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## Battle for the boozier... Hugh Grant joins fight to save the Phene Arms

It's pints at dawn as the local council decides whether Chelsea's Phene Arms can be turned into a £20m house — and Hugh Grant fights to save his local. By Jonathan Prynn and Maxine Frith



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Local opposition: Hugh Grant objects to the plans for the Phene Arms ( the pub before Sally Greene and her developer husband Robert Bourne bought it) 1 of 3

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25 October 2012

It's Friday night and the Phene Arms pub in the heart of Chelsea is rammed: the bar is packed and the restaurant is doing a brisk trade. Welcome to the front line in the battle to keep London's threatened pubs alive. If the Phene's owner, property developer Robert Bourne, has his way, it will soon join the ranks of the "lost pubs of London" and be turned into a multi-million pound private house with a steam room in the beer cellar.

Ranged against him are hundreds of furious Chelsea residents, including Hugh Grant, Sol Campbell and Mark Knopfler, who say the Phene is still their local, part of the community and a fragment of social history that deserves preserving. Who will win this war is being decided by an independent planning inspector at a hearing today.

The Phene was built in 1850 by Victorian philanthropist Samuel Phene, who wanted a place for servants and local tenants to drink. In 2002, Bourne and his wife Sally Greene, owner of the Old Vic theatre, swooped in and bought it for just over £2 million through their pension trust. They then spent a further £1.1 million refurbishing the interior, turning it from a run-down drinker's den frequented by George Best into a shiny new gastropub featured in Tatler — you can't move for the cast of Made in Chelsea in the beer garden — creating the £27,000-a-week turnover an independent consultant estimates it generates.

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But last year the Bournes applied to Kensington and Chelsea council to turn the pub into a luxury private home — which once completed would be worth £20 million, say local estate agents — and in September ownership was transferred into a Jersey-based offshore company called Blue Lagoon Holdings for an undisclosed sum.

More than 1,000 people signed a petition against his plans and the council turned down his application, but this week Bourne began a landmark appeal against that decision.

Campaigners, councillors and developers are watching the appeal closely as they believe the outcome will either draw a line in the sand for “pub-to-home” transformations — or open the floodgates, especially as a succession of further hearings in the borough are scheduled for the coming weeks.

It’s not Robert Bourne’s first foray into the courts. Last month, Kensington and Chelsea council dismissed his appeal against its original refusal to let him turn another Chelsea pub he owns — the 300-year-old Cross Keys in Lawrence Street — into a residence. More than 4,000 people signed a petition against its closure but their victory is not complete. The pub remains closed, with Bourne claiming it is economically unviable.

This time, Bourne has upped the ante. Instead of merely appealing against the council’s decision, he asked for a public inquiry, a move considered highly unusual and incredibly expensive. He has spent a fortune on retaining a barrister for four days — the hearing ends tonight — with a decision expected within six to eight weeks.

In an opening statement to the inquiry, Timothy Comyn, the barrister representing Bourne, dismissed the protesters’ claims that the pub still had strong ties to the community. He argued that the interior had changed beyond all recognition from the Victorian local it once was. Comyn said the Phene is now a “gastropub-cum-restaurant that serves no recognisable local community function” and that “the nature of the Phene Arms has changed irrevocably ... [it is] an establishment frequented by the Hooray Henrys of today”.

Local residents are outraged, pointing out that Bourne is to blame for the change. After the refit, Bourne put his 26-year-old daughter Lily in charge of the pub, despite her lack of experience of the industry — she runs a fashion boutique in Chelsea.

Kathy Gyngell, a supporter of the campaign to save the Phene, has lived nearby in Oakley Street for the past 26 years. “The pub is still a local pub,” she says. “We have our residents’ association meetings here and other people use it as a way of keeping in touch with what’s going on. Robert Bourne is just being greedy — he is buying up these pubs then turning them into the kind of houses that only a Russian oligarch would want. He is destroying the heart and soul of Chelsea.”

It’s a trend that is being played out across the country but particularly in London, where pubs are struggling and demand for properties in the best districts is high. Plans to turn the Queen’s Head on Tryon Street in Chelsea into flats was the subject of a public hearing at Kensington Town Hall yesterday, and a proposal to turn The Britannia Tap on Warwick Road, Kensington, into flats will also be decided at a planning hearing at an as yet unspecified date.

Away from the wealthy streets of west London, where opposition is vocal and well organised, the rate of pub closures is running at an alarming rate.

The Lost Pubs Project website lists 2,402 former London boozers which have disappeared. It reads like the licensing trade equivalent of the “missing in action” wartime roll call. The numbers lost, particularly in east London, are staggering — more than 100 have been wiped off the map in Peckham SE15 alone.

In Hammersmith, current uses for its 40 “fallen” include a Secrets lapdancing club, a Chinese restaurant and offices, while others were demolished to make way for the A4 flyover.

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Figures from the Campaign for Real Ale show that 46 London pubs have been converted into supermarkets since the start of 2010 alone — with 24 being turned into branches of Tesco. In many cases, the upper floors are turned into flats. A further six are currently under threat of becoming supermarkets, including the much lamented North Pole in North Kensington, due to become a Tesco Express.

Across London, the relentless rise of residential property prices and the slow death of old-fashioned pubs means that many will continue to be converted into homes. Their scale, proportions and large basements make them highly attractive to modern Londoners.

Artist Mat Collishaw bought his former pub — once The William IV — in Camberwell two years ago for £1.1 million. He ripped out some pub features, such as the ground-floor bar, but kept others, including the dumb waiter and wood panelling. The exterior marble panelling is also still there, but only just: "I found a couple of Albanians trying to crowbar it off a few weeks ago," he says. The 46-year-old, who lives there with his son, says the 5,500sq ft property would cost twice as much if it had been an old warehouse space in Hackney. The only downside is that "I get a lot of delivery men ordering a pint as a joke. It gets a bit tiresome."

Whether a putative resident of the Phene Arms will ever experience the same annoyance as he relaxes in his basement steam room remains in the hands of the planning inspector.

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**davemarkham** 114 days ago

This is what high property prices are doing to London.

I wonder how many of you feign outrage at this, then smugly look at the rise in value of your own homes. Hypocrites.

Reply

+2



**counterblast** 117 days ago

If Hugh Grant and his friends had campaigned as hard against the smoking ban as they did over phone hacking, we might still have some decent pubs left in London (and the rest of England).

Reply

+6



**gahenton** 117 days ago

Not a great loss I'm afraid. The "new" Phene has always rested on its laurels with sky high prices, bad service and questionable food. "Gastro" pub focus I think not. Interior and exterior design focus I think so. Bring back the old boozier!

Reply

0



**SeaBee** 117 days ago

If Mr Grant and his friends wish to save the pub then they should make Mr Bourne an offer for the premises. Ten mill should do it.

Reply

+4



**Anonymous** 117 days ago

These Albanians, nicking all our statues, metals and building works,,, what tozzer allows them in the country.

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**Anonymous** 117 days ago

If you buy this house, everyone is going to hate you, so you spend a lot of money to be the most unpopular tozzer in town.

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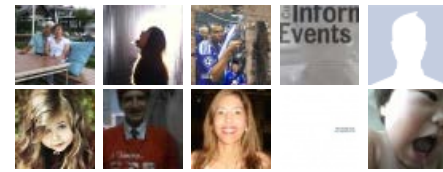
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**rabthecab** 117 days ago

"The numbers lost, particularly in east London, are staggering — more than 100 have been wiped off the map in Peckham SE15 alone."

Seen this same mistake made time & again - Peckham is NOT in East



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**SeaBee** 117 days ago

I fink the clooz in Sarfeest 15

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**Anonymous** 115 days ago

we are slowly being turned into a muslim no drink country.. because our lovely pub life is at stake... The government have too do something about this.. we are losing all of our heritage

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+1  



**pigstrough** 114 days ago

maybe bring the price of a pint and pie down in price so that the plebs can once again frequent these establishments as we always did, unlike hooray Hugh's and his friends [sic]

0  



**terryosser** 113 days ago

it is actually--in local govt speak

i live in morden and that is counted as east

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