

Much-loved Chelsea pub The Surprise is finally set to reopen

We speak to Jack Greenall, scion of one of Britain's most famous brewing families, about his plans for the iconic institution



by CLARA STRUNCK
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JACK GREENALL AND ISABELLA WORSLEY

HELEN CATHCART

On a bright, early morning in April, the usually sleepy Christchurch Terrace in the heart of Chelsea is alive with activity. Photographers are nipping to and fro along with chefs, designers and PRs. Local residents, who are used to a slower pace of life on this quiet street behind the King's Road, peer interestedly out of their front doors. Although not due to open for another month, Christchurch Terrace's much-loved pub, The Surprise, is already causing quite the commotion.



THE SURPRISE, CHELSEA

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At the centre of the action is Jack Greenall, who is overseeing the relaunch of this Chelsea favourite since its doors were closed for good in September last year. And he's more than up to the challenge: a scion of the Greenall Whitley brewing dynasty, Jack counts hospitality titan Lord Daresbury as an uncle and his family has been in the business of brewing and managing pubs since the 1750s. Already at the helm of The Pheasant Inn, a wildly popular pub near Lambourn, Jack was destined for the family business from an early age. 'Growing up, I was surrounded by hospitality talk,' he tells me as we take a seat in a corner of the pub. 'I think it was really in the blood. Working in our family's pubs over summers and doing work experience at Wetherspoon's while I was still at school was just a fantastic insight.'



SEATING INTERIOR

HELEN CATHCART

After leaving Edinburgh University with a degree in History, Greenall went on to work for Upham Pub Company, before he decided to buy The Pheasant Inn. Now, he's excited to be taking on another iconic institution. 'The Surprise is very much a landmark in Chelsea,' he says of the pub, which dates back to 1853 and is named after the Napoleonic warship. 'I was drawn to it for its historical connotations and felt there was a huge opportunity to take it into a new chapter, smarten it up and give it some love.'

Indeed, The Surprise has had a noticeable sprucing up at the hands of interior designer Isabella Worsley, who is also revamping The Pheasant Inn. 'I always try to work with up and coming designers,' says Greenall, who in the past has enlisted the help of Flora Soames and Octavia Dickinson with his pub interiors. 'Jack was very clear on what he wanted to achieve in terms of creating a really convincing, British pub,' says Worsley, who's hard at work on the day we meet, putting the finishing touches to décor. The Surprise looks just as a classic pub should: a warm terracotta on the walls, a spacious wooden bar and plenty of comfortable, olive green leather banquettes on which to flop. Perhaps most importantly, at least two dogs – owned by the head chef, Pedro – already look at home here, snoozing on the floorboards.

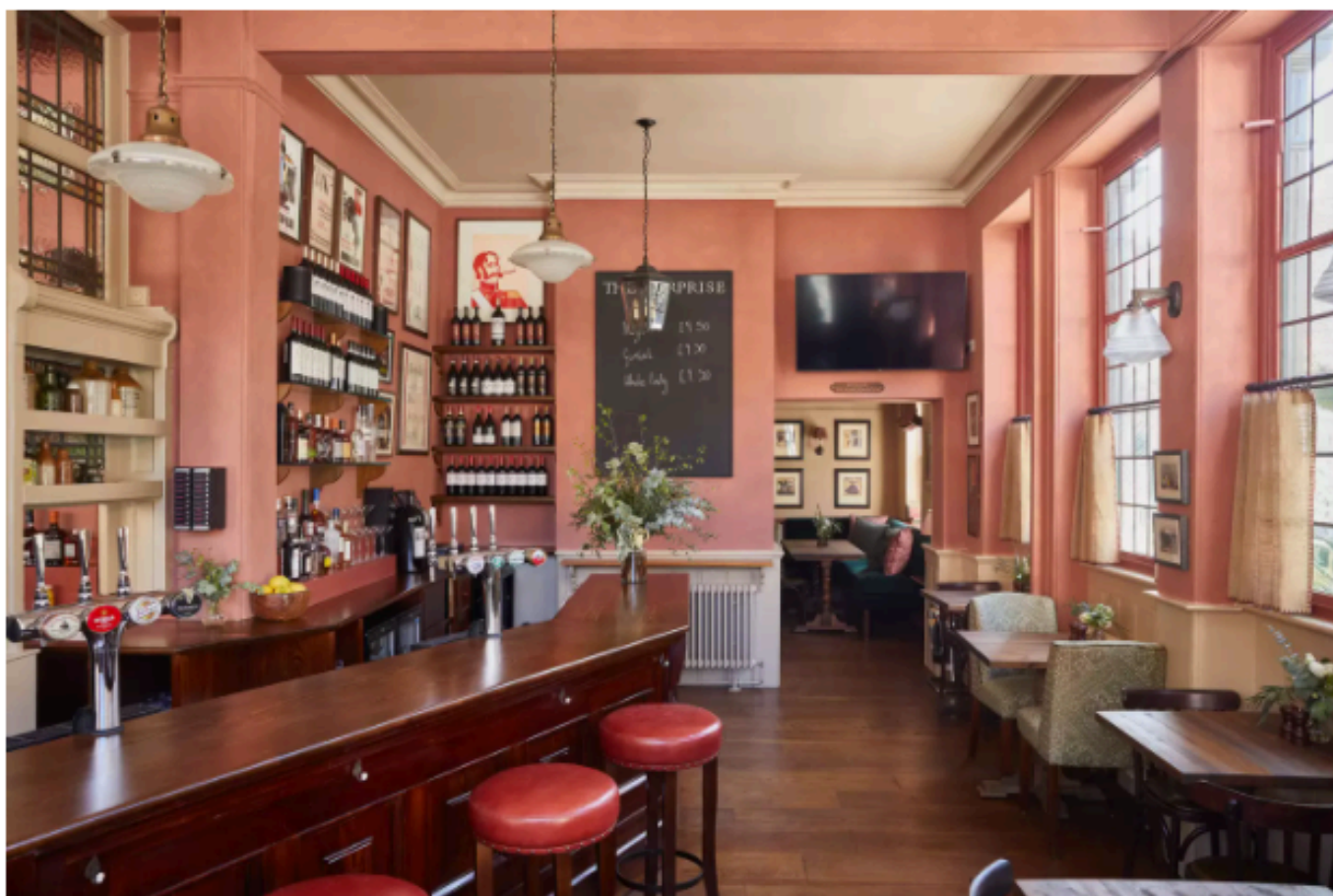


LARGE DINING ROOM

HELEN CATHCART

Everything, down to the coat hooks by every table, has been thought through in detail. 'There's a subtle naval nod in some of the artworks and all the upholstery and furniture has been made by British craftsmen,' Worsley explains. Upstairs, the Hamilton Room (named after the captain of The Surprise) is as inviting and comfortable as a best friend's drawing room. At weekends it will act as an extension of the restaurant, but is also available for private hire – handy, as it has its own bar.

The redesign has taken into account not just the history of The Surprise, but the esteem in which it's held. 'When we started at The Pheasant Inn, I wasn't aware of how many people were hugely fond of it,' Greenall says. 'And it's the same with The Surprise. Everyone seems to know the pub very well.' Worsley agrees: 'People are ready to get back to normal life and this is a great time to be opening. People keep coming by, asking to have a look. The area has a lovely, village feel to it.' As we chat, three or four neighbours pop in to see what's happening and Greenall greets them all like old friends. Unsurprisingly, he's already taken plenty of bookings for The Surprise's grand opening on 17 May, when restrictions on indoor dining in England are lifted.



THE BAR AREA

HELEN CATHCART

On opening a pub in the midst of a hospitality crisis post-Covid, ‘a lot of people have been questioning our sanity!’ laughs Greenall. ‘It’s been heart-breaking to have had to keep shutting The Pheasant Inn through lockdowns, but every time we reopen, it’s so rewarding to see everyone back in. Walking around London at the moment, it feels like a festival on the streets.’

When it comes to The Surprise, however, he’s being careful not to do too much too soon and is keen that walk-ins should be the norm. ‘We’re in no rush,’ he says firmly. ‘We want to open sensibly and get to know our neighbours. The idea is to create something accessible. A good pub attracts everyone, whether it’s for a quick lunch on a Monday, a celebration on a Friday night, or just a pint of beer at the bar. We try to be something for everybody.’ Judging by what the team at The Surprise are planning, we’re confident they’ll achieve just that.

The Surprise is open from 17 May. Book online at thesurprise-chelsea.co.uk

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