

## Bar review: Sir Richard Steele pub, London

By [Ewan McDonald](#)

3:00 PM Thursday Dec 1, 2016

This walk through London should, according to Google Maps, take just shy of two hours. When I get to my destination, I shall shake hands with my six-times great-grandfather.

Sir Richard Steele (1672–1729) was a remarkable man in an age of remarkable men. As underlined by the obituary on the wall of the only pub on the planet, so far as our family knows, named after one of us, his father was an "English Attorney" and his mother an "Irish woman".



The Sir Richard Steele pub in London.  
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Wikimedia user A Bit Iffy

Steele was a playwright, essayist and wit. He hung out with the great intellects of his time, founded the first three newspapers in England, two of which are still in print (yes, print): *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*.

He was a cabinet minister (sadly for me, a conservative) and both his wives died before him. Lonely, bereft, ageing, he wrote poignantly of the lost riches of marriage and companionship.

The rather eccentrically furnished [Sir Richard Steele pub](#) is at the upper end of Haverstock Hill. By "rather eccentrically", I mean the furniture and fittings look as if they came from the shop of a reclusive elderly Paeroa secondhand dealer who passed away and the relatives dumped what they didn't want outside the Salvation Army.

From the outside, it's everything you'd expect — these days, pray for — in an English pub. Four-square, three-storey, shady beer garden to the side, where the drays used to deliver the barrels.

Inside, it's a cacophony of posters, kitchen utensils, tennis racquets, a working set of traffic lights. I may have tripped on a horse trough. There's live music — Irish folk some nights. John Lee Hooker was wheedling on the sound system. One of the regulars (drinking, not playing) is Gallagher, N.

Coffee is available, appropriate because Steele sharpened his one-liners and brokered his business in coffee-houses when that demon drink first plagued London.

But it was a hot afternoon. And there were a number of brews and crafts that took priority.

As mentioned, my however-many-times grandfather was a wit. Quotes are chalked around the bar. I wish I'd recalled this one when I edited a newspaper: "It is to be noted that when any part of this paper appears dull, there is a design in it." And who wouldn't want to be descended from the bloke who wrote, "How can I miss you when you won't go away?"

So I asked the Canadian barmaid to pull me a Yardbird pale ale, and thought about the family connection.

Steele's descendants scattered to various colonies around the Empire where the sun never set. Our branch was Mum's paternal line, who were Martins and hadn't been Steeles for several generations, clinging to the link to an extremely minor Irish baronetcy by insisting every male had Steele as their middle name.

If one redoubtable female relative in Wellington had her way, an entirely unwarranted hyphen might have been inserted into the family tree. You might think she was trying to gain upward mobility in a socially vicious outpost of the British Empire. I couldn't possibly comment.

This spurious tradition continued until one of my cousins showed his mettle and refused to forge "Steele" on any of his sons' birth certificates. The other sidestepped the issue by producing only daughters.

Back in the pub, I had to do it: "This pub is named after my six-times great-grandfather. Would you mind taking my photo?"

If there were a 12ft stained-glass window of your forefather, you'd do it, too.

I began to walk back, through the street, shops, and streetfront houses of Haverstock Hill, so reminiscent of Remuera, and noticed pennants proclaiming the hamlet, like Auckland, has a tagline: "Steele's Village". Classy: not even my mother's first cousin twice removed in Wellington would have had the chutzpah to steal the name of an entire suburb.

From the hotel I emailed photos to my sister and cousins. Phyllis dug out the family tree. "You know there's a missing link," she pointed out, which doesn't surprise me about our family. "We can't definitively . . ."

"Oh, those are just facts," I replied. "And they would just ruin a good story." And this was it.

## CHECKLIST

Getting there: [Cathay Pacific](#) has daily connections to Heathrow and four times weekly to Gatwick.

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