Ask a silly question…

08/03/2025 by Laura Hadland

Opinion

The gentle hubbub of voices rises to greet me as I walk into the Malt Shovel. The fire is lit to ward off the February cold and the small, two-roomed pub is starting to fill. As I move towards the bar, a number of people nod at me in welcome. It is the second time I’ve called the weekly pub quiz at my local since being drafted in by the new landlady, Alison. I’ve been calling pub quizzes on and off for several years now. Turns out it’s something of a family occupation – my sister hit the national headlines when she welcomed Prince Harry to her popular trivia night on Stewart Island in New Zealand back in 2015. She was known for her no-nonsense attitude and liberal swearing during those events though, which doesn’t sound like me at all. I am rubbish at quizzes. I have a terrible memory and the (admittedly extremely low) pressure of the environment makes me forget what little information my brain can retain. That’s why I like to call them instead. I love picking the questions and shouting them out. I love the little groans when I reveal an unexpected answer. The muffled hisses of celebration when a team suddenly works out the solution to a dastardly puzzle. Being gently heckled by the local barflies, who never participate but always have an opinion. I even relish the disagreements and the diplomacy when a team challenges my authority as quiz master and lets me know that I’ve got something wrong. The pub quiz is just so much silly fun. Of course, as with everything worth writing about in the great lexicon of the British pub, the honourable Boak and Bailey have already dissected the history of the pub quiz. They pinpoint the origins of its popularity as growing from the Merseyside Quiz League from 1959, perhaps inspired by the growing popularity of television in that period and the quiz shows that arose in the 1950s. However, clubs can claim an even more venerable title, with the York CIU (Club & Institute Union) Quiz League recognised by the Guinness Book of Records as the oldest in Britain – formed in 1946. Gordon Falconer was a member of the Fulfordgate Club in York. He was the last surviving player of that first match – making him the world’s oldest quizzer prior to his death in 2008. There is so much quirkiness to admire about pub (and club) quizzes. I feel like team names should really receive their own dedicated book, because they sop up so much popular culture. Each is like a little time capsule, often wrapped up in a delicate packaging of delightfully crude puns. Without Dizzee Rascal, whose hip-hop and grime career took off in the early 2000s, my quiz could not have been won by the Quizzy Rascals. I think it unlikely that last week's winners, Hot Tub Quiz Machine, would have come up with their moniker without the 2010 film Hot Tub Time Machine. Of course, the scourge of the modern pub quiz is cheating. Everyone has potentially got access to the world’s accumulated knowledge at the top of their fingers thanks to mobile phones. I find that encouraging teams to grass up any suspicious behaviour witnessed on neighbouring tables is usually enough to stop any wily use of Google to rig the proceedings. That, and the knowledge that a pub quiz is just a bit of fun and it’s really not “worth” sacrificing your moral standing in the community for. And then there are the hardcore quizzers. I’ve not been doing my Shropshire gig for long enough to pick them out here yet, but we certainly saw them in the years I hosted the quiz for Leicester’s Two-Tailed Lion. Professional looking outfits which would roam from pub to pub, taking things very seriously and snatching the prize away from people who were just there for the craic. They were more prone to quibble over the answers than most. I eventually learned that you could fox them with a few carefully placed rounds that depended more on luck than judgement. Asking how many Instagram followers Kim Kardashian has and then awarding a single point to the team who came the closest does not follow the traditional pattern of scoring that the hardcore lot love. But it does help to open things up and give every team a chance against the hardened pros. I respect those quiz veterans though. They are doing a great service, always happy to buy a few drinks and support the industry. Indeed, every quiz player is a valuable member of the community. Rivalries may form over the night, but they are soon put aside when the winners are announced. The quiz is another important string in what makes the pub a valuable social hub, and long may they continue.