# Mayflower and Prospect of Whitby pubs keep East End's maritime heritage alive amid economic challenges



Tucked away along the quieter stretches of the Thames in London’s East End, two historic pubs fiercely vie for the unofficial title of the city’s oldest riverside tavern: the Mayflower in Rotherhithe and the Prospect of Whitby in Wapping. Each establishment embodies a rich tapestry of history and maritime lore, drawing visitors who seek to step back in time amid the clinking glasses and candlelit interiors characteristic of traditional British public houses.

The Mayflower pub, named after the legendary ship that set sail in 1620 carrying the Pilgrim Fathers to America, makes a poignant claim to history, incorporating parts of the original ship’s timbers into its structure. Located on cobblestone streets beside a decked jetty, it offers patrons not just classic British fare such as steak and ale pie and sticky toffee pudding, but also a direct connection to history. Visitors who can trace their lineage back to Mayflower passengers are invited to sign the pub’s “Descendants Book,” making it a unique pilgrimage for those with Pilgrim heritage. The pub honours its connection to the ship with the preserved mooring point where the Mayflower was originally berthed.

Across the river, the Prospect of Whitby stakes its claim to antiquity with origins stretching back to around 1520, making it arguably older than the Mayflower. Despite changing names—from The Pelican to the Devil’s Tavern, a nod to its notorious association with smugglers, thieves, and pirates—the Prospect has been a continual fixture in London’s maritime folklore. It survived the Great Fire of London in 1666 thanks to its position outside the city limits at the time, and was subsequently rebuilt in 1774 using the hull of a retired merchant ship named The Prospect. This storied past is preserved in the pub’s 400-year-old stone floor, its extensive nautical memorabilia, and the longest pewter bar in Britain, where the notorious “Hanging Judge Jeffreys” reportedly observed executions at the nearby Execution Dock, although the actual gallows were slightly farther afield. Today, the hanging noose displayed outside commemorates this grim chapter, adding to the pub’s aura as a “pocket of history” in London’s rapidly changing East End.

Despite their competing claims—rooted in continuous operation, structural remnants, and historical ties—neither pub has been officially recognised by Guinness World Records as London’s oldest. The complexity arises from centuries of rebuilding, name changes, and shifting municipal boundaries, which blur clear lines of continuity. Historians, such as English author Jacob Field, note the difficulty in pinning down any single establishment as truly the oldest, especially when considering factors like reconstructions and the evolution of London’s city limits.

Both pubs play a vital role in preserving London's cultural heritage, especially at a time when the pub industry faces significant challenges. The British Beer and Pub Association reports that hundreds of pubs across the UK are closing annually, affected by economic pressures and the lingering impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Pubs like the Mayflower and the Prospect of Whitby not only serve as social hubs but also as custodians of history, attracting locals and tourists alike who seek authentic connections to London’s past.

Visitors to these riverside haunts emerge from the shadow of the capital’s gleaming skyscrapers into atmospheres resonant with stories of sailors, smugglers, and historical figures. The enduring “loving rivalry” between the Mayflower and the Prospect, described by the Prospect’s assistant manager Justin Billington, is less about definitive claims and more about celebrating their shared heritage and commitment to offering the best in traditional food and drink.

This rivalry, entwined with centuries of maritime history, reflects a broader narrative about the importance of preserving London's historic pubs as vital community institutions. While neither the Mayflower nor the Prospect of Whitby can claim an undisputed title as London’s oldest riverside pub, both undoubtedly offer quintessentially British experiences steeped in history, charm, and tradition.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/mayflower-london-prospect-history-england-b2800120.html), [[2]](https://apnews.com/article/7e40e0786a22ad3629ad9cb59d260864), [[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prospect_of_Whitby)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/mayflower-london-prospect-history-england-b2800120.html), [[3]](https://www.mayflowerpub.co.uk/), [[7]](https://www.mayflower400uk.org/visit/london-southwark/attractions/the-mayflower-pub)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/mayflower-london-prospect-history-england-b2800120.html), [[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prospect_of_Whitby), [[6]](https://www.the-londoner.co.uk/londons-oldest-pub-doesnt-exist/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/mayflower-london-prospect-history-england-b2800120.html), [[2]](https://apnews.com/article/7e40e0786a22ad3629ad9cb59d260864), [[6]](https://www.the-londoner.co.uk/londons-oldest-pub-doesnt-exist/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/mayflower-london-prospect-history-england-b2800120.html), [[2]](https://apnews.com/article/7e40e0786a22ad3629ad9cb59d260864)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/mayflower-london-prospect-history-england-b2800120.html), [[2]](https://apnews.com/article/7e40e0786a22ad3629ad9cb59d260864)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/mayflower-london-prospect-history-england-b2800120.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://apnews.com/article/7e40e0786a22ad3629ad9cb59d260864> - An article discussing the rivalry between London's Mayflower and Prospect of Whitby pubs, both claiming to be the city's oldest riverside pub. The Mayflower, associated with the 1620 ship, incorporates parts of the ship's original timbers and allows descendants of Mayflower passengers to sign a special book. The Prospect of Whitby traces its roots back to 1520, surviving a fire in 1666 and being rebuilt in 1774 using a retired merchant ship's hull. Despite repeated reconstructions, it claims continuous operation since its original founding. Both establishments are steeped in rich history, maritime lore, and old-world charm, attracting tourists seeking authentic London experiences. Yet, due to complex historical factors like name changes, reconstructions, and shifting city boundaries, Guinness World Records has not officially recognized either as London's oldest. The competition exemplifies a broader effort within a struggling pub industry to attract customers amid economic challenges, with history serving as a strong draw. While the true title remains unresolved, both pubs embrace their heritage and rivalry in the spirit of tradition and friendly competition.
3. <https://www.mayflowerpub.co.uk/> - The Mayflower pub, located in Rotherhithe, London, is a traditional English pub surrounded by cobbled streets. It boasts an outside decked jetty and a cosy candlelit restaurant with stunning river views. The pub claims to be the oldest on the River Thames and is associated with the 1620 Mayflower ship, with parts of the ship's original timbers incorporated into its structure. Patrons can spot the original 1620 mooring point of the Pilgrim Father's ship and warm themselves by the open fire. The food menu offers classic British dishes using local and fresh ingredients, complemented by a range of traditional ales, craft beers, local gins, and fine wines. The pub also allows Mayflower descendants to sign a visitors book and is the only pub in England that sells stamps.
4. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prospect_of_Whitby> - The Prospect of Whitby is a historic public house on the northern bank of the River Thames at Wapping, in the East End of London. It lays claim to being on the site of the oldest riverside tavern, dating from around 1520. The tavern was formerly known as The Pelican and later as the Devil’s Tavern, on account of its dubious reputation. All that remains from the building's earliest period is the 400-year-old stone floor. The pub features 18th-century panelling and a 19th-century facade. The pub has a pewter-top bar and is decorated with many nautical objects. In former times it was a meeting place for sailors, smugglers, cutthroats and footpads. Sir Hugh Willoughby sailed from here in 1553 in a disastrous attempt to discover the North-East Passage to China. According to John Stow, it was "The usual place for hanging of pirates and sea-rovers, at the low-water mark, and there to remain till three tides had overflowed them". Execution Dock was actually by Wapping Old Stairs and was generally used for pirates. In the eighteenth century, the first fuchsia plant in the United Kingdom was sold at the pub. Following a fire in the early 19th century, the tavern was rebuilt and renamed The Prospect of Whitby, after a Tyne collier that used to berth next to the pub. The ship brought sea coal from Newcastle upon Tyne to London. The Prospect was listed as a Grade II listed building in December 1950. The pub underwent a renovation in 1951 to double the interior space. In January 1953, the pub was raided by armed robbers. The pub has been visited by Princess Margaret and Prince Rainier III of Monaco.
5. <https://elpais.com/elviajero/guia-el-viajero/2025/2025-07-14/the-mayflower-o-the-george-inn-seis-pubs-centenarios-en-los-que-tomar-una-pinta-en-londres.html> - An article highlighting six iconic pubs in London, each with over a century of history, ideal for experiencing the British tradition of having a pint. The Mayflower, located along the River Thames, is considered the oldest pub in London and is linked to the famous ship of 1620. Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese, with roots in the 13th century and rebuilt after the Great Fire of 1666, has hosted literary figures like Charles Dickens and Mark Twain. Trafalgar Tavern, founded in 1837 in Greenwich, was a centre for artistic and political meetings. The George Inn, of medieval origin, is the last pub with a gallery in London and has a history tied to carriage transport. The Princess Louise, from 1872, is renowned for its ornate Victorian style and strict behaviour policy. These pubs not only offer traditional drinks but also a journey into the architectural and cultural past of the British capital.
6. <https://www.the-londoner.co.uk/londons-oldest-pub-doesnt-exist/> - An article discussing the complexities surrounding the claim of London's oldest pub. It reveals that the oldest iteration of the Mayflower pub dates back to the 1780s, with the current building rebuilt after burning down in the 19th century and almost obliterated during the Blitz. The supposedly 16th-century interior is actually from 1958, an inspired tourist-trap ploy to capitalise on the sailing of the Mayflower II. The article also delves into the history of the Prospect of Whitby, stating that although the pub sits on a Tudor site, the current building originates from the late 18th or 19th centuries. The original building burned down in a fire, and the gallows are a dramatic flourish, as the real site of the executions was some ten minutes away. The article concludes that no pub in London can definitively claim to be the oldest.
7. <https://www.mayflower400uk.org/visit/london-southwark/attractions/the-mayflower-pub> - The Mayflower pub, located in Rotherhithe, London, is a traditional English pub surrounded by cobbled streets. It boasts an outside decked jetty and a cosy candlelit restaurant with stunning river views. The pub claims to be the oldest on the River Thames and is associated with the 1620 Mayflower ship, with parts of the ship's original timbers incorporated into its structure. Patrons can spot the original 1620 mooring point of the Pilgrim Father's ship and warm themselves by the open fire. The food menu offers classic British dishes using local and fresh ingredients, complemented by a range of traditional ales, craft beers, local gins, and fine wines. The pub also allows Mayflower descendants to sign a visitors book and is the only pub in England that sells stamps.