▲ London's breweries positively threw themselves onto the billiards bandwagon in the 1890s, creating an architectural legacy that, long after the game dropped out of fashion, shines on in Victorian and Edwardian gin palaces to this day.

Determined to prove, to the public and to local magistrates that pubs could offer more than just beer and skittles, the breweries invested heavily, in some instances devoting up to 40 per cent of a pub's floor space to the game. As *The Licensed Victualler* reported in 1900, around the same time as the **Crown and Greyhound** opened in **Dulwich Village** (*above*), 'One can scarcely imagine any properly furnished hotel or modern public house without its billiard room'.

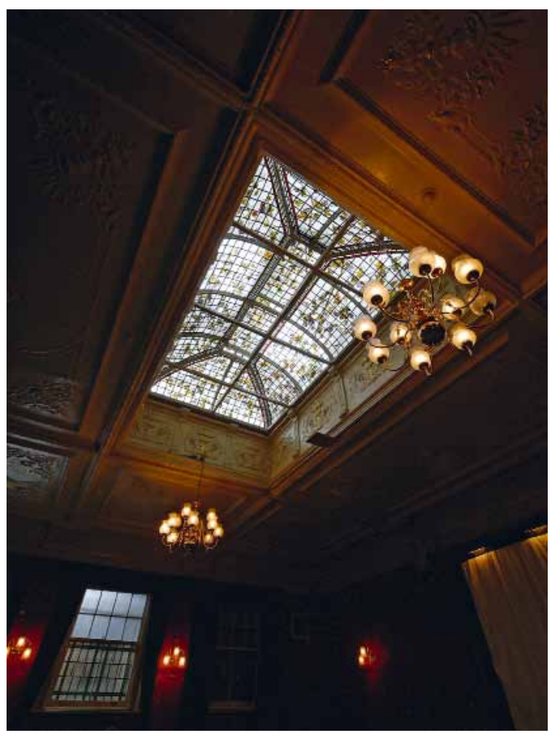
At both the Grade II listed **Boleyn Tavern**, **Barking Road** (*right*), designed for the Cannon Brewery by WG Shoebridge and HW Rising, opened in 1900, and the Grade II* **Salisbury Hotel**, **Green Lanes** (*below right*), built by John Cathles Hill and opened in 1899, painted glass roof lights were designed to shed light onto billiard tables below.

The effect was stunning. But alas what billiard players preferred were dark rooms with lights slung low over the table. Added to which affordable overhead electric lighting became available in around 1913.

Some pubs appear to have done well from billiards. But the majority found they could never recoup their initial outlay with a game so few people could play at any one time.

Pubs also lost out to the new generation of billiard halls which offered longer opening hours.

Which is why there are no billiard tables in London pubs any more, or at best, as at the Boleyn, a pool table, somewhat dwarfed by its magnificent surrounds.



While some London pubs had billiard rooms integrated within their main structure, at several, including the Grade II* listed Black Lion on Kilburn High Road (*above*) – rebuilt in 1898 to designs by RA Lewcock – distinct single storey extensions were added. Here too the original painted glass skylights survive, only now they lighten up the pub's dining area (a common use for former billiard rooms).

▲ 'Probably the most famous snooker club in the world' says a sign over the door of the **Romford Snooker Club** on **Arcade Place**.

For it was here, on table number 13, that the owner of the club first spotted a shy lad from Plumstead potting balls with unusual aplomb.

The owner? Barry Hearn, an accountant who had grown up on a Dagenham council estate and had bought the club in 1974, having noted the popularity of the BBC's *Pot Black* series.

The teenager? Steve Davis.

While Davis went on to become England's greatest snooker talent since Joe Davis, Hearn, who became his manager in 1976, set about promoting three of London's most cherished indoor sports, starting with snooker, followed soon after by boxing and darts.

Hearn named his growing empire Matchroom Sports, literally after the match room he had set up at Romford in 1982, east London's answer to Thurston Hall.

The club itself had been opened in 1933 by the **Lucania Temperance Billiard Hall Company**, originally a Welsh company that had taken its name from a Royal Mail ship, the Lucania, which had been broken up in Swansea in 1909. After purchasing all the ship's interior furnishings and fittings the directors made sure to place at least one bit of the Lucania in each of its billiard halls.

By 1937 there were 27 of them within Greater London alone, Romford included, more than any other single operator in the capital. Another twelve followed post war, by which time the label 'temperance' had been dropped.

Unlike its main rival, of whom more overleaf, Lucania did not build its own halls but rented space instead. At least two of its clubs were above Burton's, at Streatham and Lewisham, but the majority were located on the first floor of shopping parades.

As such Lucania bequeathed no actual architectural legacy, even if at least ten of those parades remain extant.

As for Hearn, he sold Lucania on to another chain, Rileys, in 1982, before finally relinquishing Romford in 1989. Six years later he bought Leyton Orient Football Club and renamed its ground the Matchroom Stadium.

The Romford club has retained its hallowed place in the snooker world all the same, and remains typical of its genre. A single door in an otherwise anonymous parade of shops leads up a flight of stairs, through a swing door and instantly into a magical, hushed world of glowing baize and furrowed brows.

As an old sign by the bar has it, 'The Lucania Lad – happy as the game is long!'

Probably the best preserved Arts and Crafts billiard room in London is that of the Brentham Club, on Meadvale Road in Ealing. Located within the Grade II listed clubhouse, designed by GL Sutcliffe and opened for residents of the surrounding garden estate in 1911 (*see page 121*), the room has two tables overlooked by a series of alcoves, each with bench seats and panelled screens.