

The Gun Tavern in Pembroke Dock

EVERY working day afternoon at a quarter after four, licensee Alf Venning pulled 20 pints and lined them up on the bar counter like soldiers ready for inspection.

Half an hour later, dockyarders on their way home from work filed into the Gun Tavern in Queen Street, Pembroke Dock, quenched their considerable thirst and then asked for a refill. How many publicans in Pembrokeshire today can claim they sell 40 pints in five minutes before 5pm?

The dockyard men were good judges of quality beer, and because Alf Venning kept an excellent cellar, The Gun was a popular rendezvous. It was also regularly patronised by Pembroke Dock's collar and tie fraternity who congregated in the saloon bar.

High-ranking police officers were numbered among the regular clientele, together with senior officers from the Royal Dockyard, solicitors, bankers and other professional men.

It was their opinion that Alf Venning - whose name was synonymous with the gun during his tenure there – made the ideal 'mine host'. He was discreet, a good listener and an intelligent conversationalist. He was also patient and good humoured and knew how to deal with the occasional customer who'd quaffed too many.

A replica cannon was mounted over the entrance to the pub, and from its opening in about 1860 to its closure in 1925 The Gun was much frequented by soldiers of the garrison at Defensible and Llanion Barracks.



The Gun Tavern left and below left, with Alf Venning pictured at the entrance. The posters in the window advertise a concert in the town's Temperance (now Pater) Hall and the forthcoming attractions at Haggar's Cinema, Pembroke. The photograph was taken in the early 1920s by H. Mortimer Allen of Tenby.



The tavern was said to be named after the 9.30 pm curfew gun fired daily from the Defensible for many years, and by which fathers in Pembroke Dock and surrounding districts timed the arrival home of their daughters. Woe betide the adolescent girl who couldn't produce a satisfactory explanation for not being indoors by the time the curfew cannon boomed!

The fact Alf Venning was landlord of a pub bearing such a name was most appropriate, because he was an old soldier and former artilleryman who first set foot in Pembroke Dock with his regiment in the early 20th century and afterwards settled in the town. He was originally a man of Devon, born in Plymouth.

Captain Frank Meyrick Owen TD, a well-remembered valuer and estate agent in Pembroke Dock, served his time as a solicitor's clerk with Mr. Jones-Lloyd, clerk to the then Pembroke Borough Magistrates and a household name in the dockyard town and neighbouring Pembroke in the years between the world wars. He recalled in an interview with the writer "Part of my duties was to deliver rate and court orders to local licensees, and I always received a very warm welcome from Mr. Venning at The Gun, "I was then too young to drink beer and spirits, so he - like a lot of other publicans on my call-list - gave me a shilling instead. I used to save this money up to pay the annual 12 shillings and sixpence membership fee to Pembroke Dock tennis club and to cover the cost of having my racquet re-strung."

"There was a parrot at The Gun which could curse a bit, so that every time clergymen or ministers called for a donation, the bird's cage was hurriedly covered with a cloth in case it let rip!" Like a lot of other people, I was very fond of that parrot; it was of colourful appearance and had an equally colourful vocabulary."

Alf Venning's second wife Maud, who died in 1992 in her 95th year, said the parrot was taught to swear by Police Inspector Anthony Thomas, then stationed in Pembroke Dock and a regular patron of The Gun.

This popular and well-respected officer began his Police career as PC64 at Milford Haven on November 4th 1899 and by 1932 had attained the rank of Superintendent. He was made deputy Chief Constable of Pembrokeshire in November 1933 and retired in June 1941.

Mrs. Venning recalled: "No-one could establish for sure who taught the parrot to use bad words, but most of the blame was leveled against men – two in particular – from the dockyard".

"When, much to everyone's surprise, Mr. Thomas eventually owned up, Mr. Jones-Lloyd the solicitor shouted: "The next time you wheel in somebody for swearing in public, don't ask me to prosecute for the police!"

"The stage was reached when we had to keep the parrot in the kitchen and cover the cage when visitors called." The Gun was very much a male domain and Mrs. Venning recalled that during her years there she seldom if ever went into the bars during opening hours. "The odd woman might call to have a jug filled with beer, but that was all," she said.

Alf Venning died in 1952, aged 76 and the *Western Telegraph* carried the following obituary report:

"During the First World War and for some time later, The Gun Tavern in Queen Street, Pembroke Dock was a pleasant place to call. Over the ever-open a wooden cannon replaced the traditional painted sign, and within customers were welcomed by the landlord, Mr. Alfred Venning.

"A tall burly man, in his younger days, he soldiered with the Royal Artillery and never lost his military bearing. Courteous, warm-hearted and an outstanding citizen, he commanded the highest respect. To know Mr. Venning was to like him, and it was with deep regret that numerous friends learned of his passing.

"Following his retirement as a publican he settled at 25 Gwyther Street where he lived quietly with his wife and daughter in a comfortable home. He loved to talk about people he had known and the many interesting and amusing experiences that had come his way during the course of a long and useful career. He will be sadly missed."



IN HIS interesting booklet *Some Old Pembroke Dock Inns*, published in 1939, Mr. H.H.R Reynolds, a noted local historian of that time, gave honourable mention to The Gun and wrote that in the mid-1800s there were some 200 public houses in and around Pembroke Dock and Pembroke. He added: "During recent years, public houses in Pembroke Dock have fallen far short of 100, for which, no doubt, Rechabites, Good Templars and others can claim a sort of moral victory."

It can also be said, of course, that the catastrophic effect on the community when the Royal Dockyard closed 13 years before the publication of Mr. Reynolds' booklet was also responsible for pubs going out of business.

Many interesting tit-hits of information are to be found in *Some Old Pembroke Dock Inns*. It's a safe bet that patrons of the Bird in Hand in Lewis Street have not the slightest inkling that their favourite local once boasted the posh name 'Alhambra'. According to Mr. Reynolds, this was the pub 'where many years ago the great Herr Dobler, mentioned in the Encyclopaedia Britannica, performed one evening some wonderful feats of conjuring by the light of a candle before a few charitable friends'. *Old Pembroke Dock Inns* also had some unusual names, such as The Steam Hammer; Royal Marines; Lamb and Flag; Soldier's Return; British Oak; Blenheim (named after a guard ship moored off the town for many years; Dock Gate Inn; Crystal Palace; Plough and Harrow; London Tavern; The Brig; Chain and Anchor; Bombay; Paterchurch Inn; The Myrtle Tree and the Porter Stores on Bethany corner where the town's Freemasons first met.

Today there are fewer than twenty pubs in Pembroke Dock - a far cry from the 1860s when there was nearly that number in Queen Street alone to help quench the thirst of the town's male population.

Brief history of The Gun

The Gun Tavern was the fifth house from the corner of Queen Street and Upper Meyrick Street in Pembroke Dock. The licensee in 1861 was a Chelsea Pensioner named James Wadell, who probably thought up the name, and the licence passed in 1867 to Simon Thomas who was still landlord in 1872.

William Stewart then took over and the pub remained in the Stewart family for nearly thirty years.

John Thomas held the Gun from 1901 until 1914, and following the First World War the licensees were Alf Venning and his first wife Catherine. The Gun was silenced in 1925 by the licensing authorities who were under pressure to reduce the number of pubs in this part of Pembroke Dock. They declined to renew the licence and made an order for compensation to be paid to the Vennings and also to the Meyricks of Bush who owned the freehold.

Compensation was set at the relatively high figure of £1,050, reflecting the level of trade at what was a popular town pub. In retrospect the Gun might have been lucky; the Dockyard closed just a few months later, plunging the town into economic despair and forcing several pubs out of business - in their case without any compensation.