



Purr 'n' Fur

FELINE FUN

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British pub signs featuring cats

Information and notes (2004)

(page checked April 2026)

This page includes a little information and background about British pub signs.
From links at the foot of the article either browse through our gallery of 'cat signs'
or use an index which lists all the signs photographed.

British pub signs: a short introduction and history

Inn signs probably originated with the Romans, when vine leaves would be displayed outside taverns to show that they sold wine. The equivalent in Britain was small evergreen bushes hung outside, and early pubs also used long poles or 'ale stakes' to show that they sold beer — together with the bushes if they also sold wine. In later times, by about the twelfth century, it had become common for taverns to have names. However, the great majority of the population was unable to read or write at the time, and so pictorial signs were used to indicate the names.

In 1393 King Richard II ordered that all pubs and inns had to display a sign, so they could be recognised by the official Ale Taster. Richard's own emblem was the *White Hart*. Ever since then a huge variety of inn signs has reflected British history, people, events and tastes. Up until the Reformation there were many religious names, such as the *Crossed Keys*, referring to St Peter, but when Henry VIII split with the Roman Catholic Church many of them were changed to secular ones or those with a royal connection, such as the *King's Head* or the *Rose and Crown*. There remain very many pub names and signs today with royal connections; for example, most *White Lions* date from Edward IV's time, and the *White Bear* was Richard III's emblem.

Probably the commonest pub name of all is the *Red Lion*: a 2009 television documentary reported that there were over 600 in Britain at the time with that name. It dates from the time of James I of England and VI of Scotland, who came to the throne in 1603. He decreed that Scotland's heraldic red lion must be displayed on all important buildings — which included pubs.

In more recent times social and industrial changes have been marked by the appearance of sporting or transport-related names and signs: *The Cricketer's Arms*, *The Railway Inn*, *The Navigation* and so on, while of course famous people such as Lord Nelson continued to be represented. Queen Victoria has many pubs named in her honour — but then she did have a

very long reign! Names such as *The Highwayman's Arms*, *The Smugglers* and *The Poacher's Pocket* recall rather more infamous characters.

Our [gallery of signs](#) featuring cats

As this is a website about domestic cats, the selection is restricted to those with names or signs that include those animals. There's a bigger variety of these than one might think. The list was never quite complete, but features nearly all such signs extant in the early years of the twenty-first century. Since then there have been numerous changes as pubs have closed, changed their name or changed their sign, but the information has been updated (as far as was practical without further travel) to reflect the situation in April 2026. Unfortunately not all pubs have pictorial signs (why not?, we ask!), and it does seem that the traditional art of painting such signs may be in decline. Note also that pictorial pub signs are not universal in Scotland.

Valuable help is acknowledged from Brian Curtis and David Roe of the [Inn Sign Society](#), who have kindly sent unusual signs featuring cats from the Society's archives and allowed us to use them. Visit their interesting website for more pub signs and information.

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