

Serving time

From the 1960s East End of the Kray twins to the gentrified Docklands of 2000, Eddie Johnson spent 38 years running the Two Puddings in Stratford. **Euan Ferguson** meets the legendary landlord of 'the world's greatest pub'. Portrait **James Pfaff**

Over the course of this thirtieth Olympiad, more than 4 million people will visit Stratford in the London borough of Newham. A few brave (or lost) Gamesgoers will leave the Olympic Park and venture into Stratford proper, where they will be greeted not by helpful volunteers in pink T-shirts but by struggling businesses, a ruthless traffic system and some of the most dispiriting building in the capital. Stratford town centre has seen livelier days – and there's one man who knew them better than most.

In 1962, the 30-year-old Eddie Johnson became landlord of the Two Puddings public house in Stratford Broadway and didn't leave for 38 years. I meet him in a café in Canning Town on his way to watch Olympic boxing. He's accompanied by his son Matt, who edited and published his new book about his years as a publican and is, incidentally, Matt Johnson of seminal indie band The The. 'What do you mean, you don't recognise me?' Eddie laughs to the young Turkish waitress curious about the presence of our photographer.

Now aged 80, Eddie's still in great condition – it's easy to imagine him as the perfect host, but I wouldn't have fancied taking any liberties come drinking-up time. Suited, faultlessly polite, erudite, witty, he is the epitome of the East End gent, but his book leaves the reader in no doubt that the licensed trade in 1960s Stratford wasn't a place for the easily intimidated. Ronnie and Reggie get a decent look-in, of course: it was near impossible for any east London pub to operate without the Kray twins' endorsement. The Puddings was then known as 'the butcher's shop' due to both its Victorian tiling and the frequently visceral conclusion of its patrons' disagreements ('I had so many fights and scuffles in the Puddings that, half the time, my hands and knuckles were swollen up, black and blue, and seemed to permanently throb and ache,' he says).

Eddie was a tally clerk in the docks, and a representative on Jack Dash's strike committee, before that Cockney itch for a better life prompted him first to run dance clubs, then move into pubs. 'Tales from the Two Puddings' is as much autobiography as history, an unadulterated, honest and affecting account of a time when landlords truly were the aristocrats of the working



class and an ordinary high street pub could become a draw for miles around.

I ask him why he decided these tales had to be told. 'Writing has been a hobby of mine for years,' he says. 'I should have been a writer rather than a publican, but I'm sad to say I wasn't educated enough.' His son encouraged him to publish. 'Matthew said, "Dad, it's 50 years since you went in the Puddings, the Olympics are on, you're 80 this year, you should bring the book out."'

Fifty years ago, he had sat nervously in the wood-panelled offices of Watney Mann in Whitechapel – with his wife Shirley, as only married men could apply – and persuaded the brewers that he was sufficiently fit and proper to run one of their outlets. So began a tenure that would last until 2000, by which time Eddie was the longest-serving licensee in London. 'In truth, the last thing I ever wanted to be was a publican,' he writes. 'I thought it was a thankless job with long hours and involved dealing with customers who, all too often, were the worse for drink. And I was right.'

Eddie's customers appear in his book as a cast of assorted troublemakers: thieves, blackmailers and armed robbers, protection racketeers, black marketeers, blaggers, boxers and brawlers. One acquaintance, 'Boater', claimed responsibility for Oliver Reed's facial scar (the notorious loudmouth picked the wrong hardman to upbraid one night in the

Pink Flamingo, Soho, and was lucky an attempted throat-slitting didn't succeed). 'Whenever trouble broke out in the Puddings,' Eddie writes, 'the police would just watch it from the safety of a shop doorway on the opposite side of the Broadway as they were too nervous to come over and break it up themselves.' Was he concerned about revisiting old arguments in his book? 'There are stories I had to leave out,' he tells me, 'and I've altered a lot of names. I'm very anti-violence now. But... I never called the police once in the seven years I lived above the premises. They was as bad as anyone else in those days.'

His story is also one of friends and family, many of whom did time in the Puddings, and of barmen and barmaids, bouncers, potmen, cooks and cleaners. The book, like his conversation, is bubbling with anecdotes about a London on the cusp of enormous change. He lists the acts he put on there: 'Some were wonderful, some not so good... The Who, The Crazy World Of Arthur Brown, The Kinks, Screaming Lord Sutch, The Nashville Teens, David Essex.' He talks about forgotten drinks (Watney Red Barrel, Cream Label, Wicked Lady). He admits to a lurid Swinging Sixties refurb – 'I bought a lot of highly coloured

plastic furniture, bright red, yellow and blue banquettes... I lowered the ceiling with enormous plastic mock wooden beams. I really thought it looked wonderful.'

His life as a retiree in Suffolk is surely less colourful. Does he miss this city? 'I do,' he says, 'but I suppose the London I'm missing is the London I knew. You know what I mean?' Over the decades he sold millions of pints of beer, staged a hit parade of bands and

singers, chucked out a whole nick's worth of nuisances and entertained a generation of East Enders. At one point in the '60s he'd put up a banner outside the Puddings declaring it to be 'the world's greatest pub' – partly to wind up local competition, partly because he thought it was. You might say Eddie Johnson has done more for culture in Stratford than £20 billion of Olympic money ever will.

'Tales from the Two Puddings' is published by Fifty First State Press at £9.99 from www.51statepress.com or good bookshops.