

Concrete and Cocktails

A journey to
Birmingham's
glitter-stained
independent heart.

Danny Smith & Jon Bounds

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Danny and Jon are editors of Dirty Bristow, a literary magazine with no ads and no rules.

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Cover photo of The Nechells Park, on Nechells Park Road corner with Cuckoo Road in Birmingham, by Elliott Brown: flickr.com/ell-r-brown

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As a part-time journalist and aspiring avatar for the gods of debauchery you are asked to do some unsavoury things. Be it covering some average indie band's third 'my dad drives the van' gig. Or having to find an interesting angle on Valentine's Day, despite having all romance crushed out of your soul by a government intent on turning the country you live in into a feudal system where big business robber barons set up their own personal fiefdoms using jazzy branding and clown make-up. But sometimes you get given a task that you are so attuned to, so personally right for, that it feels like the hand of Baron La Croix himself has pushed you to this point.

Granted, the email only asked for a small article about my favourite independent pubs in Birmingham, but I knew this was a coded communication from the Furies, a challenge. Could I drink in all of the independent pubs in Birmingham in just one day? Of course I knew it was possible, just not very sensible. In my head I counted ten probable targets and beer maths did the rest. One pint in each meant ten pints at least. I was going to need back-up.

Jon Bounds is a man with a lot of pie-placed fingers, his intelligence is sharpened by an odd wit. He seems to be the only person whose capacity for the Devil's Dishwater exceeds my own and can understand the startlingly lucid and intelligent observations I tend to make after four or five small beers. So recruiting him was important and understandably easy given his weakness for strong continental lager and odd tasks.

Please note the following account is pieced together from handwritten notes that degenerate into a language, I suspect, is a drunken dyslexic cuneiform, and a memory that doesn't work properly in the first place.

Danny Smith asks me to do many things, the better of these include drinking beer and writing. He just wanted company on a literary pub-crawl across the city centre's indie drinkeries one Saturday, that was cool. He even had a list, of sorts, even if it did include places that I'd no real interest in going. Bars mainly.

Bars are for standing and shouting above poor music choices. Pubs for chatting, forming or feeling part of a community—you expect to come away with something more than a higher blood alcohol level. Bars aspire to the functionality of the chain somehow, whereas even the managed houses of the old pub chains thrived on being different, the business hung on it.

I added a couple to the itinerary but, in Birmingham at least, the old-style city centre pubs are closing. Whetherspoonisation (by proxy as actual Whetherspoons are constructed in kit form in non-pub spaces) or a push toward a different type of independence seem to be the only options. Still, we had a criterion of sorts and route that worked. I headed out to the Flapper, which turned out to still be as far from the bus stop as it ever was.

As the crow walks, I cut through the back of the Bull Ring: past the Bull Ring Tavern, past the site of my one and only attempt a pool hustling (the long gone Toreador) and past two of the remaining 'real pubs' left in town. The Crown looks rough, but isn't. The Bright House looks rough, even smells rough, I think it is rough although I've never been in to find out. The Flapper couldn't be further away from these.

I arrive to find Mike there too, I'd asked him if he wanted to come both because I like his company and there needs to be someone sensible on such a quest. A page, a second, or more rather a monk. A designated walker and thinker for when we are non able. Plus I knew he'd keep Dan company waiting for me to arrive late.

I must admit my bias at this point. The Flapper is one of the pubs in Birmingham that is ingrained in my own personal mythology, setting up gigs downstairs for friends' bands, a crowd of twenty or so of the skating community trying to teach my rave bunny friend how to do an ollie in a busy beer garden, and tricking a proto-punk blow-hard into drinking a bottle of piss with orange squash in it because it was exactly the same colour as Reef.

At the elbow end of nowhere The Flapper shouldn't enjoy the custom it does, but it's managed to carve itself a comfortable niche as crucible of new local music and premier 'where the hell can we go and sit in the sun in the city centre' venue. The canal-side beer garden is spacious, down-to-earth and during the summer fragrant with the smoke from a thousand lands. Seeing as the music venue downstairs isn't musically discriminatory, it is also filled with most of the sub-cultures Birmingham has to offer. I tend to be early for everything, and Jon about half an hour late for everything so I had time to watch the sky ominously darken and the enormity of the task loom over me.

The music is hip to the point of being a little obtuse and if honest, a bit hipster same-y, but interspersed with classics like Zeppelin or BRMC. Jon arrives to help us decipher the awful pastiche pop art photoshop abortions that adorn the walls of the upstairs. Hungover crosses between Banksy and Warhol with a baffling array of subjects. Hendrix, Bowie, The Who, and the Rolling Stones sit with the likes of Chris effing Martin and the Arctic Monkeys.

At a point of high dread, Michael appears, Michael is a very smart, nice guy that I have known long enough to be able to call a friend. I like Michael a lot but I think I in equal parts annoy and frighten him. As a rudder and a barometer for social norms Michael is a perfect choice as our third. And he bought with him some foul-tasting Lithuanian vanilla bread rings for no other reason it seems than to make me giggle whenever I thought about them.

The Flapper is always a good place to start or end any adventure.

I'm not sure what the independence of the Flapper, as opposed to its previous incarnation as part of the Firkin Brewery, contributes. The layout is the same, there is still the regular churn of aspiring (mostly awful, but you never know...) bands. The place hasn't changed in the fifteen or so years I've been coming in, in fact the jukebox doesn't seem to have changed at all. An auto-shuffle reverie for the still-clinging-on britpop generation, it'll stay on message until the fashions come round again and it does seem that they are about to.

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One concession to the march of time and fashion are the prints above the bar—squint and you can make out the Arctic Monkeys on one, joining a Jimi Hendrix that could be Bob Marley and other giants of the unimaginative music scene. Or is it Coldplay? Or Welsh metal-popsters Stereophonics? The tables are water-damaged, even the ones on the inside. Leaks, or the salt tears of the badly-drawn boyos looking down upon them.

I spent Millennium eve here, camped out with Caffrey's and a cheese cob from the early afternoon when it became clear that we'd forgotten to get the requisite tickets to get in an a civilised hour. It was a kind of default pub for us in the late '90s, and I went to lots of gigs in the room downstairs, at that time it was part of the established toilet circuit for up-and-coming indie bands. It doesn't seem that way anymore, it's either local bands or some metal circuit I'm gladly unaware of.

It's a homely place, but the beer has never been great. The kids don't mind.

The pub that is now known as The Yardbird has had many different guises over the years, so far the jazz club skin has been the most successful. As you enter, the stage and dance floor dominates half of the venue and the jazz club vibe is very authentic, in so far as, and despite it being daytime, it is candle-lit and empty. Though the clouds were threatening rain in the early afternoon, so for a pub that is a notable music venue with a majority of its seating is outside, this is entirely expected.

We came at the wrong time for its best impression, but still enjoyed its calming energy, I only tried to goose Michael three or four times until he started getting cross and the ladies holding their glasses of cold wine by the stem looked over.

On the way to our next stop, I take Dan and Mike the canal way to point out a wonderful trail of graffiti: "this way" it says, "this way" round past the fat-stinking vent, "keep going" past the chained-up barrels, "fuck off".

The Yardbird is a weird place, it wants to take advantage of its very central location and attract passing couples to brunch outside. Somehow the shadow of Britain's ugliest hotel, all dark, sullen, glass and the cutesy Big Issue seller's kennel next door don't help create the atmosphere of European beach bar that they'd like. What does is the squinting funk when you venture in to go to the bar or for a slash. There's a step on the way into the bog, the regulars know, you don't. Removing your sunglasses, unsteady in your flip-flops you splash over your bare feet—it's unsanitary but cooling.

We sit inside, hunched over our notebooks, on one of about three tables. We take everything in there is to take in in about three seconds and talk about coach trips. Holiday vibe. The place is set up to be an after-hours jazz club and it serves that function well, but I've never liked the feeling. It's the polo-shirted soul-boy end of jazz, hipster pill-head territory—there will be pork pie hats.

You can tell it's an independent place by two easy markers. It has at least one hot member of staff, and a logo: a raven, nevermore.

Another place that is hard to separate from the shadows of my past. As a young and sincere punk we did things in the toilets of Subside (then Exposure) that have probably stained its soul. Subside is

part of a ever defusing alternative scene here in Birmingham, a scene that manages to pull itself together for a short while, only to fall a little further apart with the effort. Soon our culture will have taken so many pieces from its soul that it'll be a ghost, a cultural race memory like the Beatniks or Teddy boys.

It was still early, and seeing as most Saturday nights it's open until five am, even 10 at night could still be classed as early.

We were greeted by a friendly but bemused man, none of us looked the part, especially Michael who looks like Clark Kent took up social work. The only other customer was Herman Munster with a beard and doorman uniform. Little has changed over the years, even when the place briefly turned into a lap dancing club (Exposé) I imagine they didn't have to change the black walls and mirror décor. The sweat on the walls have been a pleasing constant for 15 or so years.

At this point a detour. Danny has put a pint glass to his good eye in the manner of Nelson and spies the home of metal. Subside "it must be indie, what chain would do that". We trek wearily up concrete hill and down concrete dale and it's open, even at just after five.

Metal as a genre has never, and will never 'do it' for me: too loud, too sincere, too loud. Moreover it's too male, with a smell of stale sweat and stale man clinging to every taughtly-tuned riff. And the black walls picked out by a vampiric neon sweat too. While Dan quizzes the barman about the independence of the place and Mike perches tenderly at the bar, I slip for a piss. Having broken the seal by now it's going to be a chance to review the toilets of each establishment. I contemplate the nature of rock pub conveniences, and wonder if it's possible that some supplier somewhere sells pre-broken bog seats.

The place is empty, we're dealing with a clientele of the nocturnal. Save Tony Curtis washing Larry Olivier's back silently out of the corner of our eyes, there's only the barman here. You put a TV in a bar and it has to show something at all times, lest it reflect the deteriorating faces of the clientele back at them. But what to show. In such male environs a swords and sandals epic seems apt, maybe there'll be oysters with the green Guinness for St Patrick tomorrow.

No such fine dinning today: a man with a beard and a trucker cap, about 15 stone, brings in a McDonald's. A veritable feat he shares with our host. It's a matter of taste.

Home of horrible-tasting pond water with rubbish homo-erotic names, and denim-wearing men. I don't like pubs that have no music or pubs that smell of a canal gypsy's underwear. The Wellington was packed as usual being used as it is as a Dad crèche, so the only place to stand was 'in the way'. It was the crowd that had gathered near the dartboard that finally made me realise that the Wellington isn't a real traditional pub, it's just styled as one. It's a simulacrum, a Disneyfied version of a country pub without the warmth or history.

It began to bother me that my lack of research meant I wasn't actually sure if the place was independent or not. I made the mistake of asking the bartender. I am constantly surprised and disappointed by my own gender's ability to take what should be very interesting things and strip away all the excitement and wonder. Trains are amazing machines yet reduced to numbers,

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timetables and codes. Sport can be noble and uplifting, yet is turned to boorish tribalism or dull statistics. Beer is about debauchery and the love of life, company, and friends, yet in the Wellington turned into a list of names on a monitor with ratings and percentages. Even asking something as simple whether the pub is independent or not leads to an answer that I frankly got bored listening to halfway through.

Michael offered me a Baltic bread ring, I declined and suggested we push on.

Pub pub, or a reconstruction of at least. The Wellington is popular and known widely outside the city as a home of "good beer". I've been here many times before, unlike Subside where I'd only ever been once.

My Subside (né Exposure) experience came some years back: I was out drinking with some lads I lived with at the time, much more rock than me, and that was where our after-hours drinking had to take place. Earlier that evening I'd been at the place's antithesis—the longest bar in Europe—Whetherspoons's Square Peg. I'd struggled to get in too; a bouncer had objected to my "sports top", but relented when assured that not only was it a baseball shirt it was a baseball shirt of a long defunct team. I was okay as long as I "stood behind a pillar". Who was going to take offence at my Brooklyn Dodgers shirt, an enraged Yankee fan? I met one in Subside later, twat.

No chance of a fight in the Wellington though, even if you spill someone's pint the worst that can happen is you have to order a pint of Old Curate's Cunt (4.3% ABV) for the chap and be washing the yeast stink out of your slacks for a month.

Birmingham has more canals than Venice and most of it seems to flow through the pipes of the Wellington and be described on a plasma as "a full and fruity ale with a cheeky aftertaste of rusting bedstead". I don't take to ale, but the place does do a nice line in cleanly brewed German lager. It's a pity that you can never get a seat and the place whiffs strongly of the sort of men that will pick tobacco out of their beards, talk leftist politics without recourse to reality and then trundle off to vote Liberal Democrat. In their polo shirts embroidered with the legend "Upper Wankelring Beer Festival 1996—We're no mugs, we just drink from them".

The place is fiercely independent, and serving a long ignored constituency—if you do take to ale there isn't a better place to be. You can even purchase snuff, or a calendar of historic King's Norton. Being in town though, it's never going to be an exclusive club of the the sandal set: while we stand doing the jig of the sorry to be in direct path to the amenities, over by the dartboard is a bundle of blusher and strappy dresses laughing and missing doubles by a clear foot.

I'm sure the sandals under the door of the trap in the gents are those of Charlton Heston, which proves all are welcome.

It's a fair step to the next pub, and in lieu of bar snacks I snaffle a couple of Mike's mini Eastern-European doughnuts.

The Victoria of my youth was a pleasant pub ran by a charming lesbian couple that had a killer jukebox but was occasionally uninhabitable due to the theatre crowd making it impossible to get a

drink during certain days on odd schedules. Now it's uninhabitable due to the hip crowd that make the place an impenetrable wall of moustaches and chunky jewellery. That said, when it isn't a weekend night, the place is rather pleasant. Low lighting, friendly staff, and cartoon characters on the wall make it one of my regular writing hangouts.

But no matter how insufferable the clientèle on weekend nights the Vic gets a pass as one of the best pubs in Birmingham because of its willingness to allow its room upstairs to be used for all manner of artistic and insane events, Japanese hip-hop karaoke, burlesque drawing classes, and miniature film festivals have all taken advantage of its reasonable rates and very open mind. Much like its spiritual brother and Birmingham alternative accomplice, Kings Heath's Hare and Hounds, people know that if it's happening, it's probably happening here.

The mood was dull when we got there. It was the weird lull between afternoon shoppers and matinée performance and the night onslaught, the staff were cutting lemons and checking the rail spirits methodically. Soldiers repacking their gear before deploying somewhere terrible. The only other clue to things to come was a sleeping Hair Metal puppet, a sincerity casualty from the irony wars. Either a victim of afternoon drinking or a hipster robot that had left itself on standby until cooler people turned up.

Much emptier, but with an alarming smell of vinegar, we've reached the Vic at a hiatus in its hipster schedule meaning that we can actually get a drink without feeling thoroughly insecure. Not having a 'tache or a tattoo sleeve will often imbue you with the super-power of invisibility at the bar here. We are joined by a tiny dog that doesn't want to get into a round. It's changed, some years back its proximity to the Alex theatre would have guaranteed a glimpse of Gielgud, Larry O. or a Chuckle Brother but we see only a sleeping goth.

We don't stop here long, aware that we are dawdling and getting slowly puddled. There's little to say about the Victoria, it's fine. The bar areas are a little too small to use at night, you'll never get a seat, so the main action is in the function rooms. Today's function seems to be Ladies' Poker, of which we cannot partake.

The Victoria, Island bar and the Jekyll and Hyde are owned by the same people, so technically aren't independent. But I have included them here because even though they are a chain, they're not a brand. The three are very separate in identity and look, also they're a small local chain independent of a brewery which means they don't have the big money backing which tends to fear risk. But most importantly they're such fixtures in Birmingham's nightlife I couldn't imagine talking about the city centre without them.

Island bar is a cocktail bar, a place where they take cocktails seriously, and I don't just mean the right amount of celery in a bloody mary way, I mean in an absolutely not smiling or showing any signs of pleasant interaction way. We waited so long to get served that by the time they asked us what we wanted we had forgotten why we were there. Which only drew fresh ire from the bartenders well that would never dry.

By this time we weren't drunk per se but Jon had a laugh that was beginning to get a little louder, Michael was becoming a little more earnest and I was rapidly over estimating how charming I really

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am. People always give a pass to The Island bar despite its slow bartending and expensive drinks because said drinks are delicious and they play cool music. I give it a pass because it's laid out exactly like a bar called The Foundry, a place that existed nearby, a place where I had my first kiss. With an aggressive young black lady who smelled slightly of fresh sweat and wore the plastic from the top of larger four packs on her wrist.

Time marches, we march—to the first place that is rejoicing in its youth and bar-ness. It's packed and they don't do lager on tap, after a brief discussion with Danny about what I would drink instead I settle for a Silver Bullet (gin, lime juice and alcoholic peppermint).

When he returns we've bumped into some people we know, that's unexpected, as is the White Russian he hands me. No chance to do anything but stand, and the bland come in, queue, pay heavily for cocktails (the drink of the part-timer), then troop back out to sit on plastic patio furniture beside a dual-carriageway. It's fridge-magnet populism in a prom dress, the walls show laminated A4 posters for The Skids, Elvis, but also Guns and Roses. It's for kids, it's not for me. And it's loud—this place couldn't be further away from the Orwellian ideal of a city pub, more handjob-under-table than Moon-Under-Water.

Upstairs, where we don't venture, is a Tiki Bar, apparently run by Kirk Douglas and Rotunda-dwelling Robert Vaughan. What a tiki bar is I'm not sure, I suspect it's the same but with more grass-matting. Gulping back the milk, I engineer an exit to the Sunflower Lounge as soon as possible—it's a place I understand.

Well, any place that has The Warriors projected on one wall is alright by me, the retro mod bar has always been a cool place to hang out, the sort of place that the Vic will become in five or ten years when all the hipsters realise their skinny jeans makes their legs look like golf clubs and irony is no reason to choose an outfit.

The thing about a big screen is that I always find it near impossible not to watch it. I have no idea what Michael and Jon were talking about because I was watching The bit where Sonny tries to rape the undercover police officer and gets arrested, I couldn't hear the dialogue but I've seen it so many times I didn't need to.

Michael brings me a pint of froth back from the bar, they've only charged him for a half which is sort of reasonable till you taste it and realise it's the dregs of the barrel. The hard foam solidifying, and no doubt doing my guts no good whatsoever, it's gone quickly. I don't chide him, but do make sure he gives me some of his pint too. It turns out to be cider, which I can't drink at all—so I nurse it.

When the Sunflower Lounge is full there is nowhere you can stand, crouch or lean that doesn't mean you spend a goodly proportion of your time shuffling and saying "sorry". By this time of a weekend night it's always full as it only holds around fifty young to ageing mods and the crowd is loyal and long staying.

It was opened by Brum DJ Paul Cook some ten or more years ago, named for his Sunflower mod and soul nights that splattered across the city in the early stirrings of britpop, and while the fashions

have ambled on there's always enough mods to fill a bar. They're an easy crowd to keep happy: sixties tinged decor, soul music and premium European lager. That suits me too, but you've got to get in early to feel part of the scene—we stumble in at getting on for nine on a Saturday, and aren't about to relax, so it isn't fun. It's not possible to chat as one of us is constantly moving to let people get past and Danny is gawking at the big screen at men in leather waistcoats. When I do catch what Michael is going on about, it's that he's hungry.

Food is the modern battleground for pubs, and an indie needs to decide quickly what it's going to go for: bar snacks only, cheap and greasy, or that particular pub nouvelle stodge of small puddings garnished with dandelion leaves. The Sunflower has chosen simple, but the chance of our sober-ish friend getting some on a Saturday night are zero. There is however a Subway next door, so we slip out to get Michael a foot-long to slip in. I secrete my taxed cider on someone else's table.

Writing up my notes I can see that we'd had a few by now; I'd planned to construct some sort of Warriors narrative with baguettes for baseball bats. Us caught out over the wrong side of the Queensway and needing to get back up our ends. It doesn't stack up, I remember Danny and I giggling over the 'sub as erect penis' trope, being loud and annoying, and being annoyed by just how long it takes Mike to chose from the bewilderingly samey options. Mike will weigh the merits of very decision with a mass spectrometer if he can, and he does here.

I get some pickled onion Monster Munch to steel myself for the fairly long walk to another Rock Pub. Scruffy Murphy's is in Dale End, much to the edge of Birmingham's liveable centre and enveloped by a bloody huge car-park. Add the fake-wood facade and faker Irish theme and it doesn't sound promising, the vast quantities of rockers draped around the entrance puffing fags indicate that it works for them. To stand outside of anyway.

By now I was definitely in my cups somewhat, and my notes have become scrawl. I do remember walking past a big crowd outside smoking, draped over the steps and slouched against the wall like it was a photo-shoot for an advertisement trying to make smoking cool again. And I do remember walking into a wall of leather and sound. Rammstien, a metal band as aggressive and German as the name suggests, chugged in the air as we fought our way to the bar. The beer was the cheapest so far but by far the worst. I didn't even finish my pint. I left it awkwardly on the floor of the space left clear for dancing, the only place we could find to stand While I tried to make Jon and Michael feel comfortable, how to explain that studs and and chains hide the gooey insides of bruised early teens hedgehog spikes and bruised egos.

Scruffy's is a community pub, complete with regulars—goths and their uncomfortable looking straight friends—and a jukebox only a cult could love. Or The Cult, perhaps. The metal-heads of Birmingham have been having a rough time of late, long-time bolt hole Costermongers has closed and the hastily Xeroxed replacement in the basement of The Swinging Sporrán didn't last long either. Both were part of a special breed of Birmingham pub that eschews light, perfect for the more sepulchral end of the fashion spectrum—Scruffy's is one of these too, concrete becomes her.

It also has one of the independent outlet staples, an attractive member of staff. Chain shops or pubs have hiring policies and recruitment agencies, indies have the whims and the engorged sexual

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organs leading to less blood to the brain of the boss. It's often a better selection policy, as long as there's someone around who can run a bar and pull a pint.

The pints are pulled efficiently but they taste foul. It's a UK-produced lager, which I would normally avoid, and I've just eaten some of the tangiest corn snacks available but it really isn't pleasant. Lager probably isn't a big rock-drink, and Nick Knowles silently mouthing obscenities on a TV above our heads isn't probably a big rock-National Lottery gameshow. It's things like this that mean the place can live on some sort of pub-doublethink; okay for suits in the day, able to advertise a psychic show, serve very ordinary beer but also to be home for large ursine men swathed in leather.

In the The Jekyll and Hyde: I drank a cocktail, got told by someone that they didn't like my make-up despite me saying I liked their dress—which is a constant problem with being me; nobody knows when I'm being sincere. And I half danced half shouted to Jackie Wilson's Higher and Higher a song I am unashamed to admit only like because it was used in Ghostbusters 2. I do remember being given a free drink from a bar tender who I used to know from scouts, I was his patrol leader and while I never took scouts that seriously (my oddly named patrol 'Buffalo' being one of my many legacies) I took looking after my younger charges very seriously, which seemed to have paid off. It's funny how these things work.

The Jekyll has an excellent beer garden they pulled out of nowhere and classy gin parlour, neither of which I visited on this occasion. I forget the layout of its previous incarnation because I only visited it once and quickly left once I realised it was the Steelhouse Lane police station's local and where the judges and magistrates go after work, but I find the layout quite awkward there never seems a comfortable place to sit or stand.

Out of the three, this one was the most fun.

Heaving in a pleasant way, the Jekyll (once the Queen's Head) is the first place I get bought a drink by someone in the pub just because they're nice. From what I remember I had a gin, went to the toilet twice, and sort of sang along to the overbearing tunes. My notes say "hipster pubs need more bar staff" and that's right, generally the cooler the staff the slower they move—and when the place pushes more than simple drinks they're going to take even longer.

I also have "tidy beard" and "but with digital watch". That could mean anything.

The Queens Arms has recently had a very swanky make over. The locals were very closed-community, but not aggressively so, which is to be expected for a pub that is out of the way so has to rely on regulars rather than passing trade. It was a warm pleasant atmosphere in which we had the sort of earnest conversation that only people 10 pints in can have, and have no real recollection of next day. I just remember Michael turning his head slightly and nodding like a scarecrow psychotherapist.

For the Queens Arms I have stronger recollections, which is useful as the two pages in my notebook say nothing but "Rodger Daltrey in corner with Pete" and variously scrawled song lyrics interspersed with the phrase "sturdy tits". Why I can't work out, the only other decipherable word is "Tupperware". It can't have anything to do with the bar, which rarely has members of The Who in there—the WHO perhaps, if they're investigating the state of the bogs.

I jest. The toilets are scrupulously clean, and there were not that many people there at all which is a shame. I really like the Queens Arms, it's homely but not cloying and is very much like what an old fashioned city boozier would be like if someone gave it a damn good scrubbing.

And we treated it like a proper old fashioned pub, round a table we talked of class. Wittily, intelligently and incisively. And also with a true drunk's grasp of the chimeral nature of the truth—for Michael agreed with the lightest of touches, the kind of touch that means he didn't agree at all, but to question would be to prolong. We were a pair of sturdy tits.

The Actress and Bishop is Birmingham's best kept secret, although it's not that well kept because it was bloody packed. It used to be massively popular five or so years ago because it was the only pub that would open after eleven. Still popular despite being out of town, the night we went was a slightly older crowd and after drinking several bottles of a sweet tasting purple drink I decided that I would chat up someone for Michael, our only singleton. I remember turning to the nearest lady and introducing myself, then realising that I might not actually be saying words, and then completely forgetting why I was talking to them. I remember several seconds of me frowning at them and walking to the bar and shouting the only word that came to mind 'PURPLE'. We danced probably. And I'm not sure.

For some time there was a kind of urban meme relating to the Actress; it was impossible to talk about it without mentioning the owner (or manager, I don't think it was ever that clear) Paul Henry, that's Benny from Crossroads, and his dislike of being reminded of his past as a character actor specialising in goat-keeping simpletons.

Back then it was an 'Over 21s' place, which implied something a little older still—you don't get 'Over 30s' bars as far as my limited experience runs, but that's pretty much what 'Over 21s' implies. It foreshadows singles' evenings and happy hours, it's one step away from being home to classic rock covers bands—everyone who still likes pubs that have music when they're over 40 likes music live, but they don't want to hear what they don't know. Musicianship is important.

The place isn't like that anymore, it has gigs in the upstairs room and everything, but it is still a little other. The punters here have taken the decision to come, it's a way out of town, they've made the decision to come here, probably because Broad Street is a little too "much" for them. And while that's a perfectly cromulent decision, it's not one I'd ever have had to have made—for me calling Broad Street "too much" is like calling Mussolini good with public transport solutions.

Which means that I wouldn't come here by choice. However by this point I'm not making sensible decisions, for some reason we're drinking some puce alcopop and when I order more drinks that's what I shout up too. More than that I bookend the round, sucking back an extra dose while being served.

Concrete and Cocktails

It was a winning end for a completed quest. Although the real beast I had to slay was the hangover next day, a foul serpent that shat in my brain and dripped venom into my stomach all day.

Looking back, the adventure was unfair in a lot of ways, because of how early we had to start we never really got an accurate picture of each pub at its peak times. After all an empty pub is half completed, like seeing a sketch of a sculpture or the raw ingredients of a meal. It wasn't fair on the later pubs because instead of the diligent notes I had been taking at the start I had had to rely on blurry memories and an incomprehensible twitter feed. And finally it isn't fair on any of the independent pubs we went to because the only thing we compare them against is each other. The great thing about independent pubs is that they're always different to the dreary cookie cutter chain pubs that they kick against, beige soul-sucking places with untidy regulars more loyal to the budget booze than any sense of community and events no more interesting than the beer and a burger offer. Independent pubs shine when contrasted with the industry's norm but no such baseline was established.

I'm disconnected by this point, not really able to hold a conversation, feeling like some sort of researcher. I accept that's what we were being, for what is a flâneur but an anthropologist with license to trample down the daisies and piss in the streets.

I realised while writing this up, that most of these pubs are the pubs and bars that I naturally favour, and while I'm all for supporting independent businesses, it's never really crossed my mind before. I choose these places for their quirkiness, because the sub-cultures overlap with my own and maybe, most importantly, all these pubs are the venues of the most interesting things that happen in the city. These pubs are the small gig venues that keep the scene alive, there the rooms where our artists are reaching a wider audience than the cities white cubes allow, and these are the places that will take a chance and support exciting ideas.

I don't know if this is true in other cities, and certainly if anyone wants to pay me to research this I'll be willing to check it out, but it's the independent pubs in Birmingham that keep it vital and give it its character. Don't believe me? Imagine a city centre without these pubs, where the only place to get a drink is the Whetherspoons or any other its contemporaries, no gigs, no events, just two pounds a pint and chart music. I can name three or four other cities that are just like this. None of them are worth living in.

Mike and I stubble into a taxi, Danny wanders off to test the patience in a fairly new relationship. Pub crawls are always too much crawl and not enough pub, but there was more than enough pub today. We're not independent and neutral reviewers, I'm sure we brought little to each venue over the money for the rounds we bought, but pubs are what you make them. And this is what we made of them.