

Phil Mellows' job

'What do you do?' they ask. 'Mostly I write about pubs,' I say. Then there's a breathless pause I feel I ought to fill. 'It's not as glamorous as it sounds.' But they never believe me.

'So you go round reviewing pubs!'

'No, it's more business journalism. About the industry. Giving publicans information and advice, that kind of thing.'

'That must be great, just spending all the time in pubs.'

'Well, I don't really. Of course I do go to pubs and talk to the licensee about their business...'

'And all the free drinks!'

'Sometimes, but quite often the pub isn't even open. And I do a lot on the phone.'

'How many pubs have you been to?'

'Oh, I don't know. Quite a lot. But I might only be in there for five minutes.'

'Why aren't you fat? You should be fat!'

'It's my metabolism.'

'Are you an alcoholic?'

'A failed alcoholic.'

'Wow. I wish I had your job. Drinking in pubs!'

You can't blame them, of course. There are worse jobs. And people do associate pubs with having fun. Which is only right and proper. But that's not how I see it.

You see, pubs are having a bad time. It's not so noticeable in Brighton, but if you go around the country you'll see pub after pub boarded up or turned into flats or a Chinese takeaway. It's miserable. And publicans are miserable. Mind you, in a quarter century writing about pubs . . . ooh, that hurt. Where's my zimmer?... my experience is publicans are never really happy with their lot. They are what I call structural moaners. If you think you can moan about the price of beer you want to hear publicans moaning about the price of beer. Publicans, though, never let on to customers that there's a seething moan constantly rumbling inside them. They have to be happy, smiling hosts whatever the state of trade.

And there's something you can do personally to ease their misery. Drop a few coppers in their till in return for a pint of beer next time you're passing your local.

That should be easy for us living in Brighton. The City by the Sea probably boasts a higher proportion of good pubs than anywhere in the land. Trust me. I've seen the rest of them.

Phil Mellows is online at www.philmellows.com