

# Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese

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Virtually every listing of London's most famous, most historical, most atmospheric pubs will highlight Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese, and feature in particular a pub sign that is possibly the most iconic in the entire country.

For the thousands of cultural pilgrims from around the world who have journeyed to this shadowed alleyway to step back in time, the geography is as important as the history.

You cannot just step in through a main door and out of the Fleet Street sunlight. You turn out of the main thoroughfare and past a formidable listing of all the kings and queens to have reigned since the pub was rebuilt following the Great Fire of 1666. As you walk a few paces up the charmingly named Wine Office Court, you notice the light changing. Turn right under that sign and into the woody darkness of a narrow hallway through which half of famous humanity have passed. Your thoughts are not for them at this point, however, as within a couple of faltering steps you find yourself cosily immersed in the 18th century.

For a history rich in tales of the hundreds of illustrious people who have preceded you into this labyrinth of crooked timbers and dark corners, any century going back to the 17th might do here. Indeed, there are suggestions of an older pub on this site before the Great Fire, and a Carmelite monastery before that. But it is primarily with the 18th century that this pub is associated, because of its most illustrious customer, Dr Samuel Johnson. While there are doubters who question the linking of "Cham" and Cheese as James Boswell never mentioned a connection, it is to misunderstand what a pub actually was in the context of 18th century London to suppose that one of history's most clubbable men might live scarcely 100 paces away and never pop in. Besides, there are several 19th century accounts of people who recall Johnson's holding forth in the ground floor Chop Room, where today a painting of the great man still hangs.



An interesting footnote to the history of this corner is that another plaque marks the spot to the left of Dr Johnson's place: in his day it was occupied by the Irish novelist and playwright Oliver Goldsmith, who lived just a few steps away, but posterity's favour has been bestowed on a later novelist and another candidate for most illustrious literary Londoner, Charles Dickens, who is known to have used the pub as a working office and a setting for at least one of his novels – *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Given the number of visitors who made their livings from writing or talking, or both, it is no wonder that London's pubs generally and this one especially developed so keen a reputation for conversation in such hospitable surroundings – all the more so when it is taken into account that precisely none of what we think of as modern communications applied in these social settings: no radio or television, no Internet or social media: just personable talkers, punch and puddings in inexhaustible supply, and a warm fire.

No pubs excelled more in providing a hearty welcome over centuries than did the Cheshire Cheese, as its roll call of famous names attests: in addition to Dr Johnson and the uncharacteristically reticent James Boswell as well as Goldsmith and Dickens, add Tennyson, Conan Doyle, Voltaire, Mark Twain, Alexander

Pope, Charles II and Nell Gwynne, Orwell, PG Wodehouse, GK Chesterton, Trollope, just about every journalist who drew breath in "Fleet Street" and almost certainly the most famous parrot who ever popped a champagne cork (the original Polly, whose ascent to *The Choir Invisible* on 30 October 1926 was marked by obituaries on the BBC and in more than 200 newspapers around the world.)

And Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese marches on boldly into the 21st century, offering guests from near and far a fireside seat at "the feast of reason and the flow of soul" (Alexander Pope) – as well as a pint of English best bitter and a menu of "solid comfort and solid plenty".



# The Cheshire Cheese

## Additional notes

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Additional notes