

Issue 118
Spring 2023

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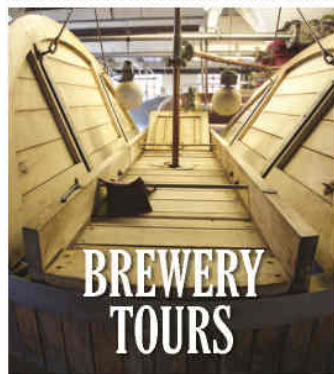


Longest-serving landlords celebrate 40 years at helm

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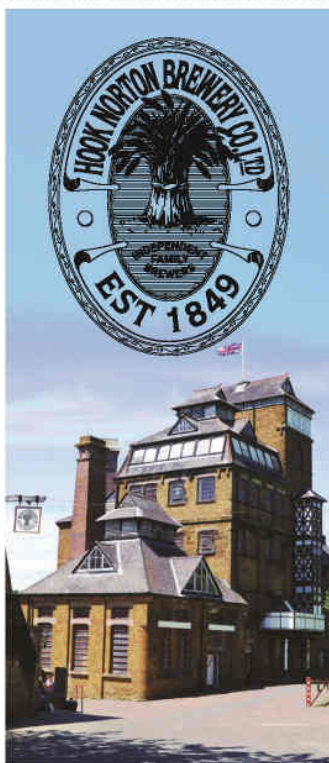
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Welcome

...to some rather surprising news
about the pub industry

COVER: Andrew and Debbie Hall (with their son Adam) celebrate 40 years at the Rose and Crown in North Parade Avenue (photo by Phil Gammon). Inset: The Halls in 1983, the year they took over the pub (photo courtesy of Oxford Mail/Oxford Times). Report on page 12.

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

4,000 copies are distributed free of charge to pubs across the branch's area, including Oxford, Abingdon, Witney, Eynsham, Kidlington, Bampton and Wheatley 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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IT'S ALL DOOM and gloom for pubs and breweries, right? Everyone from CAMRA to pub industry bodies is warning that if the March 2023 Budget doesn't offer help with beer duty, energy costs and business rates, it will be curtains for many. The message pumped out by the pubs industry is depressing, but the reality – at least locally – is more positive.

In fact, CAMRA's own figures show a rather different picture. Its latest Pub Closure Report, published twice a year, actually shows an increase in pubs, not a decline. In the whole of 2022, it recorded 140 permanent pub closures, half the total for 2021. But last year there were 320 new openings, so a nett increase of 180.

Most of these new openings are probably shop conversions, often described as micro-pubs, although some are not that small. A shop conversion seating say 30 people won't replace a large pub closed with maybe over 100 seats, but the trend is nowhere near as gloomy as the pubs industry suggests. Without doubt there will be more casualties, with pubs to let struggling to find takers, but hope (and entrepreneurship) does spring eternal. Look at our news pages for some examples.

In this edition we celebrate a very special anniversary – 40 years at the Rose

and Crown, Oxford, for Andrew and Debbie Hall. The much-deserved plaudits have been rolling in, and if you go online (address below) you will read about Long Service Awards being handed out by Oxford CAMRA to other landlords who have served at least 25 years. Our Awards Night coverage in this issue includes our two Pubs of the Year, and Beer of the Festival. Well done everyone!

Here you can also read our three thought-provoking Guest Writers, *the Oxford Drinker* being one of very few CAMRA magazines to have writers from the sharp end of the pubs and brewing business – now including Steven Lyne, manager of the Royal Blenheim, City Pub of the Year again for 2023.

For this issue there's a change in the behind-the-scenes team producing *the Oxford Drinker*, so my thanks to Oliver Sladen who has stepped up to handle advertising, and to Steve Thompson who now handles design and production. We are all volunteers.

We only have room for a limited number of articles in the printed edition, so don't forget to go online for news updates and much more. Your ideas and input are always welcome – just email editor@oxford.camra.org.uk

DAVE RICHARDSON

For regular updates visit
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Pub, Brewery and Festival News

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



ABOVE: The Perch Beer Festival will take place on Saturday 29 and Sunday 30 April.

Perch, Oxford

The annual beer festival will take place on Saturday 29 and Sunday 30 April, immediately before but not on the May Day Bank Holiday. Breweries to be represented will include Hook Norton, Little Ox, Loddon, Loose Cannon, North Cotswold, Oxford Brewery (formerly Shotover), Purity, Prescott, Siren, White Horse and XT, with ciders from Cotswold Cider Co and Gwynt y Draig, amongst others. A meet-the-brewer event is planned for 29 April, when representatives of the breweries are invited to attend.

The thatched country pub, in Binsey village and beside the Thames path, has a long-standing relationship with Hook Norton which supplies real ale and most of its kegs including lager, cider, Cotswold Pale and Guinness. Hooky Bitter (3.5%) is usually available on the bar alongside a stronger, darker guest ale, or two when volume allows it – an example being Loose Cannon's Abingdon Bridge. The festival, held in its extensive garden, has proved highly successful in previous years.

Big Oxford Beer Bash

This annual event is moving to a spring date – Saturday 20 May – this year, having previously been held in September. Organised by the Oxford Brewers Alliance, it features stalls operated by most local breweries, food and live entertainment. Venue is the TOAD distillery at the top end of South Park, with the entrance on Cheney Lane in Headington. Scheduled hours are 12-8pm and tickets can be bought in advance for £12.65: oxfordbrewers.org

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Pub, Brewery and Festival News



LEFT: The Killingworth Castle top team get to grips with their Stroud Brewery real ales: from left, owner Jim Alexander, bar manager Raj Bhatia and head chef Adam Brown.

Royal Blenheim/ White Horse Brewery

The take-over of White Horse by South Oxfordshire Brewery, known as SOX, will not affect the cask beer range at the Royal Blenheim in Oxford, it has been confirmed. White Horse used to sub-lease the pub from Everards, but for the last few years it has been run by Titanic Brewery of Stoke-on-Trent, famous for its Plum Porter. Titanic, a long-time collaborator and investor in White Horse, continues to run the pub with a wide range of White Horse and guest beers in addition to its own. SOX has acquired the entire share capital of White Horse, but the two breweries will continue to be run separately – SOX in Cholsey, near Wallingford, and White Horse in Stanford-in-the-Vale.

Killingworth Castle, Wootton

This lovely old coaching inn (right) in Wootton, near Woodstock, re-opened on Tuesdays from 28 February and is now closed on Mondays only. It celebrated 10 years under the ownership of Jim Alexander in December, and has built a reputation for fine food while also stocking two well-kept real ales. These are from Stroud Brewery, whose beers are not usually found around Oxford, with whom Jim has had a long relationship through his previous pub, the Ebrington Arms near Chipping Campden, which was sold in 2021.

It also used to operate a small brewery in conjunction with Stroud Brewery, but now concentrates on Stroud ales including amber bitter Tom Long, and OPA



(Organic Pale Ale). The Killingworth Castle, dating from 1637, has two AA rosettes for its food and has eight letting bedrooms, making it a destination pub for people far and wide. “Our vision is to start with the beer and offer a fantastic pint, and then build everything else around that,” said Jim.


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Pub, Brewery and Festival News



ABOVE: The Eagle and Child is now available to let on a free-of-tie basis.

Eagle and Child, Oxford

This pub – famous worldwide as a meeting point for writers including J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, has now been closed for three years having never re-opened after the first Covid lockdown in March 2020. Hope that it might eventually re-open has been rekindled by owner St John's College, which is now advertising it as available to let on a free-of-tie basis. A change from its previous plans is that St John's now wishes to let the ground floor and cellar only, having had hopes that a boutique hotel might operate on the upper floors. Any incoming tenant faces high costs as it is understood that the building was in very poor condition even before closure, and requires a new cellar.

Lamb and Flag, Oxford

St John's other high-profile property continues to be very busy with a mainly student and academic clientele, having re-opened in October last year. Several local real ales are usually available, but having revamped its small kitchen it announced in February that it would no longer be selling food apart from simple bar snacks.



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Pub, Brewery and Festival News



ABOVE: Oxford CAMRA presented an award to the Jolly Farmers in Oxford to mark its 40th anniversary as the city's LGBT+ pub. From left are bar staff Sam Bennett and Kane Weresch, owners Rob Jordan and Spike Greenwood, and Oxford CAMRA's Dave Richardson and Tony Goulding.

Three Horseshoes, Witney

This pub was due to re-open on 17 March under the ownership of a local team including the previous manager, Tom Higgs. It will revert to its previous name of the Three Horseshoes (previously simply Horseshoes), with the emphasis on good value food. It was one of two pubs on Corn Street, Witney whose previous owners moved on in December, leaving them closed. The other pub, the Hollybush, remains shut and is advertised as available for let by Greene King.

Closed and re-opened pubs

There continue to be several closed pubs around the county awaiting new tenants, as some breweries and pub companies struggle to attract applicants put off by weak consumer demand and sky-high energy costs. At the time of writing, these included the Gardener's Arms in North Parade Avenue, Oxford, although Greene King had started work on a revamp, and the Grapes in George Street, Oxford, owned by the city council but

with the lease held by the West Berkshire Brewery administrator.

Around the county, closed pubs included the Plough Inn at Appleton, the Blacks Head in Bletchington, the Crown in Marcham and the Black Horse in Gozards Ford. Better news is re-opening of the Talbot Inn near Eynsham following a revamp and period of closure, and other re-openings are expected.

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Hail to the Halls

40 years at the Rose and Crown

Dave Richardson pays tribute to Oxford's longest-serving landlords



EVEN WHEN A journalist is writing about a subject he or she is passionate about, it still usually feels like work and a job that has to be done. Occasionally, though, something of the spirit of the people and places involved seeps in and it becomes a pure pleasure, yet you try extra hard to make every word count.

So it is with me and the

Hall family at the Rose and Crown, and what happier occasion than the 40th anniversary in February of Andrew and Debbie arriving at this small Victorian pub in North Parade Avenue, North Oxford. Andrew and Debbie are not only the longest-serving landlords in Oxford but surely the most welcoming and urbane, with Debbie – who runs

ABOVE: Andrew and Debbie Hall, with their son Adam and daughter Annabel, receive a long-service award from CAMRA's Tony Goulding. **OPPOSITE:** The Halls have helped brew a special 40 Years Bitter (deliberately at 4.0%) at Hook Norton Brewery, one of its permanent suppliers, to celebrate the anniversary.

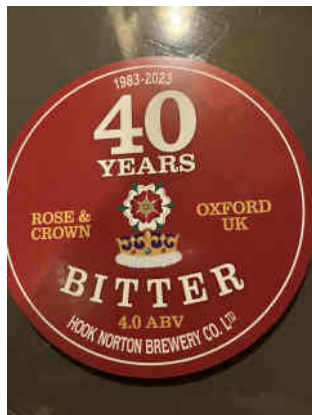
the kitchen – playing an equal role in making the pub a success. After leaving university, son Adam joined the business, and now plays a major role including all the cellar work, ordering supplies, staffing and accounting. Even daughter Annabel is seen here occasionally away from her role as a wedding planner. Andrew, in his own words, “oversees and entertains”!

The Halls have helped brew a special “40 Years Bitter” (deliberately at 4.0%) at Hook Norton Brewery, one of its permanent suppliers, to celebrate the anniversary. This slightly ruby-coloured beer uses Fuggles, Challenger and British Chinook hops, the latter variety being first used for brewing in 1983, the year they first took on the pub.

When I asked what had been the best of times and the worst of times, I didn’t get the answers I expected. The best of times have simply been too numerous to mention, as they just love running the pub and the wide cross-section of regular customers coming in. The worst of times I expected to be the onset of Covid and the lockdowns, but no – they enjoyed the enforced break, and Government financial support covered most of their costs as they have owned the building since 2009 when the Rose and Crown first became a free house. But the Government hasn’t always been their friend, and at one time Andrew became an active lobbyist at Westminster.

“The worst time was when the Government passed legislation that came to be known as the Beer

Orders, and one day Debbie took a call from the company that had taken over telling us the rent was going up from £12,500 to £36,000 a year,” recalls Andrew. “We were crying with worry. We had a young son – how were we going to pay the rent, let alone make any money? Two of the bosses came in and saw a notice I’d put up telling customers prices had increased because of them. One of them said this was quite correct. They had no shame about it.”



The Beer Orders became law in 1989, after concerns that the big brewing groups controlled too much of the market. They were allowed to keep a maximum of 2,000 pubs each, but instead of the flourishing of small private operators that many pubgoers hoped to see, the Beer Orders gave rise to a new generation of huge pub-owning companies (pubcos) who weren’t breweries but often had close links to them. Andrew calls them “propcos” rather than pubcos as they were in effect property companies with no interest in

running pubs, and many were sold off in the years to come as the pubcos gained a very bad reputation for how they treated their tenants.

Before 1983, Andrew had already been licensee at two pubs, the Rotunda Tavern in Cheltenham (where he met Debbie, who worked for him) and the Old Contemptibles in Birmingham. Born in Oxford, he took a course in hotel and catering management and worked at local pubs including the Fair Rosamund in Botley and Scholar Gipsy in Kennington (both long gone), so was already a seasoned publican when they took on the Rose and Crown. It was then owned by Ind Coope, part of Allied Breweries, which also owned the Halls of Oxford name originating with a brewery that continued to run pubs long after brewing ceased. The “Halls Hare” plaque can still be seen to this day on many of them, and – appropriately – the Halls of Oxford name reappeared when Andrew and Debbie bought their pub.

Tough years were to follow after the Beer Orders, as their beloved pub and home – which they had started to restore to its Victorian splendour – passed between pubcos including Sycamore, Inn Business and finally, in 1997, Punch Taverns. Andrew found Punch particularly difficult to deal with, and he kept detailed notes of his meetings with them. A friend in the trade advised him to become a nuisance, but a polite nuisance, as he set about persuading Punch to sell, while becoming a high-profile

lobbyist for pub tenants. Eventually it agreed, but he had to pay the full asking price and also all of Punch's costs.

"If we hadn't become a free house, we wouldn't have survived as it was absolutely disgraceful how pubcos treated their tenants," says Andrew. "When we first arrived we paid a low rent and paid a reasonable price for our beer, but then along came these property companies talking about 'commercial rents'. The Beer Orders created an utter farce."

Debbie adds: "For me, buying the freehold from Punch in 2009 was the best of times. Both Adam and Annabel were born while we lived here, and we've had so many enjoyable times including wedding parties, wedding anniversaries and wakes."

Free of tie since then, Andrew and then Adam have continued to focus on real ale among an eclectic choice of drinks (wine sells at up to £75 a bottle!) and no-nonsense food ranging from the famous pint of sausages (served in a beer tankard) and pickled eggs, to Pieminster pies and Sunday roasts. Back in 1983, the Rose and Crown served Burton Ale and Ind Coope bitter among some pretty awful keg brands, but as a free house it has settled down with Adnams Southwold Bitter, Hook Norton Old Hooky and Oxford Brewery (formerly Shotover) Trinity, with the fourth pump reserved for a guest ale which ranges from local beers by Loose Cannon, Turpin and others, to Titanic's ever-



popular Plum Porter. This dedication has been rewarded as the Rose and Crown has featured in every edition bar one of the CAMRA *Good Beer Guide* from 1997 to 2023.

"Real ale has always been important to me and I love looking after it," says Andrew, "and my promise is that every pint will taste as

the brewer intended. I'm also a great supporter of CAMRA and I love *the Oxford Drinker*, especially the online version.

"I don't really regard 40 years here as a great achievement, as it's such a wonderful place to work full of such wonderful people."

The Rose and Crown is a pub you come to meet



ABOVE: Andrew, in his own words, “oversees and entertains”.
(Photo by Phil Gammon)

people – not just those who are already friends – and for conversation. It has no TV, no piped music, no slot machines or distractions of any kind. Andrew – who is usually in a suit and tie and likes to sit in the passageway running alongside the two small rooms and leading to the covered courtyard – often introduces people who might have something in common. What really makes this pub so special is its wide cross-section of customers, from professors to bus drivers (!) and from sports celebrities in rugby, ice hockey, Formula 1 racing, horse racing and football to, as he puts it, “the girl on the knickers counter at Debenhams”.

“Here it doesn’t matter who you are,” he says. “You’ll see a wealthy person buy a drink for the girl from Debenhams, and the girl from Debenhams will then buy a drink for the wealthy person.”

Sports teamtimes, and the Sunday evening jazz sessions in the courtyard (which doubles the available seating and allowed it to open during the ban on inside trading) are always popular. So how did the Halls feel when lockdown came and everything ground to a halt?

“I loved it, because we spent three months sitting in our flat relaxing,” says Debbie.

But the family didn’t have a total rest, as Adam and Annabel were soon organising home deliveries not only of

cask ale in four-pint containers (usually Trinity) but also food. This meant they forged even stronger links not only with locals but over a wide area, and home delivery customers, me included, could support a local pub and a local brewery. Did Andrew and Debbie ever consider retirement? Fortunately not!

“We both work six 12-hour days a week, Debbie always in the kitchen while I have more variety,” says Andrew. “As we have to work we have no chance to spend, but we have 10-14 days’ holiday a year plus Christmas Day and Boxing Day when we close. We don’t know any other way of life and if Adam wanted to take over eventually we’d be very pleased, but my main aim is to ensure this will always remain a pub.

“Running the Rose and Crown is truly a team effort, and wouldn’t have been possible without Debbie, Adam and all the wonderful staff we’ve known over the years.”

We look forward to their 50th anniversary, as it just wouldn’t be the same place without all the family’s hard work and with Andrew – wit, raconteur and all-round conversationalist – making everyone welcome. It’s the pub where I take our frequent visitors from abroad, and on a recent visit I told him I’d brought a Mexican friend to see a traditional, old-fashioned English pub with an eccentric landlord.

“Oh really?” said Andrew, quick as a flash. “Where are you going to take him then?”

Where else!

Awards Night recognises top pubs and breweries

New Pub of the Year winner the Broad Face joins the celebrations

OXFORD CAMRA'S AWARDS Night made a welcome return in February as we handed out certificates to our two Pubs of the Year and Beers of the Festival. City Pub of the Year was again the Royal Blenheim in Oxford, while first place in the Beer of the Festival award, as voted by a tasting panel at the Town Hall event in October, was Yabba Dabba Doo by Little Ox.

The Town and Village Pub of the Year award went to the Broad Face in Abingdon for the first time, the most recent previous winner being the Brewery Tap also in Abingdon. The Broad Face sent a large contingent to help celebrate with owner of the business, Joshua Khan, and manager Kealey Hitchings. Although the building is owned by Greene King, the pub has freedom to sell whatever cask ales it wants, and the quality of these has now been recognised.

Joshua – who also runs the King Charles Tavern in Newbury and the Great Shefford near Hungerford – said: “This award is long awaited, and a tribute to Kealey and her team. Real ales are the heart and soul of our pub, and we have



ABOVE: Tap Social head brewer Jason Bolger (right) receives an award recognising its work with ex-prisoners from CAMRA's Matt Bullock.

between six and eight available even during January and February, both local and national brands.”

A recent selection included Oakham Citra, Dark Star Hophead, Lovebeer's Doctor Roo, and White Horse Black Beauty and Village Idiot, and there are often beers from other local breweries including Abingdon's own Loose Cannon, and Little Ox. All three of Joshua's pubs are in the *Good Beer Guide*, which

is quite an achievement.

The Broad Face is the only pub in the country with this name, with a pub sign that often makes passers-by stop to look. Theories abound as to why it is so-called, including that it shows the hangman or one of the prisoners at what used to be a jail across the road, and that it represents a bloated body recovered from the nearby River Thames.

Kealey has brought a feminine touch to the pub, which always has plenty of flowers, and it has a wide-ranging menu and regular live music. She has run it for the last two years, since when it has been transformed, working at the King Charles Tavern for six years before that.

Awards Night attracted about 40 people to the upstairs room of the White House on Abingdon Road, Oxford, where the event was held for the first time. In addition to the Pub of the Year winners and Beers of the Festival, awards were also given to the Jolly Farmers in Oxford marking 40 years as an LGBT+ pub, and to Tap Social for its pioneering work with ex-prisoners.



ABOVE: Joshua Khan (right) celebrates the Broad Face's Town and Village Pub of the Year award with manager Kealey Hitchings and CAMRA's Pete Flynn.



ABOVE: Royal Blenheim manager Steven Lyne (left) receives his City Pub of the Year award from Oxford CAMRA chairman Tony Goulding.



ABOVE: CAMRA's Pete Flynn (right) presents the Beer of the Festival award to Ian Hemingway of Little Ox.

DO YOU MANAGE to watch much TV these days? I don't. An awful lot of the programmes, including the news, just seem a bit "samey" to me, so generally I'd rather be out on the farm, in the butchery, or sitting by the fire at the Red Lion with a nice pint of Red Kite or Pig's Ear. There is just one exception to my lack of interest in TV, and that's the second series of *Clarkson's Farm* on Amazon Prime.

Marmite Man Jeremy, although not loved by all, is a very good journalist. If you have just returned from Outer Space, you may have missed that he bought a 1,000-acre farm in the Cotswolds some years ago and has become a very active, if inexperienced, farmer. All his travails are filmed for the programme, and in the dying moments of the last series we learned that after a year's really hard graft, and a huge investment in land, staff, stock and machinery, he had made a profit of approximately £140. Sound familiar? Tragically, plenty of pubs have done no better and some have done considerably worse.

The parallels with pubs are striking: the passion, the skill, the long hours, the setbacks, the bureaucracy, the heartache and the tiredness, and especially the lack of money. It is not by chance that Clarkson named his farm "Diddly Squat" because that's what he had in his farming pocket at the end of the year.

So why has *Clarkson's Farm* become so popular when other farming programmes, such as *Jimmy's Farm* and *Countryfile*, have not cut through to the same

Diddly Squat or Pot of Gold

Graham Shelton (below), a farmer and businessman who led the community buy-out of the Red Lion at Northmoor, draws a parallel with a TV celebrity

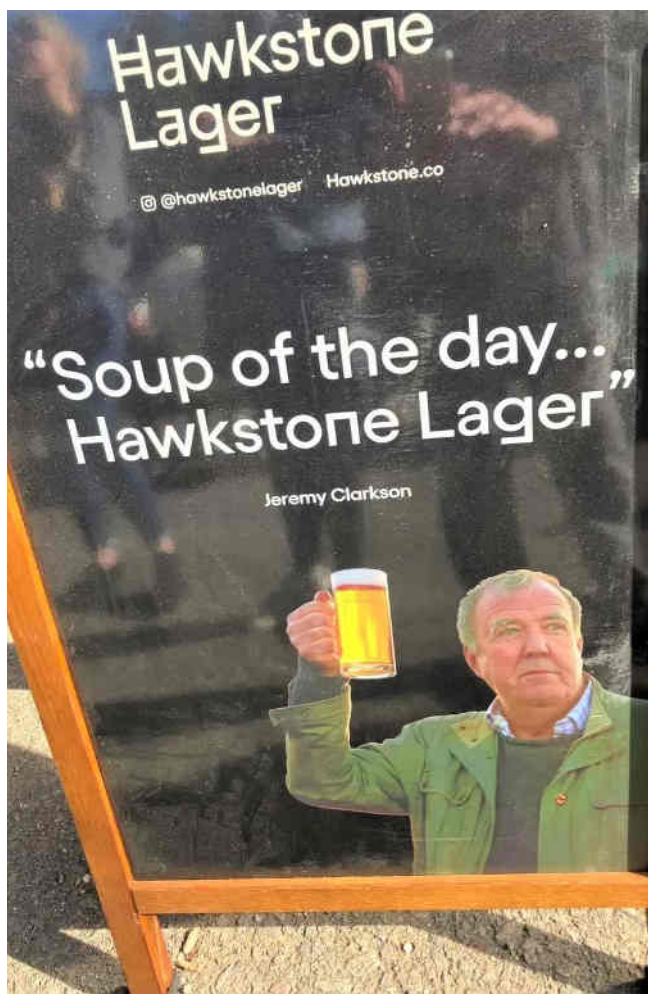


extent? And what does the Clarkson experience mean for CAMRA's campaigning to save our pubs as well as our beer?

What we can say is that he's not just filming someone else doing the farming, he's living it himself, and it shows. He's buying the machinery and the stock with his own money, he's lambing and calving, he's tilling the fields,

he's digging the ditches, he's making terrible mistakes, he's beset by officials and rules and he's battling every inch of the way. When real farmers look at the programme they say: "Yes, I get that, that's just what it's like for me." They don't say that about *Countryfile*, believe me!

If ever there was a lesson for the pub trade it's that get-



ABOVE: “Jeremy Clarkson” makes an appearance at the Big Oxford Beer Bash.

ting in there and showing what it's really like, warts and all, by the simple expedient of trying to do it, offers real scope to engage the public, to educate them and maybe even motivate lots of them to visit their locals a bit more often.

What I find really exciting is that Clarkson has more than a passing interest in beer (I know, it's only lager but it's a

start!). I think, by the way, that for those who like that sort of thing, Hawkstone Lager is rated as quite good, thanks to the expertise of the Cotswold Brewing company.

I hear that, like Oxford CAMRA chairman Tony Goulding, Clarkson is partial to a drop of cider too. And did you spot that he's bought a pub? According to newspaper

reports he said, in typical Clarkson style, “I've bought one today. I don't know the name or where it is...” If this is true, we could be in for some exciting TV that will eclipse other attempts to show our industry to a wider audience.

Tom Kerridge had a pretty good go at reporting what it's like at a variety of pubs last year, and he runs his own successful pub, the Hand and Flowers in Marlow, so he knows the score. But he's not Clarkson, and his gastro-pub is not a typical pub. The special offer on Kerridge's website at the moment is £1,200 for a couple having a two-night stay with food – on a Tuesday. I know he's got a Michelin star, but most people are simply not going to pay those prices at their local. The website mentions that the bar has “four large, comfortable stools” (and a lot of really pricey cocktails too). Big deal! More prosaically, they also sell their own ale and the local brew (Rebellion).

Kerridge is good, and he has a following, but it's Clarkson we want to see on TV behind the bar, in the kitchen peeling vegetables, being told he's done it all wrong, coming up with creative ideas, failing to make them work, cleaning down at the end of a long shift and up first thing the next day to do it all again.

I have no idea if the programme *Clarkson's Pub* will ever see the light of day, but it might. If it does, just remember you heard it first from *the Oxford Drinker*. And let's hope his pub is not another Diddy Squat but the Pot of Gold!

Blenheim on the march

Steven Lyne, landlord of our City Pub of the Year, writes his first column for *the Oxford Drinker*

WELL, THIS HAS been a long time coming! Finally getting to sit down and write an article for *the Oxford Drinker* has been on my radar for a while. Editor Dave Richardson has definitely had a conversation or five with me, keen on asking me to share my experiences of running St Ebbe's Street's last standing pub, the Royal Blenheim. For those who know me well, I'll keep it short...

If you approached me when I first arrived in Oxford almost eight years ago and told me the position I'm in now, I would have asked what on earth you were drinking! Literally though, I had absolutely no idea how vast Britain's drinking culture was. Ales were a foreign concept for me, coming from a country where Guinness flows freely and a proper cask ale was nowhere to be seen. In 2016, I spotted a part-time bar position advert in the window and well, the rest is history.

After a few months in the trade, I started to see the complexity of all that we sometimes take for granted. The vast amount of work that goes into maintaining a cellar, how every ale needed to be treated differently and keeping up to those very high



ABOVE: The Royal Blenheim is the last standing pub in St Ebbe's Street.

standards that patrons expect from their favourite venues to name a few. Marrying everything together to run a decent site sounded like a nice challenge, and one that I may potentially have looked at in the future.

That call came in February 2020, a fantastic time to become General Manager of a pub with a pandemic looming around the corner! Suddenly, all of those ideas and suggestions to improve the business that I had in the back of my head had to come to fruition. Thankfully, the pub didn't need too much help. With a refur-

bishment by Titanic Brewery back in 2017, the Blenheim had already become a favourite pub for many. Tucked away off the main streets of Oxford, it almost felt that the pub was a locals' secret. One of those pubs you would only find due to a friendly conversation with a local ale drinker. For those patrons, it was a frequented venue for a reason, and I didn't want to change any of that.

What I did realise, though, was that the pandemic was giving me the perfect opportunity for the Blenheim to go through a

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LEFT: Royal Blenheim manager Steven Lyne and assistant manager Natasha Micallef-Kelly.

transition. What would happen if the pub were to become wet-led, without food? Focusing even more so on the casks and kegs that came through our doors. Stepping away from the expectations that many have of British pubs of walking in and grabbing fish and chips on a whim, to becoming a venue where you were guaranteed to be spoilt by a vast range of beers. It was something I felt that we were all missing in the city centre, and it was something I thought many of our followers would be thrilled to take part in.

The audience at the pub is an eclectic mix, courtesy of Oxford's ability to attract people from all ends of the world. With customers being as varied as the beers we get in here, and with such a big emphasis on the revival of interest in cask ale, I spotted our niche. Sacrificing our kitchen sounded like a strange move to most, especially with the times we were

facing, but we took the chance.

Flash forward to today, and I like to think that risk has paid off. The pub has thrived in its new venture, and we have seen a real capture of interest in real ales in the pub again. We are quite meticulous about our cask ales and we ensure that as much is done as possible to keep everything in tip-top shape.

In today's times, people's expectations of quality are higher than ever. As they should be! This is one of the key differences between pubs that are doing well and those that aren't quite hitting the mark. It's all well and good if you've plenty of beers on; however, if you can't keep them at their best, you're missing the whole point of having cask ales in your venue in the first place.

Thankfully, it is a relief that the Royal Blenheim doesn't suffer from these issues – reflected in our achievement of winning Ox-

ford CAMRA's City Pub of the Year once again. It's an absolute pleasure to receive the award for 2023 and something we very much don't take for granted. We have put quite a bit of hard work into achieving what we have at the Blenheim, and it's something we could have never achieved without our fantastic team and support from Titanic Brewery.

It gives us the perfect springboard to keep on doing what we are best at. We won't be stopping any time soon as we have some exciting plans upcoming at the pub, so certainly watch this space. With a bustling atmosphere every day and beers flowing well, we want to make sure that the Blenheim only ever keeps getting better. It's a pleasure to be running such a welcoming hub in the heart of Oxford and I certainly won't be wasting any time in getting on with everything.

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Gardener's World

Do it yourself!

Paul Silcock (below) of the Gardener's Arms in Plantation Road on... pub DIY



I'M GUESSING MANY of you reading this are well aware of the 1970s punk movement. I won't delve into the history of it really. If you don't know, go buy a best of punk album and educate your ears. What I really wanted you to know about was the punk DIY ethic, the idea of if you want something doing, just get up and get it done.

Haven't got a record label, no problem, make your own label. No distribution, no problem! Just put the records in your car, or probably your parents' car and distribute them. Make your own venues to play

your own gigs in. Want to make music, be in a band and play gigs? Then make (probably bad) music, be in a (probably crap) band and play (probably terrible) gigs. And then get better.

This DIY ethic is perhaps best summed up in a cartoon by Tony Moon. It pictured three guitar chords with the caption, "This is a chord, this is another, this is a third. Now go form a band." It was first published in *Sideburn #1*, but made famous in the punk fanzine *Sniffin' Glue*. (Again, that DIY ethic – can't find a magazine about punk, start one!) What could capture the DIY

idea more than the most information you could need to do it yourself, literally telling you that if you *like* this music, why not *make* this music?

Why am I extolling the virtues of punk? I could bang on at length about how revolutionary and far reaching this DIY idea was, not only in the music industry but in culture at large. But I won't. I'll tie this back into a more pub-centric article before I get in trouble with the editor for straying too far from my brief.

The real point of making you aware of this DIY spirit is something that many, many small and medium-sized pub owners, especially free houses working without the backing of large breweries, will relate to.

There's an awful lot of things I've learnt to turn my hand to since running this pub, that I never would have thought would have fallen under the remit of being a pub landlord. Before I make any further comments on DIY-ing, I want to make one thing clear. There are some things you just don't want to try and Do Yourself. With a double-backed reason as well. DIY should never include anything to do with pipes, either water or gas ones. Also electrics. Changing a plug is a skill people shouldn't be allowed to graduate from school without being able to do, but let's not try and rewire our fuse boards from the street feed eh?

This level of Do It Yourself is so bad for two very important reasons. The first is the obvious short cut to death it can cause. The other is that

there are professionals out there who have trained in doing this work safely. Some Do It Yourself is just taking money out of the hand of the professional, so you're essentially a scab crossing the picket line. Leave the big jobs to the big boys.

When I talk about the DIY approach, it's all the things I've learnt to do around an old pub that sometimes seems to have a determination to only ever being 90% functional. It's all the last-second botches you learn to fix just before you open, sometimes just so you CAN open. I'm talking broken door handles, or keys snapped off in locks, even a jammed automatic door closer (I mean it was doing a good job of keeping the door closed, it just wasn't letting

anyone open the door, and it was the front door).

When I started at the pub I think I owned three screwdrivers, a hammer, set square and one of those plumb weights you use to check something's vertical. Now, after years in this job and this pub, I have an extensive toolkit. And I don't think there's anything in it that hasn't been used, with perhaps the exception of that plumb weight. The Gardener's Arms is over 200 years old, and I've given up trying to find an actual vertical or horizontal surface in the place.

Doing It Yourself in this context isn't just about the things you need to do just to be open, it's the things you learn to do yourself to save money. I've got pretty damn good at unblocking toilet drains. It's not much of a boast, and I'm not going to go into details about the things

I've seen, but it beats paying for a call-out fee, first hour's labour and any parts!


This is the point of this whole article though. As times get harder for pubs, and honestly from the way things are going at the moment it's very hard to see a time when things are going to get better, having to Do It Yourself is going to become more and more important for publicans.

However, just to clarify an earlier point in this article, there are some jobs that should always be left to professionals. Gas, electrics. And beer. All of you building your own home bars, or a pub in your shed, stop it. Stop it now. Pubs are best left to us professionals. Do not try to DIY the pub!



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Tony's Travels

Capital tour

Tony Goulding joins a CAMRA trip to King's Cross and St Pancras in London

THERE ARE 11 CAMRA branches in our Central Southern region and we normally have a yearly get-together in London. This has not occurred in recent years because of Covid so South Oxfordshire branch decided to organise a tour around King's Cross and St Pancras.

Our first venue was the **Parcel Yard**, a converted parcels office in King's Cross station. This Fuller's multi-roomed bar served the full range of Fuller's beers plus guests. We then took a short tube journey to Euston where the two Euston Taps occupy Grade 2-listed former lodges directly outside the station, built in 1830 and opened as bars in 2010. We headed for the **Euston Tap** in the West Lodge (the former cider house in the East Lodge is now the Bitburger Tap), where the small ground floor space is supplemented by seating and toilets up the rather perilous spiral staircase and a large outdoor heated patio. On the bar were seven cask ales, 17 British, Belgian and German kegs, and a couple of ciders.

The **Exmouth Arms** is situated close to the HS2 construction site and narrowly avoided being demolished to make way for the new HS2 station, a fate which befell the **Bree**

Louise, a favourite CAMRA watering hole which stood nearby and closed in 2018. Six casks and 12 kegs make the **Exmouth Arms** a good choice, with Titanic Plum Porter being on permanent dispense. The pub has one large open space with picture windows and plentiful

seating outside. A boutique hotel is on the upper levels with breakfast served along with tapas and burgers.

A 10-minute walk towards St Pancras took us to the **Skinnners Arms**, named after the City of London Livery company. This traditional spacious corner pub was once two bars. You can see the signs on the door and etched in the stained-glass windows. On the bar were Greene King IPA, St Austell Proper Job, Taylor's Landlord and Exeter Brewery's Avocet. It is just far enough away from the bustle of King's Cross and St Pancras to be a tranquil haven for working commut-



ABOVE: The Queen's Head, a narrow 19th-century pub off Grays Inn Road.

ers and exploring visitors. Spot the camel on the garage roof.

McGlynn's is a street-corner local, again in a quiet area away from the bustle of the stations. This spacious open-plan bar was formerly two separate rooms, and you can see where the two former entrances were. Beers being served were St Austell Tribute and two from Southwark brewery, one being Banksie Blonde.

The **Queen's Head** – a former Charrington house – is a narrow 19th-century pub off Grays Inn Road which serves locals and visitors alike. The piano is for jazz and blues on a couple of days a week. Meat and cheese sharing platters are very popular to complement the three cask ales from Roosters, Redemption and Burning Sky, along with an interesting selection of bottles and cans.

The final call and best of the bunch was the **King Charles I**. Three cask beers were being served from Twickenham brewery, Tring and Park along with a very tasty Seaside cider, the best of the day. This pub provides a sanctuary from the frenzy of King's Cross as well as spontaneous madness and hilarious and anarchic quiz nights. It also supports local musicians with live events. It is one of the few remaining proper London locals, Community-Owned since 2015 when it was saved from developers. You can bring your own food or have it delivered to the pub, and outside seating is very popular.

After commencing our tour at midday, a very enjoyable afternoon was had by all.



ABOVE: Street-corner local McGlynn's.

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Continuing a thousand-year drinking tradition

Bryan Brown, chairman of the Friends of Abingdon Abbey Buildings Trust, sets the scene for the Abingdon Beer Festival on April 14, 15 and 16

THERE ARE NOT many drinking establishments that can claim a thousand-year history, but the home of the Abingdon Beer Festival, now in its sixth year, can. This revival festival is set in the atmospheric Abingdon Abbey Buildings, the surviving remains of the great Abbey of Abingdon.

The medieval monks here were no strangers to a good drop of beer as the monastery's brewhouse aimed to produce an allowance of eight pints per monk, per day, a challenge some festival goers might like to emulate. To be fair, it was safer than drinking water at the time. Rivers and streams could be easily contaminated upstream, putting a variety of bacteria, viruses and unpleasant substances into the drinking water. The monks' long occupation came to an end in 1538 when King Henry VIII targeted the monastery's wealth at the Reformation, when he also created the Church of England, taking power from the Pope in Rome so he could divorce his first wife Catherine and marry Anne Boleyn.

Abingdon Abbey's grand church was almost the size of Westminster Abbey. The main buildings were demol-



ished but the commercial buildings by the Millstream were sold off as going businesses; a corn store and the milling, baking and brewing tradition lived on. For over 300 years, the Abbey Brewery operated in the same buildings, helping to create an Abingdon industry in malting and brewing until it was finally merged with Morlands in the 1860s.

By the 1940s, the buildings were in poor order although some 30 families lived there in wretched conditions, and demolition was planned. However, a charity was formed to save them and to this day the Friends of Abingdon work constantly to raise enough money to keep the ancient timbers and stones in reasonable repair and keep the beautiful buildings at the heart of the community.

They include the only

theatre in the town centre, the converted grain store, which was made into the charming, Elizabethan-style Unicorn Theatre in 1953. The charity, by organising new traditions such as several music and drama events and festivals, the Abingdon Craft Fair and the Abingdon Beer Festival, have created a community asset. The trust works extensively with schools and charities to engage the whole community, old and young alike.

The buildings, including the Unicorn Theatre, are a wonderful venue for private events which are a crucial source of income to maintain them, and we have a wedding licence and host up to 20 weddings a year. In the summer, it is a memorable, romantic venue; the ceremony can take place in a variety of locations including the Unicorn Theatre, the wedding breakfast in the historic Long Gallery, dancing in the Lower Hall and drinks on the South Lawn, facing the Millstream. It is a unique venue for a wedding or a family celebration, an anniversary or birthday party.

The Abingdon Beer Festival is a tradition revived and organised with the support of the Loose Cannon Brewery, ►

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ABOVE: The Abingdon Beer Festival is a tradition revived and organised with the support of the Loose Cannon Brewery.

which revived the Abingdon brewing tradition. The Abbey Buildings are now a nationally scheduled monument and architecturally Grade 1 listed. So, although they are so important historically, representing the core and reason for Abingdon's existence, there is much to do to make them more accessible and functional.

So, do come and join us in these unique buildings for a memorable experience whilst enjoying a fabulous selection of locally sourced quality ales in a variety of styles including IPAs, some lagers, ciders and wines or soft drinks, with great music from local bands and top-class festival food. Remember that Abingdon is the longest-inhabited settlement in the country so, as I say to my Oxford friends, it is far more important! Stand in the footsteps of English royalty as several kings and queens stayed here and Henry VIII came at least four times, visiting Abingdon for hunting

on nearby Andersey Island.

The Abbey Buildings need to pay for themselves, so all profits go towards supporting them. The Friends of Abingdon Abbey Buildings Trust are undertaking a project, partly supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Town Council and several local heritage funds, to make them secure for generations to come, useable for 12 months of the year and fully accessible, to enhance their purpose at the heart of the community. We also aim to create a visitor attraction, animating over 1,000 years of history for the benefit of local people, their families and visitors, and those from further afield.

So make the monks proud and contribute to supporting Abingdon's oldest and most important buildings by drinking beer! What a good way to help a charity, as we can't think of a better reason to raise a glass than joining us at the Abingdon Beer Festival.

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The Broad Face public house is at the junction of Bridge Street and Thames Street. The building was erected in 1840, but there are records of a public house called the Broad Face as far back as 1734. Mystery surrounds the origin of the Broad Face's name. Some say it's to do with its riverside location, as the building presents a broad face to the Thames. Much more colourful are the theories that it either alludes to the swollen face of a man who drowned in the river, or the bloated face of a man who was hanged at the gaol that used to be opposite the pub.

At the Broad Face, we have a huge selection of beers, lagers, wines and gins.

We also are very proud to welcome CAMRA (Campaign for Real Ale) members to experience the wide range of cask ales we have on tap.

In addition, we are members of the Cask Marque Association.