

Tobacco Smoke and Taberns



"The more peace and good-will
will abound as we fill
A jolly good pipe of tobacco."
John Usher

Introduction


PIPES—The excited bleatings of bagpipes led Highlanders to battle. Music, elevating and sublime, has surged forth from the pipes of cathedral organs. Pan, the goat-footed Casanova of legend, must have had a way with those reed pipes of his. Bos'n mates have their little peep pipes. The Pied Piper used pipes to rid a city of rats. And, of course, one could find pipes—from wind pipes to plumbing pipes—to write about.

But what pipes have given so much of solace and delight to mankind as "a jolly good pipe of tobacco"? And of all tobacco pipes—which is so intimately identified with good fellowship and fireside cheer as the long, curved-stem clay or churchwardens?

So, by your leave, we offer a bit of "clay" history while peering through the tobacco clouds of two well-loved taverns.

D. J.

**Tobacco Smoke
and Taverns**
by David Jay

ERHAPS you have visited Keen's in New York City. Perhaps, then, your eyes travelled from the walls covered with fascinating theatrical handbills to the low beamed brown ceiling. Perhaps you have wondered why the ceiling was lined with rows of long "churchwardens" — a few white and new, but many stained brown by time and tobacco. You probably noted that some of the old brown fellows had stems broken short. Like many guests perhaps you wondered who smoked those pipes — what history they had to tell.

To go back to the beginning — let us lean back and imagine ourselves in "merrie England", when "Awesome Sir Walter" Raleigh introduced tobacco to his cronies at that roost of roisterers and genius — The Mermaid Tavern. London had only 50,000 inhabitants then, yet nearly half our greatest poetry and drama issued from the smoke and the smokers of that spot. For nightly in The Mermaid, under the leadership of Ben Jonson, gathered the gallant fellows of England's golden age — Shakespeare, Bacon, Lord Brooke, Beaumont and Fletcher and all the great contemporary poets, playwrights and literary figures. Also the patrons of the drama — men like Sir John Salisbury, Shakespeare's sponsor. And, later in the evening, the leading actors of the day.

Let us get a picture of them sitting, elbows on tables, puffing on their long-stemmed clays; demonstrating their affection for "Good Queen Bess" by frequent toasts that kept their goblets filled; talking about the theatre and its

patrons, about plays and players; discussing books and writers, art and artists, airing their opinions, ideas and aspirations; exchanging news, gossip and banter. Young John Keats reflecting on the meetings of those immortal companions, summed it up two centuries later:

*"Souls of poets, dead and gone,
What Elysium have you known,
Happy field or mossy cavern,
Choicer than the Mermaid Tavern?"*

Now the true clay pipe being too long and too fragile to carry about, it is probable that the Mermaid's guests brought about what soon became a traditional tavern custom. When they departed for the night, they did not take along their pipes, but left them in the keeping of the proprietor.

As the popularity of tobacco smoking advanced, every worthwhile tavern adopted the practice of storing a supply of pipes which guests would purchase and "check" for subsequent visits.

This custom developed, in time, a prettily sentimental embellishment said to be of French origin. When a tavern-keeper learned that one of his guests had finally gone to his long sleep, he would take the pipe registered in the name of the departed, break off part of the stem, and restore the broken pipe to its customary place — to stay there as long as the tavern stood.

Now that we have visited The Mermaid Tavern while Shakespeare and his cronies held session — and now that we carry in mind the origin and development of the tavern custom relating to the clay pipes known as "churchwardens", we might skip the centuries and — say in 1910 — look in on the gathering filling Keen's English Chop House just a few steps east of the Herald Building and Herald Square.

Here too, we find a company that is both important and congenial. Here too,



after dinner, they call for the "clays" which the tavern kept for them. Through the blue clouds of this 1910 gathering place, we see Tommy, a waiter who might very well have stepped in directly from the old Mermaid, going from table to table with pipes and cannisters of tobacco.

Here too, we hear conversation, fast and sparkling — and except that they are of current interest, the subjects are much the same as those discussed in the Mermaid three hundred years earlier — theatrical ventures; arguments about managers; the success of Clyde Fitch's latest drama; the stories of O. Henry; the performances of Richard Mansfield and Mrs. Fiske; the music of Puccini and Victor Herbert; the professional accomplishments of Stanford White — and, of course, the gossip concerning his private affairs.

As we look about us, we see George M. Cohan, John Drew, Lionel Barrymore and his brother John (who, about

that time, had been given a not-too-successful trial in musical comedy), William Crane and Lew Fields, and other familiar faces. Over in that far corner our eyes are caught by a group of half a dozen actors in full stage make-up. We find that they are close by a back door which is but a few steps from the stage entrance to Harrigan & Hart's (later the Garrick Theatre) on 35th Street. Apparently engaged in fortifying themselves between cues, their appearance occasions no surprise among the tavern's patrons and it is doubtless quite usual for players to regard Keen's Chop House as a "Green Room".

And now the cockney accent of Tommy again draws our eyes in his direction and we discover him serving a group of *bon vivants* presided over by that fabulous gourmet, "Diamond Jim" Brady. At a nearby table is Harrison Fisher with some very "arty"-looking companions. And there — you can't miss him — is no less a personage than our ex-president Theodore Roosevelt.



There's "Buffalo Bill" Cody. Before us is Leo Feist, the music publisher — and there, in the flesh, the father of the Morgan who held a midget on his lap.

Getting closer to the taproom we see the newspaper boys congregated: Herbert Bayard Swope, Frank Ward O'Malley, Edwin C. Hill, Louis Sherwin, O. O. McIntyre, Rube Goldberg, George McManus, Barron Collier, Irvin Cobb. Then turning around to a less convivial corner, we see James Gordon Bennett who, as publisher of The Herald just around the corner, cast a not too approving eye on the "boys".

But the familiar faces are numberless, and we started out, it seems, to write about "churchwardens". Of course, all these celebrities have recorded their names in Keen's Pipe Register, and their pipes still gaze down on us from their brackets beneath the ceiling. Happily, most of the guests we have just looked in on still spend pleasant hours in Keen's. Today, just as twenty-five years

ago they terminate their dinners of mutton chops, steaks or kidney puddin' and musty ale with leisurely puffs of their nut brown clays.

What an amazing collection of names we read in that Pipe Register! (No wonder some "collector" made off with the first volume with its priceless autographs.) Names, illustrious, notorious and obscure, are inscribed beside those pipe numbers, and addresses from every nation of the globe.

Let us glance at the signatures on the pages of a recently filled volume of the Pipe Register . . . Sir Cedric Hardwicke, Raymond Massey, Robert Morley, Rudy Vallee, Orson Welles, Sir Louis Beale, K.C.M.G., Senator Robert F. Wagner and Eamon de Valera. De Valera, in fact, registered for half a dozen pipes, for though a nightly guest at Keen's, he could never get the pipe he'd smoked the evening before. The reason was that some remarkably vigilant but not too honorable admirer would manage to

filch the valuable memento no sooner than it was restored to its place.

We also note the names of Boris Karloff, General Machado, Horton Smith, Dan Parker, Capt. Roscoe Turner, Eddie Rickenbacker, Hugh Ferriss, Robert Benchley, Frank Buck, Capt. James Molison, Bobby Jones, Robert "Believe It Or Not" Ripley and Governor Richard W. Leche of Louisiana.

Once upon a time it was "men only" in the Tap Room at Keen's. Now, however, we see the fair sex notably represented — and their signatures in the Pipe Register tell us that they ventured to puff long "clays" — tinting the tips with lipstick no doubt . . . Fannie Hurst, Grace Moore, Lillian Gish, Irene Rich, Kay Stammers and Alice Marble, Jean Muir, and Rose O'Neill, writer, artist and "Mother of the Kewpies", who not only drew her picturesque signature in the Register but meticulously identified her "churchwarden" in the same manner.

A rather touching incident occurred at Keen's a short time ago. An English

gentleman, toward the end of his dinner, beckoned to Tommy (the very same cockney character who has been serving three generations of the Keen-minded). He solemnly drew from his waistcoat a small slip of paper.

"Fifteen years ago", he explained as he handed the paper to Tommy, "when I visited this country with my father, he brought me to this chop house several times. You kept a clay pipe for him — the number is on this slip in my father's writing.

"On our last dinner here — the old gentleman didn't expect to be able to make another trip from England — he asked me to be sure to call for his pipe here at Keen's if I ever returned to America.

"This is my first trip over since his death — eleven years ago. Do you suppose, by chance, you still have that pipe?"

A few minutes later, the Pipe Warden of Keen's handed the moist-eyed visitor



his father's pipe. And the guest himself, with reverent hands, performed the traditional ceremony of breaking off part of its stem.

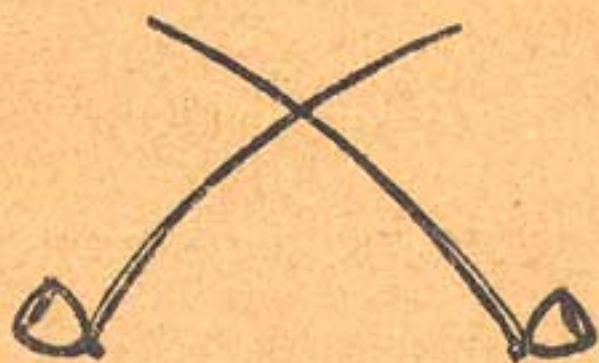
Many others are there in the Register who will nevermore call for their pipes: William Howard Taft, David Belasco, Augustus Thomas, Clyde Fitch, Floyd Gibbons. . . .

Their "clays", however, still wait in their honored places above the tables. Their stems, shorter than those of neighboring pipes, testify to a gallant gesture that has not been forgotten in an age that finds small time for sentimental customs.

In the Pipe Room of Keen's English Chop House all fine traditions seem to have survived. At ease in their comfortable chairs, with a liqueur, a cup of Cauchois coffee or a mug of ale before them on the table, guests of this modern Mermaid Tavern puff on their "churchwardens". And as the fragrant haze rises above the tables, tension, anxieties and cares fall away.



*"What wonder if I envy not
The rich, the giddy, and the proud,
Contented in this quiet spot
To blow my after-dinner cloud?"*



*"Let those smoke now who never
smoked before,
And those who always smoked
now smoke the more."*

Keen's

English Chop House

72 West 36th Street
New York City