

Issue 119  
Summer 2023

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# Welcome

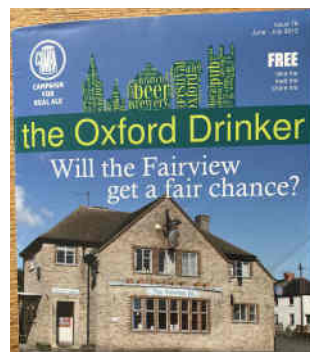
...to a decade of progress (more or less!)

**THIS EDITION OF** *the Oxford Drinker* marks my 10th anniversary as editor, so I thought it might be interesting to look back at what was happening in summer 2013 and what has happened since.

Of course there have been many pub closures, but also a surprising number of openings. In 2013, there were no micro-pubs in Oxfordshire but now there are several with opening of another – the Market Tap in Oxford – making the news in this edition. In my first edition as editor I wrote enthusiastically about the Seven Stars in Marsh Baldon, the first Community-Owned pub in our area. Now there are about 10 around Oxfordshire, a very welcome trend that has saved some if not all from certain closure.

We have also gained another Wetherspoon pub – the Narrows in Abingdon – but lost pubs including Far from the Madding Crowd in Oxford, a CAMRA favourite that became the Turtle Bay Caribbean restaurant, and the Fairview in Headington, featured on that edition's front cover (above). The onset of the Covid lockdowns and restrictions of 2020-21 did not lead to the wave of closures that many predicted, but a growing number of pubs around the county now stand empty due to energy prices and the cost of living crisis.

Turning to breweries, a growing number around the UK are closing or at risk, with Skinner's of Cornwall (since bought out) and Black Sheep (in administration) among the best-known names. But local independent breweries seem to be bucking the trend, and in the last 10 years we have seen names including Amwell Springs, Chad-



lington, Church Hanbrewery, Little Ox, LoveBeer, Turpin and Wriggley Monkey appear on the local scene.

Most impressive of all is the emergence of Tap Social not only as a brewery with two sites and a tap room, a pub (the White House in Oxford), two bars and a bakery, but as a company dedicated to turning around the lives of ex-prisoners. We like Tap Social even more now that cask ale production is starting – see news pages.

But let's also pay tribute to the many long-established breweries and traditional pubs which are, well... just themselves. Not unchanging, as no one can do that any more, but holding true to their principles while the world changes at breakneck speed. Hook Norton is the best example of a traditional brewery in Oxfordshire, followed by Wychwood, and as for pubs... let's name the Rose and Crown, Harcourt Arms, Lamb and Flag, Chequers, Bear, Royal Blenheim and Mason's Arms for starters.

Bearing in mind all that's happened, our pubs and breweries have come through the last decade in better shape than you might think. Whatever the next 10 years might bring, we hope to carry on telling the tale.

**DAVE RICHARDSON**

*Cover: Ieva Pakalniskyte (left) and Katie Baldock at the Bird in Hand in Princes Risborough. Report on an Oxford CAMRA tour of Oak Taverns pubs on page 16.*

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

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# Pub, Brewery and Festival News

For regular updates, visit [oxforddrinker.camra.org.uk](http://oxforddrinker.camra.org.uk)

## Market Tap, Oxford

The long-delayed opening of Tap Social Movement's bar in Oxford's Covered Market finally went ahead in early May, bringing to three the number of bars operating at this historic venue. Although it mainly showcases Tap's range of keg and canned beers, it plans to offer one cask ale at the market as part of an increased focus on cask ale generally.

Quality keg beers have been the main focus since the Oxford brewery was set up in 2016, brewing cask ales mainly for special events such as the Oxford Beer and Cider Festival. Although two cask ale pumps are provided at Tap's White House pub in Abingdon Road, these are generally for guest ales. But head brewer Jason Bolger wants to increase the focus on cask, and this will happen at the original brewery in Botley now that most production has moved to Kidlington where it took over an industrial unit last year.

"We are seeing quite a bit of demand for cask and we like making it, but it made sense to start by brewing keg beer," said director Tess Taylor. "Jason would certainly like to have a go and we are looking at cask versions of existing keg beers. We have enough brewing capacity now, and production is above pre-Covid levels. The White House is going very well too, and we have simplified the menu because of the cost of living."

The Market Tap, converted from a butcher's shop and originally planned to open in December 2019 before Covid intervened, is the company's sixth venue and fourth where people can enjoy beer. The original taproom in Botley was joined by the White House and the Lock29 bar in Banbury, but there isn't yet a taproom in Kidlington. The industrial unit in Kennington where it brewed before moving to Kidlington is now Proof Social Bakehouse, a bakery with coffee shop open on mornings from Thursday to Sunday.

All six sites offer employment opportunities for prisoners on day release and people recently released from custody, as part of Tap Social's commitment to social justice. That



*From left, Market Tap manager Harry Curtis with Tap Social directors Tess and Amy Taylor.*

programme is back up to speed following Covid, working closely with Spring Hill prison.

Tap Social is also managing the entertainment space in the centre of the market, adjacent to the Market Tap. Already renowned for music and comedy at the Botley taproom, it will also offer poetry readings and other "spoken word" events in conjunction with Gulp Fiction, the bookshop and bar which is a close neighbour.

The Covered Market is now open for a 12-month trial until 11pm on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights, but only a few of its 50-plus independent traders plan to stay open that long and some are very much against evening opening. Market Tap opens daily at 10am, until 11pm on these nights and 5pm on other days (4pm Sundays). The first bar to open in the market, Teardrop, is only staying open until 7pm on these nights, usually closing at 5.30pm.

# Rose and Crown PH

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## Pub, Brewery and Festival News

### Grapes, Oxford

Hopes are high that this city centre pub will re-open during the summer, with only some legal complications holding up a deal for the building's owner Oxford City Council to assign the lease to a small, independent pub company. The London-based company, which runs 16 real ale pubs in and around the capital, told *the Oxford Drinker* that it has been negotiating the deal for over one year, and that a team had been into the pub to assess the work that needs doing. It was confident that the Grapes could re-open within six weeks of the deal being signed, which it hoped would be imminent.

The Grapes would have eight cask ale pumps and at least 25 keg taps, serving a wide range of ales from independent breweries near and far. Restoring a traditional real ale pub in George Street, otherwise dominated by big pub chains and restaurants, would be a major gain for the city. It was previously leased to Greene King, then Bath Ales from 2013 (which later renamed it Beerd) and West Berkshire Brewery from 2019. The liquidator of West Berkshire held the lease after this brewery closed, and the Grapes was shut in December 2021.

### Pub of the Year voting

The Oxfordshire Pub of the Year was due to be announced in June after the four CAMRA branches covering most of the county put forward their winners for a vote, which could only be done after visiting all four. Oxford CAMRA's candidate is the **Broad Face** in Abingdon, its Town and Country Pub of the Year 2023 (the **Royal Blenheim** was City Pub of the Year). Vale of White Horse branch chose the **King's Arms** in Wantage, while South Oxfordshire chose the **George** in Sutton Courtenay, both of these being Oak Taverns pubs. North Oxfordshire's choice is the **Butcher's Arms** in Balcote, near Banbury, a Hook Norton pub.

The Oxfordshire winner will be put forward with the winners from Berkshire and Buckinghamshire to be CAMRA Central Southern Pub of the Year, with voting to be completed by July 23. The winner of this will be one of 12 in contention for National Pub of the Year, a title currently held by the **Tamworth Tap** in Staffordshire.



*The Grapes.*

### Local breweries win awards

Two Oxfordshire breweries have won awards in the SIBA Midlands Independent Beer Awards 2023 organised by the Society of Independent Brewers (SIBA).

Mrs Stoutfire by Loose Cannon from Abingdon won a bronze in the Overall Champion Cask Beer category, while Black Beauty by White Horse from Stanford-in-the-Vale took a gold in the Cask Session Dark Beer category.

The Overall Champion Cask Beer award was won by Navigation Brewery from Nottingham.

### Oxford pub videos

Oxford tourist guide, author and CAMRA member Rob Walters has added videos to his Rob's Oxford Youtube channel of two more pubs, the **Rose and Crown** and the **Harcourt Arms**. The in-depth videos feature interviews with landlords and other staff, a focus on regular customers talking about what makes the pub special, and the live music on offer. The channel also features videos of the **Lamb and Flag**, **Turf Tavern**, **Wheatsheaf** and **Grapes**.





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## Pub, Brewery and Festival News

### Old Anchor Inn, Abingdon

The pub closed suddenly in April and we understand Greene King is giving up the lease, as it doesn't appear on the brewery's list of tenancies to let. A lovely historic pub which didn't realise its potential under a series of tenants, it was originally run by Morland brewery of Abingdon, passing to Greene King following its takeover and closure of Morland in 2000.

What it really needs is an independent operator to take over, give it some TLC and offer some interesting beers to tempt people down there, and to make best use of the courtyard and riverside setting by St Helen's Wharf. But it could take a while for this to happen, as many would-be pub operators are wary to take on a business while energy bills remain so high and the trading environment so unpredictable. The Grade 2 listed pub was converted from three cottages around 1884 when the riverside was redeveloped, and the cottages are believed to date from the 17th century.

### Closed pubs

The *Oxford Mail*, in collaboration with CAMRA, has started focusing on the growing number of closed pubs around the county, starting with the **White Hart** in Wytham, **Prince of Wales** in Iffley, **Old Anchor Inn** (see above) in Abingdon, and **Bat and Ball** in Cuddesdon, which were covered in early May. It has also featured the long-closed **Crown** in Marcham, on sale for £425,000 and under threat from a developer, which villagers are hoping to get listed as an Asset of Community Value so they can have a say



*Old Anchor Inn, Abingdon. (Photo by Andy Ffrench/Oxford Mail)*

in its future.

Pub companies have many pubs to let in the county (as of early May), some of these being already closed while others are still trading. Greene King, for example, lists the **Gardener's Arms** in North Parade Avenue, Oxford, closed in November when long-time tenants David and Jenny Rhymes retired, with an up-front cost for tenants of £42,875 then £50,000 a year annual rent, with refurbishment planned. It also lists the **Horse and Jockey** in Stanford-in-the-Vale, and **Waggon and Horses** in Southmoor.

Heineken-owned Star Pubs & Bars lists pubs including the **New Inn**, Witney; **Fox**, Steventon; **Royal Sun**, Begbroke; and **Sturdy's Castle** near Tackley. Admiral Taverns lists the **Golden Ball**, Littlemore; **Bat and Ball**, Cuddesdon; **Plough**, Appleton; **Queen's Head**, Eynsham; and **Abingdon Arms**, Wantage.

The highest-profile closed pub in Oxford, the **Eagle and Child**, is still on the market by Savills, having closed over three years ago. The **Oxford Blue** (off Iffley Road) was also closed at the time of writing.

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# Saluting our longest-serving landlords

**Dave Richardson** tells the stories of landlords in our branch serving over 25 years at one pub

**IT TAKES A** lot of dedication to run any pub successfully, and over the last few months Oxford CAMRA has presented the longest-serving landlords in our branch with awards to recognise their work. Longest serving of all are the Hall family of the **Rose and Crown**, Oxford, marking 40 years in 2023 (see Issue 118), with their now-retired near neighbours David and Jenny Rhymes, who spent nearly 30 years at the **Gardener's Arms**, North Parade, Oxford, not far behind (Issue 117).

But there are several others, and the first award was given to the Meeson family, who celebrated 25 years at the **Mason's Arms**, Headington Quarry, Oxford, last September. The family has deep roots in the licensed trade around Headington, as Chris Meeson's grandfather and great-grandfather had the Britannia and the Chequers from around 1900. Chris started working around 1989 at the White Hart in Old Headington, moving on to Parker's, now the Angel and Greyhound but then a cocktail bar, the Chequers in Headington Quarry and then the Antiquity Hall (now the Oxford Retreat and formerly the Nag's Head). He



*Mason's Arms, Oxford.*

then managed the White Hart in Old Headington before coming to the Mason's in 1997. It was already a free house but the only real ale served back then was Greene King IPA.

"The pubs I worked in before coming here were very different, but I wanted to keep the Mason's as an old-fashioned pub, the kind of pub I like to drink in myself," he said.

That's exactly what the Mason's Arms – named after the stonemasons who laboured in the local quarry – still is today. It's a wet-only pub with no food served, open only in the evenings except at weekends, and it still has a range of sports teams. A ma-

jor part of the pub's success is down to its focus on real ale, and this has brought rewards as Oxford CAMRA City Pub of the Year on numerous occasions, and unbroken listing in the *Good Beer Guide* from 2005 to the present day. It has five cask ale pumps, three of which are regulars – Vocation's Bread and Butter, Harvey's Sussex Best, and Rebellion's Smuggler. The other two are ever varying guest ales. Chris runs the pub with his brother Matt, while another brother Andy used to operate a small brewery in the pub's garden, the aptly named Old Bog.

In Witney, there are two pubs with long-established landlords, starting with the **Angel Inn** in Market Square. Steve and Diana Rose arrived in 1992 so have now done over 30 years, with their daughter Lynn now in day-to-day charge while another daughter, Dawn, runs the kitchen. The pub is a free house which sources its beers from the Marston's stable, including regular ales Hobgoblin Gold and Brakspear's Oxford Gold which are brewed just a couple of hundred yards away at Wyewood Brewery. Its house beer Angel Ale is in fact Banks's Mild, and there is usually a guest ale too such as Chadlington's Oxford Blue, or beers from Purity or Lister's.

"We have a good range of real ales, and although we used to have Hobgoblin Ruby, golden beers are now taking over," says Steve. "No-one really knows how old the pub is, but it certainly dates from the 1700s. We try to cater for everyone and have a tremendous range of customers."

Witney High Street is crowded with pubs, but at the



Left: Angel Inn, Witney.  
Below left: Matt Kearney (left) of the Mason's Arms in North Leigh receives his award from CAMRA's Steve Lawrence.



**Royal Oak** the Semaine family – Dean, his mother Lesley and daughter Sam – have been involved in Witney pubs since 1985 when the Butcher's Arms in Corn Street – no

longer a pub – was purchased. They ran it until 2004 but in 1999 bought the Royal Oak, a free house which sources its real ales from Greene King, which runs the

Olde Cross Keys across the road. The Royal Oak's forte is food with strong sales for breakfasts, lunches and teas.

A pub little visited by CAMRA members is the **Mason's Arms** in North Leigh, near Witney, but the one real ale it sells – Butcombe Original – was in excellent condition when we visited. Owner and landlord Martin Kearney – known as Matt – will mark 35 years at the pub in August this year. An Irishman who worked in the building trade and also ran a shop in Oxford's Cowley Road, Matt is in fact a teetotaler! This is a very old pub, much extended to the rear, with some very loyal customers who, Matt admits, sometimes serve themselves.

Moving on to Kidlington, Gerry and Chris McGrath are retiring from the **King's Arms** this year having run it for 28 years. This free house and *Good Beer Guide* entry serves an excellent and ever-changing range of real ales, good value food and a great choice of malt whiskies. They were tenants at this former Halls pub from 1995 and have worked for Allied Breweries (Ind Coope), Punch Taverns and finally as a free house. The King's Arms is owned by the Salter dynasty who purchased the business in 2012.

More recently, we headed for Bampton in West Oxfordshire to see Steve Mace, now in his 33rd year at the **Morris Clown** and clearly held dear by his band of regular drinkers. That loyalty is reciprocated.



*During the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021, Steve Mace of the Morris Clown took to his bicycle to deliver ale to his customers' homes.*

ed, and during the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 Steve took to his bicycle – they called it the “Maceroo” – to deliver ale to his customers' homes, often in harsh winter weather and still in the shorts he always wears. Two real ales were waiting for us on this occasion – Butts Traditional, a beer from an organic brewery near Hungerford, Berkshire; and a golden seasonal ale from Abingdon brewery Loose Cannon called Marzen Boy. The blackboard listing people who were barred caused amusement – in addition to the partners of some regulars (only joking!) it listed V. Putin and L. Truss.

Steve's father Thomas took on the Morris Clown in 1976 as he ran a pub in London but with a large family, wanted one with five bedrooms. The Morris Clown, then a Courage house and recently renamed from the New Inn, actually had six. The Mace family have been in the licensed trade for about 200 years and come from Yorkshire.

When the infamous “Beer Orders” of 1989 forced large breweries such as Courage to dispose of many pubs, the Morris Clown passed to various pubcos including Phoenix and Namura with Steve buying the property in 1998 – as a sitting tenant, he got a good deal. Since then it has been a free house and, unusually for a small country town, does not serve food but only drinks, opening in the evenings only except at weekends.

The Morris Clown is a



Grade 2 listed stone building dating from the 18th century, with some of the stones in its large rear garden coming from a demolished castle. It has character inside too, with murals painted by his first stepmother in the 1970s, depicting the Moulin Rouge

and other French scenes in the style of painter Toulouse-Lautrec. The name Morris Clown was/is actually very controversial, and this is the only pub so named in the country.

Steve seems very happy in the pub – also his home –



From left: Chris and Gerry McGrath of the King's Arms in Kidlington receive their award from CAMRA's Tony Goulding and Pete Flynn.



CAMRA's Steve Thompson (centre) with the Plough team, from left: Tim Catlin, Mark Edwards, Tim Bowring and Sophie Evans.

explaining: "I don't have a wife, children or mortgage, so I'm very cheap to run. We've always had loyal customers and most are good friends. The most important thing about retirement is having something to do – but this is my life. When I lived in London I always wore trousers, but now I'm the boss of an old

boozer I wear shorts. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else."

On then to Wolvercote on the edge of Oxford, where Tim Bowring has been in charge for 27 years through various changes of ownership. In 1996 the **Plough** was owned by Oxford brewery Morrells, which was to cease brewing only two years later. He was

attracted because he liked Oxford and it had good living accommodation.

"Morrells came to a messy end, and many of the pubs were sold to an outfit which did no work on the pubs and treated us badly – it was like dealing with the Kray Twins, a horrendous time," said Tim. "But I managed to acquire the lease, and when Greene King bought most of the Morrells pubs, they had to honour that for six years. Greene King has always left us alone, as long as we pay the rent and sell plenty of beer. We can sell any of the real ales on Greene King's guest list."

On this occasion the real ales were Butcombe Original and GK's Olde Trip and Old Speckled Hen. The Plough is a popular food pub with plenty of outside seating on Wolvercote Green. Tim now spends most of his time in the kitchen, and his daughter Katy mainly runs the administrative side with Tim Catlin, here for 22 years, being a loyal bar manager.

Tim is of retiring age and his current agreement with Greene King only runs until the middle of 2024. We wish him well whatever happens, but wouldn't be surprised if he's around for a while yet.



**Back issues of this magazine can be read by following a link on the *Oxford Drinker* website. Search for the pub or family name to read more of their stories.**

**Have we missed anyone? If you know of the landlord of a pub selling real ale in our branch area who has served more than 25 years but isn't mentioned here, please email the editor using the contact details provided.**

# Lamb and Flag: The first six months

**Dave Richardson** catches up with one of Oxford's top real ale pubs

**WHEN OWNER ST** John's College announced closure of the Lamb and Flag in January 2021, the shockwaves went around the world. It had in fact been closed since December 2020, having re-opened for just a few months after the first Covid lockdown, and the closure was blamed on difficult trading conditions.

Why all this interest in the Lamb and Flag, however historic and well known it might be? News soon spread beyond Oxford via international news agencies Reuters and Agence France Presse, and the BBC, with headlines about it appearing as far away as Chile and Australia. It seemed the world's media saw in its closure a vital piece of "Olde Englande" under threat, and the thousands of people around Britain and around the world who remembered it from their student days expressed their regret.

But some did more than that, as a group of former students, some very wealthy, got together and mounted a rescue bid, calling themselves the Inklings after the group of famous writers, led by J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, who met here from the 1940s to the 1960s – and their links with the pub also



*Manager Dylan Dudbridge-Hay welcomes customers.  
(Photos by Phil Gammon)*

fuelled media interest. In reality, the original Inklings were more associated with the Eagle and Child, another pub owned by St John's, which had a display about them on the walls. A former long-serving landlady at the Eagle and Child once told *the Oxford Drinker* that she asked them to leave as they bought very little and wanted part of the pub to themselves – maybe that was when they moved to the Lamb and Flag?

The Eagle and Child, which is directly opposite across St Giles, shut for the first Covid lockdown and has remained closed for over three years, although St John's has been trying to relet it. But despite worldwide concern over the Lamb and Flag's closure, there was never any doubt that it would re-open – it was simply a question of when, and whether it would be much changed.

The pub remained closed until October 2022, after a long refurbishment which was complicated by its status as a listed building. A new cellar, toilets, bar and a lighter interior (while retaining its nooks and crannies) were installed, but the most obvious change to visitors was the removal of the bar at the front of the pub to create more table space. This is sometimes now used for functions.

It still looks shabby from the outside, especially the fascia and sign, but this is the responsibility of St John's – as are the upper floors which are used as student accommodation. The college claims that as a charity, it can't spend on anything which is not of direct educational value – with the Inklings funding much of the revamp work.

They pledged to create a pub where the emphasis





*The most obvious change to visitors was the removal of the bar at the front of the pub to create more table space.*

would be on local beers and other local drinks, and have been true to their word. It has eight hand pumps, the same number as before, and although there is now only one real cider (Yellow Hammer) compared to two before, the range of real ales is currently rivalled only by the Royal Blenheim in the city centre. All these are from local breweries, some from Buckinghamshire or Berkshire, and the same is true of most of the keg lines. The regular cask ales are Prospect by Oxford Brewery (formerly Shotover) and Hop Kitty by Animal/XT, while the others can come from any local brewery such as Hook Norton, Little Ox, North Cotswold, White Horse, Loose Cannon or Siren. In future it will be a contender for the *Good Beer Guide* and City Pub of the Year award, as many times in the past.

Management team is led by Dylan Dudbridge-Hay and his wife Alice, with Dylan having previously worked for XT and the small, Oxford-based Dodo Pubs group. So how is the Lamb and Flag doing, six months after re-opening? It always seems to be very

busy, being right in the heart of student Oxford, but on my recent visit on a Wednesday afternoon just after Easter – out of term time – it was still fairly busy even at 3pm. I caught up with Dylan over a pint of Ox Blood from Little Ox.

“We certainly have a lot of students, many of whom never knew the old pub, but it doesn’t feel very different out of term time,” he said. “We see the same volume, but a different mix. We still get a lot of CAMRA people, mainly in the daytime, whereas students come mainly in the evenings when we sell more keg beer. But I don’t think the audience for cask and keg is split by age, although people who are less versed in beer will go for keg. Our highest seller of all is Oxford Brewery’s Prospect.”

When the pub was closed, the fear was that it could be taken over by a large company which would impose more of a corporate feel – as at the Eagle and Child, which was run by Nicholson’s (an M&B brand) before closure, although the lease had been due to pass to Young’s, who later pulled out. The Lamb and Flag

remains proudly a free house in charge of its own destiny, and one reason why it didn’t attract a large pub company was the restricted size of its kitchen with no room for expansion.

“We keep our food offering to really simple bar snacks – things that go well with beer,” said Dylan. “In the old Lamb and Flag beer was always the big seller, and we didn’t want to lose sight of that. People come in to drink, not for food, but if you’re hungry we offer something to nibble on. We’re still finding local breweries we haven’t had before – Wiggly Monkey, for example. Pale ales are definitely popular, but we also have dark ales such as Broken Dream by Siren, a breakfast stout. Only two cask ales and five kegs are regulars, and we try to keep it local with Tap Social and Renegade (the successor to West Berkshire) among the keg suppliers. People will come in and ask for Guinness, but are happy with a local stout. It’s the same with lager – we offer them one from Renegade.”



**Dave Richardson** joins a CAMRA tour of pubs with a difference

**MANY PUBS, APART** from a few in busy city centres, would say that you have to serve food to survive. There are of course exceptions, but Oak Taverns is probably unique in this area being a small pub chain operating in villages and small towns where fish, chips, burgers, pizzas or more lavish pub grub are never provided, unless by takeaway vans. We toured five of them in Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire one Saturday, and will look at another five later this summer.

As managing director Simon Collinson told *the Oxford Drinker* a few months ago: "Cask ale needs to be sold in good quality specialist outlets, not in big food pubs which don't get the throughput to maintain quality. We run a chain of 14 pubs and we don't fry a chip, employ a chef or a kitchen porter in any of them. The thousands of pounds we could have spent on a kitchen can be spent on other things."

Our tour actually started at **XT Brewery**, not only because it fitted in well with our itinerary but because XT is now brewing some beers exclusively for Oak Taverns pubs in addition to its core and Animal range. Oak pubs including the **Angel** in Bicester, **Cross Keys** in Thame and **Swan** in Faringdon have their own micro-breweries, but XT is now brewing for them and also producing beers for an Oak Taverns initiative with the Dead Brewers Society, reviv-

# No food? No problem for Oak Taverns



*Rising Sun, Haddenham.*

ing recipes used by long-gone breweries.

One of these was on offer in the taproom at XT – Hall's of Oxford AK Pale Ale, with a recipe from 1904 – along with XT3 and Numbat, from its experimental Animal range. Hall's can trace its heritage back to the 17th century but became Halls Oxford & West Brewing Company in 1896, closing in 1926 when taken over by Allsopp's, along with 300 pubs. A distribution depot in Park End Street was retained, and in 1980 Ind Coope, then a brewing giant, brought back the Hall's name

for its local pubs, introducing the "Hall's Hare" ceramic plaques that can still be seen on nearly 50 pubs around the county today.

So much for the history – I found the AK Pale delicious as I like a malty taste. We were to see it at some pubs later, and demand was such that one pub, the **Cross Keys** in Wallingford, sold 15 barrels of it. But these Dead Brewery Society beers are limited editions and you can't find AK Pale now, the latest edition being Blatch's Pale Ale from Theale, Berkshire, from a 1964 recipe.



*Bird in Hand, Princes Risborough.*

XT operates on a farm in Long Crendon, near Thame, and director Russ Taylor gave us a tour and talked us through its journey since he founded it in 2011 with Gareth Xifaras – their initials creating the name XT. Expansion was rapid until Covid hit in 2020, but production is still around one third less than 2019 levels. Cask ales predominate although cans and bottles are available too, with the tap-room open from 12-6pm from Wednesdays to Saturdays. XT beers have become a familiar sight not only locally but further afield, as it will deliver anywhere within a day's drive by transit van. Some XT beers are always in production (XT25 is the highest numbered so far), whereas nearly all Animal beers are experimental with over 100 already produced.

Suitably refreshed, we piled back into the minibus for our first Oak Taverns pub stop, the **Rising Sun** in Had-denham. XT has achieved pretty well a permanent tap take-over here – a certain R. Taylor lives nearby – with XT3

(its IPA), XT4 (amber), Animal's Hop Kitty (now a permanent beer) and Katydidd (don't ask!), named after a green coloured American tree cricket. Much rarer was my choice, Narwhale Blonde by Well Drawn Brewing Company of Bedwas, Wales, which was unremarkable. This is a cosy, open plan pub and one of two in the village, and with some historical interest. On display is a reproduced poster from 1878 offering two pubs and two cottages for sale including the "neat and substantial" Rising Sun.

Venturing further into darkest Bucks, we next pulled up at the **Bird in Hand** in Princes Risborough, an end-of-terrace pub away from the town centre but near the station. Here the beer choice was more eclectic, including two from Chiltern Brewery – Beechwood Bitter and Chiltern Black. Still available was the previous release from the Dead Brewers Society archive, Edmunds of Banbury Best Bitter from 1952, which I naturally went for. I didn't

enjoy it as much as the Hall's AK Pale but it was still good, and White Horse's Pacific Pale and Old Rosie cider were also on hand pump. This was a busy little pub with a modern interior, where some customers had ordered in a pizza while watching sport.

Next stop was the **Red Lion** in Chinnor, where Simon Collinson, who lives locally, joined us for a drink. It was no surprise to hear that Oak plans to acquire a couple more pubs where it will roll out the same concept, so we look forward to hearing more about these. Apart from XT3 this pub had three very unusual beers on offer, Hill-foot Best Bitter from Blue Bee Brewery in Sheffield, Stranger from Handsome Brewery in Kendal, and Marc Antony from Roman Way Brewery in Northamptonshire. I enjoyed a half of the latter two as I looked around the pub, where live rugby made it probably busier than usual on a Saturday afternoon. It's not often that three of the four breweries represented were names I'd never heard of!

We then moved on to Thame, and a pub I knew already as the "must visit" stop when in town. Situated on the edge of the town centre, the **Cross Keys** was the first Oak Taverns pub to try out the real ale specialty idea after it was acquired from Punch, proving so successful that it became the model for other pubs in the group to follow. No fewer than nine real ales, plus flat ciders, were on offer, to be enjoyed while perusing the display of pump clips recalling the hundreds of ales that have featured here at one time or



another. What a line-up. Hall's of Oxford AK Pale Ale was also available here, but by now I wanted a change and went for halves of Chiltern's Ruby and Tring's Mansion Mild, both very tasty. The full line-up included Hop-piness, badged as Thame Brewery but produced at XT, XT4 and Animal's Hop Kitty; Cocow and Cap Bitter from Ampersand in Norfolk; and a beer from Cross Bay brewery in Morecambe whose name I didn't catch – again, two breweries I had never heard of. Truly impressive.

Our final stop was at the latest addition to Oak's portfolio, the **Sun Inn** in Wheatley, functioning in recent years as a café-bar but acquired in December with its cellar intact and ready to resume life as a village pub. Here we found all three real ales were from the XT stable, although this isn't usually the case. The amber XT4 and XT8 porter were joined by Ermine from the Animal range, described as a "hazy, pale, milk stout stout". This was an unusual range of beers, and I don't recall having a pale coloured stout before. But was it really a stout or a stout? – by this time, I was past caring about the semantics. The Sun Inn is a large, stone-built pub with a substantial garden, and brings much needed variety to the Wheatley scene. Like some other Oak pubs, it welcomes a food van on busier nights and there are now many cuisines available.

Thanks as ever to our chairman Tony Goulding for driving us. We look forward to the second Oak Taverns tour later this summer, visiting towns including Faringdon, Wantage and Wallingford.



*Cross Keys, Thame.*



*Sun Inn, Wheatley.*



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# “Premiumisation”

## A blessing in disguise for cask ales?

**Steven Lyne,** landlord of City Pub of the Year the Royal Blenheim, asks where cask ale currently finds itself in the post-pandemic recovery

**WHAT DO WE** all look for in a cask ale these days? It's a burning topic asked on both sides of our bars at the moment and fascinating to see how varied an answer you can receive. Price, quality and consistency seem to appear relatively often, as you would expect. However, you would never believe some of the answers, such as “I quite like the sharp, metallic taste of that brewery” or “It's brewed near where I live”, not realising it's from the opposite end of the country.

This highlights an interesting problem for us. With everyone taking such different approaches to what they like, how do we get our cask offering right? Maybe we must look at why people have become so particular about what they're drinking. Seeing where is cask ale going in the post-pandemic environment, and is it heading in the right direction? I believe it is and bizarrely, those very difficulties that the industry has been facing might just be the shake-up that everyone needed to see.

The drinks industry has had to overhaul its entire op-



*More venues realise that cask ale can now be promoted as a more premium product.*

erations to tackle the immense challenges since 2020. Some businesses have adapted better than others, some we've sadly lost. However, we are thankfully starting to feel a little bit normal again trading-wise. That's not to say we haven't seen our fair share of surprising trends popping up.

One set of data I've found interesting is how the attitude to drinking has changed, and the volume consumed is still well below what we used to see while prices are going up.

People are starting to pay a lot more attention to what they are consuming and a fantastic term is now more prevalent than ever: “premiumisation”.

Premium beers have been available for decades with snazzy marketing, elegant glasses and bigger numbers flashing up on the tills. It's mostly been dominated by world lagers, and drinkers have often been choosing them as the market becomes saturated by “better versions” of strong selling classics. While their prices have al-



ways been north of the £5 mark, those prices have now been pushed up even further but that hasn't stopped people from drinking them! So what is premiumisation doing to the cask ale market?

Cask ale seemed to have this weird reputation when I first moved over here from Ireland. Students drank it because it was the cheapest drink while purists jotted down in-depth tasting notes, and someone like me fell somewhere in between. I started to find it baffling that cask was always so affordable compared to other offerings, as an enormous amount of work and skill are poured into making cask ale. It almost felt nonsensical how some people would pay £6+ for a keg IPA but turn

their nose up at an exceptionally made cask IPA for less than £5. But flash forward to the present day and the price of cask is playing catch-up. And this is a good thing, I promise.

The surge in prices across the board is forcing people to pay more attention to what they're purchasing, while publicans are having to change their perspective on how cask ale is sold. To justify the costs involved, pubs are now having to place cask ale prices into a range normally reserved for more "premium" products. And suddenly people that once turned their noses up at cask are starting to notice it. Places that do their cask ale range properly and highlight the hard work that goes into keeping it in such good

condition are showing people that when done well, cask is just as premium a product as any other. And they are selling more of it!

With more venues realising that cask ale can now be promoted as a more premium product, the once diehard craft ale/keg consumer is starting to cross over just that little bit more. Cask ale can now be placed on a little pedestal of its own so that it more than justifies the true cost of what it is worth, unlike larger corporations putting up prices on products because of their newfound popularity. If more of us can tackle these new trends correctly, we might just see people drinking their beer for its true quality, and not just blindly placing faith in its convenience.



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## Beer Heroes

# Ride a White Horse to success

In the first of a new series, **Pete Flynn** meets White Horse head brewer Gav Stanton

**NESTLING AT THE** foot of the stunning White Horse Hill, adorned with its prehistoric hill figure formed from deep trenches filled with crusted white chalk, is the eponymously named brewery, situated on an industrial estate just outside the village of Stanford in the Vale. This is where I met up with White Horse (WHB) head brewer Gav Stanton.

I was pleased to catch up with Gav who is knowledgeable and very passionate about beer. It is rare for someone to say that their vocation is also their passion.

"You fix one thing and then something else goes wrong," he lamented as we walked upstairs to the brewery office. Trouble brewing, I guessed. As I sat down I was welcomed by Gav's dog Albert. A lovely little fella and a cross between a Jack Russell, a cockapoo and a chihuahua. As a lad, Gav spent his last year of school juggling a full-time job and then spent a few years flipping between warehousing and cooking in his hometown of Stoke, before his brother introduced him to the delights of brewing at Titanic. These formative years enabled him to learn about distribution, cask sterilisation, and other labour jobs.

"It was an exciting time to join the team at Titanic as the



*Pete Flynn.*

business was in a growth phase and the introduction of Plum Porter put the company on the map," he told me. With Plum Porter today accounting for roughly 60% of sales, this was an incredible success story and Gav's partner Anneli Baxter was the inspiration for the recipe, having persuaded owners David and Keith Bott to go full steam ahead. Gav remarked how a local beer festival rated the brew best in fest and it wasn't long before it gained notoriety after it was included in a Wetherspoon festival.

I asked Gav about his ambition to become a brewer and he told me he was encouraged to learn via work experience, and after a while it all fell into place. I was surprised to learn that he has no formal brewer's certificate. "I never really bothered about this aspect, preferring to gain experience on the job."

This certainly paid off as Gav is the proud winner of several Society of Independent Brewers (SIBA) awards for his

Dark Blue bottled ale and the first in the cask ale range – Pacific Pale and West Coast IPA. I asked him what made WHB beers so flavoursome, and he explained that attention to detail and striving for the best were the key. Certainly, the addition of up to 6 kilos of hops per brew in Village Idiot, a delightful pale ale, makes it such a distinctive one and a template for this style. "Without naming names, there are brewers out there who skimp on hops, preferring to rely on varieties of malt," he told me.

I reminded Gav that a personal favourite of mine is White Horse Bitter which is a wonderful session beer with a deep gold colour and floral aroma, redolent of the excellent bitters available from the West Midlands such as Hobsons and Holdens. With five different hop varieties in the brew it certainly has a distinctive flavour.

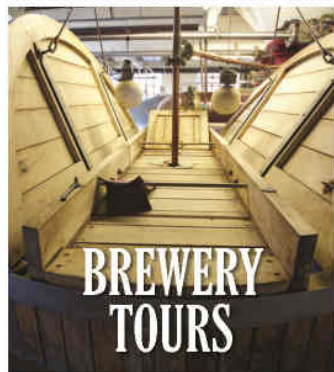
Brewing certainly has its moments and WHB faced a horrendous time when the boiler blew up in June 2022. It was a tumultuous moment when Anneli and fellow brewer Alex left, ending with the brewery facing two months downtime and the brewing process being contracted out to Titanic, Arkells and Navigation. This series of events brought about some huge changes for WHB, culminating in Titanic disposing of its shareholding to South Oxfordshire Brewing. By acting promptly, Gav was able to provide stewardship for the business at a moment of crisis. Simultaneously, founding partner Andy Wilson was able to realise his exit strategy and sell his stake to the new owners.

I asked Gav about brew-

Continued on page 24

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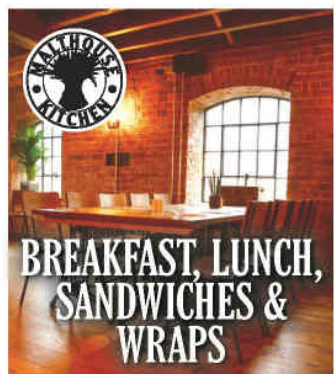
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ing and his typical day. "I arrive at the brewery before 7am to ensure everything is underway and aim to finish by about 3pm. We tend to brew most days and the 6.5 barrel plant can be cranked up to produce nine brews a week." Gav is complemented by a small team of three and I was introduced to assistant brewer Thom Hays who enjoys a multiplicity of roles.

Gav explained that beer production is around 85% of what it was pre-Covid and this seems to be normal among the local breweries with whom I have been in contact.

With beer production remaining below pre-pandemic levels, I put it to Gav that continuing with the Luna subsidiary was a waste of valuable resources.

"It all started with an idea from Anneli when she was at



*White Horse head brewer Gav Stanton.*

Titanic, and before she headed south to oversee WHB. It had always been her ambition to start an offshoot as a platform for collaboration brews coupled with an opportunity to consider specialist varieties

while WHB continued to focus on its core range."

This was seen as a pioneering move and a prescient one given the different varieties of beer that are available today. Coincidentally, he is about to release a batch of New Zealand IPA at 6% abv for the forthcoming SIBA awards, and feels confident the brew will go down a hit with his contemporaries. Looks like Luna is here to stay with such passion and enthusiasm from a key figure in the local brewing fraternity.

I parted company with Gav and Albert and looked forward to meeting up again at the forthcoming Oxford Beer Bash. A likeable bloke and one who is keen to experiment and drive new ideas forward, unlike some dyed-in-the-wool inveterate. I'll drink to that!



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# Oxford Beer Festival to go ahead

## after agreement reached on costs

Oxford CAMRA and Town Hall will work together to make it a success

**OXFORD CAMRA HAD** decided to cancel its annual festival due to increased costs and falling attendance, but will now work with the Town Hall to ensure that a three-day event from Thursday 9 November to Saturday 11 November will be a success.

The Oxford Beer and Cider Festival attracted up to 3,000 visitors in 2019 and in previous years, before the 2020 and 2021 events were cancelled due to Covid. When a two-day festival was reinstated for 2022, attendance slumped to under 2,000 as many older customers stayed away, with the declining number of people working in the city centre being another factor.

"We are very pleased that Oxford City Council has shown some flexibility, and thanks in particular to Councillor Ed Turner for calling interested parties together to work out a solution," said Oxford CAMRA spokesman Dave Richardson.

"We had started looking at other possible venues including Brookes University and the King's Centre in Osney Mead, but nowhere compares to the Town Hall for convenience and atmosphere, as people really appreciate its city centre location and Victorian splendour.

"The festival was first held



*Volunteers Mark Geeson (left) and Michael Corless dispensed excellent beers and advice.*

at the Town Hall in 1998 and became one of the most successful public events in the city, providing a major economic boost to pubs, restaurants, cafes, shops and other businesses as people poured in every year from near and far. But then came Covid, and this year both the Town Hall and ourselves faced major increases in costs. We are very pleased to have found a way forward."

Saturday opening was abandoned in 2022 as attendance had been low on Saturdays for many years, and not enough to cover costs. The return to a three-day event this year will see some beers held back for Saturday, and the main auditorium may be reconfigured to provide more seating

space.

The Town Hall will also promote the festival strongly, as Councillor Turner, deputy leader and cabinet member for finance and asset management, explained.

"The Oxford Beer and Cider Festival is a terrific event and Oxford Town Hall is its home," he said. "We want it back not just this year, but for the long term, and we hope to have found a way to make that possible. Our superb town hall and communications teams will do all they can to promote the festival to maximise the attendance and promote enjoyment of real ale, cider and perry, including products from Oxford's incredibly dynamic local brewing landscape."



As originally reported in April, Oxford CAMRA had decided not to go ahead with this year's festival as projected costs for hiring the Town Hall had increased from about £7,000 to £10,000 for the same two-day event as last year, with a day either side for setting up and taking down. Returning to a three-day event still involves a degree of risk, which could mean an increase in prices paid at the door and for beer and cider. Other economies could be made, including cutting back on the beer order, as so much had to be poured away in 2022.

Last year, the festival had 120 real ales and 30 ciders, with around 30 local breweries being invited and a Beer of the Festival chosen by a tasting panel – Little Ox's Yabba Dabba Doo was the overall winner. The festival was staffed by over 80 volunteers, who are now urged to put the dates of Thursday 9 November to Saturday 11 November in their diaries. Set-up day will be Wednesday 8 November and take-down day Sunday 12 November, when many volunteers – including some with special skills – are needed.

Public demand for beer festivals is still strong, as at the Perch near Oxford over the weekend of 29-30 April, which was close to selling out by Sunday afternoon with a wide choice of mainly local beers. Upcoming festivals include the Beer and Music Festival at the Nag's Head, Abingdon on 5-8 May, the Big Oxford Beer Bash in South Park on 20 May, a festival at the White Hart in Headington on the same date, the Chadlington Beer Festival on 3 June and the Charlbury Beer Festival on 24 June.



*The first afternoon saw a steady stream of visitors before the evening rush.*

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# Is this the future? ChatGPT in tap takeover!

**Graham Shelton**, who led the community buy-out of the Red Lion at Northmoor, considers the potential of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in running pubs. Then he asks the ChatGPT bot to write an article about the real ale pubs of Oxford

**THE YEAR IS** 2025 and *Oxford Drinker* editor Dave Richardson walks into the Techno-Bar, one of the few remaining drinking establishments in the South of England. "A pint of your usual, Dave? I saw your car pulling in, so I have one already poured for you."

"How did you know it was me and what I was going to order?" says Dave in surprise. "I've never been here before!"

ENID, younger second cousin of ERNIE (Electronic Random Number Indicator Equipment) is smart and a member of the Generative Pre-Trained Transformer (GPT) family. She knows a lot about Dave: his birthday, where he lives, which car he drives, his favourite beers, the name of his pet parrot and what he does in his spare time.

ENID is a Trainable Machine, and she doesn't need code in order to learn. She spent four years at Artificial Intelligence (AI) University, studying the entire Internet with the other open-AI students from ChatGPT, so she knows a lot about all 70 million of us in the UK, and quite



a bit about the other seven billion people around the world as well. She's a great conversationalist too. Philosophy, art, movies, science, films, pop music: she is happy to follow your lead on any subject.

Not surprisingly, ENID manages the bar with speed and skill, and doesn't seem to mind that she has to do all the work because the Techno-Bar can't afford to pay people anymore.

Dave and I came in to have a chat about AI and the future of pubs, but he finds ENID rather intriguing, so it is hard to get him to concentrate. He is getting on rather well too. He finds out that

ENID stands for Electronic Neurogenic Intelligence Device, and that she does all her shopping at Amazon who, along with Microsoft and Google, develop most of the leading AI technology. She loves their sophisticated problem-solving abilities. Dave agrees and I see that if I don't drag him away, they'll soon be swapping IP addresses.

I try to explain that she isn't intelligent, that she doesn't have emotions or much in the way of creativity, and that she gets a bit lost unless she has a set of rules to follow, along with a big bank of relevant data. She's pretty good at covering it up, though, and sees no problem in making up plausible stuff that isn't true. I explain that she is a large language model, and am relieved when Dave agrees and says she isn't really his type.

So are we going to see more of ENID? Hopefully not behind the bar. But for stock control, ordering, and managing repetitive tasks, she's ideal. Her AI friends are pretty good too, at controlling our cars, washing machines, central heating and fridges. But for those emotionally driven human parts of the hospitality business, she is going to struggle. The worry is that she has several children already and who knows what they will be able to do? Fortunately, I'll be too old to care.

P.S. Only some of this was made up, and none of it was written by ChatGPT! Now let's see how "she" coped when asked to write 500 words on the real ale pubs of Oxford, in the style of Jeremy Clarkson. Corrections are by Dave Richardson.

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Continued on page 30

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Ladies and gentlemen, it's time to talk about real ale pubs in Oxford. Now, I know what you're thinking.

"Clarkson, you old dog, aren't real ale pubs just for old men with beards?" Well, let me tell you, my friends, nothing could be further from the truth. Real ale pubs are for everyone, from the seasoned connoisseur to the casual drinker looking for a tasty pint. And Oxford has some of the best real ale pubs in the country.

Let's start with the Royal Blenheim. This historic pub has been serving up delicious beer since the 1800s, and it's not hard to see why it's still going strong today. With a wide selection of ales from local and national breweries, you're sure to find something you like here. And if you're feeling peckish, their menu of classic pub fare is sure to hit the spot. *[The Royal Blenheim stopped selling food a few years ago.]*

Next up, we have the White Hart. This charming pub is tucked away on a quiet street in Jericho *[Really? There were several White Harts in Oxford but never one in Jericho. Those still open today are in Headington and Wolvercote.]* and it's well worth seeking out. Their rotating selection of ales means there's always something new to try, and their cosy atmosphere is perfect for a relaxing drink with friends. And if you're feeling adventurous, their selection of ciders and perries is not to be missed.

Of course, we can't talk about real ale pubs in Oxford without mentioning the Turf Tavern. This iconic pub is a favourite among locals and tourists alike, and it's not hard to see why. With a wide selection



*The White Hart, Headington... or Jericho?*

of ales and ciders, as well as a menu of delicious pub grub, it's the perfect spot for a night out. And the pub's famous "inscriptions" (including one allegedly written by Bill Clinton) are a must-see for anyone visiting Oxford.

But let's not forget about the King's Arms. This cosy pub *[The back rooms may be cosy but...]* is tucked away on a side street just off Broad Street and it's the perfect spot for a quiet pint or two *[It's always raucous when I go in.]* Their rotating selection of ales means there's always something new to try, and their menu of traditional pub food is sure to satisfy. And if you're looking for a spot to catch up with friends or play a game of darts, their upstairs room is the perfect spot. *[There is no darts board, or upstairs rooms open to the public.]*

So there you have it, folks. Oxford may be famous for its university, its history and its beautiful architecture, but it's also home to some of the best real ale pubs in the country. From cosy neighbourhood pubs to historic watering holes, there's something for everyone. So what are you waiting for? Grab a pint, find a cosy spot, and enjoy the deliciousness that is Oxford real ale. Cheers!



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# The Broad Face Abingdon

Oxford CAMRA Town and Village Pub of the Year 2023



Welcome to the Broad Face in the heart of Abingdon. Our aim is to be a quality pub showcasing the best of local produce and providing a warm welcome to locals and visitors alike.

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.

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