two of the kitchen staff trot downstairs to lend a hand and heave great big olive trees in huge pots out to the pavement, where they flank the front door. Someone has practiced their handwriting on the chalkboard by the bar: 'Gimlet, £12'. Barrels roll about, and a neighbour's head bobs briefly above the curtains, nose to the glass, thirsty and panting. The taps are polished and the glassware is neatly stacked. There are sounds from the cellar, a rumble of moving furniture from above, a kitchen alive with something garlicky and rich, the whirring of ovens and a little radio. Isabella nudges a great plant pot an inch or two to the left outside, and I ask Andre, the manager, if he could open up tonight, if he had to. He shrugs and smiles: "sure, why not?". Jack and I talk a bit about pies, and the mid-morning sunshine beams in through the big windows. This is the calm before the storm, if you'll permit the maritime metaphor. I have rarely been so eager for the heavens to open.