

Hazlitt's Hotel

I took a cab to Hazlitt's Hotel on Frith Street. I like Hazlitt's because it's intentionally obscure — it doesn't have a sign or a plaque or anything at all to betray its purpose — which puts you in a rare position of strength with your cab driver. Let me say right now that London cab drivers are without question the finest in the world. They are trustworthy, safe and honest, generally friendly and always polite. They keep their vehicles spotless inside and out, and they will put themselves to the most extraordinary inconvenience to drop you at the front entrance of your destination. There are really only a couple of odd things about them. One is that they cannot drive more than two hundred feet in a straight line. I've never understood this, but no matter where you are or what the driving conditions, every two hundred feet a little bell goes off in their heads and they abruptly lunge down a side street. And when you get to your hotel or railway station or wherever it is you are going, they like to drive you all the way around it so that you can see it from all angles before alighting.

The other distinctive thing about them, and the reason I like to go to Hazlitt's, is that they cannot bear to admit that they don't know the location of something they feel they ought to know, like a hotel, which I think is rather sweet. To become a London cab driver you have to master something titled The Knowledge — in effect, learn every street, hospital, hotel, police station, cricket ground, cemetery and other notable landmarks in this amazingly vast and confusing city. It takes years and the cabbies are justifiably proud of their achievement. It would kill them to admit that there could exist in central London a hotel that they have never heard of. So what the cabbie does is probe. He drives in no particular direction for a block or two, then glances at you in the mirror and in an overcasual voice says, "Hazlitt's — that's the one on Curzon Street, innit, guv? Opposite the Blue Lion?" But the instant he sees a knowing smile of demurral forming on your lips, he hastily says, "No, hang on a minute, I'm thinking of the Hazelbury. Yeah, the Hazelbury. You want Hazlitt's, right?" He'll drive on a bit in a fairly random direction. "That's this side of Shepherd's Bush, innit?" he'll suggest speculatively.

When you tell him that it's on Frith Street, he says. "Yeah, that the one. Course it is. I know it — modern place, lots of glass."

"Actually, it's an eighteenth-century brick building."

"Course it is. I know it." And he immediately executes a dramatic U-turn, causing a passing cyclist to steer into a lamppost (but that's all right because he has on cycle clips and one of those geeky slip stream helmets that all but invite you to knock him over). "Yeah, you had me thinking of the Hazelbury" the driver adds, chuckling as if to say it's a lucky thing he sorted that one out for you, and then lunges down a little side street off the Strand called Running Sore Lane or Sphincter Passage, which, like so much else in London, you had never noticed was there before.

A reason why the narrator liked to go to Hazlitt's was that...

1. ...cab drivers liked driving there.
2. ...it was in the center of the city.
3. ...cab drivers didn't know where it was.
4. ...it was an old brick building.