



# *The enduring appeal of the local*

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The Social Issues Research Centre**

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## Contents

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<b>Introduction</b> . . . . .	<b>3</b>
<b>Research methods</b> . . . . .	<b>6</b>
Focus groups and interviews . . . . .	6
Omnibus Poll . . . . .	6
<b>How often do we go to the pub?</b> . . . . .	<b>7</b>
What it means to be a 'regular' . . . . .	8
<b>Why do we go to pubs?</b> . . . . .	<b>10</b>
<b>What makes the pub different / special</b> . . . . .	<b>14</b>
Eating out . . . . .	16
The Landlord / landlady . . . . .	17
<b>Who do we go to the pub with?</b> . . . . .	<b>19</b>
Going Solo . . . . .	19
Gender . . . . .	20
Meeting new people: Expanding sociable networks . . . . .	20
Friends, family, pub-friends and work-mates . . . . .	21
Drinks with close friends . . . . .	21
Pub-friends . . . . .	22
When pub-friends become pub-family . . . . .	23
Work networks . . . . .	23
Smoking networks – sparking up new friendships . . . . .	24
The national picture . . . . .	24
<b>Pub rituals</b> . . . . .	<b>28</b>
Gossip and democracy . . . . .	28
Round buying . . . . .	28
<b>The enduring appeal of the pub in the new technology age</b> . . . . .	<b>30</b>
<b>Conclusions from Kate Fox</b> . . . . .	<b>33</b>

## Introduction

In the late 1930s Tom Harrisson and his colleagues at the Mass-Observation Unit conducted what is probably the earliest, and certainly the most extensive, study of pub-going. Centred on 'Worktown' (Bolton) but venturing to Blackpool in the holiday season, the team of social anthropologists did little else for nearly two years but sit in pubs and observe the complex rituals of behaviour that subtly underlie everyday life in the local.

Their report *The Pub and the People* was not published until the Second World War was nearly over – ostensibly because of paper shortages but more probably because the country had more on its mind than the apparent 'frivolities' of the snug or saloon in a Lancashire town. And yet, as Harrisson and his colleagues showed so clearly, the pub as a British institution towered over its rivals for attention, commitment and, indeed, 'donations': "Of the social institutions that mould men's lives between home and work in an industrial town, such as Worktown, the pub has more buildings, holds more people, takes more of their money, than church, cinema, dance hall, and political organizations put together."<sup>1</sup>

Today, little in reality has changed. There may now be rather fewer pubs in relation to the population and many certainly look rather different from the vaults and taprooms of old. But as this project focusing on the 'local' has shown, and in line with our work on all aspects of pub life on and off over the past thirty years, the pub retains its unique position in British society, and for much the same reasons as in Harrisson's day. As he noted then, it is ... "the only kind of public building used by large numbers of ordinary people where their thoughts and actions are not being in some way arranged for them; in the other kinds of public building they are the audiences, watchers of political, religious, dramatic, cinematic, instructional or athletic spectacles. But within the four walls of the pub, once a man has bought or been bought his glass of beer, he has entered an environment in which he is a participator rather than a spectator."

This idea of participation is crucial to understanding what pubs, and locals in particular, are all about – why people are attracted to them and why they endure as a focus for social networks even in the digital age of online communities, texting and other forms of 'instant' communication. We may go to the pub 'for a drink', but 'having a drink' (rather than just 'drinking') is essentially a social act surrounded by tacit rules – a special 'etiquette' that gives us a sense of inclusion and belonging that is independent of our status in the mainstream world. In this sense the pub is very much a social leveller – something that was apparent even in the Middle Ages. As Theodore Leinwand notes in his study of Shakespeare's plays, in the 15th century, alehouses, taverns and inns were " ... sites ... where people of disparate status mixed...[which] brought men, high born and low, into relation, fostering a propinquity that might secure, adjust or threaten hierarchies."<sup>2</sup>

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1 Mass-Observation (1943) *The Pub and the People*. London: Victor Gallanz Ltd

2 Leinwand, T.B. (1989). Spongy plebs, mighty lords and the dynamics of the alehouse (drinking in Shakespeare). *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 19(2): 159-184

The special features of the local – the layout, the decor, the music in some cases, the games, the etiquette and ritual practices and, of course, the drinking – are all designed to promote positive social interaction, reciprocity and sharing. In this sense the British pub has much in common with dedicated drinking places in other parts of the world. In Austrian *lokals*, for example, the anthropologist Thomas Thornton observed that " ... intimate social groups...come into being there, even if only to last the night. Benches surround the tables, forcing physical intimacy between customers. Small groups of twos or threes who find themselves at the same or adjoining tables often make friends with their neighbours and share wine, schnapps, jokes and game-playing the rest of the evening."<sup>3</sup>

In almost all drinking-places, in almost all cultures, the unwritten laws and customs involve some form of reciprocal drink-buying or sharing of drinks. This practice has been documented in drinking-places from modern, urban Japan and America and rural Spain and France to remote traditional societies in Africa and South America and has long been recognised by anthropologists, sociologists and even zoologists – so fundamental is this practice to the survival of any social species.

The combination of the special factors of the local and its near equivalents in other countries ensures that it is often at the centre of community life. In Poland, for example, the *Karczma* is where contracts are sealed, village disputes settled, celebrations held and marriages arranged<sup>4</sup>, while for Guatemalans in the US, the bar is a meeting-place where "one may seek out others, develop friendships, and if needed, find temporary assistance in a loan or lodging or obtain information about jobs."<sup>5</sup> In New Zealand, Theodore Graves and his colleagues observed that " ... the pub is probably the most important working-man's club. Men from all ethnic groups come there to be with their friends; their alcohol consumption is a by-product of this socialising. This does not mean that the consumption of alcohol is an unimportant part of pub activity. Otherwise a man might as well meet his friends in an ice-cream parlour or coffee shop. One of the major functions of moderate alcohol use is to promote social conviviality. But it is the conviviality, not the alcohol, which is of central importance."<sup>6</sup> As we will see in later sections of this report, exactly the same is true of the British local.

Countless other studies in many other parts of the world confirm the universality of the role of special drinking places. The British pub, like its 'foreign' counterparts, meets timeless and global human needs – that is why it survives and

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3 Thornton, M.A. (1987). Sekt versus schnapps in an Austrian village. In M. Douglas (ed.), *Constructive Drinking: Perspectives on Drink from Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

4 Freund, P.J. (1980). Polish-American Drinking: An Historical Study in Attitude Change. Providence, RI: Brown University Department of Anthropology – *Working Papers on Alcohol and Human Behavior*, 9.

5 Gordon, A.J. (1985). Alcohol and Hispanics in the northeast: A study of cultural variability and adaptation. In L.A. Bennett and G.M. Ames (eds.), *The American Experience with Alcohol: Contrasting Cultural Perspectives*. New York: Plenum Press.

6 Graves, T.D., Graves, N.B., Semu, V.N. and Ah-Sam, I. (1981). The social context of drinking and violence in New Zealand's multi-ethnic pub settings. In T.C. Harford and L.S. Gaines (eds.), *Social Drinking Contexts*. NIAAA Research Monograph No. 7. Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office.

will continue to do so despite the many other opportunities we have for 'joining' and for networking. We may sign up to an online community to communicate with like-minded people who share our interests across the globe, or we may reveal selected aspects of ourselves on Facebook. These are, however, 'non-local' by definition. They are what the late urban planner Melvin Webber, predicting over thirty years ago the internet trends that we witness today, called 'community without propinquity'. They are, in a very significant sense, different. They may extend our social and professional lives and allow much wider patterns of interaction, but they do not replace the more traditional and timeless face-to-face activities that take place in the special social institutions created to facilitate them – central among them, the pub.

## Research methods

In order to get to explore the often taken-for-granted but highly significant social aspects of pub-going our research incorporated both qualitative and quantitative methods:

### Focus groups and interviews

Research began with a series of informal discussions and conversations with around 20 pub-goers from different walks of life in order to gather opinions and to identify the salient themes. More formally structured focus group sessions in the SIRC offices – three groups of between 8 and 10 participants – were then augmented with additional, informal interviews with 10 people in their local pubs. Varying the setting of the research in this way facilitated the involvement of participants from a wide range of different socio-economic backgrounds, in keeping with the nature of the pub itself as a socially 'neutral' or 'levelling' space.

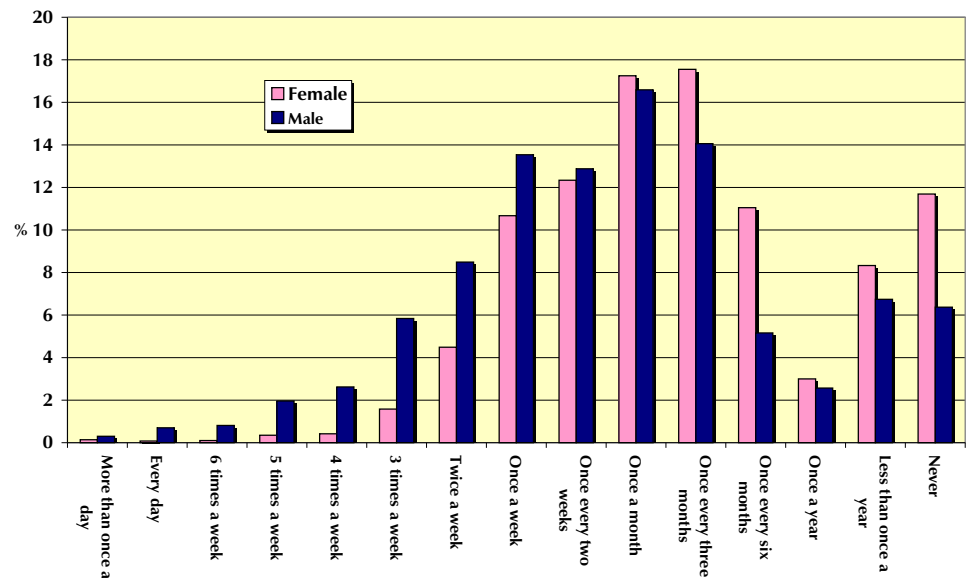
### Omnibus Poll

Detailed analysis of the transcripts of the qualitative material provided the basis for the design of a nationally representative poll that was conducted by YouGov. The total sample size was 2,217 adults and the fieldwork was undertaken between 7th and 10th March 2008. The survey was carried out online. This report summarises the main findings from both elements of the research.

## How often do we go to the pub?

The frequency with which British people visit the pub provides some indication of the importance of the pub as a focus of social interaction in our daily lives. Fifteen years ago, research conducted by SIRC and the well-known zoologist Desmond Morris<sup>1</sup>, estimated that the pub-going population numbered approximately 25million, with a third of the adult population describing themselves as 'regulars'. Despite the significant changes that have taken place in British society over the past decade and a half, including liberalised licensing laws and the smoking ban, it would seem that pubs are visited as frequently now as they were in the past. According to one recent survey, 33,321,000 adults have been to a pub or bar for a drink in the last 12 months<sup>2</sup>. Of respondents in our own national poll, 90% said that they go to pubs with around a quarter visiting between one and six times per week, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Frequency of visiting pubs – by gender



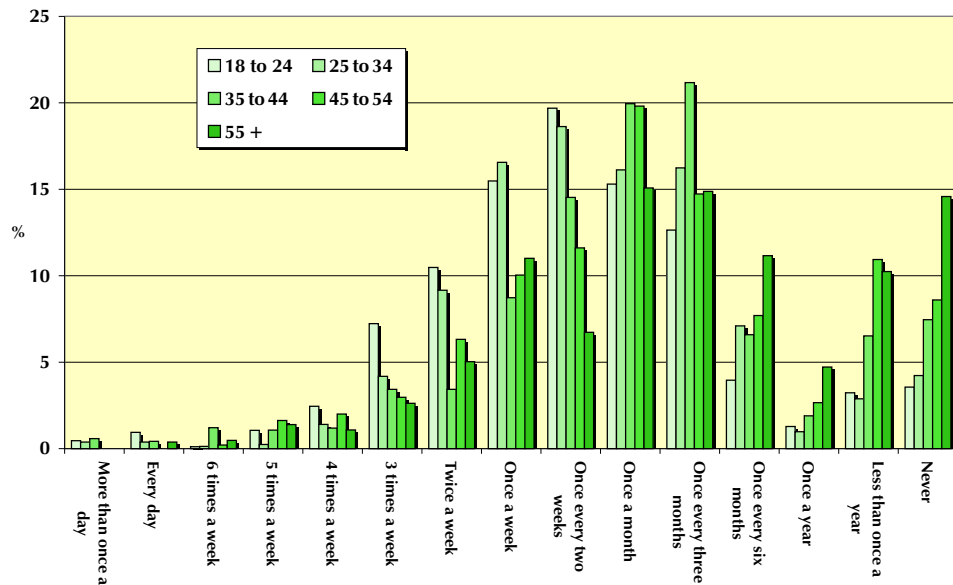
There were some age differences in this context. Those who go to pubs at least once a week are most likely to be under 35 and least likely to be aged between 35 and 44, as we can see from Figure 2. Having children presumably plays a role here.

Of the pub-goers in the focus groups, the majority visited the pub three or four times a week.

1 Fox, K. (1993) *Pubwatching With Desmond Morris*. Alan Sutton Publishing

2 <<INSERT REFERENCE>>

Figure 2. Frequency of visiting pubs – by age



It is evident then that the pub is still an important aspect of social life in Britain simply because it remains a public space where a large number of people regularly spend a significant amount of their free time and money. As one focus group participant suggested, after home and work the pub often represents a third principal focus for social interaction:

*"It is like home from home. Even though we all live quite close together as a group of friends ... like you could go to someone's house for a few beers but that's not quite the same ... you're used to being in your house and you're used to being in your job and you want a place that's kind of like home, (where) you don't really do anything, you just sit there and chat. (On) any given day there's a different reason for going to the pub ..."*

### What it means to be a 'regular'

Being a 'regular' certainly involves being in the pub on a regular basis, whether popping in after work each day or making a predictable appearance once a fortnight. The regular investment of time indicates the importance attached to the social space of the pub. People often feel uncomfortable in a 'local' pub on their first visit because there is a sense that newcomers must prove their worth as fellow 'participants', often through a number of ritualised social activities. Over time, however, regular sessions spent in the pub, observing the hidden etiquettes that surround pub life, eventually lead to trust and affinity with existing regulars and provide evidence of a certain level of commitment to the community that the pub represents. There are, of course, exceptions to this pattern. Some focus group participants commented that local pubs can be very welcoming to new visitors from the outset:



*"I was originally introduced to the pub by a friend of mine ...the landlord is such a friendly guy and isn't just about being friendly to get customers – he's that kind of person and it makes you want to go there. You feel very welcome."*

A number of other participants suggested that the quality of the social interactions that take place, and the ability of pub-goers to conform with the tacit rules and rituals that define membership in a group of 'regulars', was more important than the quantity of time spent in a pub. Actually being in the pub is only part of the equation. To understand how time spent in a pub translates into a shared sense of social belonging and community, we need to explore why people would want to be pub regulars in the first place.

## Why do we go to pubs?

The most obvious answer to this question is that pubs provide a service – primarily they sell drinks and, sometimes, food. Although it would be naïve to suggest that drinking does not have a significant role to play in the atmosphere and attraction of the pub as a social space, there are other reasons.

Undoubtedly some pubs draw people through particular kinds or brands of alcoholic beverage. The national poll showed that 23% of men and 10% of women choose their pub according to the cask or real beer on offer. One of the focus group participants said:

*"(I like this pub) because they serve ... I'm not sure I should confess this, but fruit beer, strawberry beer."*

Another, a CAMRA member, added:

*"(The pub) has my favourite beer, so when I come into town I will go in there."*

*"I'm a bit of a real beer person and I actually like trying different beers so I go to different pubs [just for that]."*

*"... a really nice pint of ale."*

For some people it was other types of drink that contributed to the attraction of a particular pub:

*"I'd avoid a pub that didn't have ... a good red wine, but I wouldn't necessarily go to a pub because it had my top favourite wine, I would just avoid one that didn't have a good selection."*

*"Gin, in one word ... it has a fabulous gin selection and also it's really cosy. It's got lots of little nooks and crannies and little snugs and also it's just a really nice atmosphere. Big squishy sofas ... it's just gorgeous."*

While the type and quality of drinks served in a pub are clearly of importance in determining which pub becomes your local (assuming you have some choice in the matter) these are outweighed by other factors, as we can see from Figure 3. While the range and choice of products in pubs is now far greater than was the case in Tom Harrison's day, and this adds considerably to their appeal in contemporary Britain, the pub is not just about ale. The atmosphere of a pub, for example, is the key factor for over half of the people who visit a pub at least once a month. The majority favour a cosy and welcoming feel while others are attracted by a more modern and lively feel. Feeling part of the community was also of significance for nearly a quarter of poll respondents. Participants in the focus groups echoed the poll results:

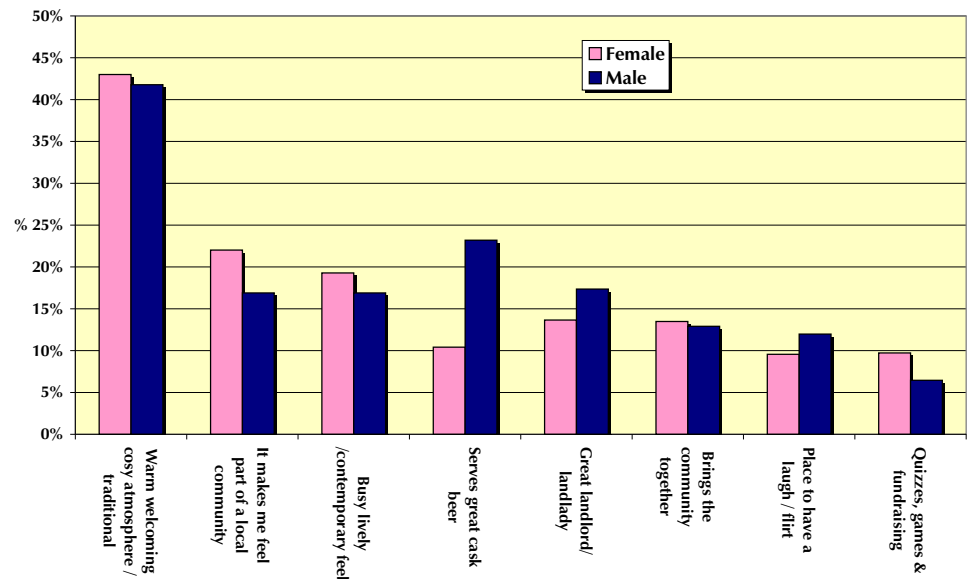
*"(My local is) warm and welcoming and, more often than not, it will have a pint waiting for you when they see you come in."*

*"Some people like a beer at home, I just don't see the point, it's more about socialising and meeting up with friends and the atmosphere, and getting out of the house....."*

Others pointed to the fact that some people go to pubs for the atmosphere alone, without necessarily having anything alcoholic to drink:

*"I went out twice with friends over Christmas actually, with a group of friends, and on both occasions I was ... with seven or eight friends and I was the only one drinking in the pub, but we'd chosen to go to a pub because of the atmosphere."*

Figure 3. Reasons for going to a particular pub – by gender



Alongside drinking, pubs play host to a number of different activities – watching sports, playing darts, competing in quizzes, to name just a few. Each of these may provide an initial reason for going to a particular pub but later the main attraction becomes that of more general sociability.

*"[I first went to this pub] because[of] the pub quizzes ... it's a real mixture with a lot of older, 'real' village people ... a big age range."*

As with the pub quiz, other pub activities provide a means of developing particular kinds of social networks and interactions that are characteristic of the pub. There are two different kinds of sociable networking that underpin all the other activities.

On one hand, the pub is a focal point for *existing* social networks of friends to get together in a communal social space, within which they feel a strong sense of belonging. The friends may be 'pub-only friends' who interact within the single setting of the pub. Alternatively, they might be friends from other social contexts who meet in settings additional to the local pub.

On the other hand, the pub facilitates the expansion of social networks and the development of new friendships. Unlike most other public social spaces in Britain, the more fluid, open social context of the pub allows for novel interactions with strangers, often through social activities like drinking, smoking, playing games, or

watching TV. It is this combination of different kinds of sociable networking – the sense of belonging within an existing social network, alongside the excitement of new and unexpected social interactions – that gives the pub its unique character.

In the focus group sessions, participants talked about their participation in these different kinds of social interactions in a variety of ways. One used the word 'escapism' – in its most positive sense – to describe his experience:

*"Isn't it escapism? You can forget what ever else is happening in your world ...whatever is happening at home or at work You go to the pub a lot of the time just simply to relax ... the person doesn't necessarily know you or not know you, but you can have a straightforward conversation about general things."*

*"It's an amazing place for anybody to fit in and go to ... as a woman, who is older, you don't actually feel odd about going in there and it's very welcoming."*

Others focused more on the importance of the local as a place where it is possible to come across friends without necessarily planning to do so:

*"It's because it's the place where all my friends go."*

*"It tends to be where all the students go and also I tend to meet people there I would like to see ...it's just the kind of social atmosphere where a lot of people I know go."*

*"There is a difference between a 'generic' pub and a local. I mean if you're talking about the difference between a local pub where you can expand your interactions with other people, that, to me sounds more like a local pub and one that you will frequent ... you know people are going to be there and you can just turn up and it's really great."*

*"In terms of the actual pub, location, something close by, and groups of friends that you're going with ... that really dictates where I'm going."*

Other participants emphasised that because of the wide variety of different types of pubs, one could choose particular pubs for particular purposes:

*"My favourite pub ... I've got thousands of them because it depends on what I'm looking for in a pub at that particular moment in time. In terms of if I was just going out to find some people I knew and have a beer I would probably go to the place across the road or the place next door to here, purely because I know people around here. If I was going out for a nice meal I would choose somewhere a bit more exclusive. One of my favourite pubs that I like to go to is the [name] ... [I] would say on a weekly basis I would pop in for a pint."*

Talking about the 'Vibe' of the pub, this was something everyone felt you could pick up on quite quickly:

*"If I didn't like it, I'd just go to the toilets and leave."*

*"You can pick up a vibe in a pub quite quickly can't you? ...you can't explain it."*

One participant described the difference between her local pub and a community pub she used to work in:

*"It's different in the [name] from a local pub because basically I arrange to go with a group of friends and we go and sit in one of the snugs and, you know, put the world to rights and we don't necessarily know anyone else who would go there or intend to meet anyone else. But I used to work in the [name] and that was a place where there were very well established locals. There were the bar flies who would always be there when you got there, and that was a place I would go to regardless of what the day is because I always knew there would be people who I could just go and chat with and just talk to everyone because it was very family oriented."*

On occasions participants said they might choose a particular, less familiar, pub because of its neutrality or its anonymity:

*"You might go to the pub because you know there won't be anybody there ... I'm just talking about being neutral, when you just want to sit down with your book or crossword or whatever and not be disturbed."*

For others, the pub provided a social arena that didn't involve any cleaning up afterwards and this was one of its singular attractions.

*"The thing is because I'm a student, I think basically its just a nice easy way for no one having to take responsibility for inviting everyone round to their house and tidying up afterwards and all of this sort of thing and basically you can say we're going to be in the pub at this time if you want to come along just come along and it's nice and easy."*

Particular thematic elements in a pub were also singled out by some participants as their reason for spending time there. So too were types of music, aspects of décor, comfort, etc.

*"... it has really nice big comfy sofas, there's a really nice small bar, lots of sports memorabilia around and it's the people as well"*

*"I like the comfy seating around the sides ... I like a lot of things about it ... hmm, I like ... the music they play ..."*

It is clear that in the pub we can function on various levels. We can move from 'serious' conversations about the state of the environment or the potential impacts of falling house prices to seemingly trivial chat or gossip that constitutes the bulk of human social discourse. We can also do this in most cases with people from all walks of life – people with whom we would have very different types of exchange in the world outside of the pub. Many of us welcome such opportunities – to be just a little bit different from our everyday roles, to feel comfortable in an environment that combines predictability and social safety with random encounters.

## What makes the pub different / special

The participants in the focus groups made quite clear distinctions between pubs and other services providers or facilities that they used on a regular basis. They felt that the pub atmosphere was one that allowed them to relax and considered it a 'less intense' way of meeting people, whether building strong friendships, 'less strong' friendships or just adding acquaintances.

*"It's definitely a mixture because that's why the pub's so nice. You go with your friends or you meet your friends, but there's also these things you can sort of 'ping' off with...you know, like interactions with other people, like amusing situations or things that you can actually bring into the group that you've already gone with."*

The pub was also considered to be neutral territory. When entertaining at home some felt pressured to 'play host' and interactions could sometimes be a little stilted. The pub, by contrast, allowed conversations to 'flow'.

*"I think it's a really less intense way of meeting people...like I imagine if you go to the pub with your wife and you really don't know anyone it's like a really nice way of being together without it being at all intense. It's like a very relaxed way of being completely isolated ... when you get to the pub... it's less intense because there's no pressure to talk about anything that's bearing down on you in your life like there is at home ... there's kind of a flowing sort of atmosphere where it doesn't feel like there's any pressure like there would do in a different social situation."*

Responses to the national poll confirmed much of the content of the focus group discussions and interviews, as can be seen from Figure 4 below. Here we can see that the perception of the pub as being a 'neutral' space was the dominant response of those who visit a pub once a month or more frequently.

Emphasis was placed on the pub as a being a place where different generations could meet. As we will see later in the 'Who do we go to the pub with' section of this report, the role of the pub in preserving the extended family in this is of considerable importance. Figure 4 also reflects the role of the pub in preserving friendship networks and forming a central focus for communities.

*"I first went to the [local pub] because I knew [name] as a friend outside and then got to know lots of other people there, but it interests me how I suddenly thought last year how some of the people either working there or actually younger people give me a great deal of pleasure because I've just retired from teaching and it's nice having that sort of aspect again because my own sort of young people have grown up."*

The idea that the pub is a 'great social leveller' was very evident in this section of the poll. Here, however, there were some interesting age differences, as shown in Figure 5 below. We can see that the attraction of a mix of people from varying social backgrounds – the differences being levelled in the pub – was significantly greater for older people than those in the younger age categories.

For younger people, social class is less of an issue than among their older contemporaries – which is why they are less conscious of the 'levelling' nature of pubs.

Figure 4. Perceptions of the pub – by gender

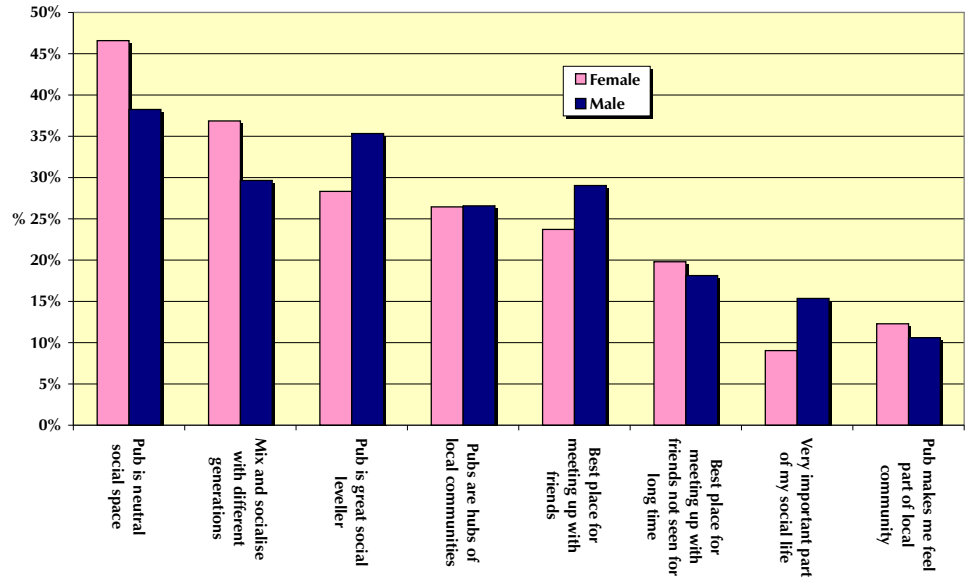
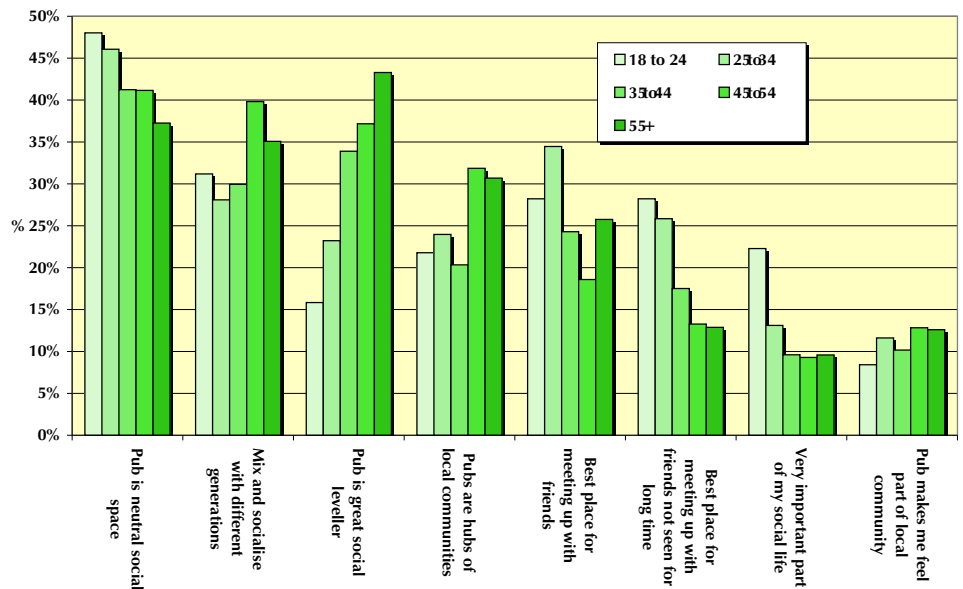


Figure 5. Perceptions of the pub – by age



## Eating out

Other participants drew a sharp distinction between pubs (even those that serve meals) and restaurants.

*"When you go to a restaurant you're going to a restaurant to be with that group specifically, definitely not to have interaction with anyone else and when you go to a pub you go to a pub because it's a looser atmosphere and the chances are that you will have some bouncing off from somebody else...the fact that there are lots of other pockets of people and things going on is definitely why I would go to the pub because I would feed off of that energy that's coming from everybody else."*

*"We are looking for something which is broadly pub-like about the place if you like ... so there might be a fire for example, a bar obviously, quite a wide variety of beers and wines for instance...With a restaurant I would be more guided by price, to be honest I don't really go to restaurants that often."*

*"It's more relaxed going to a pub [than a] restaurant..."*

*"Less formal, yeah I think it's that so you can make an evening of it if you like and enjoy the pub aspect of it and the restaurant bit as well. Having said that, Alison and I often go to the pub for the sheer pleasure of going to the pub."*

When comparing the experience of being in a wine bar to being in a pub, again the level of formality / informality appeared to be a key difference.

*"If you think of somewhere like the [name] which is somewhere we've been a few times, I mean that's just very, very different because it just feels more formal and is more geared to quality of wine."*

While café culture was felt to have some appeal, it was the combination of atmosphere, social dynamics, layout, opening hours and, of course, alcohol that made the pub so special:

*"I think in England there are more pubs with character than cafés with character ... as in there's something about it, individuality, cosiness ... just general atmosphere and what time they're open until. It seems that if you want to go to a coffee shop it has to be between the hours of nine or five or at the weekend .... Personally I would go out to use the pub as a coffee shop in the daytime or the evening before dinner, or something like that, just because it's a nice place to have coffee, not necessarily for the alcohol, that's just a nice addition."*

*"I think there's more fluidity of movement [in the pub] isn't there, just generally ... so people are moving, just standing around, sitting, shifting...just more in a pub."*

*"The seating is different in a pub, I mean it facilitates a different kind of interaction if you like, in a pub ..."*



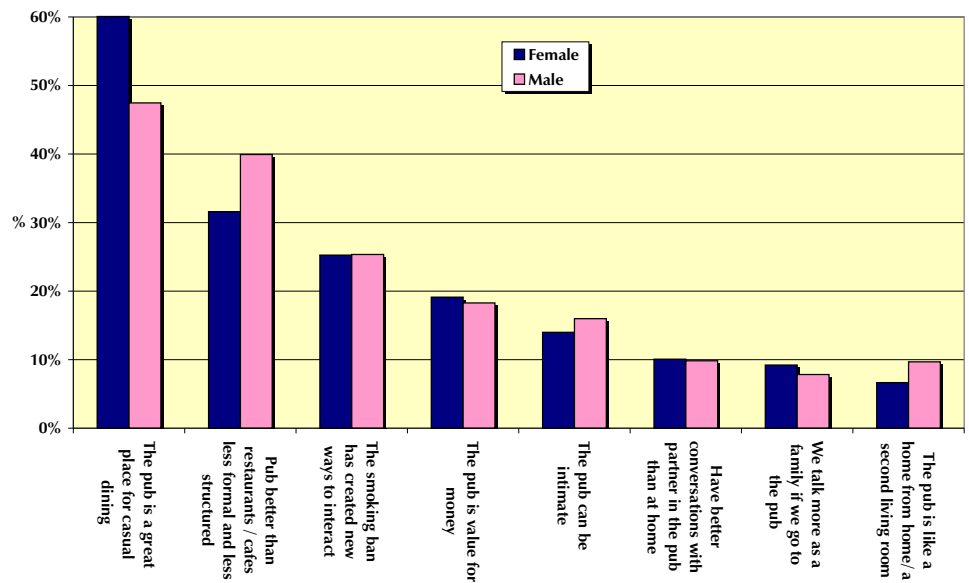
*"It's also to do with the length of time it takes to drink in a pub compared to a café...like if you have a couple of pints, you know, you can stretch it out over a couple of hours ... well I can! You know, there's only so much coffee you can drink before it becomes like ... what am I doing sitting here drinking all this coffee ... even though cafés are informal, there is still a more formal feel when you meet people in a café. You would meet maybe one or two people in a café, but I wouldn't meet a group of people ..."*

Some of the participants also volunteered that the unwritten but ever-present social rules that prevail in pubs marked them out as unique institutions – quite different from mere bars of cafes.

*"I think there's kind of an un-written rule about openness."*

The appeal of the informality of pubs compared with restaurants was highlighted by respondents in the national poll. From Figure 6 we can see that 60% thought that the pub was great place for casual dining and the second-most attraction was the informality of meals in pubs.

Figure 6. Food in pubs – by gender



This section of the poll also included some questions that we examine further later on this report – particularly the impact of the smoking ban and patterns of interaction within the pub.

### The Landlord / landlady

The importance of the landlord or landlady in the pub was stressed by all participants in the focus group.

*"I think landlords are hugely important, absolutely massively important. I think that's the thing, for me, that would make or break a pub."*

Participants also saw the role of a pub manager or tenant (they rarely distinguished between the two) as quite different from that in other catering or retail contexts.

*"Running a pub is a trade. Historically a publican was a pillar of the community, someone who could sign your passport photo."*

Good landlords were viewed as having autonomy and a vested interest in the way that the pub is run. They also felt that it was a distinct advantage if the landlord had originated from the community in which his/her pub was located.

*"I think it is important if someone has come from that community as well. You know, if you are just shipped in, you don't know anything about the history of the community, what goes on, who is who, what the dynamics are ... you know having a vested interest that the people in there are kept happy."*

*"The landlord of the pub is like the heartbeat [of the pub]."*

There was some consensus that 'character' or a little eccentricity could be a good quality for a landlord to possess and that in the pub, we were perhaps more likely to tolerate idiosyncrasies than we would at, say, the checkout at Tesco. This seems to add further emphasis to the notion that the pub is 'special' – it is more than simply a retail outlet that sells food and drink. It requires, therefore, very different kinds of people in terms of management and staff – people who *participate* in the life of the pub, rather than those who simply provide a service. We expect bar staff, for example, to be more than the equivalent of check-out till operators in the local supermarket and the landlord to be a welcoming *host* rather than a mere manager.

## Who do we go to the pub with?

The quotes in the previous section from the focus group participants give some indication of the broad range of social interactions that are associated with pub-going – reinforcing existing social networks and expanding them through meeting and interacting with new people. In this section of the report we examine how this process happens.

### Going Solo

Many pub-goers relished the experience of going either to unfamiliar pubs to meet new people or meeting new people in their local pub. As one male focus group participant suggested, the setting of the pub makes it easy to engage in conversation with strangers and then, if necessary, take one's leave:

*"It must be because as an individual you can walk into any pub anywhere, you're only there for one drink, if you don't like it you walk away... Maybe it's just an age thing but it doesn't worry me wherever I am, just going into any pub. I don't feel threatened...maybe its just me walking in and feeling confident in myself."*

Another focus group participant pointed to the ease with which it is possible to strike up conversations with strangers in a pub setting, partly because of the shared social activities that are facilitated:

*"All of a sudden you might start talking to someone because they're drinking the same ale as you ... you get so many 'ins' to actually talk to people ... idle banter just erupts in a pub, it just sort of happens, whereas if you're sat on a train or an aeroplane, twelve hours next to them, what are the chances of talking to them?"*

Others, however, were far less confident about the notion of walking into an unknown pub and striking up a conversation with strangers. To an extent this depended on the kinds of pub and the time of day. Most men, for example, agreed that they would be more comfortable going to a quieter pub on their own during the day, rather than drinking in a busier, youth-oriented pub later at night:

*"If I was to go into a pub which was predominantly a young persons' pub, something I don't really like the idea of, and I went in there on my own, I think I would feel self conscious. The other more mixed natural blend of people I have no problem with, however rough it might be I don't really care."*

*"I have friends that will always be late for a beer because they don't want to go in a pub on their own."*

*"If it's quite busy and full and there's lots of people shouting and having a good time you kind of stand out more on your own."*

For those slightly less comfortable with the idea of drinking alone in a bar, a few survival techniques were mentioned, the most effective of which was the idea of striking up conversation with the bar staff:

*"I always tend to sit at the bar, that way you can always talk to the bar staff if they're friendly. I think it depends on the pub."*

*"If I've got an hour to kill on a Saturday before an appointment or something ... I can walk into any pub and sit there, turn the paper over and have a pint."*

The pub, then, is both a place to meet people and one which offers a kind of 'sanctuary' for lone visitors. While it offers the prospect of sociability – perhaps through the bar staff whose role is to chat as much as it is to pour drinks – it also provides for solitary activity in a congenial atmosphere.

## Gender

When discussing the idea of going to the pub alone, either to be alone or with the intention of meeting other pub-goers, there was a marked gender divide among the focus group participants and interviewees. Gender stereotypes, it seems, still influence notions of how men interpret lone women in pubs and, in turn, how women feel about being in a pub on their own. The women participants, particularly the younger ones, felt they would never go into a pub on their own, whereas they would a wine bar or café. The only exception to this was if it was their local.

*"You go to a bar more (rather than a pub) as a girl."*

*"I'd never go to a pub on my own, not without the intention of meeting someone there."*

*"I'd avoid a pub that was very heavily male ... a bar that was all men looking as if they were all very much together."*

The dominance of the 'male boozier', however, may be a thing of the past. Compared with the time when the *Pubwatching* study was conducted 15 years ago there has been a noticeable increase in the number of women one sees in pubs, especially in single-sex groups, and the results of our national poll confirm the extent to which people now see pubs as being more women-friendly than before, as we see later in Figure 8.

## Meeting new people: Expanding sociable networks

For some, then, being alone in an unknown pub was a potentially uncomfortable experience while others (mainly men) were perfectly happy with the idea of enjoying a quiet pint on their own. Most, however, agreed that more 'neutral' social interactions, mixing already established friends with new acquaintances, was one of the most enjoyable things about a good night in the pub. This combination of known and unknown, or predictable and unpredictable social exchanges, was what many saw as the key ingredient for that most elusive of pub qualities – a 'good' atmosphere. As one participant suggested:

*"You pay to have a drink because there's an atmosphere already there ... generally that's why I go. It's nice to meet all the same people at home but in the pub you get the extra bonus of the buzz from everybody else."*

Others voiced similar opinions about this blend of randomness and predictability:

*"I walk into the pub and I nearly always get introduced to people I've never met before ... I wouldn't necessarily be associating with them outside of the pub but I'd always say hello to them and ask them how they've been getting on and things and then I'd probably settle down with the group that I almost certainly always see in the pub everyday ... so it's a kind of mixture really."*

*"It's definitely a mixture because that's why the pub's so nice. You go with your friends or you meet your friends, but there's also these things you can sort of 'ping' off with ...you know, like interactions with other people, like amusing situations or things that you can actually bring into the group that you've already gone with."*

*"You may go for one drink and stay all night. You may meet a life-long friend. It supplies a much needed degree of 'randomness' in our lives."*

## Friends, family, pub-friends and work-mates

An important aspect of establishing a sense of belonging in a pub, then, is the feeling that you are in the company of friends, whether old or new. As suggested above, focus group participants and pub-goers made it very clear that the pub plays host to variety of different 'kinds' of friends, ranging from very close friends and family, who we might see in other social contexts, to workmates, to exclusive 'pub' friends, to completely new acquaintances. Part of the experience of being a regular in the pub is seeing the boundaries between these categories blur as sociable networks expand and contract. Completely new acquaintances may become pub-friends and then close friends and possibly even family or 'pseudo-family'. The scale can of course slide in the other direction as well as pub-friends move away from the local and become strangers once more.

## Drinks with close friends

In some pubs, particularly the larger, more anonymous city centre ones, focus group participants agreed that they were more likely to limit their sociable networking to the group of close friends with whom they had gone to the pub:

*"... I'd go with a certain group and you may well meet other people while you're there but the reason why I'd arrange to meet up with people in the pub in the first place is so that I can sit and talk with them, so although I would probably say 'hi' to someone to pass the time of day I would then go and sit with people that I'd come with."*

In more local pubs, either in an urban community or smaller village, people's sociable networks were more likely to move beyond close friends or acquaintances to include other kinds of associations. Participants agreed that expanding their social networks was something that tended to happen in local community pubs rather than a 'generic' pub. The role of the pub also tended to have a different significance depending on how long one had lived in a certain place.

## Pub-friends

As noted earlier, pub-friends were identified as those only seen within the specific confines of the pub environment. While one might be perfectly happy to spend considerable amounts of time with these friends on a regular basis, a distance remained that limited the extent of the friendship. You might spend all night setting the world to rights with 'John the Bandit' or 'Big Dave' from the pub (we sometimes only know our pub-friends by their pub-names, not their real ones), but you wouldn't invite them to dinner or go on holiday with them. The pub allows pub-friends to enjoy a level of fraternity and intimacy but places no expectation on developing this friendship further. Indeed, there is sometimes a kind of unwritten social code that forbids stepping over this line into other social domains:

*"No, they're (pub friends) not the same ... you wouldn't necessarily pick the people you talk to for ten, maybe twenty minutes and have a chat with in the pub as friends necessarily."*

*"You can have 'pub friends', can't you?"*

*"The word acquaintance kicks in there doesn't it? Someone you can kill twenty minutes talking to but don't want to get stuck with all night."*

Part of this 'unwritten social code' is perhaps implicit in the fact that pubs, by definition, are open to people from all walks of life. However individual we may feel, the social groups to which we belong in our daily lives are very much defined by factors such as kinship (where one's family is from), age, socio-economic status, work, education and, decreasingly, religion. The sociable networks fostered by the pub are not so rigidly defined by these categories: as one participant commented:

*"I think that's the great thing about pubs is that you can have a totally different experience and talk to people you wouldn't normally talk to or normally mix with."*

In the context of the pub we are able to interact with people who we might not come across in our normal daily lives. Outside of the pub we return to the more rigid social confines of our normal lives where we would be less comfortable in interacting with our pub-friends. In this way, then, the pub facilitates a kind of sociable networking that is unique in its character. Another focus group participant put it like this:

*"The people you work with and to an extent the people you mix with can be quite homogenous. If you get a pub with a real range of classes and a real range of ages ... for me, that's what makes a good pub."*

This confirms very clearly points we have noted earlier about the way in which pubs enable an expansion of social networks to include people with whom we would rarely interact, or interact with on a very different basis, and acts as a social leveller. In today's society, at a time when there is much concern about a decline in social cohesion, the importance of the pub in this context may be far greater than people might imagine.

## When pub-friends become pub-family

Having said this, however, participants also indicated that the line between certain pub-friends and closer friends can often be blurred, with friends-of-friends perhaps beginning as pub-friends before entering a more intimate social network outside of the confines of the pub. In this way particularly intimate pub communities extend sociable networks to an almost familial level as pub-friends become pub-family. The following focus group quotes provide some evidence of this:

*"In my case it extends my social network for sure. I knew [name] and he introduced me to the pub and then over a period of time I suddenly had this huge group of friends, all of whom are very interesting people and people I have a good connection with ... definitely people I see all the time, not every day but two or three times a week."*

*"There are a handful that you will end up chatting to at the bar and you will certainly find that you have common ground and become friends ... I don't know what percentage you're looking at but certainly ten, fifteen, twenty percent of people that you come across will become part of your social group."*

Another participant continued with the family metaphor by describing his local as a kind of second living room – but one that he didn't have to worry about cleaning up:

*"It kind of varies but primarily it's kind of an extension of your own home ... a large sitting room where you can chat and have a drink, have a sandwich, play bar games ... the [local pub] has that country pub, almost café edge to it as well. You can pop down there in the afternoon and get some peace and quiet."*

As well as being a family-style setting the pub, as we noted earlier, is also a place that we visit with our families – preserving family traditions in way that few other social institutions can.

## Work networks

It is evident that the pub serves a variety of different social purposes and that different pub-goers use their pub to reinforce different kinds of networking. Most of this networking is essentially social in nature but occasionally the pub also serves as a nexus for economic exchange as well. After all, where better to find a plumber, a lawyer or a doctor, than in your local?

*"The pub breaks down a lot of artificial barriers ... there's a lot of people who ... would use tradesman who they actually meet in pubs as their contact, and you've doctors who know builders and plumbers and electricians, it all kind of moves both ways so..."*

*"Work-wise, one person I met in the local pub who is now a really good friend ... he's done work for me, I've done work for him in terms of sort of acting and film stuff. That was completely cold ... never met him before, the landlord just said 'oh he's a photographer' and that was it."*

## Smoking networks – sparking up new friendships

Most participants and interviewees agreed that the smoking ban had altered interactions both in and outside the pub. In general they thought that this had given rise to more positive social interactions. The following focus group quote describes the prelude to what has been popularly described as 'smirting', or the act of flirting among a group of smokers outside a bar or pub. Brought together in their isolation outside of bars and pubs, smokers find a novel social setting which opens up new sociable networks with people who they might not have otherwise interacted with:

*"I was in a pub in Cork, before the smoking ban arrived here. We were chatting and then I realised that people kept disappearing, going outside to smoke. When they came back, one of the girls I was with said: 'It's really interesting, I would never normally talk to the people outside, but because we were all outside together smoking we were all talking to each other.'"*

*"It would be interesting to see how many new relationships spark up from people going outside for a cigarette..."*

Another focus group participant made the connection with other confined social spaces where smokers are excluded, creating a kind of bond:

*"A bit like the old smoking rooms that don't exist in offices anymore. That was always a place where you could have a similar sort of thing ... you'd speak to people who you would never normally see all day ... as soon as you have a fag, they open up and they're you're best buddy for ten minutes."*

## The national picture

The results of the national poll largely confirmed the picture emerging from the focus groups and discussions. We can see from Figure 8 that people tend to go to pubs with other people rather than alone. This is most marked in the case of women even though, as Figure 8 also shows, pubs are seen by them as more welcoming than in the past. Nearly 30% of male respondents, however, said that they were perfectly happy going to the pub on their own even when not meeting anyone else there. Given the comments of some focus group participants these may well be the people who are content simply to chat with the landlord or staff



rather than other customers – again highlighting the important role that these individuals play in determining the atmosphere and attraction of a pub.

Figure 8. Who we go to the pub with (1) – by gender.

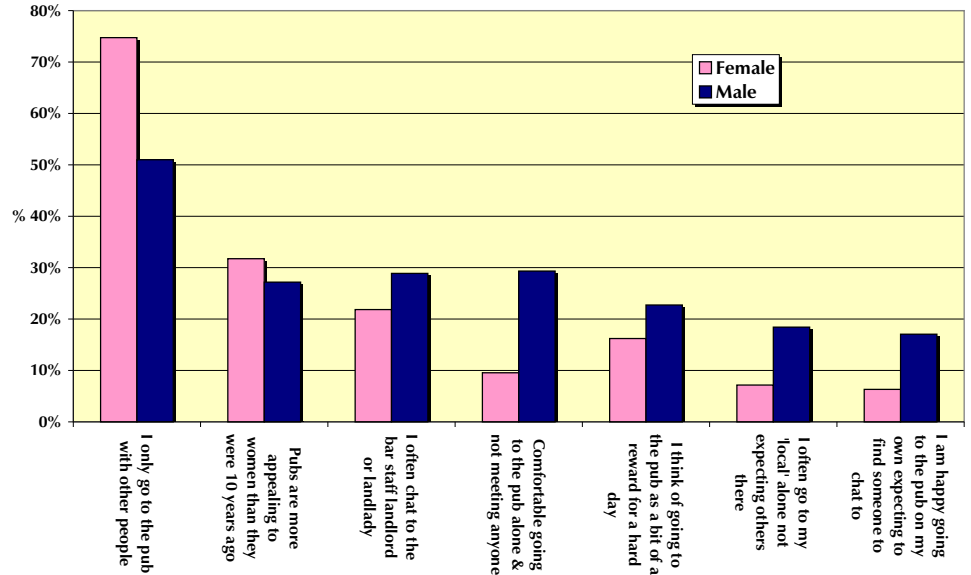


Figure 9. Who we go to the pub with (2) – by gender.

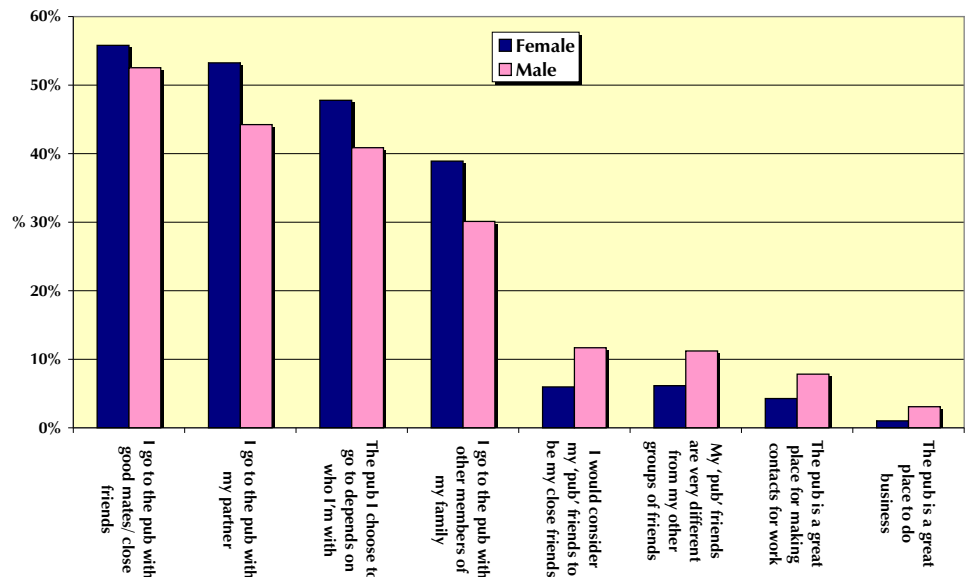


Figure 9 shows that for people who go to pubs at least once a month, the majority go with either their friends or partner. The composition of the group that meets at the pub can vary – if you are with your wife you may be less likely to invite your working colleagues along. A significant proportion (35%) also go to pubs with, or

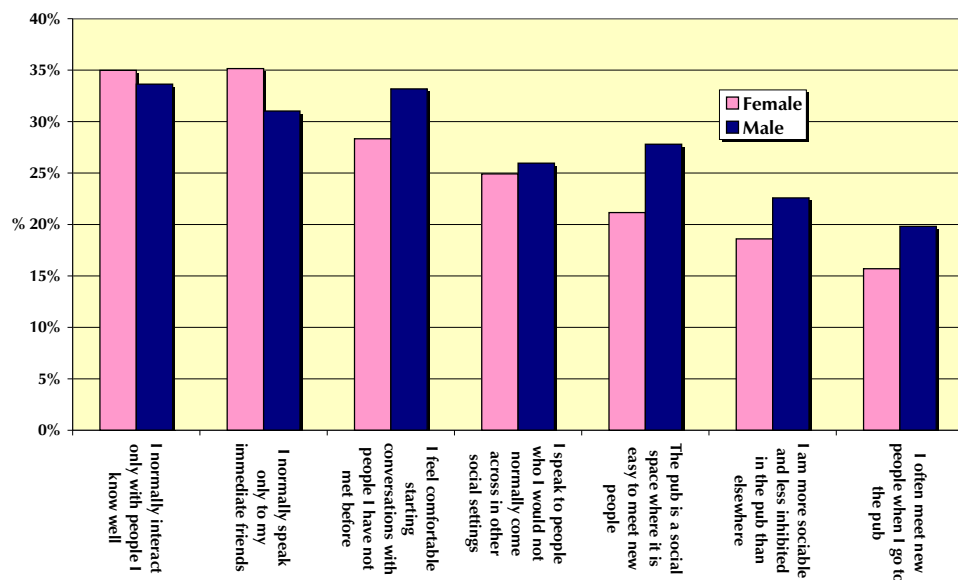
meet up with in the pub, other members of their family. This was particularly the case for those aged 45 and over. The pub may be one of the few remaining social institutions that actively preserves the extended family and inter-generational relationships.

One interviewee said that due of the nature of his profession he rarely saw his family, who lived in a small village 40 miles from his home. His parents had been in the same place for over years and spent what he described as "a great deal of time" in the local pub. On the relatively infrequent occasions that he is able to visit his parents, he now no longer calls at the house first but drops into the local where he invariably finds his folks ensconced and deep in conversation with their friends, other relatives or the landlord.

The distinction between 'pub friends' and other types of friend noted above in the comments of focus group participants is very evident in the poll data. Fewer than 10% of the respondents felt that their pub friends were 'close' friends. However, even fewer thought that pub friends were separate or different from other categories of friend. So, while we may not feel particularly close to the people we encounter in the pub (and rarely at other times), they are still part of our normal social networks. The data provide quite clear evidence for the pub as means of providing for an extension of our friendship circles – something very much stressed by the focus group participants.

The types of interaction in the pub in which people engage were also the subject of a section of the national poll questionnaire. We can see from Figure 10 that while many pub-goers stick with their own friends, 28% of males and 21% of females see the pub as a place where it is easy to meet new people.

Figure 10. General types of interaction in the pub – by gender

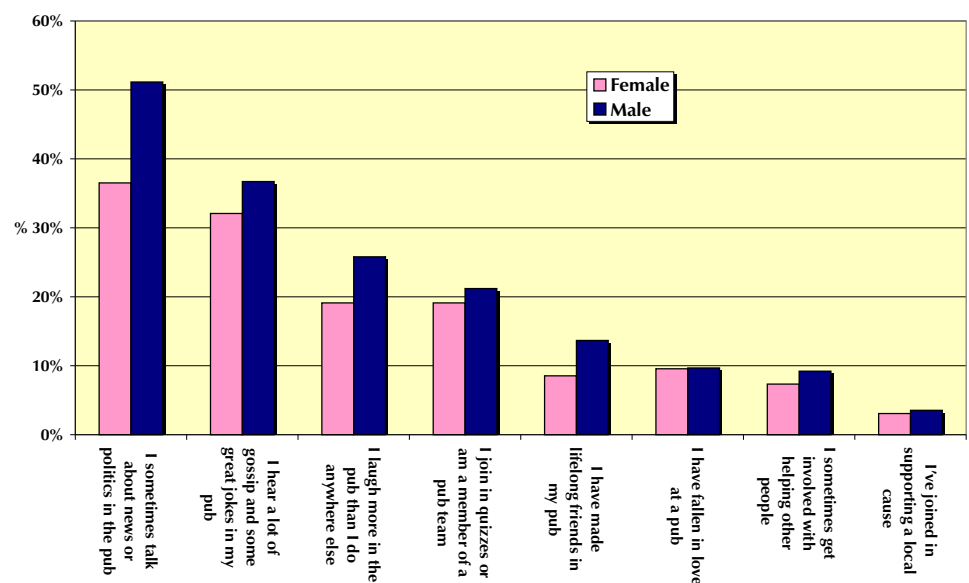


A significant proportion also felt that they were more sociable and less socially inhibited in the pub than in other settings. Feeling comfortable about starting

conversations with strangers was the third highest response here, confirming much of the content of the focus group discussions.

The more specific types of interaction in which poll respondents engage (those who go to a pub at least once a month) are illustrated in Figure 11. Here we can see that the dominant response related to talking about news and politics – those timeless preoccupations of any informal social group – and particularly involving men. Listening to gossip ranked second in this context and here the men were again more likely to be involved in what gender stereotypes might lead us to think is a women's activity.

Figure 11. Specific types of interaction in the pub – by gender



'Having a laugh' was the third highest ranking response in this section of the poll questionnaire, reflecting the role of the local pub as a facilitator of conviviality and humour. This simple fact can easily be confirmed through observation. Stand in the street and count the proportion of people walking past who are smiling or laughing. In most cases the percentage will be very low. Now enter the pub and do the same assessment. Through laughter and sociability the pub acts as 'de-stressor' – a most valuable institution in the current age.

A significant number of poll respondents who visit a pub once a month or more frequently (20%) also said that they were a member of a pub team or engaged in pub quizzes and similar activities. We can also see from Figure 11 that while, as noted earlier, pub friends and other types of friend tend to be separate groups for most people, 14% of men and 9% of women had made 'lifelong' friends in the pub. In our experience of research on pub-going over the past three decades, a good proportion of such lifelong friends may very well be their husbands or wives.

## Pub rituals

### Gossip and democracy

*"If you have a local pub where you go a lot you do have local gossip going on there ... Having moved away recently and having come back, I'm kind of out of the loop a bit as to what's going on...it takes a little while to get your head round it again."*

The majority of the group agreed that being in 'the know' with gossip was a good feeling to have, no matter how trivial. This sense of shared knowledge in the pub was seen as arising partly from the democratic nature of their local

*"There's something quite democratic about the pub because you might well say: 'are you coming along to that restaurant?', and I might say: 'sorry, no I can't afford it'. But you would never say that about a pub would you? 'No, I'm not going because I can't afford it' ... so you're not excluded on account of price really, whereas you might be in a restaurant. I could go to the pub with a fiver in my pocket, whereas I couldn't go to a restaurant with a fiver in my pocket."*

This sense of democracy and 'economic levelling' was also linked to the timeless complex rituals of round-buying – a subject of much (half serious) joking:

### Round buying

*(Male) "Women never do it..."*

*(Female) – "Yes they do."*

*(Female) "I'm scared by it! Depends how big the round is."*

*Do you get involved with round buying?*

*(Female) "You have to buy a round with no expectations."*

*(Male) "Pubs are well built for [round buying] because there's not many other places where you go, like you go to a restaurant and you buy one meal you don't buy four meals, like, there's nowhere else you could go that lends itself to that."*

All of the participants were well aware of the social conventions surrounding round-buying. Most admitted that at one time or another they had found themselves in the situation where they had to tactically withdraw from the round-buying process. 'Real' friends were rarely disconcerted by this and would often 'chip in' to cover others' drinks. A successful outcome in those with no money being 'up front' about their current financial status.

*"You have to make your point. It's a social thing. If you have been honest, and rocked up and said: 'I really just can't afford it', everyone kind of takes you under their wing and goes: 'C'mon, let me get you a drink!'"*

For some of the participants the 'legacy' of being 'skint' and not being able to afford to buy drinks at one point in the life remained with them. For one woman in

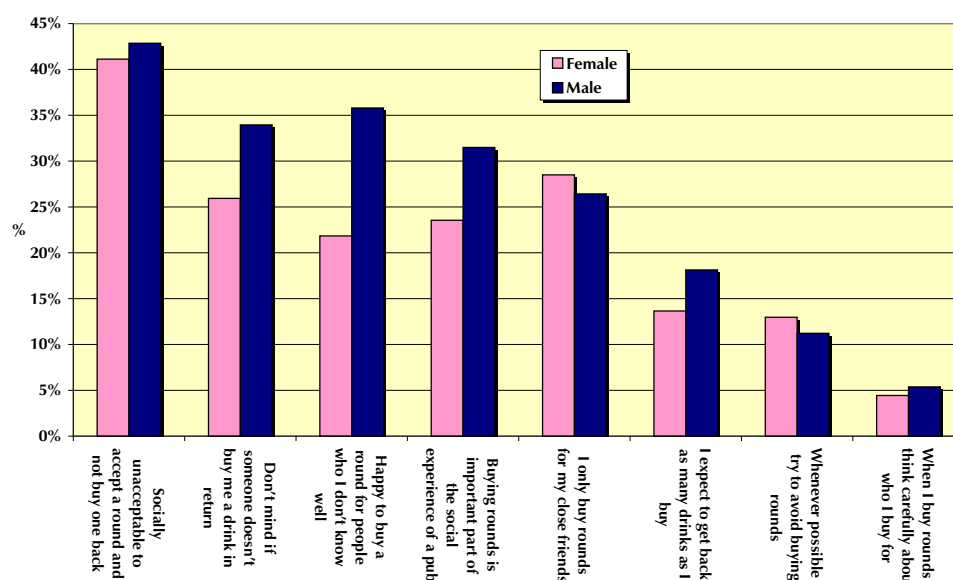
the focus groups this meant that she was now frequently first at the bar, offering to buy drinks for her friends, as a way to balance the round-buying books. In recognising the social obligations that go with round-buying, she said:

*"I feel I need to pay people back for the times they got me a drink."*

Round buying ultimately could be quite hazardous. If a round involved more than four people then often smaller sub-groups would naturally develop to make the bar tabs more manageable. Some participants admitted that there had been occasions when they had regretted buying a round, particularly as a 'moderate' or non-drinker.

The specific issue of round-buying was explored in the national poll. From Figure 12 we can see that the most dominant response here was that it was socially unacceptable to accept a drink in a round and not subsequently reciprocate.

Figure 12. Round buying – by gender



There was, however, also evidence from the poll data that while everybody should pay their share in round-buying, the occasional failure in this context could be tolerated. Nearly a third of respondents chose as their dominant response the statement 'Buying rounds is an important part of the social experience of drinking in a pub' – a view very much stressed in the focus groups and interviews. Only a small minority of respondents (5%) said that they were 'selective' in their round buying – i.e. buying drinks for some of the group but not for others.

In the way that the pub is a social leveller, it also facilitates economic levelling as well. People with less money may visit the pub less often than their wealthier contemporaries. Once inside, the pub, however, they are on an equal footing with everybody else and share the same social and financial obligations when it comes to buying drinks.

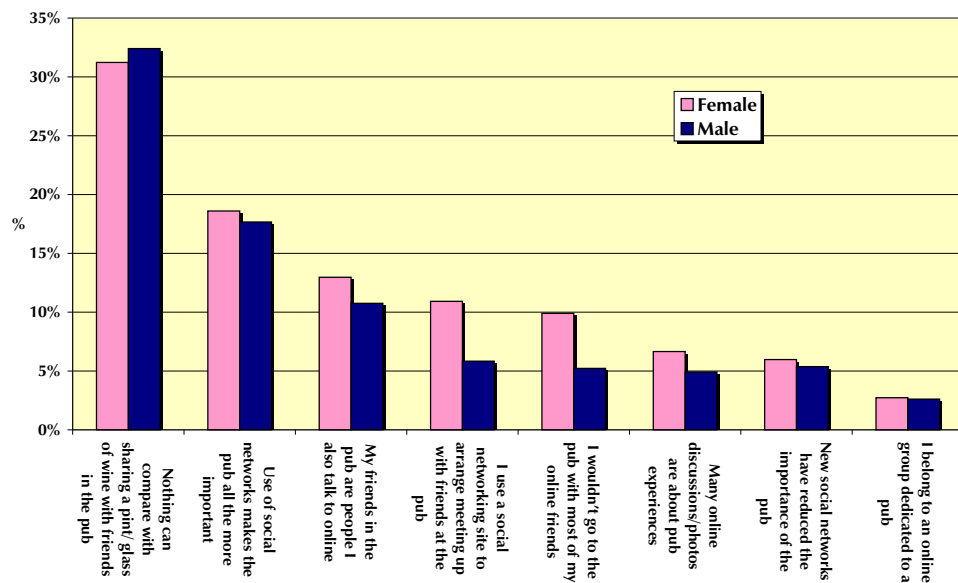
## The enduring appeal of the pub in the new technology age

*"People have the option to 'go global' at any and all times of the day. They go to the pub for a reason. They go there for the conversation, the chat and the opportunity to meet people that you wouldn't otherwise come into contact with. It's about taking the 'whole global thing' and for a while, leaving it all behind."*

As we noted in the Introduction, we now live in an age of online communities where we interact with others who may be on the other side of the planet. We also argued that while the internet may enable us to extend our social networks in ways that were undreamed of only a decade or so ago, there is no substitute for 'real' face-to-face interactions – and for many there is, therefore, no substitute for the pub. We posed a set of questions in the national poll to explore the extent to which our argument stood up.

We can see from Figure 13 that the most dominant response was that there is nothing to compare with the experience of sharing a drink with friends in the pub. Perhaps, most significantly, the second most dominant response was that the use of social networks made the pub all the more important.

Figure 13. The web and the pub – by gender



We can also see from Figure 13 that there is a degree of overlap between social networking on the web and that which takes place in the pub. The people we meet there can also be people with whom we are in regular email contact or are members of the same online communities. If anything, then, the internet and other elements of contemporary technology add to, rather than detract from, the local's role. We text people to say that we will be in the pub at a particular time using a gadget that some people have accused of killing the art of conversation! The statement 'New social networks have reduced the importance of the pub' received one of the lowest levels of agreement.

A small number of both male and female respondents (3%) said that they belonged to online communities that were dedicated to a particular pub – thus extending the networks in which they socialised beyond the physical structure of their local. They could discuss issues with each other over a pint in the pub and also, with the same people, away from the pub online

In the focus groups a large proportion of participants were on Facebook and many used it frequently to share photographs taken the previous evening. A significant proportion of those evenings had spent in the local pub with other Facebook members.

*"The Facebook people are the ones I see down the pub!"*

Most participants, however, drew a sharp distinction between the nature of the online interaction and that which typically occurs in the local.

*"You know you can share things with those people in those social networking websites, but it's not the same as sharing with a group of people at the same time, you know, having anecdotes and stories all at the same time ... you can't have that contribution of different people butting in and that whole group conversation. Even where people can log in and chat on line, it wouldn't happen in the same way."*

While there was a strong overlap between Facebook friends and pub friends in many cases, the web clearly extended social networking well beyond the pub and the local community to distant places all over the world. That, after all, is the main function of social networking sites.

*"Some of [my online friends] are the ones in the pub, but I have friends all over the world so that's a good way of keeping in touch cause its better than just email ... you get to see pictures and an update of what they're doing now..."*

*"Most of my Facebook friends are old school friends that I haven't seen for fifteen years or something to just say hello and see what they're doing, and there's friends from the pub and then there's friends abroad and stuff."*

Others in the focus groups, however, had become disenchanted with such sites, finding that they did not deliver a kind of interaction comparable with that experienced in the pub. For many, new technologies were more a means of organising pub experiences rather than providing substitutes for them.

*"I tend not to use [Facebook] much. It seemed like a good idea at the time, everybody was going on it ... but I actually communicate with mobiles ... just to say 'I'll meet you there' ... If I'm not sure where anybody is, they're probably down the pub anyway so I tend not to use it."*

For many in the focus groups, face-to-face communication such as with friends in the pub was seen as being more 'trustworthy' than that available online.

*"I suppose it's ... because you can trust something more face to face than you can online ... Its not very trustworthy."*

*"How do you know what you're dealing with if its online?"*

*"I think you can tell pretty quickly when you walk into a pub whether you like the atmosphere or not and it's the same with a person ... you can't get that on-line."*

This issue of 'atmosphere' cropped up repeatedly in the focus group discussions, as we have seen earlier in this report. While it is a rather intangible concept, its importance cannot be overestimated. In the context of comparisons between pub and online networking it was the lack of atmosphere which made web-based communities so much less 'real' and, therefore, much less satisfactory as a means of interacting and establishing relationships with others. The internet could never, all agreed, be a pub. Nor could it ever be a substitute for the pub.



## Conclusions from Kate Fox

Fifteen years ago I worked with SIRC's long standing friend and advisor, the zoologist Desmond Morris, to produce a slim book called *Pubwatching*. In his introduction Desmond wrote:

*"In a strange way, pubs bring out the best in people. They turn couch-potatoes into bar performers; convert the shy into the confident, the mumbling into the articulate and the solitary into the sociable."*

Reading through the results of SIRC's latest study of pub social life it is immediately striking that very little has changed during the intervening decade and a half. While many people today bemoan the 'breakdown of community' in Britain, often without good reason in my view, the local pub continues to serve as a hub for sociability and the bringing together of people from different walks of life in a way that no other social institution or public space can. Existing social networks expand through chance encounters with relative strangers in a setting that combines predictability (we know that some of our friends will be in the pub) with unexpected but welcomed opportunities to step outside of our usual social circles.

As an anthropologist I have always been fascinated by the complex rituals that underpin everyday social life – the timeless little courtesies that we extend to others around us and which, in turn, are reciprocated by them. And the pub has always been the place to observe them most clearly – from the way one catches the barman's attention to the 'economic levelling' that round-buying ensures. There is laughter, gossip and endless debate on how to put the world to rights. The alcohol may help to lubricate these occasions, but that is not the real reason why we go to pubs – we could, after all, drink at home in lonely isolation. We go to the pub primarily for sociability – something that this research has demonstrated with considerable clarity. We may choose one pub over another because it serves our favourite cask ale – or wine, or gin, or whatever – but it is the people we go with, or who we meet in the pub, that defines our local. That has always been the case, as we saw from the Mass Observation material in the Introduction, and will continue to be so even in the new digital age of instant communication and social networking opportunities on the world wide web.

I am reminded in this context of another SIRC study we conducted a few years ago on mobile phones – those 'dangerous' bits of technology that threatened, allegedly, to destroy the art of conversation and 'proper' face-to-face interaction. I argued that the impact of mobile phones was quite the opposite – that they had "...allowed us to return to the more natural and humane communication patterns of pre-industrial society, when we lived in small, stable communities, and enjoyed frequent 'grooming talk' with a tightly integrated social network ... Mobile gossip restores our sense of connection and community." The mobile phone, then, is just a modern version of the garden fence, over which we could exchange seemingly trivial snippets of information and comment with our friends and neighbours, except now we are away from home much more and need a gadget to meet these timeless needs. That is why we also continue to need the pub.

Coming out of the research very strongly is the finding that modern communications and virtual networking, while expanding our social contacts in a

very substantial way, are no substitute for the 'real thing'. We text friends, but often only to say that we will be in the Dog and Duck at half past eight. Modern technology reinforces social networking rather than posing a threat to it. An online discussion does not have an 'atmosphere' – a good pub does, and that is why we go there, as the research clearly shows.

Also standing out, for me, in the research findings, is our need for 'mixture' in our social networks. In our workday and professional lives we may usually meet only people who are 'like us' – in terms of social background, education, etc. In a good pub you meet people from a wide variety of backgrounds, and that is one of the big draws. In SIRC's after-work local on a typical evening, for example, you will rub shoulders with a museum curator, a police officer, an electrician, a retired teacher, a college porter, a few students, a brick layer, an IT specialist and, yes, a couple of social scientists. On another evening, the mix might be rather different, adding an element of randomness or the 'unexpected' to one's pub-going life. Where else would you encounter such variety?

Another thing that always fascinated me about the pub is the special type of 'banter' that one encounters there – sometimes difficult to decipher at first. Becoming familiar with these special codes, involving the use of nick-names and references to events and situations known only to regular visitors, are what establish you as an 'insider' – someone with special membership of a distinct community. And this sense of community is what comes out very clearly in the focus groups. The pub is not just a place that serves refreshment like, say, a café or a wine bar – it is very special social world in which, in a very real sense, we feel we belong, rather than somewhere we merely frequent. It is also a safe haven to which we can escape, as one of the focus group participants clearly articulated. We need such opportunities – to be, perhaps, a little 'larger than life' on occasions, to leave behind pressures of work for an hour or so, to be cheered up or to 'get things off our chest' among those we trust.

We do not, however, seek to escape from our families in the pub. In fact, the research shows that we go to the pub most frequently with our partners and/or family members. In a very real sense then, as the report emphasises, local pubs are one of the few remaining social institutions that plays an active role in maintaining the extended family network with fathers, sons, mothers, daughters, granddads and grandmas all sharing in the same enduring rituals that characterise 'going for a drink'. Yes, there are pubs that appear to cater almost exclusively for the under 25s. There are pubs where the entire clientele consists of old fogeys. The true local, however, reflects the age demographic in which it is located – a true community within the community.

'Pub friends' are not always our 'best friends'. We may drink regularly with them but never see them in their own home, nor in ours. In this way, as the research highlights, we can extend social networks without necessarily being 'burdened' with additional obligations. We probably do not know when their birthdays are so do not have to remember to send them a card. In the pub, however, we may share with them quite intimate thoughts – reveal things about ourselves that we would never do to 'strangers'. All of this relies on the element of 'trust' that exists within the local – a feature again strongly reflected in the qualitative research and

appreciated most, perhaps, by women who find pubs increasingly welcoming and catering for their needs.

Pubs do, of course, evolve over time. The typical local of today looks rather different from those of Worktown in the 1930s, even though it serves exactly the same function. It is also increasingly a place to which we go to eat as well as to drink. The research highlights what is for many this added attraction of the pub – its casual nature compared to that of a restaurant. The national poll also shows that informality in this context is what people are looking for.

As the pub adapts without losing its essential element of community it ensures its survival in a modern world. In the increasingly faceless anonymity of the urban environments in which most of us live, a sense of belonging and being part of a genuine community become all the more important. We can sit at our computers and exchange stories and pictures via *Facebook* or *Myspace*.. Or we can go to the pub. Or we can, of course, do both. Just as the mobile phone helps us to meet up with people for a 'real' exchange, ICT reinforces the role of the pub rather than threatens it.

I find it fascinating and highly revealing that in all of the focus groups and interviews I have done about online social interaction, people invariably, without exception, compare their online conversations with what they would or would not say in what they always call 'real life'. Emails, chatrooms, networking sites, online forums and so on have their place in our lives, and it is an important place, but we all seem to be aware, if only subconsciously, that it is different and separate from 'real life'. 'Real life' is still what happens in our homes, and in our home-from-home, the pub.