

CONVERSIONS

A new lease of life for Britain's pubs

Max Davidson raises a glass to the notion of living in a converted local boozer

Last orders have been called. The doors and windows are now boarded up. And there's a deafening silence in what was once the saloon bar, which used to ring with tipsy laughter. This is the plight of many a pub.

Around 30 establishments in the UK close every week and, if your friendly local boozer is not yet an endangered species, it could be facing an uphill struggle. From Ascot to Aberdeen, the Fox and Grapes – and, for that matter, the Hare and Hounds, the Crooked Billet and the Admiral Nelson – is looking a bit careworn.

The good news is that, in the right hands, a pub which was forced to close due to a lack of customers can soon reinvent itself as a residence fit for the 21st century. The thousands

of happy punters who have downed pints at the Bromley Arms in London's Fitzrovia over the years – and they have been downing them since 1826 – will be delighted to hear that, although the old pub has long since closed, its spirit lives on.

"As soon as I set eyes on the building, I thought we can do something really special here," says Ravi Pankhania, the boss of Nacropolis, the company behind the new residential development on the old pub site.

For a period after the pub closed, the premises were given over to bog-standard offices and bedsits: an uninspiring use of a listed corner building, in a conservation area at the heart of a great city.

Pankhania had bigger ideas. Not only is The 1826, the name of the new development, a homage to the old Bromley Arms, it has even mimicked aspects of its architecture.

The old pub façade, with its large

ground-floor windows, has remained intact. In fact, from 100 yards away, you could easily look at the building and feel yourself licking your lips at the thought of a restorative gin and tonic. Many of the old Victorian tiles have also been used in the new building, which consists of four luxury two-bedroom apartments, starting at £2.85 million.

Pride of place goes to the vaulted subterranean spa, which would have had the drinkers of old shaking their heads in amazement.

The 1826 is a stylish addition to a dormant area. Fitzrovia has tended to be regarded as Marylebone's sleeper neighbour. But this brilliantly resurrected pub, rising from the ashes like a regular shaking off a hangover, could be a harbinger of better things to come.

"We do not see all that many former pubs being converted into residences in central London," says James Burrows of CBRE, the selling agents. "They are more common in the East End. But when a stylish pub conversion does come on the market, it attracts a lot of interest. The best pub conversions are a bit like warehouse conversions in the way they acknowledge their previous existence in their layout and design."

As a nation, we may not drink in pubs as much as we used to, but still we feel a strong emotional attachment to them, a sense that they are part of our cultural heritage. We do not want to see them simply bulldozed when they cease to be commercially viable.

Another former boozer is the

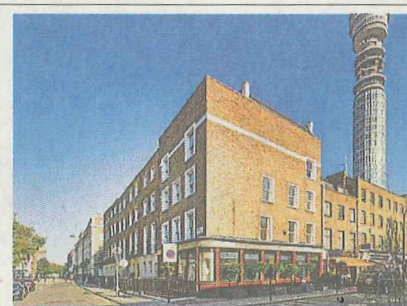


FOR SALE PROPPING UP THE BREAKFAST BAR

London Fitzrovia

Large two-bedroom pads (over 2,000 sq ft) at The 1826.

Guide Price: £2.85m
Agent: CBRE (020 7420 3050; the1826.com; cbreresidential.com), Hudsons (020 7323 2277; hudsonsproperty.com)



Surrey Chertsey

There are five bedrooms, three bathrooms, five living rooms and a swimming pool in York House.

Guide Price: £1.395m
Agent: Barton Wyatt (01344 843000; bartonwyatt.co.uk)



London Victoria Park

The Penshurst Arms has been transformed into five apartments and two houses.

Guide Price: £850,000
Agent: Fyfe McDade (020 7613 4044; fyfemcdade.com)



Penshurst Arms in Hackney, which dates back to the 1860s. The pub closed its doors 10 years ago and fell into disrepair. But nine new residences – a mixture of apartments and town houses – have now come on the market on the restored site.

"I have lived in Hackney for more than 20 years, so I remember the old Penshurst Arms," says Hugo Warner, the managing director of Warbird, the developer. "It was an attractive building, if pretty run-down, and once it went out of business, the owner stayed on for years, entertaining his friends in the downstairs bar. But, although my background is in leisure and hospitality, I could not see any future for the Penshurst as a tartered-up pub. There are too many other good pubs in the area already. So I took a different route."

Regulars at the old Penshurst will barely recognise the new place. The downstairs bar has been converted into posh wardrobes. The vault where the barrels of beer used to be stored is now an underground spa. But regeneration – turning the old to new uses, not discarding it altogether – is the theme throughout the property. Even the reclaimed wooden shelving has been crafted from the rafters of the old pub.

Like The 1826, it is a building which, in small, subtle ways, has kept faith with its roots. The owners of the new properties would not be human if they did not from time to time raise imaginary pints of bitter to the ghosts of the past.



Foxhounds, once an 18th-century pub, is now a family home for sale through Hamptons, main; a three-bedroom flat in an old pub in Euston is for sale through Foxtons, left