

Do you remember...

the Carpenters' Arms?

An 18th Century pub, built when the Botley Causeway was opened in the 1760s, the Carpenters' Arms was named for the sawmills on the site of Walbrook Court offices in North Hinksey Lane. It must have been central to village life when 'Botley' meant the village grouped around the pub, the rump of which survives in the half-dozen houses at the back of McDonalds, but it's hard to find out much about it. An old poster shows that the public rooms on the first floor were the site of the auction of many houses in the village in 1841, and the *Oxford Journal* of around that date contains a firm assertion from John Parker Jnr that he would not be selling the pub after the death of his father. Shortly afterwards, the notice of the sale appears, but with no indication why he changed his mind.

Ellis Wren was the landlord in the 1930s and 40s, and the photograph shows his two sons in the road outside enjoying the floods – probably the 1947 ones. Mrs Wren, when she was caretaker at Elms Road Nursery, once told me how embarrassed her husband had been to have been caught on camera when he should have been at school. Frank and Betty Morris were the landlords during the 1970s and 80s, when the Shark Fishing Club was established. I haven't been able to find out anything at all about this surprising club, so if you know anything, please be sure to pass it on and I'll add it to the archive. I was a member of the pub cribbage team for a while, with Danny Darcy and others. Danny had lived four doors down from the pub all his long life, and was outraged to be banned from the pub at the age of 80 by a later landlord, the contentious Ken Freeman, who had a short fuse and got a reputation for the number of people he banned.

During the 90s, the pub was taken over as a Beefeater, and acquired a glossy new interior, including shelves of oldish books bought by the yard to convey a snug feeling. The filtration was not great, and the neighbourhood was flooded with the smells of sizzling steaks. During this time, they made the mistake of digging out a cellar – no other house nearby has a cellar, because the water table is so high – and found they had to install a permanent pump to keep the water out.

In March 2001 McDonalds swooped, bought the pub and turned out the staff at a day's notice. The *Oxford Mail* quoted Mr Pownceby of Cumnor as saying: "We turned up at the pub on Wednesday night to find the builders there. I think it's disgusting that regulars weren't informed." The regulars decided to go for a drink at the Seacourt Bridge pub where they found members of staff from the Carpenters Arms. Mr Pownceby said: "Some of them were crying into their drinks... The Carpenters is an ancient pub and it's another amenity from the Botley area that has gone." Ed Matts, a West Oxford man, tried to get the 200-year old building listed, but it was too late, although the trees in the car park were all given Preservation Orders. The building was gutted, and machinery replaced the first floor assembly rooms where the neighbourhood had been auctioned in the 19th century. The top floor can now only be reached by ladder. Even Chris Gray, the renowned *Oxford Times* columnist had some words to say: 'My memories of the Carpenters are mainly happy ones: lunchtime pints in the seventies served by the improbably named landlord 'Bonky' Morris, the visit of Ken Freeman's racehorse, Swell Sound, a skittles night defeat for *The Oxford Times* under my captaincy, by Morrell's team, in March 1983...'

McDonalds faces outwards to the passing traffic, although it does also serve the local community, and is much more aware of local opinion under its current franchise holder, Karl Room. In this, it does fulfil the function of the original pub, placed where it was to supply travellers stopping at the Botley tollgate, just a mile from the first gate (and the Old Gatehouse, now the White House) at the other end of the Botley Road.

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