

One pint, the rest is history



Keith Austin samples 4000 years of London tradition in a crawl between 10 of the city's fine old pubs.

Six hundred years ago, in *The Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer had his pilgrims meet in the Tabard coaching inn in south London before starting their journey to Canterbury Cathedral.

He was no fool, that Chaucer. London is full to the brim with history but nowhere does it come to life as vividly as in its pubs. Here, in the company of like-minded fellow travellers, you can knock back a cup of good cheer in the knowledge that the mere act of ordering has written you into a timeline stretching back, almost unchanged, for hundreds of years.

Sup your beer and think about all the people who in that same pub have ordered their pint, half pint or pewter tankard of lager, ale, porter or mead. Surely they weren't that much different? Chatting, laughing, drinking too much, arguing - and now you, too, are part of that tradition.

So here, in an easy five-odd kilometres covering a mere 4008 years, is a pub crawl through 10 of central London's oldest.

Ye Olde Mitre

The Mitre is the Brigadoon of pubs, appearing only every 100 years or so. Honestly, it's so out of the way that even when I worked at a newspaper around the corner I had trouble finding it. Mind you, I often had trouble finding my way back to that newspaper, so welcoming is this tiny pub.

Just a few minutes' walk from the Cittie, turn left into Hatton Garden, the jewellery centre of London, and keep an eye out on the right for a nondescript alley. Outside, attached to a lamp-post, is a small, blue bishop's mitre that points the way. "Ye Olde Mitre public house," it reveals, "established 1546." What it doesn't reveal is that it was demolished in 1772 and rebuilt.

Another, smaller sign further in lists the opening times (Monday to Friday, 11am-11pm) and boasts it is "possibly the oldest pub in London".

It has two bars, the smallest of which would fill up if more than 15 people walked in at once. Which is a large part of its charm - as is its ever-changing list of real ales.

Ely Court, EC1. Age: 464 years.