

Whose round is it anyway?

While a visit to the pub remains the cornerstone of British social life many of today's bars and pubs bear little resemblance to the humble, spit and sawdust affairs of yesteryear. Where once patrons could expect no more appetising fare than crisps, nuts and mouldy sandwiches, gastro pubs now serve top quality cooking in pleasant, smoke free environments, while theme nights; karaoke and televised sport have supplanted the more traditional darts and dominoes. However, one aspect of pub life that has survived unscathed and still dominates Britain's drinking culture is 'the round'.

In this curiously British custom each member of a group buys drinks for all the others in rotation. Key phrases used in round buying are: 'It's my round' or its variants 'It's my shout' and 'I'll get them in' where the speaker is volunteering to buy drinks for all. Also useful are 'Whose round is it?' and, perhaps angrily, 'It's not my round I got the last one in' when whose turn it is has somehow been lost.

Some believe the practice may have originated with the Vikings, whose belief in the idea of heroic, competitive drinking may have had a lasting influence. Others suggest, rather more fancifully, a connection to King Arthur and his knights of the round table.

Whatever its origin the convention has endured for a number of reasons. Most basically 'getting a round in' is practical and efficient. It saves time by preventing the clogging up of the bar with customers thus maximising the all-important drinking time. On a deeper level the round is a complex and highly regulated social ritual which allows each member of a group the pleasure of treating all of his friends and serves as a bonding ritual by reinforcing feelings of trust and belonging among the group.

The practice has its pitfalls though and unwritten rules abound. Appearing over keen to buy a round can be seen as showing off while any hint of reluctance will mark you out as the lowest form of pub life – the round dodger. With large groups too the practice can become expensive and complicated. A round of 3 or 4 is generally accepted as the optimum number. Some also believe that buying drinks in rounds encourages excessive drinking, a belief that led to the government briefly banning the practice in the north of England.

But whatever the drawbacks the custom remains hugely popular. A recent survey revealed 82% of Britons are happy to buy a round which suggests that whatever else may change in pub life our favourite method of paying for drinks seems set to be around for a long time to come.