In a gadda da vida

24/05/2025 by Laura Hadland

Opinion

As I write these words, the sky outside my window is the most vivid shade of blue. There is a handful of the laziest, fluffy clouds you can imagine floating wistfully by. I think we can all agree that spring has been kind this year. The April showers forgot us almost entirely, with just 51 per cent of the long-term average rainfall being reported last month. With sunny, dry days comes one unavoidable urge. The visceral need to down tools and head to the nearest beer garden. That can mean anything from the most chocolate box-perfect rural idyll to a rickety bistro table set on the pavement, tottering precariously by the roadside. It doesn’t matter. The satisfaction of a good beer in the sunshine is one of life’s fundamental joys. I consider myself something of a connoisseur when it comes to beer gardens. Back in 2015, I started a hunt for Leicester’s best beer garden on my blog. It involved a selfless three-month quest to investigate and rate as many pub outdoor spaces as I could after work. These days, on a different blog, I keep a directory of Shropshire’s pub playgrounds because information on their whereabouts is simply impossible to access easily elsewhere. It is sparsely populated as yet, because I am reliant on word of mouth and sheer luck to include further entries. A decade into being very vocal about how great beer gardens are, I know that there is no real way of assessing which is the best, because it is deeply personal. A nice playground and lots of green space to explore is high on my list, because we’ve usually got a small human to entertain when frequenting hostelries in the warmer months. For other people, play equipment would undoubtedly be a big red flag. I can entirely understand that. Not everyone has taken the time to properly acclimatise their children to behaving appropriately in the pub environment and this can make things uncomfortable for other patrons. I was aghast to read a Facebook update from the wonderful Queens in Ludlow recently, for example, which had all of its carefully planted flower pots massacred by a visiting family. Staff posted a sorrowful picture of piles of flowerheads, petals and leaves that had been stripped from the plants. Hours of work and no small expense, ruined in a moment. There’s no excuse for behaviour like that and it saddens me to hear of a pub garden being treated so disrespectfully. But thinking about the work that so many publicans like this put into prettifying their spaces makes me wonder about the positive impact that, collectively, our pub gardens have on the environment. So many of them are true green oases in an ocean of grey. A potted plant here, a hanging basket there, a couple of rolling acres at the other. They all make a difference when organisations like the Royal Horticultural Society report that the UK populations of bees and other pollinators are in decline. Other attributes that may or may not feature in your dream beer garden might include quality and availability of furniture, access to a bit of shade (for the fairer-skinned, like myself), overall size or dog friendliness, perhaps. But really, when the sun is shining, any square inch of outdoor space will do at a pinch. I was fascinated to hear from proprietor George Greenaway how instrumental the expansive outdoor space had been to the success of the two-time Pub of the Year, the Tamworth Tap. While the pub was founded in 2017, it was in the aftermath of lockdown that it really gained notoriety. The pub’s beer garden is impressive, bordered on one side by the imposing Saxon curtain walls which pertain to an early phase of the castle. While it is a popular venue for outdoor gigs and other events these days, it hit the big time during social distancing as 200 people could be accommodated there without breaking the law. This drew a local crowd, eager to get back to fraternising with friends and family. Upon discovering just how good the pub was, their loyalty was cemented and their visits continued well after the restrictions were lifted. The current Pub of the Year, the Bailey Head in Oswestry, is less generously endowed, although the spacious terrace at the front of the pub opens onto the heart of the town and catches the sun well, so they still get a big tick in that box from me. In fact, the only Pub of the Year without some form of garden or terrace I can identify (though admittedly I’m unclear on the first winner, the Boars Head at Kinmuck) is the only London winner, the Harp in Covent Garden. But anyone who has passed by the 2010 Pub of the Year knows that the lack of formal outdoor arrangements does not deter the average Londoner, as crowds are often found to be gathered the length of Chandos Place, pint in hand. So my little wander around the beer garden has me wondering. Are venues without outdoor spaces at a disadvantage when it comes to winning the overall Pub of the Year title? Do we need to look at how this aspect of pub life is weighted when judging those hallowed finalists? Or is it, perhaps, time to institute a Winter Pub of the Year, where cosy interiors are not eschewed in favour of those with al fresco facilities? Beer gardens are great, but I don’t want to see pubs without them overlooked.