

TOAST TO THE HOSTESS

WITH THE MOSTEST

**KATHRYN
HUGHES**
SOCIAL
HISTORY

**The Last
Landlady**
Laura Thompson
Unbound £16.99
★★★★★

Just occasionally a book comes along that leaves you breathless with pleasure, admiration and a dash of envy too. *The Last Landlady* is Laura Thompson's exquisitely observed and brilliantly written memoir of the life and times of her grandmother, the first woman in England to hold a pub licence in her own right.

For decades the magnificent Violet (a young 'Vi' pictured right) – hair fluffed up at Harrods, scarlet lips courtesy of Estée Lauder, and a dash of leopard-skin somewhere about her person – presided over a Home Counties pub serving local farmers, tradesmen and the occasional

thirsty City commuter. It sounds incongruous but Vi, born into a London pub-owning family, knew exactly how to make it all work.

Indeed, what interests Thompson, who has written previously about such icons of 20th-century female non-conformity as Agatha Christie and the Mitford sisters, is the way in which her grandmother forged a path for herself in unpromising circumstances. Divorced just after the war, and with a young child (Thompson's mother) in tow, Vi clearly hadn't got the memo about living small. Despite film-star looks and multiple marriage offers from rich men, she preferred to stay single, devoting herself instead to turning a sleepy

historic coaching inn into the best boozier for miles around.

Thompson spent a lot of her Seventies childhood in Vi's pub, and her child's-eye view of flirtatious salesmen, philandering housewives, drunk youngsters and alcoholic regulars, all glimpsed through a haze of Benson & Hedges, is simply delicious.

Into this wonderful word-picture she inserts an entertaining account of all the best pub landladies in history, dating right back to the

'ale-wife' of Anglo-Saxon days, before ending with a heartfelt lament for this vanished tradition. For by the Eighties, tougher drink-driving laws, smoking bans and family-friendly policies meant that pubs had become safer, cleaner and a lot less fun.

Vi went to her grave at 96, still refusing to believe that either food or children (apart from granddaughter Laura) had any real business being part of the rich, raffish culture over which she had presided so magnificently for a large part of the 20th century.

**IT'S A
FACT**

**Charles Dickens
recalled going into a
London pub at the age
of 12 and ordering and
being served a glass
of its best ale, known
as Genuine
Stunning.**



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