



Susan (Dorothy Ellis) outside her pub 'The Locks' at Geldeston.

Susan's Pub

J. Kenneth White visits the presently deserted site of one of the most remarkable public houses in East Anglia; at Geldeston.

Horses for courses, they say. Which implies that success is dependent on more factors than one—and so it is.

You'd think that an ability to sell beer and the like would rank high in the qualifications of a publican; and certainly an IN-ability to sell it won't advance the publican's standing, at least in the eyes of his bosses. On the other hand, if he hasn't any bosses, then maybe that inability will recoil only on his financial standing in his own eyes. And if that doesn't bother him all that much . . . and if he sees more in his trade than just 'selling beer' . . . then maybe his particular inn won't be a chromium plated palace, but it could be a lot more.

Which all leads up to 'Susan's Pub.' And why 'Susan' isn't all that easy to say because she was Dorothy—Ellis, if that matters. Perhaps just a familiar name—or perhaps someone knows? And what is—was—'Susan's Pub'?

Strangely enough, it's in East Anglia; strangely enough, a lot more people in East Anglia know about it now than did early in March; strangely enough, it was Susan's death that made them know; and, strangest of all, East Anglians knew less about the whole thing than Londoners, Midlanders, Scots, Canadians, Australians and all the other lesser tribes without the law.

Dorothy Ellis was born in Londonderry 78 years ago; and who knows but that her character could owe much

to her nationality, for with one parent Welsh, one Scottish and an Irish childhood, anything could happen! She took over the Locks Inn as Geldeston when she was about 44 and during most of those 34 years had built up a reputation, outside East Anglia chiefly, to make her known not only as Susan but as the Boadicea of the Broads. And if 'Susan' has a friendly ring about it, so does 'Boadicea' have an aura of determination and leadership—and both fit. We cannot imagine Boadicea accepting direction from the all-powerful (nearly) Romans . . . and neither would Susan.

Perhaps the inaccessibility of her inn went far to explain its comparative obscurity, locally. No 'ample car parking for patrons' there; no scampi, chicken-in-a-basket, juke-boxes, and all the rest which seem to make up the stock-in-trade of the popular inns of to-day. Not that it was quite inaccessible by 'road' despite its much easier and more romantic approach by river, for there is a rutty, grassy track, three-quarters of a mile long, from Geldeston village and another approach from Ship-meadow, both just on the Suffolk side of the Waveney. But these riverside dwellings have other drawbacks than mere remoteness, that indeed being an asset in Susan's eyes; for every winter there is danger of floods and then the Inn would lose its lowest three feet to the surging waters, indeed becoming an island as much in Norfolk as in Suffolk; and Susan would take refuge upstairs,



Above: The goose 'Grumpy,' named after his master.

Left: The bar with a bowl of marshland flowers.

occasionally permitting herself to be evacuated by water, the policeman in charge of the boat, often; but sometimes she, equipped for a siege and well provided with provender, would stay put until she could descend in (comparative) safety.

To revert to the car situation. Yes, you could get there. But you couldn't turn round when you did so your withdrawal would be in the correct way from royalty—backwards—and if someone was behind you, you awaited his pleasure. So, all in all, it was best approached on foot—or by bicycle—or by Waveney.

Motorists aren't easy to deter however and the only tragic story I heard illustrated that. But later on.

Not only was access difficult but when you got there you found one small room only and that a dark one; you did not find electricity but only oil-lamps, so redolent of Victorian and earlier days; and candles, in sconces; and more of those candles later as well. You didn't find running water because it had none laid on. And you didn't always find you could satisfy your particular thirst because Susan didn't stock draught ales, only bottled. And more of that later also. And finally, as my pictures show, you wouldn't award any first prizes for old-world charm, roses round the door and so on. Although charm, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder so maybe that WAS an aspect of Susan's pub that attracted.

So, all in all, why did the aborigines, the Eskimoes and the ten little . . . coloured . . . boys know all about it?

Susan, of course!

In the full title 'Susan's Pub,' SUSAN was the real feature and perhaps nothing will explain that more clearly than some of the many stories told about her. But first, how it all began.

Susan had travelled much in many parts of England

but knew little of East Anglia until she became house-keeper to Mr. 'Grumpy' Morris, so called because in forthrightness he must have approached Susan herself, being anxious to serve only those . . . he was anxious to serve! And that quite irrespective of their social or financial ranking. But in fact Mr. Morris was not really 'grumpy' and even the little extent to which he was could readily be forgiven because he suffered from an illness from which he died in the early nineteen-fifties, leaving the inn to Susan, who at that time was back in her native Ireland. Susan returned and carried on the inn in precisely the same style . . . inherited with the premises, so to speak.

A well-read, well educated woman—she had been known to read six books from the library in a week—she was by no means out of her depth in languages other than her own. Indeed it was on their conversational abilities that Susan judged her customers and nothing gave her more pleasure than the pure joy of good talking; which of course meant that the casual dropper-in, lacking that art, did not meet with Susan's whole-hearted approval!

Another intense feeling she had was against publicity in any shape or form. The mere suggestion that the wider world of the mass media could make her better known she would reject as quickly as she would those who hinted at it—and as to the goggle-box! To her, no description could have been more apt. The point lay, in a way, in her independence and simple requirements. What could more trade mean to her? More money ranked not at all, and the publicity would have been unwelcome in every way. One friend told me that he went to the inn one day to be asked what he had come for 'A drink of course,' he replied. 'Rubbish,' said Susan, 'you could have got one much more easily in the village.'



The fatal bridge.

'Well then, to see you,' amended my friend.

'Why didn't you say so at first, then? I like people to be honest.'

'Put the money in the till,' she would say, 'and take your own change.' And I daresay she lost little that way. Kind herself, she assumed an equal honesty on the part of others. Anyway, she'd be talking so much the customer had a job TO pay! If you wanted a pint of draught bitter, she'd say, 'If that's what you want, you'll find it in the village; and if that's what you'd really like, then that's what I want you to have.' Often the customer would ask what she DID have; and Susan would finally take breath after retailing an almost inexhaustible list. Why not draught? There's a tale there also, because casks had two drawbacks. One, they might have to be moved and that might cause Susan difficulty. Two, when the monsoon came the place would flood, and casks of ale don't take kindly to floating about!

Susan had her own ways of speeding the less welcome people who would soon realise that they were customers only, not guests. And when they went, if they'd declined her list, she'd laugh and say, 'All the fewer glasses for me to wash.' And ME was the word of course. One method was to vary her closing hours—the Locks Inn was a free house—and 'Time, please' would dispose of the unwanted while those who knew would linger!

Despite lack of those amenities so many of us regard as among life's essentials, she was meticulously hygienic, even to the point of preventing a customer from drinking from a glass which had made physical contact with the bottle. She would remove the glass and replace it, another bottle as well if she thought it necessary. Maybe her V.A.D. training in the First World War stood her in good stead. When she went out, she was immaculate and a day's shopping in London was a joy. Interested in all the latest trends, even space flights, and her liking for young people was a mutual one.

A departing customer would sometimes be presented with a candle in a jam-jar to help his rough passage over the rough track to the road and I daresay those glimmering fire-flies gave rise to more than one tall story. Not that Susan was averse to ghost stories, and her candle-lit, wind-surrounded bar was appropriate enough for them.

Perhaps one of her most endearing customs—although it WOULD depend on what entry she made!—was to keep a kind of written 'bar-locality' record of some of her customers. 'Third on right from fire—crazy; corner by door—queer; end of bench—nice.'

Yes, there was a tragedy. One day in the fifties, a couple drowned in their van near 'her' bridge, which is shown in my photograph, and often enough she'd tell the story and very unpleasant it was. 'Tell 'em about the two that got drowned, Susan.'

It seems that those customers had, somewhat unwisely, crossed that insecure-looking bridge in their van. They had a Guinness but she didn't take to them, which could well have meant only that they differed from her ideal, and she didn't press them to stay. When they had gone Susan heard a lot of unusual noise from her goose, named Grumpy after her dead employer, and on investigating found the van in the river. Presumably the driver had tried to turn round to avoid reversing over that bridge and mis-judged his distance.

Finally the bodies were recovered, late enough for Susan to have gone to bed. It became a wildly tempestuous night, Susan awoke and went outside . . . to find two bodies in her wood-shed, whence they were to have been removed in daylight. Such a story is macabre enough anyway and in such surroundings could be terrifying indeed.

The inn itself is 19th century and used to be well-known to the wherrymen, a breed by no means convinced that smuggling was illegal; or, if convinced, uncaring, and rival groups have been known to fight it out on the spot. If the law on the Suffolk side got wind of the landing, it would take place on the Norfolk bank, and vice-versa, which seems rather hard on the enforcement officers, presumably out of contact with one another.

It is not perhaps generally known that the Lock which gave the inn its name refers to Shipmeadow Lock, not to Geldeston, despite the inn's close proximity to the latter village.

I visited the inn a few days before it was due to be auctioned and was taken by the appropriateness of a framed motto once on the wall, for almost everything movable had been taken away for safety.

*'Be modest in your bearings
And subdue your voice.
Lo, the harshest of all voices,
Is the voice of the ass.'*

The modern world seems to set great store by conformity. 'Everyone does it' means everyone else must. But no human being is the counterpart of another and the rare Susans must hold an affectionate place in many hearts, for surely she was a character in the very best sense of that term. Little bowls of flowers were always maintained in her bar. 'All from God's own garden,' she'd say. Meaning of course, the marshes. Such was Susan.

Before the Inn was auctioned there was much anxiety that it might be bought only to be 'improved and modernised' and when it was finally bought by the Commissioners of the Rivers Yare, Bure and Waveney, that anxiety was dispelled, for they stated that it had been bought 'in order to retain the character and amenities of the area.'

If, as seems likely at the time of writing, the Inn is run by Walter Coe, a great friend of Susan, it will be run in Susan's way and she will surely be there to approve. For, without doubt, it was SUSAN who made that Inn and only another like her can continue it.

The writer of 'Susan's Pub' is greatly indebted to Mr. Coe who made available so much of his long acquaintance with Dorothy Ellis and her pub.