

# War-gamers have been meeting up every week for over 20 years to fight with miniature armies

## How sports pub becomes a battlefield

by CAITLIN MASKELL

A GROUP of tabletop war-gaming enthusiasts have been meeting twice a week in the backroom of a traditional sports pub for more than 20 years.

The Central London Wargames Club has members who travel from as far as the Midlands to gather at the Escape Bar in Mornington Crescent.

Together they recreate historical battles and imaginative “what if” conflicts using miniature armies and dice.

The group started in 1985 and originally met at the Cock Tavern in Somers Town. War-gaming is a hobby in which players use miniature figures, maps and rule systems to recreate historical battles and fictional conflicts.

The group has 186 people on their mailing list but, unlike more structured clubs, has no constitution, chair or membership fees.

Tim Porter, one of the members, said: “At the end of the day we are just people who play with toy soldiers. If you squint from a long distance this could be an abstract version of chess but with a different set of rules.

“Some people choose to re-enact historical battles but part of the fun is to



Members of the Central London Wargames Club at Escape bar ready to battle it out at the board; inset: some of the miniature figures

play ‘what ifs’ – what would it be like if you had an Aztec army fighting an Egyptian army.”

Richard Case, another member, said: “There are different aspects of the hobby: the painting, visiting historical battlefields, reading, and playing. In this day and age, when a lot of people spend time on screens, it’s a really good hobby as it offers variety. Painting is a real flow activity and good for mental health. There are very few hobbies that have so many aspects to them.

“Fifty years ago it was a very British and American hobby, now it is international.

“It’s become more mainstream. You’d be amazed by how many people have dabbled in war games.”

The group attends around a dozen competitions a year held in the UK and Europe, although competitions are also held in the US and Australia.

The Prussian High command developed a system called Kriegsspiel – meaning

“war game” in German – in the 19th century as a method of training officers in battle strategy.

HG Wells popularised the pastime in 1913 when he published a rule book for playing with toy soldiers called *Little Wars*. Actor Peter Cushing was among one of the hobby enthusiasts, and today actor Henry Cavill is among those interested in the popular war-gaming system Warhammer, the world’s most popular form of war-gaming, which attracts a younger demographic because of

its medieval fantasy setting.

Mr Case said the group were sensitive about playing contemporary warfare in their games.

He said: “At the end of the day this is a game but there was a reality where it was not.

“You have that slightly in the back of your mind if you are doing something that is too contemporary.

“Some people have accused people who play of being war-mongers – I

would say it’s the opposite. You are only too well aware of how brutal real warfare is.”

Mr Porter added: “You end up doing a lot of reading about the history of warfare, so as a group I suspect we are all very conscious of the reality of war.”

Ravi Senathirajah, landlord of Escape in Lidlinton Place, offers the group the space on Monday and Thursday evenings, where he has

built them a cupboard in the backroom to store their equipment.

Mr Porter said: “We get the odd quizzical look from other punters but most guys have been coming here for 20 years – we’re all just helping keep the pub open.”

Mr Case added: “Ravi has built and supported communities within the community. It’s a chance to socialise and be face to face with people.”

## Ravi: ‘I’m the only one in my family to run bars’

A SPORTS pub that has stood the test of time continues to attract a crowd of Camden Town regulars as well as those from further afield, writes Caitlin Maskell.

The Escape Bar and Restaurant in Lidlinton Place, Mornington Crescent, is brightly lit and lined with glowing screens, while regulars gather around the darts board and pool table.

Behind the bar, next to the fish tank and lagers on tap is Ravi Senathirajah who has been running the venue for the past 20 years.

The postwar estate pub, situated next to the Amptill Square tower blocks, was previously known as the Russell Arms, and later JD Sports Bar. Mr Senathirajah took over in 2016, renaming it Escape Bar and Restaurant. He was born in Trincomalee in Sri Lanka, and came to the UK aged 21.



Ravi Senathirajah, above, runs Escape sports bar in Lidlinton Place

“I’ve always run bars, and started in Harrow,” he said.

“I am the only person in my family to run bars. I like people, so running bars was what suited me.

“When I was a kid I never thought I would be owning a bar in Mornington Crescent. When I came with nothing, it wasn’t easy when I started but now the community knows me and I know them,

everyone just calls me Ravi.”

Mr Senathirajah runs Escape full-time, with the help of two part-time workers. The bar is known for its lively atmosphere and dedication to showing sports, which attracts big crowds on football match days.

He had expected 150 people through the door to watch the Champions

League final between Arsenal and Paris St-Germain on Saturday, but on the day the number was closer to 350 fans.

“It was very busy but everyone enjoyed themselves,” he said. “It was mostly regulars and their families – a good crowd.”

While football may be the main attraction in Escape, Mr Senathirajah said he was more of a cricket person and that, while the bat and ball sport was not usually shown in the bar area, it was playing the whole time in the kitchen.

“In Sri Lanka cricket is massive, everyone plays,” he said. “I played as a kid – when you finished school or on Saturdays and Sundays, evening times... any chance we could get.”

Mr Senathirajah said the bar’s regulars were mostly from Camden Town, Somers Town and Euston.

“When I started there were eight or nine pubs in the area,” he said. “The place used to be very busy but after the pandemic it got quieter.

“The younger generation aren’t coming out to the pub or spending money. I don’t mind it though – our regulars and groups that come in keep us going.”



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