

Get a taste of good old London at these historic pubs



The George Inn's "gallery" balconies are where guests watched plays back in the day. (Michaela Urban / Chicago Tribune)

By **Eric Vohr**
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London's pubs aren't just a great place to get a pint. Many make an ideal spot to soak up the city's history, too.

The George Inn dates back — way back — to medieval times. It was rebuilt in 1677 after a fire destroyed most of the Southwark neighborhood. It's the only surviving "galleried" pub in London, meaning it has outside balconies where guests of the inn watched plays performed in the courtyard.

Next to the main bar is the table where Charles Dickens drank his pints, presumably contemplating his next novel. One thing that hasn't changed over time is the popularity of The George, 75-77 Borough High St., where it's often a standing-room-only crowd.

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Another one of my favorites, Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese, was a preferred watering hole for such literary giants as Mark Twain, Alfred Tennyson and Arthur Conan Doyle. Rebuilt after the Great Fire of London in 1666, the pub is a kooky combination of odd-shaped rooms connected by twisting, narrow stairways that can be

dizzying — even before you start to drink. Legend has it that the upstairs rooms of this pub on Fleet Street were once used as a brothel.

Just down the road is another landmark pub, The Old Bell Tavern. Architect Christopher Wren — who oversaw the rebuilding of 52 churches and St. Paul's Cathedral after the Great Fire — constructed the tavern in the 1670s to house masons working on neighboring St. Bride's Church. There have been a few minor changes over the years, but one can still stand at the curved, dark wood bar and hoist a drink like those early masons did after a hard day's work.

Many London pubs claim to be among the oldest, when they're really just newer buildings located on the site of demolished classics. Not true of the above mentioned, the timbers in which once echoed the hearty clinking of 17th-century mugs of suds.

Does the beer taste better when you're leaning on a pub rail that dates to when Charles II sat on the throne? I think it does, and I'll drink to that.

Eric Vohr is a freelance writer.

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