

Issue 120
Autumn 2023

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the Oxford Drinker



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Cover: Volunteer Mark Geeson dispenses excellent beer and advice at the 2022 Oxford Beer and Cider Festival. This year's event will be held at Oxford Town Hall from Thursday 9 November to Saturday 11 November. Inset: Named after Fred Flintstone's famous catchphrase, Little Ox's Yabba Dabba Doo was voted Beer of the Festival last year.

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.

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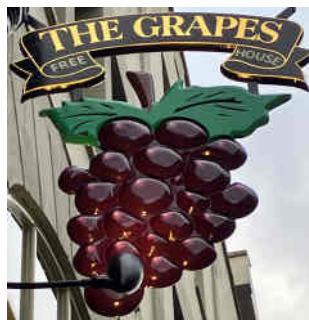
Welcome

...as "hope springs eternal" on the Oxfordshire pub scene

I'VE GAINED A lot of knowledge about the pubs industry over the last 10 years, and people sometimes ask me if I'd ever run a pub myself. I look after my bank balance and my sanity too carefully to ever consider that, but as I look around Oxford and around the county I see there are many who are keen to join the fray.

Hope does indeed spring eternal, despite a brutal cost-of-living crisis and runaway inflation coming hard on the heels of Covid's lingering effects, with shortages of staff ongoing. The evidence is here for you to read about with the Grapes in Oxford (above) re-opening in August, and the same canny operator soon to re-open the Gardener's Arms in North Parade Avenue. There are even signs of life at the long-closed Eagle and Child, while the ongoing success of the Lamb and Flag proves that being closed for a good while doesn't mean a pub can't be thriving again.

The picture is more mixed in smaller towns and villages, but in these pages you will also read about more planned re-openings as well as closures. It's a great shame to see Drummer's Bar in Witney give up the ghost, following on from closure of another micro-pub, the Bailiff's Tap in Banbury, during the pandemic. The Black Prince in Woodstock will also be missed, but Oak Taverns has bought the Crown at Marcham (closed for a year) and there are other revivals in the pipeline.



Oxfordshire is again bucking the national trend, but that doesn't mean there aren't severe and ongoing problems for the pubs industry. It's the same for breweries, and with the exception of Philsters, a very small operation, we aren't aware of any local brewery that has ceased trading recently.

All our local breweries and many from further afield will be invited to the 24th Oxford Beer and Cider Festival, to be held at the Town Hall (again over three days) from Thursday 9 to Saturday 11 November. You can read about the festival's origins inside, so put those dates in your diaries and prepare for a treat.

This edition of *the Oxford Drinker* has a record number of contributors, as Pete Flynn, Tony Goulding, Steven Lyne, Graham Shelton, Paul Silcock and Steve Thompson have all written thought-provoking articles for you to mull over. We are one of very few CAMRA magazines to have regular contributions from serving landlords, and my particular thanks go to Paul and now Steven for their involvement.

Enjoy your autumn drinking in pubs, taprooms and festivals, and don't forget to go online for regular updates.

DAVE RICHARDSON

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Pub, Brewery and Festival News

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Grapes re-opens

With Gardener's Arms to follow



The Grapes, before and after.

The Grapes in Oxford re-opened on 3 August, and days later it was announced that the company now running it would be re-opening the Gardener's Arms in North Parade Avenue with a target date of late September. The company running them is a small London-based group whose first pub opened in 1974, the Morgan Pub Collective.

The Grapes had been closed since December 2021. Morgan Pub Collective, founded by Dick Morgan, first expressed interest soon after then to the building's owner, Oxford City Council. But there



were complications relating to the licence and the lease, the pub having been run by West Berkshire Brewery and Bath Ales in the last decade.

Landlord Johnny Roberts returns to George Street three years after leaving the Four Candles, where he was assistant manager, moving in Sep-

tember 2020 to the White House in Bladon. Eight hand pumps are available, with a wide choice of local real ales in the first few weeks plus highly regarded beers from further afield, including Harvey's Sussex Best. Two real ciders were scheduled for re-opening, Snails Bank's Apple

Hog and one from the Lilley's range.

"As at the Four Candles and the White House, I am trying to provide a range of different strength ales from very pale to dark," explained Johnny. "Our real ales are priced around the £4.95 a pint mark, and with Wetherspoon and the Wig & Pen as neighbours, there's no point going for ridiculous prices. Most of the real ales are local, and there's a 10% discount for CAMRA members."

Keg ale and lager drinkers are also well catered for with no fewer than 40 keg lines, some of them duplicated, including well-known international brands but also local suppliers. But there are changes inside, including removal of the partitions along the wall to create more seating capacity at tables with stools.

While the Grapes is a free house, the Gardener's Arms in North Parade Avenue – not to be confused with a pub of

the same name in nearby Plantation Road – is a Greene King tenancy. It closed last November after long-serving landlords David and Jenny Rhymes retired, but the brewery was struggling to attract interest as the original asking price of £42,875 up-front and £50,000 annual rent was later reduced to £36,625 and £35,000 respectively.

For more on this story, read the *Oxford Drinker* online.

Hitchcox Cider set for major expansion

Real ale drinkers are getting the chance to try more cask-conditioned ciders from a local supplier as Hitchcox continues its drive to sign up more pubs and beer festivals. The company, based on a farm near Chalgrove in South Oxfordshire, has taken on experienced local pub operator Mat Burden to develop new sales outlets, and has also installed a new bottling plant available also to small breweries.

Among the first Oxford pubs to take Hitchcox ciders are the Wheatsheaf, White Rabbit, Rose and Crown, Teardrop bar, and the Victoria in Jericho. It will have a major presence of four traditional plus four varied fruit ciders on cask at the Oxford Beer and Cider Festival, and before that will supply the Headington Beer Festival at the Mason's Arms.

Founded in 2010 by Toby Hitchcox, the company operates a taproom at its farm, open from Wednesdays to Fridays, and this will soon be expanded. Available on draught during a recent visit were apple ciders Medium Dry (6.4%), Dry (6.2%) and Medi-



Mat Burden at Hitchcox.

um (5.6%), plus fruit ciders Old Rusty and Black Panther (both 4%).

As ciders can be supplied in casks, kegs, "bag in the box" or 500ml bottles, pubs don't have to make the same commitment to Hitchcox as to a brewery. This is a major advantage when pubs are tied to major suppliers or have few hand pumps available for guest brews.

"Some pubs are sceptical because they have these agreements in place, and because cider has never been a big thing in Oxfordshire," said Mat. "But at the Wheat-

sheaf we are now out-selling the big names, and having started with bottles they have gone on to 'bag in the box' and hand pump.

"We are not like big cider companies, using a completely different process with pure juice, not concentrate. We use no artificial sweetener and fermentation is from one to three years. Real cider is still in its early days, but in a few years time it could develop like small breweries have done."

For more on this story, read the *Oxford Drinker* online.

Pub, Brewery and Festival News

Pub of the Year chosen

A village pub near Banbury has a chance of becoming top pub in the whole country after being voted Oxfordshire and regional Pub of the Year by CAMRA members. The Butcher's Arms in Balscote, near Wroxton, is a village local owned by Hook Norton brewery. Two of its beers – typically Hooky and Old Hooky – are served direct from casks behind the bar rather than from hand pumps. It has been a Hook Norton pub since 1878.

First it was voted Oxfordshire Pub of the Year, other finalists being the Broad Face in Abingdon, the King's Arms in Wantage and the George in Sutton Courtenay. CAMRA members who voted had to visit all four pubs and score them using a range of criteria, with the quality (not quantity) of real ale, cider and perry being the most important. Pub staff's promotion and knowledge of real ale is also very important, with other categories including cleanliness and hygiene, community focus and atmosphere, service and welcome, style and décor, sympathy with CAMRA's aims, and overall impression and value.

The Butcher's Arms then came up against the Berkshire and Buckinghamshire county winners, the Bell at Aldworth and Bird in Hand at Princes Risborough, to become Central Southern region Pub of the Year. This is one of 16 regional finalists around the UK and the eventual winner – chosen by the CAMRA National Executive – will be announced in 2024.

For more on this story, read the *Oxford Drinker* online.



Butcher's Arms, Balscote.

Broad Face, Abingdon

The company running Oxford CAMRA's Town and Village Pub of the Year has appointed liquidators and is to be wound up. The pub is still trading but landlady Kealey Hitchings announced her intention to leave, with all staff telling customers they didn't know what was happening. The pub is owned by Greene King, which would presumably re-let it if Vital Events, the company leasing it, is wound up.

"I can't tell you anything regarding what's happening with the pub, as I have not been informed," she said. "I sadly will be leaving the Broad Face, and my last day will be 10 September. The Broad Face is a fantastic pub, and in my eyes can continue to be a great pub. I do hope it continues to serve great beer and food, and it will always have a very special place in my heart. I have enjoyed managing the Broadie and will miss it very much."

Loss of the Broad Face or a different style of operation would be a major blow to Abingdon and to CAMRA. Vital Events also runs the King Charles Tavern pub in Newbury, also still trading. Director Imran Khan, known as Joshua, had not responded to requests for comment as we went to press.

Old Anchor Inn, Abingdon

Greene King has confirmed that it is ending its involvement in this Thames-side pub, which closed in May, raising hopes that it might be taken over by an independent operator. "We have explored options for the ongoing operation of the Old Anchor Inn but have reluctantly concluded we are no longer the most appropriate operator for the pub," said the brewery. "We are therefore in discussion about ending our involvement with the pub with representatives of the freehold owner."

Crooked House, near Dudley

The fire that destroyed this “national treasure” of a pub in the West Midlands, swiftly followed by its demolition, has awakened memories of two Oxford pubs that burned down in what were then considered by some to be suspicious circumstances.

In July 2006, the King of Prussia, the only pub in Rose Hill, burned down in the early hours. The pub was closed and planning permission had already been obtained to build a store on the site, which is now a Co-op, and since then Rose Hill has no pub. In 2009, the derelict Fox and Hounds, on Abingdon Road, also burned down, with the *Oxford Mail* reporting at the time that a man was arrested on suspicion of arson but later released without charge. It was later demolished and a Tesco Express store now stands there.

The Crooked House was visited several times by Oxford CAMRA minibus trips to the Black Country, and featured on the cover of Issue 83 of *the Oxford Drinker*. What happened to it has caused a national outcry with petitions demanding that owners of the site should be made to rebuild it, after it emerged that fire-fighters had been blocked from attending by mounds of earth, and that demolition equipment had reportedly been seen nearby since before the fire. The former Banks's pub, recently sold by Marston's to a developer, was remarkable because of its crooked appearance, caused by subsidence.

CAMRA Chairman Nik Antona said: “The case of the Crooked House is a national tragedy, and we have now learnt that the full demolition



Oxford CAMRA visits the Crooked House in 2014 – and the camera is being held straight!

of the building was not required following the safety inspection. The police and council must both act swiftly to investigate the fire and subsequent demolition of the building.

“Despite the Government granting full planning protection to pubs in 2017 – meaning that change of use or demolition requires planning permission – we continue to see developers flouting the rules with pubs routinely converted or demolished without that permission in place.”

Cricketer's Arms, Littleworth

Another *Good Beer Guide* listed pub, the Cricketer's in Littleworth, on the outskirts of Wheatley, closed down on 30 July. The future of the independently owned and operated pub is unknown, having been taken over in 2020 by David Nelms. He wrote to customers in a recent Facebook post: “It's been a pleasure to serve you over the years and hopefully (I'll) be back behind the bar one day in the future.” A builder who lives locally, he leased the free house for three years from previous owner Stuart Bull, a website designer who had returned to Sheffield with wife Angie. Under Stuart's 11-

year ownership the Cricketer's ran regular beer and sausage festivals, which David continued, and secured a place in the *Good Beer Guide*.

Crown, Marcham

The only pub in this village near Abingdon has been bought by Oak Taverns from Admiral. Closed last summer, the former Morland pub was the subject of a community buy-out bid, but villagers were knocked back when Vale of White Horse district council refused to grant an Asset of Community Value (ACV) order. It will hopefully re-open around the end of September as the latest in Oak Taverns' stable of real ale pubs, none of which serve food although food vans sometimes trade nearby. Its most recent previous purchases were the Sun Inn in Wheatley and Cross Keys in Wallingford, and it operates the top real ale pub in Thame (the Cross Keys), Bicester (the Angel), Faringdon (the Swan), Chinnor (the Red Lion) and Sutton Courtenay (the George). It also operates the King's Arms in Wantage, voted Pub of the Year by CAMRA's White Horse branch, and a few pubs in neighbouring counties.

Pub, Brewery and Festival News



Adam Manning at the King's Arms, Kidlington.

King's Arms, Kidlington

Briefly closed for modernisation, this pub on The Moors has re-opened following the retirement of long-serving couple Chris and Gerry McGrath. It is now under the management of Adam Manning, whose two five-year stints at the Red Lion in Kidlington gave him the experience and confidence to take it on. The two bars have been knocked into one brighter room, with Adam saying most locals now regard this as the right decision despite initial misgivings. A lounge bar with function space is being created in a historic stone building at the rear, which will open at weekends when food and live music are also planned.

The King's Arms is a privately owned free house, but as Carlsberg Marston's helped fit out the cellar, six of the

eight keg lines sell their beers or partners. Four real ales are retained with Wainwright's Gold and a Little Ox beer (such as Yabba Dabba Doo or Ox Blood) being regulars, plus local or national guest beers which were White Horse The Dons' Dark Ale and Wriggley Monkey's Charabanc ruby ale on a recent visit. It is open from 12am-11pm every day.

Red Lion, Yarnton

This pub is currently the subject of an Asset of Community Value (ACV) order giving villagers six months to put together a buy-out bid. An active campaign has been launched to save the pub, and full details are on the Save the Red Lion Yarnton Facebook page organised by Leanne Charlett, whose parents ran the pub when she was a child.

Greene King

The largest pub operator around Oxford has become the first major brewer to invest in the production of 4.5-gallon pins, which could mean a wider choice of real ales at its own pubs and tenanted houses. Half the size of the 9-gallon firkins used by most brewers, it will allow pubs to keep real ales on at times of lower demand, as they would need to serve only 12 pints a day, rather than 24, to keep the beer fresh.

The brewer has rolled out cask pins to all managed, leased, tenanted and free trade customers starting with its seasonal Fresh Cask Releases. The first seasonal beers to be available in pins were Ale Fresco, a golden ale, and New Tricks, a collaboration with Nethergate brewery.

All Greene King owned and operated pubs are now offering a 10% discount to CAMRA members on cask ales, while M&B pubs are offering 20p a pint off.

The Wolvercote, Wolvercote

This is the new name for the former Jacob's Inn – and before that the Red Lion – in Wolvercote, on the northern edge of Oxford beside Port Meadow. The pub was closed for a few weeks having been an up-market dining pub. Jonathan Bailey and Lynn Norwood, who now run it, aim to create a more traditional atmosphere in the front bar with up to four real ales from the Marston's range, the choice being Brakspear Oxford Gold and Ringwood Razorbark on re-opening.



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Pub, Brewery and Festival News



Tommy Pritchard at the Fox, Boars Hill.

Fox, Boars Hill

Re-opened in March 2022 after many years of decline under various leaseholders and pubcos, this imposing old country pub in a wealthy village just outside Oxford is thriving again under the management of experienced local landlord Tommy Pritchard. Up to four real ales are usually on offer, with a bar atmosphere provided in parts of a pub which is also re-establishing its reputation for food and offers fine views over the countryside.

One regular beer is supplied by Timothy Taylor, but rather than the ubiquitous Landlord this is usually Bolt-maker, a previous CAMRA national champion. One or two beers are usually supplied from Oxford Brewery (formerly Shotover), often Prospect or Trinity. The other pump rotates, with recent offerings including Tring's Side Pocket for a Toad, a Butcombe beer and Woodforde's Wherry.

Tommy, who is also head

chef, said he was determined to retain a pub atmosphere although much of the pub is laid out for dining. Previously working in Oxford pubs including the Bear Inn and the Punter, his vision is for a traditional village pub with good food on offer. It is a characterful old pub with exposed beams and an ancient fireplace, being owned by Heineken's Star Pubs and Bars division.

Eagle and Child, Oxford

Closed since March 2020 when the first Covid lockdown took effect, this historic pub famous for its association with writers J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis is subject to a planning application to build a ground floor rear extension. This is seen as a positive step towards re-opening, after owner St John's College gave up on plans to create a boutique hotel above it – a move which would have required massive investment by an incoming pub company.

Drummer's Bar, Witney

Witney's first and only micro-pub shut abruptly on 23 July, although there remained some hope of re-opening under different owners and possibly a different name. The closure came as a surprise to regulars although the business's owner, Simon Scamp, made no secret of his wish to retire and move on from day-to-day running of the pub.

Closure was hastened by a decision by West Oxfordshire district council to enforce its denial of retrospective planning permission for a conservatory added to the front of the building during the Covid restrictions, which allowed Drummer's to effectively double capacity. It built up a loyal following and became first stop in Witney for many beer aficionados, and was in the *Good Beer Guide*.

The bar opened in 2018 as Oxbrew, taking the same name as the brewery started in Enstone in 2016 by Simon and his stepson, Aaron Baldwin. Oxbrew merged its operations with Little Ox in Freeland in 2019 as Little Ox Brew Co, with Simon renaming the bar Drummer's.

Bull, Great Milton

One of the first Community-Owned pubs in Oxfordshire, situated off the A329 road near Thame, is now privately owned by a local resident and run by a landlady who previously worked at the Brewery Tap in Abingdon, Flora Noble. A refurbishment is planned and a return to offering more of a pub than a gastro-pub atmosphere.

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On the Front Lyne

Key to pub success?

Consistency

Steven Lyne (below) of Oxford's Royal Blenheim discusses the critical thing pubs need to do to succeed



WITH THE CLOSURE rate of pubs across the country continuing at worrying levels, breweries and landlords have been frantically adjusting their businesses to cope with new trends and ever-changing economic factors. What does the modern pub need to focus on, to ensure that customers keep coming back and the doors stay open?

Pub closures have risen at an alarming rate, and are now at their highest rate in a decade. Pubs already face daily challenges in maintaining a viable and thriving business and to make matters worse,

we are currently experiencing a perfect storm. With the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, rising costs in utilities and lingering debts, it is more difficult than ever to recover and stabilise from the difficult years of trade during the pandemic.

Over the past few years, it has been interesting to see how pubs have taken grip of the challenges they face and have tried to re-imagine their venues. Some have worked out better than others, but I have seen plenty of fantastic projects. The successful ones have injected new life into their proud places of work.

Vibrant atmospheres, fantastic drinks and punters leaving with a new firm favourite local. What are these pubs doing that the quieter ones are not?

I find it quite difficult being a landlord of a pub and walking into other venues sometimes. I seem to almost always switch into "work mode", spotting issues and noticing the condition of my ale. What would I do or change regarding an issue overheard from another punter's table? Annoyingly, these types of venues always tend to stick out as they've missed something critical that would end up leaving a customer with a sour visit. And in our current climate, fumbling the ball now may lead to the final whistle being blown sooner than in previous years.

The good pubs, for some reason, never get the shout-out they all deserve, quietly tipping along in good praise and almost always subtly. We all have our firm favourite boozers, and we should wax lyrical about them. Yet for some reason, if you get people taking about pubs, the conversation always starts with ones that aren't quite hitting the spot. I suppose we all like a good moan, but it does highlight an important observation about us punters and landlords. We all love to find the negative in things, but we must dig a little deeper to see what we truly love about our favourite pubs.

Underneath all of what we love about our favourite watering holes is one critical principle: Consistency. It has to be one of the crucial main points that all modern pubs should be focusing on, in what we do and what we promise to our customers. It was the highest item on my



Ensuring the Royal Blenheim remained as consistent as possible has led its customers to know exactly what to expect when they walk through its doors.

list when I first took on my general manager position at the Royal Blenheim. And it was a fairly daunting one as it is something that can't be done in a short time span.

I was 23 and looking at my first senior management position at a much-loved pub. Looking at what I had to work with, I had several large decisions to make, and with a pandemic with unknown troubles lying around the corner, I had to make some bolder choices. One of them was committing the Blenheim to becoming a properly wet-led pub. For those of you who don't know the Blenheim, we have a plethora of lines to utilise in bringing the best beers we can to Oxford city centre. However, in previous years, we had also tried balancing having a kitchen open alongside our drinks offer.

For some reason, one side of the pub always felt like

it was compromising the other. So, in February 2020, I committed us to the wet-led route and promised to ensure only the best quality drinks would be served from our lines. I remember at the time reading articles about how the pandemic could be the nail in the coffin for wet-led pubs. Yet we kept our heads down and slowly battled our way through the pandemic.

Out the other side, I am glad to say we have kept our word. And I won't lie in saying it was easy, but it wasn't any fancy marketing scheme or a prime location that worked in our favour. It was the day-in-day-out consistency of the fundamentals that have allowed us to flourish in our tiny corner of Oxford.

Ensuring we remained as consistent as possible has led our customers to know exactly what to expect when they walk through our doors. A lack

of consistency is often the first thing that starts the brutal cascading effect of a pub going downhill. And consistency is one of the few subtle things that successful modern-day pubs are doing very well. With a reliable expectation of what you will get from a venue, people start coming back regularly and more importantly, they are happy to!

Many people might jump to conclusions too quickly as to what makes a pub a busy and successful venue we love to visit. Is it the brand of drinks it has on offer? Is it because it is cheaper than the competition? Maybe it is its location on the bustling high street?

Rarely is any of that true. More importantly, a consistent venue leads to one of the most satisfying things you can achieve in a business. It is one thing you can never buy and is certainly difficult to earn. Loyalty. And with all the



In February 2020, the Royal Blenheim was committed to becoming a properly wet-led pub.

challenges we face in the coming years, loyalty to a venue will be one of the most critical life-lines a pub can have.

With pubs adjusting their venues to handle all the current challenges we face, everyone loses out if consistency starts to be lacking. It may seem more important than ever to squeeze out savings where possible, maybe by getting cheaper products in. Or where businesses try to do as many things as possible to attract new customers. However, if that means sacrificing a consistent experience to a new patron as they walk through your front door, it is time to refocus and regroup before going any further. We are losing enough pubs as it is, so let's make sure none of our favourites becomes one of them.



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Oxford Beer Festival Past and present

Looking forward to the Oxford Beer Festival – and how it used to be – **Dave Richardson** considers the recent history of CAMRA festivals in the city

CAMRA'S OXFORD BEER and Cider Festival will be held from Thursday 9 to Saturday 11 November this year, but although we'll be celebrating a quarter century at Oxford Town Hall, it hasn't always been plain sailing. It was first held here in 1998, but as we lost 2020 and 2021 to the Covid pandemic, this will in fact be the 24th such event held at this prestigious venue. However, it can trace its roots back further to an event first held in 1994.

Oxford City Council has shown great flexibility in accommodating us again this year, after early fears that the festival would not go ahead due to increased costs. Attendance peaked at up to 3,000 visitors at three-day festivals in 2019 and previous years, but when a two-day festival was reinstated for 2022, attendance slumped to under 2,000 as many older customers stayed away. But with the Town Hall's support we are confident of higher visitor figures again this year, which sees the format return to a festival over three days with some beers held back for consumption on the Saturday.

Look out for publicity nearer the time to know more about what to expect, but we will again have a stellar line-up of real ales and ciders from near and far. As before there will be no keg



*Festival programmes from 1994, 1996 and 1998.
(Thanks to Graham Baker)*

beers or other drinks, but a selection of food from the Town Hall's caterers. The stately and historic Town Hall has won many positive comments from visitors impressed by its grand interior and position at the heart of Oxford, making it much better than any old hall or marquee.

The Beers of the Festival will again be chosen by an expert tasting panel who will consider all the local beers available within a radius of about 30 miles. This year, as the festival falls on Remembrance Weekend, we hope to welcome delegations from Oxford's twin town partners of Bonn (Germany), Grenoble (France), Leiden (Holland) and



Wroclaw (Poland). It promises to be a memorable event.

But to look back at its origins, what was described as the first CAMRA Oxfordshire Beer Festival was held over two days in 1994 at the Bus



A two-day festival was reinstated at the Town Hall in 2022.

Museum in Long Hanborough, between Woodstock and Witney, with admission costing £1. The museum is still going strong, but many of the breweries and beers offered then are no longer with us, including, of course, Oxford brewery Morrells which closed down four years later. Only 25 real ales were provided, plus three ciders, compared to 120 real ales and 25 ciders last year. CAMRA had only 45,000 members back then, but now has over three times that number having celebrated its half century in 2021. There has been enormous growth in the number of breweries, too, although pub numbers have declined rapidly.

In 1994, the only local beers available were Morrells Oxford Bitter and the stronger Graduate

(5.2%), plus Wychwood Shires, Blackwyth Stout and, er... Dog's Bollocks (6.5%). Bodicote Old Original Porter, brewed by the Plough Inn at Bodicote near Banbury, was described as "very rare but well worth seeking out", while its No. 9 Bitter was described as "just what the doctor ordered". This first festival was more a platform for beers from further afield, including some that are still with us including Holden's Mild and Bitter, Woodforde's Wherry, Hop Back Summer Lightning and a future best seller, Timothy Taylor Landlord.

By 1996, still at the Bus Museum but now called the Oxford Beer Festival, there were still fewer than 40 real ales on offer, with the emphasis again on ales not normally

to be found locally. Morland and Hook Norton had joined the range of local brewers, while Wychwood (still independent) again supplied Dog's Bollocks with the programme noting its strength had been reduced to a mere 5.5%: "Mega favourite at the last two festivals. Not just a daft name." Another local product was from the Firkin in Oxford, described as "Oxford's only brew pub when it opened in May 1995, after the Bake House brewery closed down". Firkin beers were brewed at the University & City Arms on Cowley Road, now simply the City Arms, with the Red Lion on Gloucester Green and Jericho Tavern also operating under the Firkin brand.

The 1996 programme (thanks to Graham Baker who made these available) also lamented the state of Oxford's pubs, not realising that much worse times were to come. The Hobgoblin, Wychwood's only pub in Oxford, had been sold to Bass. Banks's had acquired the Red Lion at Wolvercote, while Morrells had "remodelled" the Marlborough House as the Brewery Gate, starting point for brewery tours. Special mention was made of the Wharf House, "an ageing, slowly dying little hostelry" recently purchased by two CAMRA members and "Oxford's only genuine free house". Sadly, it would close for good in 2006. Fuller's and Wadworth were praised for the "true taste" at their pubs in the city.

When the festival lived up to its name by moving to the

Town Hall in 1998, the brakes came off with 120 real ales available over three days from 28-30 May, with admission costing £2, or £1 before 5pm. It boasted beers from every English county plus Wales, Scotland and some islands, with Morrells, Wychwood, Brakspear and Hook Norton all taking their own stands.

"Unfortunately, because of their recent actions one Oxfordshire brewer will not be represented," notes the programme. "Morland has cynically announced the closure of one of the most famous names in English brewing – Ruddles – only months after purchasing it. We cannot condone such practice and expected better of a company who, with the help of CAMRA, themselves fought off the threat of take-over and almost certain closure a few years

ago. A petition against the closure will be circulated at the festival; we hope you will sign it."

The rest, of course, is history. Greene King acquired Morlands in 2000 and closed down its Abingdon brewery, with its brands including Old Speckled Hen produced thereafter in Bury St Edmunds. With Morlands came the Ruddles brand, and a pale not-even-imitation of Ruddles Best (now 3.7%) can still be found at Wetherspoon pubs where it is usually the cheapest real ale on the bar.

From there on, the festival went from strength to strength until Covid hit, with 2022 coming as a reminder that success can't be taken for granted. So come along this year and support us, and let's make it one to remember.



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I WAS IN for a surprise when I met Jim Southey, head brewer and owner of LoveBeer, as Nellie, Purdie and Bonney came bounding towards me barking loudly. If you are familiar with the tasty beers he brews in Milton, near Didcot, you will know that the ales are named after owners' dogs, be it those from LoveBeer or the pubs they supply.

Jim started the business as sole brewer around 2017 following a visit to a brewer friend in Devon, and now has two experienced full-time brewers helping him: Peter Brooke and Harry Benbow. Jim has always had a passion for beer and has brewed on and off for most of his life.

The brewery is situated at the front of his house and comprises a six-barrel plant complemented by a brand new eight-barrel fermenter. "‘Ombibulous’ is the word of the day," Jim told me. With 14 different beers available via his printed menu, the word – meaning sampling all kinds of alcoholic drink – is one to consider. But perhaps not at 9.30am, so I settled for a mug of tea.

I asked Jim how he manages day-to-day running given that some small breweries are succumbing to spiralling costs which they can't pass on to customers. "I'm convinced that we are possibly the only small brewer that relies solely on solar power for the seven-hour production of a brew," he said proudly. His vision is to create a long-term sustainable business free from fossil fuels, whilst saving on costs. He is also encouraging his suppliers to introduce an ethos of sustainability, as some still wrap products in plastic. With a seven-year financial payback, the emphasis is on the longer term.

Beer Heroes

“Ombibulous”?

Fabulous!

Pete Flynn profiles local entrepreneur
Jim Southey of LoveBeer Brewery



The ales are named after owners' dogs, be it those from LoveBeer or the pubs they supply.

Jim is keen to exploit a profitable sales opportunity, as he and his team have an established takeaway service which was set up pre-Covid. His regular beer festivals are popular with CAMRA members and local drinkers alike, with Abingdon Morris Men and local bands performing to around 300 revellers. Working hand in glove with local pubs is certainly a way to get his beers out there, as are farmers' markets, festivals and events. An opportunity to consider a local outlet was passed over this year but other possibilities will arise.

"The current brewing site is at maximum capacity and a difficult decision will be to justify where to move to next,"

he said. Taking a wrecking ball to his delightful house is not an option!

Jim hosts an annual get-together with local CAMRA members to talk about all matters beer. One criticism he has of CAMRA is its primary focus on prices, pubs and customers whilst no mention is made of the complex supply chain structure. Spiralling input costs have resulted in exponential increases in the price of energy and hops, for example, over the past 18 months. Profit margins are going to be higher on beer sold via the brewery shop, farmers' markets and events, so Jim is keen to expand this.

Jim buys his hops, as most small brewers do, from



From left, brewers Peter Brooke and Harry Benbow, and head brewer and owner Jim Southey.

wholesaler Charles Faram Hop Merchants and Factors, which has been around for over 150 years. It provides an artist's palette of flavours to create every type and style of beer, from the traditional hop varieties to exciting new developmental varieties from Faram's own breeding and development programme. Jim is one of the first brewers to get his hands on the Harlequin varietal, a unique UK hop. It is used successfully in the production of Skyfall, a handcrafted golden ale with delicious floral and tropical fruit flavours (according to the LoveBeer website).

Jim is keen to use British hops as they are competitively priced compared with their

American cousins, which can cost three times as much. "It's all about buying in volume with both hops and malt contracted, so you know what amounts to purchase in advance," he said.

LoveBeer produces white label beers for three local pubs: the Fleur de Lys, East Hagbourne; the Jolly Farmers, Oxford; and the Plum Pudding, Milton. The idea is to provide a locally produced house beer for the pub, as more and more people are asking about provenance of the product. What is proving particularly difficult, he told me, is to sell in Oxford pubs as competition is fierce among local free houses.

We talked about his own

pop-up bar which is now open 1.5 days a week, normally serving two guest ales. Appropriately, the name of this smallest of micro-bars is the Doghouse. With bus routes close by, it would be an attractive option to spend a Friday afternoon sampling outstanding ales in the company of Jim, his team and delightful dogs, and it's worth mentioning that the Plum Pudding which serves Jim's OG beer is a five-minute walk away.

I thoroughly enjoyed meeting the team and I'm convinced that the word "ombuluous" will keep me thinking about trying different brews, and hopefully others too.



Go with the flow

IN EARLY JUNE, I took a river walk along the Thames from Folly Bridge along the Towing Path to the **King's Arms** in Sandford-on-Thames via the **Isis Farmhouse** and the **Prince of Wales** in Iffley (where there was unexpected good news). It was my longest Oxford waterways walk so far.

Previous ventures include the River Cherwell from King's Mill Lane to the **Victoria Arms** in Marston (wellies essential in autumn, winter and spring); the Oxford Canal from Hythe Bridge Street to the **Plough** in Wolvercote; and the little-known Castle Mill Stream (a tributary of the Thames) from Folly Bridge through the city centre to Port Meadow. For some reason they all seem to include pubs!

First stop on my latest walk was the hard-to-reach Isis Farmhouse, where I was welcomed by manager Aga Kruger and barman Joey Laird. It was quiet when I arrived at opening time, but I was sure it would be busy later, on such a sunny day. On tap in the bar were Prospect and Trinity by Oxford Brewery (formerly Shotover) and (of course) Isis by Little Ox on keg.

The Isis Farmhouse is probably unique among English pubs in that there is no road access. Morrell's Brewery, which owned the pub from 1855 to 1998, delivered beer in a light hand-drawn cart that could navigate the narrow towpath. Sometimes, supplies even arrived along the river by punt!

Incidentally, until the boundary changes of 1974,

Steve Thompson goes on a route (beer) march from Folly Bridge to Sandford-on-Thames



Barman Joey Laird at the Isis Farmhouse, which has a riverside location but no road access.

the western side of the river was in Berkshire rather than Oxfordshire and this had consequences for the Isis Tavern (as it was then). According to Dave Richardson's book *Oxford Pubs*: "The Berkshire coroner held hearings at the pub between 1850 and 1925 to determine the cause of death of bodies found in the water. Bodies found on the Berkshire side of the river produced a reward of 7s 6d for whoever pulled them out; but Oxfordshire paid only 5s.

You can guess on which side they were always hauled ashore! A landlord of the pub fell in and drowned while fetching water in 1923, when the pub had no running water."

In his *Encyclopaedia of Oxford Pubs, Inns and Taverns*, Derek Honey adds to the sombre tone: "Opposite [the then Isis Tavern] on the other bank is Iffley Lock, first built in 1632... Originally a toll was levied to cross, and no dead bodies were allowed through, either those drowned in the river or on their way to Iffley Church. By doing so a right of way would have been established, and as late as 1948 the toll-keeper refused permission to the police to carry a drowned man over the lock. The lock is now free of tolls."

After the Isis Farmhouse, I crossed the river at Iffley Lock to Iffley Village to check out the Prince of Wales, then closed but due to re-open that weekend (10-11 June) according to manager Sage Dodds. She was busy getting the Wadworth pub ready for business, accompanied by noisy dachshund Rosie.

According to Derek Honey, in 1975 the Prince of Wales "became a 'real ale pub' popular with members of CAMRA and regularly held beer festivals".

Then back on the Towing Path, heading south to Sandford. At the Eastern By-Pass Road, the Towing Path be-



The Prince of Wales in Iffley re-opened in June.



The King's Arms is right beside Sandford Lock.

comes the Thames Path (actually more open field than a path, but easy to cross in dry weather), where I continued to the playfully named island of Fiddler's Elbow as it seemed the best way to reach the King's Arms. This Chef and Brewer pub (Greene King) stocks GK IPA and Abbot, St Austell Tribute and Black Sheep Best Bitter by Black Sheep Brewery in Yorkshire. I enjoyed a well-earned pint of Black Sheep Best Bitter and lunched on fish goujons ciabatta.

Oxford is well known for its

appearances in fiction, and the King's Arms alone has attracted at least two famous names, one real and one fictional. Lewis Carroll, author of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, drew much inspiration from the River Thames in Oxford. A fellow of Christ Church College lecturing in mathematics, he wrote the books to entertain the three young daughters of the College Dean Henry Liddell. In 1856, he stopped on nearby Rose Island for ginger beer and lemonade on the first

known river trip he took with any of the Liddell girls, Alice's older sister Lorina.

In *Tom Brown at Oxford* (1861), the sequel to *Tom Brown's School Days* by Thomas Hughes, Brown foolishly attempts to row a skiff single handed from Folly Bridge through Iffley Lock where, in real life, several inexperienced rowers had drowned. He soon finds himself in difficulties and has to be rescued by a stranger. Hughes writes of Brown and his rescuer: "They met on the bank at the little inn by Sandford Lock, and had a glass of ale, over which Tom confessed that it was the first time he had ever navigated a skiff by himself, and gave a detailed account of his adventures, to the great amusement of his companion."

By contrast, the Isis Farmhouse features hardly at all in Oxford fiction. There is an exception in *Gaudy Night* (1935), one of the popular Lord Peter Wimsey novels by Dorothy L. Sayers. Wimsey and his soon-to-be fiancée Harriet Vane take a punt down the river to where the Thames and Cherwell meet when they notice a stink from the nearby corporation rubbish dump. However, they decide to continue down the Thames and dine at what can only have been the then Isis Tavern.

The 3.4-mile walk from Folly Bridge to the King's Arms took me about two hours because I stopped several times along the way, but it can probably be done in 90 minutes. If you're a bit weary at the end (as I was, more due to the unaccustomed heat than anything else), you can take the city3A bus from Henley Road back to Oxford.



TWO YEARS AGO, we decided to try an experiment in the Gardener's Arms. Forced by the pandemic to adopt table service in 2020 as part of the government's rulings on safe re-opening for pubs, we opted to keep table service when, in July 2021, all Covid restrictions were lifted in England. This wasn't out of, what many of our customers believed, some heightened sense of health and safety, but rather the recognition that in our specific pub, table service was a much better way to run the establishment.

No longer would we have customer-detering queues snake from one side of the pub into the other. During busy periods, this queue was a constant problem we fought to serve through as quickly as possible, watching, as we did so, many would-be customers walk in through the front door, give the queue a quick glance, and wrongly come to the conclusion it was going to take them hours to be served.

Why wouldn't they? It looked like it was 20 deep at the bar! Of course it wasn't. If I had been running a pub that could be 20 deep at the bar I'd have made so much money I would be writing this article on my solid gold laptop on a beach.

Instead of being 20 deep at the bar it was in fact only two deep, and the rest were indulging in that particularly British pastime of politely queuing. Or occasionally impolitely queuing, as the alcohol took them. We (and by we I mean me and my well-trained team of staff) could serve people pretty quickly, but there were always hold-ups. Like "What types of gin

Gardener's World

Back to the bar (by popular demand)

Paul Silcock (below), landlord of the Gardener's Arms in Plantation Road, Oxford, continues his regular column



have you got?", or "I'm sorry, I was too busy talking and I've no idea what I want" (despite having been in the queue for five minutes), or "I'll just have a cappuccino, half-fat oat milk, sugar-free vanilla syrup, foam on the side and with some of those little marshmallows, but not too many."

And these hold-ups would happen because, naturally, people want a choice, and they don't always know where to look for the choices, and then they get to the bar and

still don't know where to look.

But despite our best efforts we would still get this queue, simply because our bar (and we only have one) is about 4 metres across. Yet the pub, on a busy day, could have over 150 people. That's just 2.67cm of bar space per customer. Barely space to get your finger on the bar, let alone see what's on offer.

Table service solved this problem. Take a seat, relax and peruse the food and drinks menu provided by my staff. Then place your order and have your drinks brought to your table.

We didn't even ask customers to scan a QR code and order online, where drinks requests would vanish into the ether and be intercepted by a bartender, or maybe not.

That wasn't the only benefit of table service. We run a busy vegetarian and vegan kitchen, and before we turned to table service customers would order at the bar and be given an order number on a receipt. Serving staff would then have to wander around



Table service in the garden on re-opening day after the first lockdown, 4 July 2020.

the pub calling, in increasing desperation, the order number. If we were lucky, we knew if the customer was inside or outside. If not, the customer would have put the number in his wallet, or lost it, or thought 15 was 50. All the while, the food was growing cooler, and the kitchen was backing up.

So all round, table service worked for us. And for the customer. I've even written articles on how table service worked for us – which makes this one a little pride-swallowing to author.

Because we're not going to keep table service much longer. Not because it slows us down, or is inherently wrong, but because deep down *you* don't want it. Table service is not part of the pub tradition. Even if you really

like not having to queue for ages to get a pint, you miss it all the same. Being jostled, ignored, or slightly covered in someone else's pint, is all part of the pub experience. Table service is for restaurants. And people subconsciously behave as though they were at a restaurant, even when it's a pub.

At least that's my observation.

It's not that table service is bad. In fact, I hope I've demonstrated its functionality, and the reasoning as to why we kept it. But sometimes, what *works* best is not *actually* best.

People just don't want table service in a pub, when they want a pint. And that's the most important thing.

Okay, you may have to wait a little longer to be

served, but if I hadn't written this article you probably wouldn't notice the wait anyway. You'd be stood with friends in the queue, probably talking all the way to the bar instead of deciding if you wanted beer or wine.

We are not simply reversing three years of table service though, because there are things that would be nice to keep. Like a food system where we're not wandering around trying to find who ordered pie. Or a system where a table can run a tab for the evening and settle at the end, rather than after each round.

What all this has shown me, though, is how important it is to listen to what people want. After all, the house is for the public, so it should, and must, run in a way the public want.



THE VILLAGES AROUND Otmoor are very much one pub per community, but we are lucky in that four of the six are free houses. We start our adventure at the **Nut Tree** in Murcot, a former Halls public house which is a delightful old thatch and stone building with a lovely old duck pond at the front. Imogen and Mike North have run this Michelin Star establishment since 2006 and it is a popular fine dining pub. They have, nevertheless, kept a cosy small bar area as you enter the pub for serving two local beers. It is nice to see there is still the Halls of Oxford tile on the front of the building.

A couple of miles down the road, you come to the **Crown**, Charlton-on-Otmoor, now owned by a local couple, Phil and Kerry Baker. They have run this for the past five years very much for the local community. It is closed on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays, and has one changing beer from Vale Brewery, in nearby Brill, on the bar. No food is served, just snacks for the Aunt Sally and football teams, with food vans in the car park on Fridays and Saturdays. The once nearby George and Dragon, however, has been closed for over 40 years.

As we enter Islip, the **Red Lion**, a former Halls coaching inn with a large garden and rear car park, comes into view. After frequent changes of management, it has now settled into being a comfortable food pub and is run by the Aziz Group with popular Indian and British cuisine. The beers served are generally Sharp's Doom Bar, Marston's Pedigree and Timothy Taylor Landlord in this Punch Taverns-owned pub. As we make our way out of the village, we pass the **Swan**, a former Mor-

Tony's Travels

Otmoor: Community pubs and more

Chairman **Tony Goulding** gets back on the road visiting pubs to the east of Oxford



From top, Nut Tree, Murcot, and Crown, Charlton-on-Otmoor.

rells pub, now a high-end restaurant with no real ale.

A mile further on we pass the small hamlet of Noke where the former pub, the Plough, is now a picturesque cottage. Once owned by Courage, it has been closed for the past 30 years.

Diverting off the B4027 road, we come to the **Abingdon Arms** in Beckley, another former Halls pub and more recently run by the Brakspear Pub Company. This failing pub was purchased by the local community in 2017 and is now one of the most popular and well-run establishments in the county. Top-class food is served accompanied by up to four local beers. Dark Horse Stout, which has replaced Guinness, is brewed by White Horse. The rear garden has superb views over Otmoor plain.

Further along the B4027 we come to the **Talkhouse**, Stanton St John, formerly the George. With fine pub food and quality rooms, this is now owned by Fuller's Pub Company. Up to three Fuller's and Dark Star beers are served in comfortable surroundings. The nearby Star Inn, which was run by Wadworth Brewery and owned by Oxford University, closed three years ago and is now awaiting re-development.

As we drive the last mile to the village of Forest Hill, you will notice a large King's Arms pub sign. This pub has been closed for 30 years and is now a private residence. Opposite is the **White Horse**, a former Morrells pub but a free house since 2006. Thai food is served and available for take-away but it is still very much a pub, with Doom Bar and one changing local beer. Despite being popular for food, it still has a darts board on the wall.



White Horse, Forest Hill.

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The Last Drop

Tales from the Nose and Frown

Graham Shelton presents the first, and quite possibly the last, in a new occasional series

THURSDAY EVENING WAS when you could always find Joe in the corner by the fire of the Nose and Frown. He was one of the oldest, but also one of the nicest and funniest men, and he made me welcome from the first moment we arrived in the village.

By contrast, the proprietor of the N&F, Stan, and his common-law wife, Sue, never cracked a smile – ever – always managing a grubby indifference to any overtures of friendliness.

Which was the Nose and which the Frown was often debated by the drinkers, but no conclusion had ever been reached, as Stan and Sue both sported big conks and dour expressions.

The beer was good, though, and that made up for a lot. It was a Clinch's pub with beer brewed at the Eagle Brewery in Witney: nicely kept Light Ale and Brown Ale always on tap. "Above all others" said the clips on the pumps and no one ever disagreed. No guest beers, but no matter. What there was suited the local clientele very well after a hard day.

I quickly learned that you couldn't get a good tale out of



Joe unless he'd had at least three pints and one of his "specials". Nobody except Sue and Joe knew what was in a "special", but it was rumoured to feature vodka (for strength) and cider (for colour) in roughly equal proportions. Importantly, it always did the trick. He must have been a rich man, but I never found out where the money came from, and he never let on.

The first time I ventured

into the pub, it was an early summer evening, and the woodpigeons were shouting insults at each other across the garden. I'd missed the beginning of the conversation in the Public Bar, but Joe was explaining the virtues of the "long-drop", a form of convenience consisting of a hole in the ground and a seat con-

Continued on page 30

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tained within a wooden shed for privacy. His, he explained, was the deluxe version, with pages torn from the *Daily Sketch* for comfort and entertainment.

It wasn't long before the talk had moved on to the Nightsoil Man, Elijah, who came in a horse-drawn cart to remove the "nightsoil" from those civilised souls who had modernised and

replaced the hole in the ground with a bucket. Elijah's job was to empty the bucket and carry away its contents in a slopping container on the back of the cart. He had the best tomato plants in the district.

It being warm work, Elijah had taken off his jacket and, perhaps ill-advisedly, had placed it on the side of the container. They continued their round in companionable if noisome silence until, as is the way of equines, Dobbo the horse suddenly spotted a drain cover in the road and shied as if he had seen a crocodile. The cart jerked, and Elijah's jacket slipped inexorably into the container.

In a flash, Elijah had rolled up his sleeve and plunged his arm in up to his armpit. "I've got it!" he shouted excitedly. "Why did you do that, Elijah?" asked Joe, who had observed everything and was now lying convulsed with laughter in the road. "You can't wear your jacket now, you old wurzel." "I knows that," said Elijah crossly, "but my sandwiches are in



the pocket."

Joe had a lot of stories like that, and one never knew if it was him or one of his "specials" talking. He drove an old Rover pick-up, converted from a saloon by the simple expedient of cutting off the roof at the back and welding up the rear doors. "Even the King of England don't have a motor like mine," he used to say, with no fear of contradiction.

He'd take it around the fields at night with his son standing in the back, shooting rabbits with a rusty .410, and it was quite a few years before his beloved Rover finally split in half as he came up Kingston Hill with two steers in the back. He always drove at high revs and low gear, with the handbrake half on. "I likes to keep her curb chain good and tight," he'd say (a curb chain is used for a horse). "I don't want 'er leaping any 'edges and ditches without my say-so."

Anyway, that's it for now. As Joe would say, "You'll have to come back on Thursday if you wants any more."



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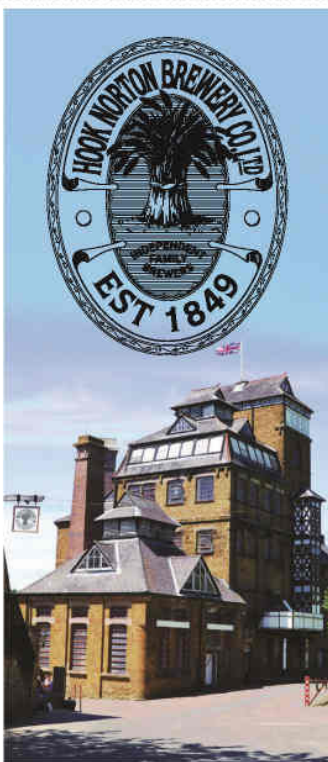
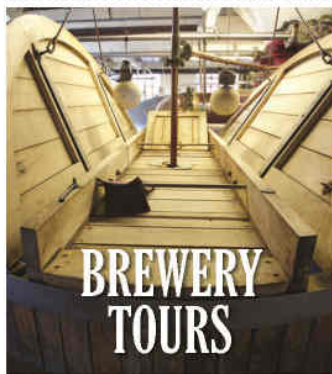
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