

The Snack Bar King & The Napier Arms

By Robert McKill

The Napier Arms pub was commonly known as the 'Nap' and its proprietor from 1957 until 1982 when he died was Frank Harris who was known as the 'Snack Bar King'.

Frank was born into the pub business as his family were proprietors in many public houses all over East and South London. Frank's father at one stage was proprietor of The Robin Hood at High Beach and Frank often talked about his life and exploits at High Beach where motor cycle racing used to take place. Frank and his wife Esther had several experiences at being landlord and landlady of various pubs but his main success was at The White Hart Hotel in Witham Essex where they stayed for several years. When leases had expired Frank and Esther moved on to the Napier Arms Pub in South Woodford which was then a Charrington House in the spring of 1957.

They had two children when they moved into the Nap. Lynda (13 years old) and Peter (aged 18) remember that the trams used to turn round at the Napier Arms. Lynda still lives in South Woodford while Peter emigrated to South Africa over 40 years ago as he did not like pub life.

The business at the Nap quickly developed due to the introduction of a cold refrigerated cabinet which at the time was very rare but it brought Pub catering to South Woodford. Frank would simmer up at least three hams at a time in a huge simmering pot filled with water, bay leaves, lemons and his secret ingredients. A reputation for exciting new snack bar food helped Frank to become known as the 'Snack Bar King'. He was renowned for his 'speciality home-cooked hams' which he carved at the counter majestically. As his son-in-law, he trained me to carve these huge hams and his famous cry to me was "if you cannot see the blade as you carve then you are cutting it too thick". In his heyday he would sell at least one 21lb cooked ham per day. People came for miles for this ham and his cold middle skate, lobster tails, roast fore rib of beef, rolled leg of pork with stuffing, chicken, turkey to name only a part of his fabulous and extended snack bar menu. On Friday the speciality would be jellied eels and soused mackerel.

Frank had a huge personality and was a host that everyone who entered the Nap would remember. He was a known gambler and, every lunchtime, many customers would place bets on the horses with Frank who would then pass on what he thought may be winners to the few bookmakers that were always on hand at the bar. Many that he thought were losers he would keep for himself and if they won he would have to pay out of his own pocket. Of course the family only heard of the wins never the losses. Frank was known to bet on anything and everything and he was always open to buy goods from customers, or even lend money to help his customers if they asked. One of his famous exploits was to buy hundreds of mousetraps, many of which were still there when he died 1982. Many of the customers were local car

dealers, local businessmen, butchers, and a group known as 'The Heavy Mob' who were a crowd of friends from the Walthamstow area and whose name referred to their number!

Esther, Frank's wife, was affectionately known to all the clientele as Essie and she, in her own way, was very effective in the running of the Napier Arms. Essie was in control of reconciling the tills each morning after which she would then do the cooking for the snack bar and prepare a daily lunch for the two live-in barmen. On Sunday all staff and family would sit round the table together for a sumptuous roast fore rib of beef lunch. Every evening at around nine o'clock Essie would appear in the lounge bar always immaculately dressed and take her place at the corner stool at the snack bar where a gin and tonic was waiting. If that seat was occupied on her arrival it was common place for the incumbent to move to another stool or seat and it would often be that person who bought the first gin and tonic.

There were many famous personalities of day that visited The Nap. Among the most regular was comedian Ted Ray who played golf at Crews Hill. He was a frequent user when in the area, as he loved the famous ham. He often brought Reg Varney or some other personality with him and the family have fond memories of his visits. Joe Brown also and Tommy Cooper often called in when he was doing a performance at the Kingfisher, which is now the County Hotel. Tommy took great delight when Frank appeared in a red fez trying to kill a till roll as he thought Tommy Cooper would have done 'just like that'. Frank loved dressing up as he was the inimitable showman. A very prominent 6 foot-plus man with a very imposing figure that you would never forget.

During the War, Frank saw service in Africa as a marine and later on in the War was stationed at No 10 Downing Street as orderly to Winston Churchill, a position of which he was very proud of.

Even now, his daughter Lynda who still lives locally with her husband of 40 years in South Woodford, will often get stopped by old customers of The Napier Arms in Waitrose or in George Lane. They will recall stories we are often unaware of and expressing all the good times they had in the Nap.

Frank Harris proprietor of The Napier Arms, South Woodford was part of the history of South Woodford for a quarter of a century. He played hard, worked hard and is a legend of his time and, even now, after 30 years it is said there is still a presence of Frank Harris in the cellar of The Napier Arms.