

Issue 116
August - September 2022



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Four closed Oxford pubs
- what's happening?



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FRONT COVER PICTURE: Four closed pubs: The Lamb and Flag, The Mitre, The Eagle and Child and The Grapes.

The **Oxford Drinker** is the newsletter of the Oxford branch of CAMRA, the Campaign for Real Ale.

4000 copies are distributed free of charge to pubs across the branch's area, including Oxford, Abingdon, Witney, Eynsham, Kidlington, Bampton and Wheatley and and most of the villages in between.

PDF downloads of past issues are available at the Oxford CAMRA website, www.oxford.camra.org.uk.

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Welcome

..... to the first Oxford Drinker magazine in print since March 2020

Have you missed us? Maybe, maybe not! The Covid pandemic halted production of all CAMRA magazines for a long time, as there was no point producing them when pubs and breweries were closed or under trading restrictions, and the advertising needed to cover printing costs simply wasn't there. Some CAMRA magazines have returned to print before the *Oxford Drinker*, some have yet to do so and some may never return, but with the support of our advertisers we feel that the time is now right to go back into print.

We haven't been sleeping, however – far from it. In September 2020, six months after the pandemic started and while CAMRA was still not allowing magazines to be printed, the *Oxford Drinker* was relaunched as a dedicated website. In the nearly three years since then more than 100 articles have appeared online including news, features, guest columnists and Comment, and all these are still available to read. Updates are usually made once or twice a month, and these continue as the *Oxford Drinker* online is still our prime focus. News can be posted online as it happens, and the website has become an important source of information for local print and broadcast media as well as CAMRA members and anyone interested in local pubs and breweries.

We are going back into print as well because we appreciate that not everyone has online access, and many who do still prefer the look and feel of a printed magazine that they can enjoy while supping a pint. A printed version can never rival online for topicality, but we will be producing another in the run-up to the Oxford Beer and Cider Festival in October, before settling down to more regular production in 2023.

Every edition of the magazine will have content that you can read here first before it goes online, and in this edition that includes guest columnists Paul Silcock and Graham Shelton, and Tony's Travels along the Cowley Road. We also update you about Oxford's four closed historic pubs, CAMRA's latest national figures, the return of beer festivals, pub and brewery news, and a tour of country pubs.

There are still many threats to pubs and breweries, not least the consumer spending squeeze that can only get worse come the autumn. Cask ale is in decline nationally with a mixed picture locally, but whatever happens we will be there to tell you about it. Your contributions, suggestions and comments are welcome: contact editor@oxford.camra.org.uk.

DAVE RICHARDSON

For regular updates visit
www.oxforddrinker.camra.org.uk



RIGHT: The Lamb and Flag, Grapes and Eagle and Child in happier times

BELOW: The Mitre then and now

Four closed historic pubs: An update

Dave Richardson reports on four much missed pubs remaining shut in the city centre



ALTHOUGH PUBS in Oxford and the surrounding area have recovered strongly from the pandemic, there are four major exceptions where Covid may not have been the main reason for closure, but has certainly delayed their re-opening. Here is the picture as we understand it today.

Lamb & Flag

Re-opening of the many times Oxford CAMRA City Pub of the Year has now been postponed until later this summer with September 1 being one date mooted, but with the apparent lack of progress and previous missed deadlines, there has to be some doubt about that.

The delay is put down to the difficulties in renovating a Grade II listed building in a Conservation Area. Originally planned to re-open by last Christmas and then for around Easter, the news will disappoint many pub goers who will now have to be patient a little longer.

It was announced last autumn that owner St John's College had reached agreement with a Community Interest Company

called the Inklings to lease the pub, and the Inklings have made clear their intention to continue focusing on real ale with up to six hand pumps dispensing beers from mainly local breweries. A major revamp of the cellar and kitchen was ordered, and upgrade of the toilets, and the front bar has been removed to create more space for tables.

The Inklings – named after the group of famous writers led by J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis – have raised more than enough money to take on the lease and renovate the pub, with St John's role in the renovations apparently limited by its status as an educational charity. The upper floors continue to be used as student living accommodation.

Inklings board member Dave Norwood wrote to shareholders a few months ago, saying: "First of all, thanks so much to the many Inklings who attended our parties in late February, and for all the lovely feedback since. Everyone seemed to enjoy the events, and it was great to see beer flowing in the pub again (albeit from a keg on the work-in



-progress bar). Not only were Inklings present, but we also welcomed friends from St John's College, Oxford CAMRA and the *Oxford Mail*, all of whom have been great supporters of our mission to reopen the pub.

"The renovation work required to make the pub fit for 2022 and beyond was more extensive than we initially expected, and we have learned more along the way. Everyone agrees that the toilets are a transformation, but we are still grappling with the kitchen and extraction, the electrics *et al*. Due to the Grade II listing of the pub, and its historical significance as an Oxford landmark, some of these improvements inevitably require listed building consent. The protections are especially high, given the pub is within the Central Oxford Conservation Area."

Eagle and Child

On the opposite side of St Giles to the **Lamb & Flag**, this old pub did not re-open after the first lockdown in March 2020 and will probably remain closed for at least a couple more years.



It is also owned by St John's, and had announced plans to create up to eight boutique hotel rooms on the upper floors, but a great deal of work is needed on the whole property. No news has emerged following visits by prospective leaseholders last autumn, with plans to lease it to Young's having previously fallen through.

The **Eagle and Child**, or "Bird and Baby" in university parlance, had been run as a Nicholson's pub by M&B for many years, but the price St John's is seeking may put off the kind of large pub company that could have afforded it in better times. Another stumbling block could be the condition of the building, described as very poor by staff working there prior to closure.

The Eagle and Child matters not only because it is a beloved pub, but because it has achieved global fame because of the writers who used to meet there regularly. J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis were the leaders of a group known as the Inklings, who also patronised the **Lamb & Flag**.



Mitre

What is sometimes considered to be Oxford's oldest pub, the **Mitre** on High Street, is set to become a Gusto Italian restaurant according to a planning application to Oxford City Council. Although functioning mainly as a restaurant for many years prior to closure in 2019, it retained a bar selling real ale where you could go just for a drink – although the original Turl Bar, at the rear of the building, became part of student accommodation around 20 years ago.

Owner Lincoln College – whose bishop's mitre crest gives the building its name – has been criticised by tour guide Rob Walters for not respecting the building's heritage and in effect allowing only diners to enjoy it. The Grade II-listed **Mitre** has a more credible claim to be Oxford's oldest pub than the **Bear Inn**, which claims the title based on a former coaching inn which used to stretch all the way from High Street to the present building, which dates from 1606. The **Mitre** has a 13th century cellar and used to display a list of landlords

RIGHT: The Grapes today with overgrown floral displays

dating back to 1230, although the building you see today dates from the 17th century.

“As a badged city guide in Oxford for many years and as a keen pub goer I have started many a pub tour from the **Mitre**,” says Rob. “So, not surprisingly, I am appalled and saddened to hear that this Oxford establishment may become an Italian restaurant. I can hardly believe that the owners would countenance such a change to what is the oldest pub in our city.

“Four city centre pubs have closed over the past few years and three of those are owned by colleges. Visitors are, quite rightly, puzzled by this. They assume that the colleges are careful caretakers of our heritage, and so they should be. Visitors do not come to Oxford to visit Italian restaurants, and even if they did a restaurant can only be visited for a meal. A pub meanwhile is a place of community and heritage. It can be visited time and time again just for the price of a pint. Its atmosphere can be savoured, its architecture admired, its history discussed and exaggerated, the long list of



former drinkers toasted and recalled.

“So come on Lincoln College, respect the legacy that you have cherished since the 15th century. Find a tenant who can run the place as the pub it should be.”

Grapes

The **Grapes** did re-open after the lockdowns but closed in December 2021 after leaseholder West Berkshire Brewery got into financial difficulties. Owner Oxford City Council is now seeking a new lease holder for what is the last traditional pub on George Street, but it is likely to prove too small, with limited kitchen capacity, for a big group to take over. Rents in this area,

dominated by restaurants and bars, are notoriously high.

The 19th century pub – so-called as inns serving wine as well as beer often took the name **Grapes** – has had a chequered history over the last decade as successive leaseholders have tried to make it work. It passed from Greene King to Bath Ales which made quite a success of it, but then rebranded it as **Beerd** as the craft keg movement gathered pace. When St Austell brewery took over Bath Ales and didn't want the pub there were rumours it would become yet another coffee shop, but the lease was taken on by West Berkshire with a mix of cask and craft keg ales. Now, like all four of these closed pubs, it looks increasingly dilapidated.

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Pub & Brewery News

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King's Arms, Oxford

Members have queried ownership of this famous old university pub after Young's beers disappeared from the bars in early July, but Young's retains ownership. Young's beers have been brewed by Marston's at Bedford for some years, while the Young's pub company operates separately. Not for the first time, Marston's appears to have capacity problems leading to a shortage of Young's beers, with the Angel and Greyhound in Oxford



having none of these beers a few months ago when local brewery Loose Cannon effectively had a tap take-over. The beneficiary at the King's Arms was Lister's brewery from West Sussex, with four of its beers being available on hand pump including an unusual Limehouse Porter.

North Star, Steventon

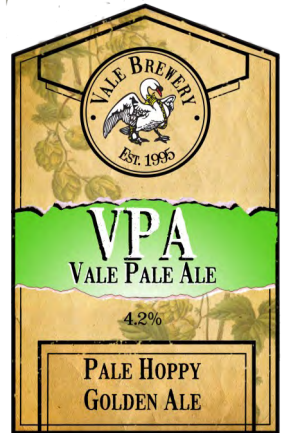
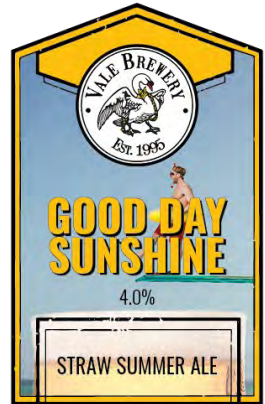
This historical gem in a village between Abingdon and Didcot is one of 11 pubs around the

country given extra protection from change in a collaboration between CAMRA and Historic England. All these pubs have been upgraded or re-listed as either Grade II or Grade II* because of their historic interiors, which in the case of the North Star means its unusual layout (no bar, only a servery) cannot be altered. CAMRA's Pub Heritage Group chairman Paul Ainsworth said: "Times are tough for all pubs at the moment, including those with important historic interiors. The more protection they can receive, the better. We have been working with Historic England to identify pubs that deserve to be listed, upgraded or have their list descriptions enhanced so that people can truly appreciate why they are special."

Vale Brewery

Two of its ales have been awarded Bronze in the SIBA Midlands Independent Beer Awards 2022 -- Red Kite at 4.3% and VPA at 4.2%. Both beers are available in firkin as well as bottle and can be purchased from the brewery taproom and shop, which is open every Friday from 12-6pm, and also on the last Saturday of the month from 12-6pm. It is again hosting monthly brewery tours which can be booked at

valebrewery.co.uk



Seasonal beers available this summer include Amity, a 3.9% light copper coloured ale with

citrus notes and a crisp finish; Good Day Sunshine, a 4.0% summer straw beer with passionfruit, grapefruit and blackberry aromas; and Fork Handles, a 4.2% Blonde coloured ale with fruity aromas.

George Inn, Littlemore

Residents of this Oxford suburb are joining with the parish council to consider mounting a community buy-out bid for the pub after the building's private owner announced that it would be sold. The council had it listed as an Asset of Community Value in 2020, and if this is renewed it would then have a breathing pace of six months in which to make a bid.

Greyhound, Besselsleigh

This pub, a few miles from Oxford alongside the A420

Swindon road, continues to excel as a real ale and fine food venue, although it is a "destination pub" which the vast majority of customers drive to. On a recent visit it had six real ales available, with another six conditioning in the cellar and all with pump clips. Eight breweries were represented among the 12 ales, including Vale, Loose Cannon and Hook Norton among the local contingent, plus Timothy Taylor (Landlord and Boltmaker), Chiltern and St Austell. Why can't all country pubs be like this?

White House, Bladon

The departure of landlord Johnny Roberts, in charge since the pub re-opened as a Community-Owned venture in September 2020, led to the tenancy being advertised on

industry portal the *Morning Advertiser*. It was voted Best Newcomer 2020 in this year's Ox in a Box awards, and has gained a reputation for good local ales and food. On the edge of the Blenheim Palace estate, it is said to be the pub "where Churchill learned to drink", and he is buried in the churchyard opposite.

White Horse, Stonesfield
Villagers have re-invigorated their plans for a community



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buy-out of this closed village pub, which has been put back on the market by the building's private owner. A previous share offer was very successful, but despite meeting the asking price the community group was knocked back when the property was sold, apparently for a lower price, to another private individual. This raised suspicions that developers may be at work, and any effort to change its use from a pub would be resisted. Villagers are being urged to reclaim their shares, and it is understood that

many have done so.

Tap Social

The craft keg and can brewer has moved out of its main brewing base in Kennington to open a much larger brewhouse on the Station Field Industrial Estate in Kidlington, as it could not keep pace with demand. The original brewery at Botley, opened in 2016, is still used for small batch, seasonal and experimental beers, and is also the venue for a busy taproom with lots of special events including a new festival in

August (see Festivals story). The Kidlington brewery came on-stream in May allowing Tap Social to triple its capacity. It also operates the White Horse pub on Abingdon Road, Oxford.

West Berkshire Brewery

Now in the capable hands of Ian Rogers (the founder of Wychwood Brewery & Hobgoblin), West Berkshire will shortly be rebranding itself as Renegade Brewery. Its most popular beers, Good Old Boy, Maggs' Mild, Maharaja and Mister Chubb's will retain the same branding and will be brewed to the same recipes by head brewer Will Twomey in the immediate future, but new beers and new brandings are promised later in the year.

Up in Arms, Oxford

The Marston Road pub, owned

THE BEAR INN

The Bear Inn is the oldest pub in Oxford and is a hidden gem, just off the hustle and bustle of the busy High Street.

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by the small, loco Dodo pubs chain, has scheduled a series of Beer, Beats and BBQ summer party events which are free to attend. All are on Saturdays including the Up in Arms Street Party on 27 August, 24 September and Oktoberfest on 8 October. It promises a fun and inclusive family day starting at 12 noon with a local DJ spinning decks, the Dodo Smokeshack BBQ and the new Dodo Beer Bus serving craft keg beer.

Fox Inn, Boars Hill

Up to four rotating real ales that could be from anywhere in Britain can be found at this country pub just outside Oxford, which was taken over last winter by Chris Mulhall, proprietor of the Plough at 38 in Oxford. The Star Inns (Heineken)-owned pub has been refurbished outside and inside and hopes to become a leading dining pub again, with fine views from the garden. Real ales on a recent visit were Tring Brewery's Side Pocket for a Toad, Castle Rock's Harvest Pale, Woodforde's Wherry and Dark Star's Hophead.

Hook Norton

The brewery is celebrating another year of beer and brewing with the first release of its 173 Anniversary Ales range - 173 Strong Ale. It started brewing anniversary ales in its 167th year and has released a new range each year, with the beers brewed increasing a percentage in strength each time. Established in 1849 and now in the 173rd year of brewing, Hooky has released 173 Strong Ale at 7.3%, a strong and robust dark red beer, fruity, full bodied with a hint of spice. It combines a robust trio

of all-English hops, delicate and smooth Goldings, spicy Challenger and floral Fuggles. Jubilee Ale (on cask and in bottles) has been brewed to 5.2% to reflect 1952, the year of the Queen's accession to the throne, a dark ruby red beer that combines Goldings and Fuggles with two new hop varieties. James Clarke, Managing Director commented: "The recipe is based on two historic beers: Old Hooky, first brewed to celebrate Her Majesty's Silver Jubilee in 1977; and Celebration Ale, brewed in 1999 to celebrate our 150th

Anniversary."

Hook Norton Brewery has also become involved in the #DrinkersForUkraine campaign to help raise funds for the Red Cross humanitarian relief efforts.

Drinkers For Ukraine have asked breweries around the world to brew RESIST, an "Anti-Imperial Stout" at 6%.

Updates are invited: send to editor@oxford.camra.org.uk

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Cowley Road pubs past and present

Branch chairman and chief reporter **Tony Goulding** gets out and about



ABOVE: The Black Swan and the Rickety Press

PAGE 14: : The Donnington Arms and the City Arms

IT WAS TIME TO look at the Cowley Road scene, at the pubs that survived and what those that didn't are now used for. Starting up at the city end of Oxford's most cosmopolitan area, the **Star** in Rectory Road was first established in 1876 as the **Star Royal** and appeals predominantly to students and locals. It has been a free house for many years now, and has one large bar and a very popular large garden at the rear.

The former pool table which was in the centre of the bar is sadly now part of the inside seating area. Two ever changing beers are served, and on the evening of visiting these were West Berkshire Golden Ale along with Siren's Memento Best Bitter, and for myself a very tasty Oxford Cider. No food is served at the **Star** but customers are more than welcome to bring their own. The couple who took over the pub in October 2020 have been successfully running it ever since, and landlord Gus Rogers is the son of Oxfordshire brewing legend Ian Rogers, joint owner of Wychwood Brewery in the 1990s. The West Berkshire beer is a pointer as Ian is now running the reborn

West Berkshire Brewery.

Back on the Cowley Road you will notice a **Nando's** chicken restaurant, and this was formerly a Morrells house called the **Prince of Wales** which closed some 20 years ago. Across the road is the former **Elm Tree**, which was also a Morrells House, and was the legendary Joe Ryan's last pub before he retired. It is now very popular as the **Big Society**, and a big surprise here was being informed by the staff that it is now known more as a cocktail bar. Students now dominate this end of the Cowley Road and their taste seems to be changing from ales and lagers to cocktails. No cask ale is sold here and there are only six kegs, these being beers by Siren and Meantime plus two lagers and one cider.

Food is dominated by burgers, hot dogs and chicken wings. Table tennis and table football are played in a spacious bar area, and it also has a very spacious patio at the rear and seating at the front. The pub is leased by a small independent company from Greene King.

Just off the Cowley Road in James Street is the **James**

Street Tavern, formerly the **Red White and Blue** and a former Morland House now owned by Greene King. From its days of being a cask ale house with up to nine beers on the bar about 10 years ago, how things have changed. On the evening of visiting there was only Wadworth 6X although a guest ale is sometimes available, in a very spacious but spartan bar area. Again this pub is very popular for cocktails, and it's a very popular music venue on Fridays and Saturdays especially in the new covered James Street pavilion. We felt out of place as we were at least double the age of those in there.

Just around the corner in Temple Street is the **Temple Lounge**, now a wine bar but formerly the **Temple Bar**, an old Victorian coaching inn. It was run by Ind Coope-Halls until 1980 when it became Wadworth's only tied house in Oxford. Finally 15 years ago it became what it is today.

Back on the Cowley Road we entered the Oxford branch of craft keg giant **BrewDog**, this being previously the **New Inn** and later the **Corridor**, built in late 1890s for Halls Oxford

Brewery. We met Archie Meeson who was serving behind the bar, Chris Meeson's very capable son from the Masons Arms in Headington Quarry. No cask ale is served here but lots of kegs, bottles and cans, along with quirky food.

Just off the main road in Crown Street is the **Black Swan**, a former Morrells back street boozier which is now a Greene King house. Cask ale has not been served for years and Dave was seen with a half of Fosters lager!! Having been a very popular Irish pub, a lot of Guinness was sold. What a shock for me is that it's now more like a cocktail bar with students and a few locals. Sports are shown on the big TVs inside and outside in the big garden.

The second part of our Cowley Road wander, a couple of weeks later, started at the **University and City Arms**, now just the **City Arms**, mainly because there are now no pubs surviving beyond this point until you get into Cowley itself. Built new for Ind Coope in 1938, this imposing corner building remained unchanged until it became the **Philosopher and**

Firkin in 1995, the only one of three Firkin pubs in the city to actually brew. The Firkin name was acquired by Bass and greatly extended all over a wide area. When the Firkin name fell from grace the pub became an **It's a Scream** and following that failure became the present **City Arms**, now owned by Stonegate Pub Co.

Two cask beers were being served, Sharp's Doom Bar and Adnams' Ghost Ship, in the noisy mainly student environment. It reflects the new fad for cocktail bars on this road, and also has a pool table and many slot machines. Since Covid it has developed a large outside seating area, but the only thing of importance to me were the clean toilets with original Gents urinals.

Dave had never been to the **Donnington Arms** just off the main road down Howard Street, but this is an interesting building to visit. Built in the early 1930s for Ind Coope, it was acquired by Greene King in 1990 and sold on to become a Nepalese restaurant, Everest, while retaining a separate bar. This is also an impressive corner pub with many original features including, above the front



entrance, a wrought iron Halls of Oxford sign plus a very early Greene King motif almost carved into the brickwork. The bar is as built along with all the doors and windows, and a very friendly welcome came our way. Despite the Fuller's London Pride pump clips, it has not served cask ale for many years.

We then decided to have a quick look at the very successful **Rusty Bicycle**, formerly the **Eagle Tavern**, on Magdalen Road, part of the Dodo pubs group along with the **Rickety Press** and **Up in Arms** in other parts of Oxford. This is an Arkells house with 3B and Liberation IPA on the bar, plus a cider. In Dave's words it was like a kindergarten, with many families eating and lots of young children early on a Saturday evening. It would certainly be for older clientele later.

Back on the Cowley Road we arrived at the **Library**, previously the **Brickworks** and before that the **Crown**, built in 1871 and one of the smallest pubs in the city. At one time it was known as the "Rat Hole" with the downstairs bar below street level. After many years as the **Crown** the pub was

renamed the **Brickworks** in 2000, this daft name giving way in 2010 to the present **Library**. Over the years the small yard by the toilets has been covered over and a very inviting rear garden developed. Again, as with most of this road, students are the main customers with a good few kegs and cocktails. One ever-changing cask beer is served, and today this was a very tasty Marathon Runner from Vale brewery. As for food, well! Pizza.

A few yards away is a large street corner house, the **Cowley Retreat**, built in 1850 for Halls as the **Ampney Cottage**. In 1996 it became one of two Hobgoblin pubs in the city, the other being **St Aldates Tavern**, until in 2016 becoming the bar we have now. Back in the 1960s milk and ice-cream were served here, but today Sharp's Doom Bar and St Austell Tribute are the cask beers served in the very spacious single bar and large covered rear garden. Among the staff is Maxx Hocker, latterly of the now closed **Grapes** on George Street.

Our final pub of the evening was the **Bullington**, the **Arms**

part of the name being lost 40 years ago. Looking more like a shop conversion it was actually built as it looks today in 1890, and was for many years until 1980, as described in an early beer guide, a working man's local opposite Tesco. At one time both those very tasty beers Ind Coope Burton Ale and Draught Bass were served, but as the music scene got more popular and continues to be so, real ale slowly disappeared and from 2000 there was nothing. The building is now dark and forbidding except for music fans, but in its previous form had served the city's Irish community very well.

Cowley Road was a disappointment for real ale, with the Vale beer at the **Library** and West Berkshire beer at the **Star** being the only local beers available. But it's good to remember the old days, and the previous identities of many of these pubs.

For more on East Oxford, go online at oxfordrinker.camra.org.uk to read about Tony's Travels around St Clement's and down the Iffley Road.

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What are our best village pubs?

A **minibus tour** identifies Good Beer Guide contenders for 2023



WHAT MAKES a great village pub? Many people would say good food, log fires, a homely or rustic atmosphere, and maybe nice views from a garden or patio. When the main consideration is quality of real ale, however, many of the obvious names fall by the wayside. Establishing a reputation for quality real ale in a village environment isn't easy, with the probability of many patrons having to drive there another reason for being cautious in what you offer.

But some pubs achieve this balance, and our first minibus tour since 2019 set out in March to survey and provide beer scores for pubs which are either in the current *Good Beer Guide* or have been included in past editions. We had to put forward all our suggestions for 2023 in April this year, so this was an opportunity to visit pubs which otherwise may be hard to reach.

Seven Stars, Marsh Baldon

Situated in a village one mile from Nuneham Courtenay on the A4074 Oxford to Reading road, this pub will celebrate 10 years in community ownership next year. But in 2021 it went through a change as the

Community-Owned society in charge appointed a small pub group to run it. The Seven Stars is now one of five pubs in the Free Spirit group which also includes the Sun Inn in Hook Norton and Castle at Edgehill, both near Banbury.

Three real ales are usually on offer, with **Timothy Taylor** Landlord being a regular and the others rotating, but today's choice extended to four including **Young's** Original, **Purity's** Mad Goose and an own-branded beer produced for Free Spirit. This comes from **Lakeland Brewhouse** of Cumbria, formerly known as Stringers, and is branded On the Green – Marsh Baldon having one of the largest village greens in England.

The absence of anything brewed locally didn't go unnoticed, but I was happy to pay £5 for a "paddle" of three one-third pints. All tasted good, and I got talking to landlord Kevin Bloomfield who arrived last year. He said his first year's trading had of course been impacted by Covid restrictions, and although trade was now picking up it was felt necessary to change the menu to a more informal style rather than the

RIGHT: The touring party with bus

BELOW: The Seven Stars and the Abingdon Arms



“fine but casual” model used before. Although three typical pub dishes remain – fish and chips is £15.95 – the rest of the menu is made up of smaller “sharing plates” including braised pig cheeks (£14), roasted pollock fillet and tandoori cauliflower. With a price range of £6-£14 for the sharing plates and £4 for the sides, it could be quite expensive.

But this is still a country pub where you are not pressured to eat, with plenty of space for drinkers too and a large garden. It could make a return to the GBG for 2023 – let’s see!

Cricketers Arms, Littleworth

Situated on the outskirts of the small town of Wheatley, this pub was also a GBG regular but had to drop out due to a change of ownership which happened just before the first lockdown. The business was acquired by a regular at the pub, David Nelms, from previous owner Stuart Bull, but little has changed. It is still an unpretentious pub, a little rough around the edges but none the worse for it, with a decent amount of outside space. Beer festivals have made a

comeback and the pub seems to be doing well, when it could easily have closed for good if no-one had come forward.

Only two real ales were available on this occasion, being March, but it expects to have three or four on for the summer. It’s the kind of pub where almost anything can turn up, and today’s beers were Wherry from Norfolk brewery **Woodforde’s** (which has a great following) and City of Love from **Bristol Beer Factory**, “made with ESB Fuller’s yeast” according to the pump clip. Both were unusual finds for Oxfordshire, but as in all pubs where most if not all beers are rotated, you may not see them again for a long time, if ever.

Both tasted good, and there was time to see what else the pub offered including the garden. Food is served (mainly evenings) with steaks a speciality and also theme nights. Look out for upcoming festivals although the nearest public transport is about a mile away.

Abingdon Arms, Beckley

The beer buying policy is very different at this Community-

Owned pub in a village to the north-east of Oxford, off the B4027 Wheatley to Islip road. All the beers are usually from small local breweries and today was no exception, with Yabba Dabba Doo from **Little Ox**, Oxford Blue from **Chadlington Brewery**, and Vale Best from **Vale Brewery** all on offer. At the tail end of a Saturday lunchtime the pub was busy with diners, pizza being one of its specialities. It’s a pub where pre-booking is advised if you want to eat, with most of the tables laid out for dining. One of its big plus points is the garden, with fine views over Otmoor.

With stone walls, exposed beams and polished floorboards this is the quintessential village pub although, by necessity perhaps, it feels more devoted to dining than to drinking. As a true village pub it aims to be at the heart of this small community, with events such as quiz nights and talks on local history. Some local produce is on sale including Beckley honey, and paintings by local artists adorn the walls.

It’s easy to forget that this was once a failing pub, and could easily have been lost to private housing. The community



share offer is still open if you want to join the original shareholders, who saved the pub in 2016.

King's Arms, Kidlington

Kidlington has been described as "England largest village" but in reality is a small town, with much new building in recent years. It supports several pubs including three on the main A4260 road from Oxford towards Banbury, and two in the back streets of which the King's Arms is one. "Unpretentious" is the word that came to mind at the Cricketers in Littleworth and the same could definitely be said of this free house, which is very much a traditional pub with only a limited, but good value, food offer.

It retains two separate bars, a rarity in a small pub nowadays, and also has function and outside space. Four real ales were on offer and these came from far and wide –

Chadlington's Oxford Heritage being a local beer. **Ringwood's** Razor Back is a regular, while the others were new to me – Rampant Ruby from **Mauldons** Brewery in Suffolk, and Eastgate from **Weetwood Brewery** in Cheshire. The



Rampant Ruby was exceptional and my best beer of the day, and all of them cost £3.90 a pint which is low for the Oxford area. Food was also competitively priced with roast of the day being £6.95 and fish and chips £7.50 – less than half what some pubs charge. The only fault I could find is that our newly elected (again!) chairman Tony Goulding is a regular, but we'll let that pass. Out of the GBG for a few years, it must surely be in contention.

White House, Bladon

We weren't visiting this pub for GBG purposes as it is outside the Oxford CAMRA branch area in North Oxfordshire branch, but we could still score the pub and it could get into the GBG 2023 on merit, if enough scores are high enough.

The White House is yet another Community-Owned success story, re-opening in October 2020 in what proved to be the brief period of trading between Covid-imposed lockdowns. Despite that difficult first year it has gone from strength to strength and has now re-established itself as the only pub in this wealthy village near Woodstock, helped by tourists

and passing traffic on the A4095 road to Witney. One other advantage is its links with Sir Winston Churchill, who allegedly "learned to drink" here. He learned his lesson well!

We had high hopes for the beer quality as landlord was Johnny Roberts, previously assistant manager at Wetherspoon's Four Candles pub in Oxford, who developed the real ales and forged links with local breweries while there. Although only two real ales were available we weren't disappointed, as Easy Pale Citra from Berkshire brewery **Stardust** was joined by an unusual local beer, Darkstar Black IPA from **Luna**, part of the **White Horse** brewery range. Other local breweries including **Chadlington** are often represented. Johnny has since departed but we hope the new tenant will continue his good work.

The pub was clearly very popular among locals. It also has a crib team (a rarity these days) and supports social clubs and other good causes, including Stonesfield Owl Rescue. It has a growing reputation for food and a large

LEFT: The Kings Arms and the White House

RIGHT: The Morris Clown at Bampton



patio, outside space being very advantageous these days. How on earth could previous owner Greene King not have made money out of this pub, you wonder?

Red Lion, Northmoor

It was now time to head out to the "Wild West" and a small village off the A415 Witney-Abingdon road, reachable only along single track country lanes. A real gem of a pub awaits those who take the trouble, as this – our fourth Community-Owned pub of the day – is a great pub for beer and for dining, with three "shepherds' huts" for overnight accommodation adjoining its large market garden, where rare breed hens roam.

Four real ales, all from local breweries, were on the bar – with **Loose Cannon's** Abingdon Bridge, and **Brakspear's** Gravity (brewed by Wychwood in Witney) being regulars. Guests today were Red Kite from **Vale Brewery** and Shepherd's Delight, a "lemon citrus floral ale" from **Cotswold Lion**, of Gloucestershire. The beer quality here never fails to satisfy and my Red Kite went down

very nicely indeed.

The Red Lion is something of a gourmet's pub as chef Ian Neale (whose wife Lisa runs the bar) has a great reputation for fresh and seasonal dishes cooked with flair, but pub classics and snacks are always available. A garden and marquee are available, and it attracts walkers from the nearby Thames Path and has won various awards. The pub's only drawback is its remoteness, but when you get there you feel one of the privileged few. Once again, how could previous owner Greene King have not made money out of this pub?

Morris Clown, Bampton

This pub, out of GBG for a few years, is a rarity and something of a throwback – a traditional pub that doesn't sell any food. It's in a small country town rather than a village so there are alternatives nearby, including two other pubs, and opening hours are limited (from 5pm weekdays, 3pm Saturdays, 2pm Sundays). But it has very good support from regulars, and landlord Steve Mace performed heroics during the lockdowns by delivering beer by bicycle, come rain or shine.

It's a free house, and as trade hadn't yet returned to pre-Covid levels, only two real ales were available. These represented two ends of the spectrum, however, being Green Man IPA from **North Cotswold** Brewery, and **Luna's** Darkstar, which we had already seen at the White House. I sampled it again and can vouch for its quality, although black IPA is not to my taste.

Steve was pleased to see a CAMRA party again and updated us about trading conditions. This free house is well worth a look, and with bus services operating to Bampton you don't have to drive. With its quirky interior murals, stone walls and cheery atmosphere, it's the kind of pub that has almost disappeared and a suitable place to end our day.

Please get out and visit these pubs if you can, and entering beer scores is easy and a possible route to inclusion in the GBG. Remember it's beer quality, not the number of beers, that is all-important. Celebrate the fact that all these pubs are still with us when most of them could so easily have been lost.

In it to win it

Graham Shelton, who led the community buy-out of the Red Lion in Northmoor, considers the value of awards



TODAY I HAVE brought my diary up -to-date, written loads of e-mails, made numerous telephone calls, and cleaned the car: every one a Grade A displacement activity!

I always struggle to find the right way to start. It's a good job the deadline is just a few hours away or I would have ended up mowing the lawn and cleaning the drains, even though it's dark!

The topic this time is "Awards". I have to tell you that there are some pretty rough pubs out there, and not every award is for being good. I was concerned to see one pub (not in our area) described as suffering from "ineffective management, no food, no investment and a fight involving an axe which required police involvement". Another "had a reputation for being a bloodbath – 'I don't know how many times the carpets have been changed'".

Happily, our Community-Owned pubs are of a different ilk and are uniformly at the other end of the spectrum! Top of my list is the **Red Lion Northmoor** because it's my local and because it's very good, meriting its regular place in the Good Beer Guide and its Michelin Plate for serving consistently lovely food. In their very first year of opening, over eight years ago, Landlords Ian and Lisa Neale won a Best

Newcomer award, and they have been quietly salting away the trophies every year since. Last year they were Countryside Alliance South of England champions, the year before, it was Oxford CAMRA Town and Country Pub of the Year runner-up, and the year before that it was a national Community Pub award from the Sawday Guide. This year they have scooped a Muddy Stiletto's Best Destination award.

Muddy Stiletto's styles itself as "the ultimate 'urban guide to the countryside' – a witty, super-useful insider's guide to the very best food, walks, boutiques, day trips, hotels, interiors and events for smart, fun-loving women living outside London". In these gender-inclusive times I believe that men also find it useful.....

Lisa takes up the story: "It was an amazing surprise to win Best Destination Pub for Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire, and it doesn't get much better than that for a small village pub in the countryside. It's a testament to our team's loyalty and hard work. We could not have won it without the support of our community, friends and family too, and will display our winning certificate with pride!

"It's currently a really tough time for small businesses like ours where we are consumed by the constant day-to-day running of

LEFT: An award for the Crown;

RIGHT: The Red Lion at Northmoor and the Abingdon Arms



the pub with such a skeletal team. We rarely draw breath to see the bigger picture, and often we question what we are doing and whether we're going in the right direction. It gives us a real boost to know that people value and appreciate what we are doing. It's a great motivator and reward for the whole team, and it brings in new trade for the business."

They've been having some major success at the **Crown, South Moreton** too. It's outside the Oxford CAMRA area but it's an Oxfordshire Community-Owned pub, so that's good enough for me. The South Moreton team told me all about it: "From the sad, shuttered shell sold off by the brewery to housing developers in 2018, to becoming owned and fully refurbished by the community, the Crown at South Moreton now thrives. Its mix of pleasant location, friendly atmosphere, good honest food, and excellent local ales and ciders is working well, and the pub is firmly established at the heart of the village community. Indeed, it was the hub of the village's Platinum Jubilee celebrations.

"The exceptional efforts, through trying Covid times, of landlady Diana Humphrey and her team in generating this vibrant atmosphere were recognized by South Oxfordshire CAMRA in May with their award of Pub of the

Year and Cider Pub of the Year. This is now commemorated with a wonderful bench constructed from left-over oak from the newly erected gazebo in the garden. Everyone involved in the revival was overjoyed at the recognition for Di and her team, and at the footfall increase from pub-goers new to the Crown that has been generated by the award."

Elsewhere around the county, it was also good to see the **Abingdon Arms, Beckley** named runner-up in the Best Pub in Oxfordshire awards by dining website Ox in a Box, presented by celebrity chef Raymond Blanc. Over 20,000 people voted in these very competitive awards, and this success has helped the pub become better known far and wide.

With some ten Community-Owned pubs already in Oxfordshire, we have proven how good this model of pub ownership and operation can be. It is great to see the **Plough, Great Haseley**, firmly back as a Community-Owned pub after a brief spell as a restaurant, and to hear how the **Plough, West Hanney**, has also been given a boost with two accomplished personnel joining from the **White Hart** in Fyfield. We have great stalwarts in the **White Hart in Wolvercote**, always worth a visit, the **Amp in Risinghurst**, and the **Bull in**

Great Milton. The **White Horse in Bladon** is getting back up and running again too.

And that's not all. There are plenty of Community-Owned pubs coming through. The **White Horse in Stonesfield** is putting up a good fight in its bid to become Community-Owned after a few setbacks. While over in Marsh Gibbon, the **Greyhound Inn** Community Pub Group has raised over £200,000 in a bid to make their pub a focal point for the community and, they say, "to have a bit of fun along the way".

Such an important consideration, I'd say. The more so because it's pretty brutal out there in the hospitality business and even if we can't all own the pub in our community, every one of us has a duty to support and encourage the pubs that are still open in the places where we live. There is nothing inevitable about them always being there. Those splendid people who work so hard to keep our pubs running need our support, our nurturing, and every bit of encouragement.

And finally, just remember that winning a prize provides a huge boost, so encourage your local to have a go. As the man in the TV show said, "you've got to be in it to win it!"

It's festival time again!

There's plenty to look forward to before the return of our flagship event at **Oxford Town Hall**



RIGHT: Big crowds ensured beers ran out earlier than hoped at Charlbury Beer Festival in June

WE MAY NEVER be able to say with certainty that the Covid-19 pandemic is behind us, but the return of beer festivals both locally and nationally is evidence that we are at least learning to live with it. CAMRA's **Great British Beer Festival** (GBBF) at London's Kensington Olympia in August, and our own **Oxford Beer and Cider Festival** in October, are both scheduled to return for the first time in three years, as are many smaller festivals.

Most beer festivals held so far, whether organised by CAMRA, other groups or individual pubs, have been a great success. The White Hart in Headington, Oxford held a very successful event in May while towards the end of June the **Charlbury Beer Festival** overcame showery weather and a train strike that day to stage its annual event at Charlbury Cricket Club. Back after a two-year Covid-induced hiatus, it sold out all beer by 6pm and had to get emergency supplies from Church Hanbrewery. At this year's event it passed the landmark of having served 10,000 gallons of beer since it started, while raising money for community projects, both in the Charlbury area and overseas. With a selection of food, live music, the Culture Tent with its varied programme of performances and talks, children's entertainment and the 10th World Aunt Sally Singles Championships, this was a great example of what a community beer festival can achieve.

CAMRA is still being cautious when planning festivals, working on the basis that the expected attendance will fall short of previous totals. There could also be a shortage of volunteers to run these events, and not the same wide choice of beers as many breweries are still limiting production while some, sadly, have closed down. Further unknowns include the effect on people's spending as the cost of living crisis intensifies, with further increases in energy and fuel costs likely to dampen demand as the year rolls on.

But let's put those gloomy thoughts behind us for now and look at what's coming up.

CAMRA's **Great British Beer Festival**, taking place at Kensington Olympia, London from 2-6 August, boasts over 1,000 British and international beers, ciders, perries, wines and a dedicated gin bar. The brewery line-up is a unique feature of the festival where brewers from across the country are invited to bring their beer range to sample, and the first to sign up include big names returning such as Harvey's, Titanic and Adnams alongside newcomers such as Black Storm, Iron Pier, Ossett, Saltire and Three Tuns. The festival is open from 12 noon each day, except on Tuesday 2 August when trade visitors only are admitted until 5pm when doors are opened to the public.

Tap Social brewery is hosting an event at its Botley taproom

on Bank Holiday Sunday, 28 August. The **Change is Brewing Beer Fest** (£10 in advance) involves a diverse collection of breweries, many of them coming to Oxford for the first time. There will also be a major line-up of live music, DJs and street food vendors throughout the day, plus live podcasting, curated panel discussions, and more. Among the 13 mainly craft keg breweries represented will be Wild Beer, Wild Card, Pretty Decent Brewing Co, Queer Brewing and Rock Leopard.

The **Finstock Ale festival** (West Oxfordshire) returns at the Village Hall on Friday 2nd/ Saturday 3rd September with 30+ ales and ciders, a gin palace, full bar and food. It will have the "Best of Bristol" beers and other selected gems, with all cask ales at £3 a pint and the £5 entry price including pint

glass, programme and first beer. Friday evening is Race Night with fun for all the family when you can lose your shirt or win a fortune on horses, dogs (and pigs)!

The **Headington Beer Festival** at the **Masons Arms** in Headington Quarry, Oxford returns from Friday 9-Sunday 11 September, again for the first time since 2019, and as ever we can rely on Chris Meeson and his team to put on a great show in the function suite and garden (note change of dates). Over the same weekend, the **North Cotswold CAMRA** beer festival is held in **Moreton-in-Marsh**, Gloucestershire.

The Oxford Brewers Alliance returns on Saturday 17 September with the **Big Oxford Beer Bash**, held successfully for the second time last year but not in 2020. This outdoor event

in the grounds of The Oxford Artisan Distillery (TOAD) in Cheney Lane, at the top of South Park, features most local brewers who are available to talk through their latest beers, along with food stalls and live music – tickets are already on sale at £10.

The **Chadlington Beer Festival** (West Oxfordshire) takes place on 24 September, followed on 1 October by the first beer festival to be organised by **Oxford Downs Cricket Club** in Standlake, off the A415 Witney-Abingdon road and on the Stagecoach 15 and 19 bus routes. Originally planned for two years ago, the event is branded ODCC Beer Festival 2020+2.

Then it's the one we've all been waiting for – the return of the **Oxford Beer and Cider Festival** at the Town Hall, last held in 2019. This will take place on Thursday-Friday 20-21 October, but opening on Saturday 22 October may not happen as the attendance on previous Saturdays did not cover costs. Further details including opening times will appear nearer the time, but put it in your diaries now especially if you plan to volunteer.

But some festivals sadly did not go ahead, including **Reading** (planned for 23-26 June) and **Wantage**, planned for 21-23 July but now reverting to its usual slot in March for 2023. Let's hope a resurgence of Covid doesn't put paid to others.



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Gardeners' World

Paul Silcock, landlord of the Gardeners Arms in Plantation Road, Oxford, dusts off his keyboard to look back on a turbulent time

IT'S BEEN TWO YEARS since this column has appeared in print, well, I think it's been two years, time has been weird hasn't it? How have you been? So what's changed in the world of pubs in the last two years?

Everything and nothing, it would seem. I'll try and clarify that a bit for you. What I mean is that while we are still a pub, doing the pub-like things of serving beer, cooking food and offering a social scene for our customers, we no longer do bar service, which has had some expected and unexpected effects.

The biggest expected change? The grumbings of a certain type of customer who cannot fathom this idea of sitting down and having a beer brought to you. That somehow the pub-going experience is brought low and moribund by not being able to pick up the pint glass from the bar yourself.

Oddly, this isn't usually from the more traditional pub-goer either. It tends to be twenty somethings that do the most complaining. Maybe they just think they've got more energy and don't feel in need of as much of a sit down as the rest of us? Generally everyone else has rather embraced the change. I always hated standing in a queue behind someone who has just spent five minutes waiting to get to the bar, only to have no idea what they would like to drink. I don't want to be

mean, but you've had five minutes to make up your mind! If you don't know what you'd like to order by now, tough -- go to the back of the queue and let people who do know what they want get their order in.

As a landlord you do get called a host of unflattering names during your career, but I think the majority of insults have come since the introduction of table service. Honestly, I thought I had a pretty wide and deep expletive library before, but I've learnt some new ones in the last few months from people who just cannot wrap their heads around something that everyone in Europe has grasped for years. They also feel a need to wave their hand about as they leave, which I have no idea about.

The biggest unexpected change? A definite decline in cask ale sales. I don't know if this is due to an actual shift in drinking trends, if keg has become much more popular during lockdown (and it's entirely possible that craft beer clubs really did boost people's appreciation of this style of brewing). Personally, I think cask ale drinkers choose not by brewery, not by ABV or original gravity, not even by style of beer, but by pump clip. I long suspected this, beers with the most eye catching pump clip, an amusing pun based image say, or just a good picture of a dog would always be strong sellers (Seriously, beers with dogs on

the pump clips sold well).

The true upshot of this though is that I used to be able to comfortably keep four different cask ales at all times, and not have to ever worry about any of the beer turning because we'd sell it quickly enough to always keep it in good condition. But now I'm down to just two cask ales, and I can't really see that changing in the foreseeable future given what the till tells me about sales figures.

“ The biggest unexpected change? A definite decline in cask ale sales. ”

Yep, there's another unexpected change -- I got myself one of those new spangly tills that lets you do all sorts of clever things and prints out reports giving me a breakdown of sales over the week, or the month. It can probably do my tax return as well, but the manual was thick and I didn't read that far through it. On that note however it is worth giving a quick mention to Tap Social, whose Time Better Spent is not only the best-selling product on the bar but also the most incorrectly ordered beer in history.

“I'll have a Time Well Spent please.”
“Pint of Time Spending please.”

“I’ll take a Spending Spree.”
“What’s that IPA you sell? That one by the Tap Dancers.”

These are all mis-orders for Time Better Spent that I’ve had. It’s like Time Better Spent is not so much an actual title, as just a vague suggestion of some words that might have a distant relation to the beer in the cellar. But still, big seller, big.

So why are we sticking with table service? It’s not just to be different. It is a decision based on business. The simple fact is you can get a beer quicker by sitting down than trying to queue at the bar. In This Pub.

When we are busy, and in the summer months that’s pretty much always, we would have a queue from the bar that ran around the pub, because the bar is pretty damn small. Like three people wide small (not

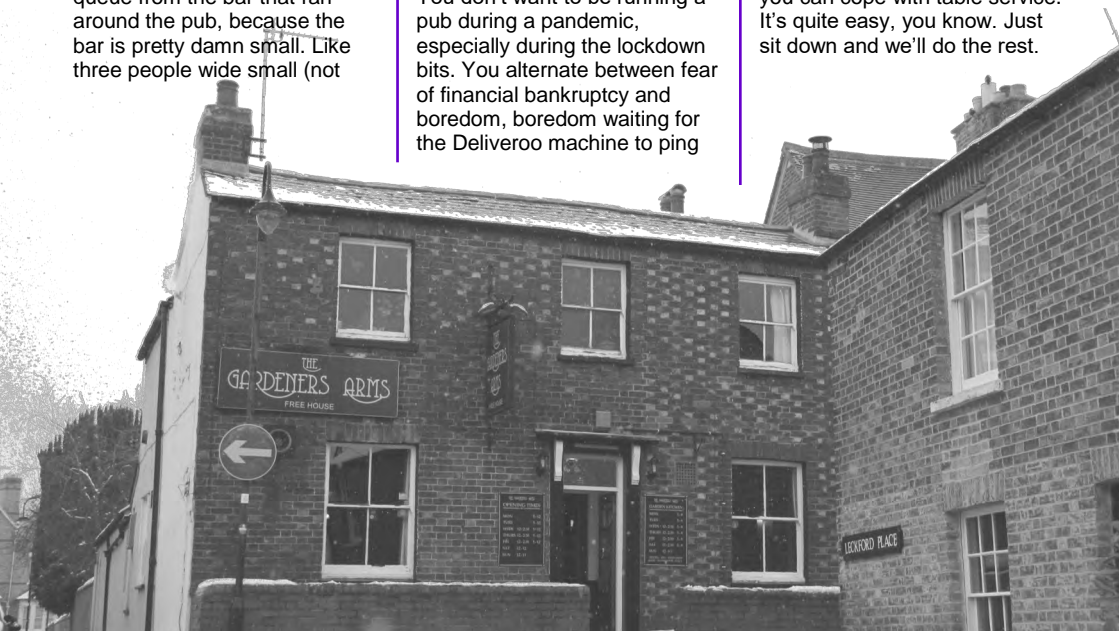
because the staff were slow, which they weren’t). It was always a continual battle to keep the queue moving, so that new people who walked into the pub on a busy shift wouldn’t walk straight out again believing it would take forever to get served.

We had a major problem for a pub, that the bar itself was a bottleneck. Which means table service is not a simple one cure for all, as pubs with sensible sized bars are clearly better staying with the tried and tested bar service. As I’ve banged on about before, variety is a necessary spice of pub life. And so, what else have we learnt from the last two years? That’s an easy one.

You don’t want to be running a pub during a pandemic, especially during the lockdown bits. You alternate between fear of financial bankruptcy and boredom, boredom waiting for the Deliveroo machine to ping

and give you the joyless task of taking the food order from the bar to the kitchen, and then sitting back down again. We survived the lockdowns thanks to being able to offer food service through takeaways, but as I’m the bar side of the business I did feel more than a little surplus to requirements. If it wasn’t for the hygiene reasons you could have trained a chimp to do my job. Oh, and you also wash your hands a lot. A LOT.

Importantly though, we made it through the pandemic, as did thankfully a lot of other pubs in Oxford. In fact, we did good compared to many other towns and cities. We are still here and trading and looking forward to seeing you all again. Provided you can cope with table service. It’s quite easy, you know. Just sit down and we’ll do the rest.



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A mixed picture for pubs

Dave Richardson examines what measures CAMRA is proposing to support pubs

LATEST CAMRA figures show mixed picture for pubs

Closures continue but new openings – mainly conversions of existing buildings – a cause for optimism

CAMRA is calling for a package of government support for pubs after releasing figures for 2021 showing that nearly 300 pubs were demolished or converted to other uses, with over 500 others being classed as long-term closures while remaining pubs for planning purposes. Although the rate of closures has slowed compared to a few years ago, there is still major concern as pubs emerge from the pandemic to face a likely curb on consumer spending as the cost of living crisis bites.

The area around Oxford is fortunate in being relatively wealthy compared to many parts of the country, with a large student population sustaining many pubs in the city while also providing a ready source of casual labour – with staff shortages being endemic throughout the hospitality industry. There are very few pubs that closed since the start

of the pandemic and remain closed today, except the four historic pubs in the city centre (see separate story), plus the **Bullnose Morris** in East Oxford.

One new opening since the pandemic started in March 2020 is the **Tile Shop** in Headington, Oxford's first micro-pub converted from a shop – a trend that accounts for many of the new openings nationwide. The **Tile Shop** joins new openings shortly before the pandemic including the historic **Plough at 38** on Cornmarket Street, and the **Teardrop** “nano-pub” in the Covered Market, operated by Church Hanbrewery.

CAMRA's figures are compiled from the WhatPub database, which covers 47,500 pubs nationwide including 34,000 selling real ale. The picture in the South East generally, including Oxfordshire, was brighter than the national trend, with 45 permanent closures and 35 new openings (mainly conversions) – a net loss of only 10 in 2021. While there were 290 closures nationwide, there were 264 new openings (mainly conversions), with 505 pubs



regarded as being long-term closures having not re-opened, been converted to other uses or demolished.

The package of support CAMRA is pressing for includes:

- An immediate cut in VAT for on-trade food and drink sales, to help both businesses and consumers
- Introducing an Online Sales Tax, with the funds raised directed to relieve the grossly unfair rates burden on the pub and hospitality sector
- Using the upcoming Statutory Pubs Code Review to bring more tied tenants into the scope of the Pubs Code
- Bringing forward the introduction of the new draught duty rate for beer and cider, confirming that it will apply to containers of 20L and over
- Confirming the retention of the duty exemption for small cider makers making under 70HL of product a year

Pubcos

who they are and what they do

Paul Ainsworth, of CAMRA's Pub & Club Campaigns Committee, explains how they came about

MANY CAMRA members would find it helpful to have more information about the companies that control many of our pubs. This is the first in a series of articles that will provide the facts on pub company practices and operations, explaining in particular how their business models work and what this means for both licensees and, ultimately, us as customers. The aim is to let the facts speak for themselves, so that members can make up their own minds about the positive or negative effects of these practices on our pubs and the folk who run them.

Fifty years ago, when CAMRA was formed, the pub landscape looked very different. For a start, there were many more of them – some 75,000 against around 47,500 now. The majority of pubs (52,000 or so) were owned by breweries. The 89 small and regional breweries had 13,800 of them and the rest were in the hands of the “Big Six” – Bass Charrington, Allied, Whitbread, Scottish & Newcastle, Watney/Grand Metropolitan and Courage/Imperial.

Most of the other 23,000 pubs were free houses (in name anyway – many tied their beer supplies to a big brewer in

return for loans and discounts). Companies that just owned pubs were few and far between – the likes of Sir John Fitzgerald in the north-east and Heavitree in the south-west, though they tied themselves to Bass.

Just about every pub-owning brewery rigorously imposed a supply tie on its own products. As late as the mid-1980s, I remember a Greene King Director recoiling in horror at my suggestion that they allow a few guest beers in their pubs. As a result, new breweries found outlets hard to come by and we customers were hardly spoilt for choice, as a glance at a *Good Beer Guide* of that era will reveal.

Then, in 1989, along came the Beer Orders. The story of this epochal legislation (for better or worse) is superbly told in Laura Hadland's recent *Fifty Years of CAMRA* book but, in essence, the Government acknowledged the stranglehold on the industry exercised by the Big Six and, among other things, capped their pub ownership at 2,000.

By now, because of closures and sell-offs, the Big Six owned fewer pubs between them but the Orders still meant around 11,000 pubs coming onto the market. We, of course, dreamed of a new golden age of multi-



hand pumped free houses galore, but the reality was sadly different. Companies were quickly established, usually with close links to the Big Six, to Hoover up these pubs in big batches then negotiate supply deals, invariably with the company who previously owned the place. Enterprise Inns, for instance, started off with the purchase of 368 pubs from Bass, and that's where they bought the beer from.

In the years that followed, wheeling and dealing saw companies variously grow, collapse, merge, acquire, dispose – it was very difficult to keep up with who owned what. Some companies concentrated on managed pubs, some on tenancies, a few on a mixed model. Behemoths emerged – by 2004, Punch Taverns and Enterprise each owned more than 8,000 pubs, though both had accumulated so much debt that they ran into trouble come the financial crash and subsequently retrenched. We'll have a closer look at the current pub company scene in the next article.

A brief history of Punch Taverns illustrates the volatility surrounding pubcos from the 1990s onwards. Punch formed in 1997, purchasing a tranche of pubs from Bass. Two years later, they bought Inn Business (mostly former Whitbread pubs) and then the rump of the Allied estate. The managed pubs were spun off into a separate division called Spirit. In 2003, they acquired their 3,100-strong rival Pubmaster plus a couple of smaller companies. Next, Scottish & Newcastle's managed pubs were snapped up and added to Spirit. By 2011

the impact of the crash was being felt, calling for a "strategic review". Spirit was demerged and, in 2015, sold to Greene King. Come 2016, a takeover bid totalling £403 million (plus the taking on of a billion pounds of debt) was accepted; 1,900 pubs went to Heineken, with the remaining 1,300 residing with Patron Capital, though the Punch brand has been retained.

In the meantime, the treatment of their tenants by many of the pubcos had become a major issue and, after years of campaigning, the Government was persuaded, in 2014, to announce a statutory Pubs Code aimed at regulating their practices and ensuring fair treatment for tenants. We'll return to the Code in a future article. In this context, though, it needs mentioning that the currently accepted definition of a pub company embraces breweries that own pubs – and nowadays most such companies have separate management structures for their pub and brewing operations.

Pub companies are here to stay. There is nothing wrong with the basic model and, indeed, there are some excellent companies (mostly smaller ones) who treat their licensees well and clearly see their pubs as more than just property assets. It would, though, be difficult to argue that the ways in which some companies operate raise many issues around their custodianship of what aren't just piles of bricks-and-mortar but, in most cases, precious and valued community assets. We'll examine those issues in due course.

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