

Portsmouth in England

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (December 2019)



Blonde Man Reading, Karl Knaths

Portsmouth in England used to be one of the great naval ports of the world. It is so no longer, because of the much-reduced role of Britain in the world, its navy being now a tiny, if

expensive, fleet.

Furthermore, the city was heavily bombed during the war and, as was the case almost everywhere in the country, little effort was made to restore what could be restored. British officialdom and its associated intelligentsia at the time, having lost their self-confidence, had no attachment to the past, which they wanted to forget because they had now come to accept that the country's history had hitherto been nothing but a tissue of injustice. On the contrary, they wanted to build a brave new world of social justice on the ruins of the old world; and, in a strange and often corrupt alliance with property developers, they caused soulless modern buildings to rise from the ruins as quickly as possible, the property developers making fortunes in the process.

Wiser counsels later prevailed, and what little remained of the old buildings was restored: but it was too late for the city as a whole. Old, elegant and charming buildings are now to be seen in the midst of the dross of modernity, which prevails principally by its size: gigantism being almost a deliberate humiliation of all that came before, as if the architects knew that it was their only weapon in their unspoken competition with the architects of the past with whom they would one day be compared. There are, in fact, few sights more dispiriting than that of an elegant eighteenth-century terrace restored to fine condition literally overshadowed by a large edifice from anywhere between the 1950s and the present day. This is more dispiriting even than to see recent buildings without such a comparison before one's eyes; loss is the more bearable if one is permitted to forget it for a moment.

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And yet, for all its imposed ugliness, its elevation of the motor car above human beings in general and pedestrians in particular, its constant reminders of a bygone age more glorious if not necessarily more just or better to have lived in, I have come to like Portsmouth. I quite often stay for a day *en route* for France and always enjoy it, perhaps a little guiltily. The fact is that we sometimes come to love what we hate.

It helps, of course, when the weather is beautiful, as it was on my last visit. No doubt Hell itself would be better in fine weather. And I always enjoy the human spectacle of Portsmouth greatly: it is an excellent vantage point from which to observe, if not the modern world, at least some aspects of the modern world.

There is no doubt that we live in the golden age of multiculturalism, that is to say of many different cuisines to choose from. I dined on this occasion in one of a chain of Japanese restaurants patronised largely by young people, in this case students. Although the chain is relatively inexpensive, it is nevertheless far more expensive than anything I could have afforded as a student fifty years ago: evidence of a general increase in prosperity, perhaps, or of a more liberal resort to credit, or both.

The waiter who greeted us was Spanish, obviously an intelligent young man—though tattooed. He immediately caused me some disquiet. Of course, I like waiters to be intelligent and helpful, as this one was, but I could not help but wonder whether he was of too high a calibre for the job he was doing. Was he merely filling in time until he could find something more suited to his talents, and probably his qualifications, or was our economy not dynamic enough to find suitable employment for such as he? Certainly, he gave no impression of embitterment at his current employment, as do those who believe themselves to be too good for their jobs, but perhaps he was just a good actor. I should not have been surprised to discover that he had a degree in archaeology or even in particle physics: in which case would it have been sufficient to say that, if he were doing a job that was beneath his capabilities, it must have been his own fault? We soon enter questions of political economy that even now have no definitive answer and that perfectly sensible persons answer in a different way.

But more disconcerting still, at least for me, was the fact that he was tattooed. On one of his forearms were words inscribed in Chinese, on the other wrist some words in Arabic. Did he speak either, or both, of these languages? This seemed improbable: more likely he had been told what these words meant and liked them well enough to have them inscribed on his body until he died. This implied a great deal of trust in whoever tattooed him, for the words could easily have said 'The bearer of these words is a fool'—or an infidel.

I have been forced by circumstances to revise somewhat my opinion of tattooing. I still think that it is aesthetically appalling, but my first explanation of why what used to be the province of sailors, criminals and a few degenerate

aristocrats or eccentrics had started to ascend the social scale is no longer viable, if it ever was. Since those who tattooed themselves, or had themselves tattooed, were usually people on the margins of society, I argued, those of more elevated status who followed them were thereby exhibiting their sympathy for them and thus their political virtue. But now that a third of men in several western societies are tattooed, I do not think that this can explain the epidemic mass self-mutilation that now afflicts our societies.

Whatever the explanation, the taste for self-mutilation plays an important part of the part of Portsmouth known as Southsea. This is the part where Sir Arthur Conan Doyle lived and practised medicine for eight years while he invented the most famous of all private detectives, Sherlock Holmes. His house was bombed during the war, and was replaced by some flats of quite extraordinary architectural banality (if banality can ever be extraordinary), with only a blue plaque to signal the former residence of that great man. Thus do we now honour the great—and Conan Doyle was great in more than one respect.

A stroll in Southsea tells you quite a lot about modern society, or at least a part of modern society. The fact is that for a considerable distance down its main street, it is easier to get yourself mutilated, either by tattoo or by piercing, than to buy a tomato. Fresh food, it seems, is scarcely ever bought by the people of Southsea, probably students living in shared rented houses. Apart from tattoo parlours and one shop called, no doubt to describe its customers, *Bored* (selling designer shoes indistinguishable from any others except in their price), two others selling camouflage-patterned clothes and four others that I shall come to soon, there were scores, if not hundreds, of takeaway food outlets of as many different cuisines as Jacob's coat had of

colours: Turkish, Korean, North and South Indian, Mexican, Italian, Spanish, Thai, and many others. If only everyone were as interested in aspects of all these different cultures other than their cuisine.

Since all of the outlets were still in business and presumably profitable, and since it was far easier to obtain a takeaway bibimbap than, say, a loaf of bread or a pound of butter, one must presume that the local inhabitants, many if not most of them students, never cooked for themselves, and probably would not have known how to do so if they had to. I suspect that many of them ate in solitary fashion, as if eating were a faintly disreputable thing to do, like watching pornography on the computer.

The four shops to which I referred briefly above were, amazingly enough, second-hand bookshops. From this I concluded that local rents were not high, for—with the exception of rare book dealers at the higher end of the market—no dealer in old books can afford anything other than a low rent.

It was a Tuesday, and I discovered to my chagrin (to put it no worse) that all of them were shut that day. It is rare nowadays to find such shops anywhere, let alone four in one street, and I felt as presumably a cheetah feels when the gazelle gets away, namely cheated of my prey.

One of these shops in particular was dear to me because its owner is quite oblivious of the internet. The prices of his books bear no relation to those of other sellers: he charges according to what he thinks they are worth and irrespective of

the likelihood of a passer-by wanting to buy them. He has been in business a long time—thirty years—so I suppose his business model is a success of sorts; I imagine that while he wants to make enough to live, profit is not his only, or even his main, motive. He loves buying and selling books for their own sake and has one of the most remarkable collections of old detective fiction, admittedly often not in very good condition due to the general disorder of his shop, that I know. Detective fiction is not to be despised, especially that of a bygone age. Very clever men, people like Wittgenstein and Bertrand Russell, used to devour it avidly, the latter at a rate of one book a day.

When I found that the shop was closed, I pressed my nose against its window as a little boy who has no pocket money left used to press his nose against the window of a sweetshop or candy store, in the days when such shops or stores still existed. Perhaps it would be more apposite to compare myself to the alcoholic who waits, shaking, for the bar or pub to open, for when it comes to old books I am as addicted as any alcoholic to his tippie. On my way to, or entry into, a second-hand bookshop, my hand trembles with excitement, I experience a mounting tension until I have bought a volume that, to 99.99 per cent of humanity, would seem but a dusty and none too pleasing object, often giving off the acrid smell of acidic paper, or with yellowing and brittle pages with poor print, sometimes smelling strongly of the cigarettes of him who once owned it. How can so wretched an object excite so much enthusiasm?

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I was very disappointed, desolate even. So near and yet so far! It is absurd at my age to covet yet more material possessions when I shall not be able to enjoy them for more than fifteen years, if the life tables of the insurance companies are to be believed (and fifteen years backwards now seems to me like yesterday). It is not as if I own no books that are still unread by me; I have thousands of them, though none that I do not intend to read if I live to be several hundred years old. Even if my little obsession with books is relatively harmless, apart from filling my house to overflowing and reducing the space in which I can move around in it, it is not rational: and if I am not rational myself, why should I expect others around me to be rational? And yet I do, often marvelling at or irritated by their little absurdities which I see so clearly.

In future I shall avoid Portsmouth on Tuesdays, and I shall so arrange things to arrive when the bookshops of Southsea are open. Not that I felt that my last visit was entirely wasted. I shall retain for ever the vision of the young lady in the corner of the restaurant in which I dined, of enormous bosom, turquoise hair, a ring through her nose and a tattoo on her upper right arm so dense that at first I thought it was the sleeve of a garment, Lord, what fools these mortals be! But she was having a very jolly time with her companion.

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