

Issue 121  
Winter 2023-2024

**FREE**  
please take one



Campaign  
for  
Real Ale



# the Oxford Drinker

**Sell-out for Beer Festival**



**Thanks to our loyal volunteers**

The free newsletter of the **Oxford** Branch of CAMRA  
For regular updates visit [www.oxforddrinker.camra.org.uk](http://www.oxforddrinker.camra.org.uk)

# Rose and Crown PH

North Parade Avenue, OX2 6LX



4 syphonic  
handpulls



kitchen  
open  
every day

courtyard  
with awning  
and heaters



A warm welcome awaits  
those who enter our door.

Licensees since 1983

T: 01865 510551

E: [halls@roseandcrownoxford.com](mailto:halls@roseandcrownoxford.com)

W: [roseandcrownoxford.com](http://roseandcrownoxford.com)

*Cover: CAMRA volunteers with Councillor Ed Turner (in jacket) before the opening of the 2023 Oxford Beer and Cider Festival at Oxford Town Hall on Thursday 9 November. Front row from left: Steve Lawrence, Tony Goulding, Ed Turner, Matt Bullock, Graham Baker and Grahame Allen. Report on page 20.*

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

4,000 copies are distributed free of charge to pubs across the branch's area, including Oxford, Abingdon, Witney, Eynsham, Kidlington, Bampton and Wheatley and most of the villages in between.

PDF downloads of past issues are available at the Oxford CAMRA website, [www.oxford.camra.org.uk](http://www.oxford.camra.org.uk)

Editorial team:

Editor: Dave Richardson  
[editor@oxford.camra.org.uk](mailto:editor@oxford.camra.org.uk)

Advertising: Oliver Sladen  
[advertising@oxford.camra.org.uk](mailto:advertising@oxford.camra.org.uk)

Design and Production:  
Steve Thompson

Valuable contributions have been received for this issue from Paul Ainsworth, Nick Clements, Pete Flynn, Tony Goulding, Steven Lyne, Graham Shelton, Paul Silcock, Steve Thompson and John Winney.

Please send contributions to the editor at the above email address.

Pub news can be sent to  
[pub-news@oxford.camra.org.uk](mailto:pub-news@oxford.camra.org.uk)

The views expressed in this publication are those of the individual contributors and not necessarily those of Oxford CAMRA, or of CAMRA Limited.

Printed by MRD Digital Print  
[Email mrdigitalprint@gmail.com](mailto:Email mrdigitalprint@gmail.com)

© Copyright Oxford CAMRA 2023

# Welcome

...to a hopeful time  
for city pubs and  
local brewers

**PLANS TO RE-OPEN** the Eagle and Child after refurbishment and conversion of its upper floors are a welcome boost for the Oxford pub scene, following on from re-opening of the Grapes in August and Gardener's Arms, North Parade Avenue in October, both by the Morgan Pub Collective.

Things are stirring in the country too, although some pubs remain closed. Real ale and wet-only operator Oak Taverns is at the forefront of developments, re-opening the Crown in Marcham and buying the Red Lion in Yarnton, which it plans to re-open by Christmas. Both had been closed for over a year.

Although a community buy-out bid failed at the Red Lion, villagers in Stonesfield are re-opening the White Horse while a community bid has been launched for the Fox Inn at Middle Barton. The local scene is indeed much brighter than the national outlook for pubs, which will benefit from a 12-month extension of the 75% reduction in business rates until April 2025.

Re-opening a historic pub is one thing but respecting its heritage quite another, but I'm confident the Eagle and Child is in safe hands. Oxford CAMRA has been invited to meet the new Los Angeles-based owners while work on it continues, and you can read about their plans on the following pages.

Re-opening of the Mitre as Italian restaurant Gusto a year

ago was a major disappointment, as there is nothing to remind you of its history. Let's hope that City Pub Company, new operator of the Plough at 38 and now being bought out by Young's, respects this building's centuries-long history as a pub when it re-opens.

The mood of optimism extends to local independent brewers and cider makers too, despite the long-anticipated closure of Wychwood, owned by the giant Carlsberg Marston's Brewing Company, in November. Most of the local independents supplied the Oxford Beer and Cider Festival in November, and none of them (apart from a very small niche operation) has closed despite the growing number of brewery closures nationally.

The festival was much more successful this year than in 2022, so much so that by mid-afternoon on the Saturday, all the beer had gone. We apologise to the many people turned away, but it has become very difficult to predict how many will attend and how much they will drink after the disappointment of 2022. Online booking, new for 2023, was another unknown, but those who couldn't get in could claim refunds.

*Oxford Drinker* magazine is echoing the upbeat tone, with even more contributors to this edition which goes up to 40 pages rather than the usual 32. Thanks to our advertisers for supporting us, and to Steve Thompson who is in charge of production and Oliver Sladen who handles advertising. Enjoy this bumper edition, and don't forget to go online for regular updates.

**DAVE RICHARDSON**

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

# Pub, Brewery and Festival News

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

## Eagle & Child sold

### but will continue as a pub

The last closed pub in central Oxford, the historic Eagle and Child (right) on St Giles, has been sold to the Ellison Institute of Technology (EIT) which plans to use its upstairs space for meetings and research by students. But it has confirmed that the “Bird and Baby”, as often known, will be open to the public and will continue as a pub.

Oxford CAMRA has welcomed this and called for the historic front part of the pub, with its alcoves, to be retained. Older parts to be kept should also include the space near the bar where the Inklings group of writers, led by J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, held their meetings for many years, and where information about them has been on display. Further back in the narrow pub are modern additions, including a conservatory slated for demolition.

The sale by St John’s College is a surprise, as previously it had been trying to find a company to lease it long term, as with the Lamb and Flag on the opposite side of St Giles, run by a Community-Owned group also called the Inklings. Few people outside its field have heard of EIT, which was founded eight years ago in Los Angeles and is building a new campus in Oxford Science Park. It started as a research and development centre for cancer, health care and global public health; and has since expanded into food security and sustainable agriculture; clean energy and climate change; and government policy and economics.

Some may suspect that the character of the pub will change irrevocably, but at least it is continuing as a pub and if the historic parts are retained, that would satisfy CAMRA, the planners and probably the Tolkien Society, which



has had significant input into past renovations. The pub was run by M&B brand Nicholson’s for many years up to closure on the first Covid lockdown in March 2020, but St John’s had lined up Young’s to take over. That fell through and the Grade 2-listed pub remained closed. It requires significant investment, and no re-opening target date has been announced.

The new owner stated: “EIT will refurbish and re-open the historic pub to the public, while creating meeting spaces for Ellison scholars and EIT Oxford faculty and staff to collaborate and innovate. With design led by Foster + Partners, the rebirth of the Eagle and Child will modernise the space and secure its long-term economic viability.”



North Oxford welcomed a major new player on the real ale scene in early October with the re-opening, after nearly a year's closure, of the Gardener's Arms in North Parade Avenue. Still owned by Greene King but now a free house, it is run by the London-based Morgan Pub Collective which also operates the Grapes in central Oxford, which re-opened in August. The Gardener's has six real ales and 10 keg lines.

Staff and other resources are shared by the two pubs, with landlady at the Gardener's being Jade Harrison. But a major change at the Gardener's is that it doesn't serve food apart from bar snacks such as pies and sausage rolls, whereas the Grapes does serve cooked food. Under its previous long-serving tenants the Gardener's was known for its traditional food, but the pub is now very different in appearance and style although the original layout has been retained.

The pub – not to be confused with the other Gardener's Arms in nearby Plantation Road, which specialises in vegetarian food – has newly installed wood panelling throughout, a brand-new bar front and back bar fitting, as well as new furniture and flooring. But the other big change, apart from the bigger and better range of real ales, is the “young” feel about it, although it still plans to attract a wide-ranging audience.

Whereas previously it was limited to Greene King beers or GK's guest range, now it is free to offer an ever-changing range of independent beer, and it also has a well-stocked fridge with some Belgian classics and more modern offer-

## Gardener's Arms North Parade re-opens



*Pictured on opening night are, from left: Tony Goulding, CAMRA; landlady Jade Harrison; Johnny Roberts, landlord of the Grapes; Oxford Drinker editor Dave Richardson; and Steve Thompson, CAMRA.*

ings. It is offering a 10% discount to CAMRA members while all customers can buy any cask ale for only £3.50 a pint all day, every Monday, plus a loyalty stamp card where every 10th pint is free. The cask line-up in opening week was Harvey's Sussex Best (now a regular, as at the Grapes), Titanic's Plum Porter, Chadlington's Oxford IPA, Vale

Brewery's Gravitas, and Thornbridge's Jaipur. Also on hand pump was Big Smoke brewery's Golden Hour Pale Ale, Big Smoke (from Surrey) being run by James Morgan, son of the group's founder Dick. By week three, the range had been varied to include draught Bass (rare in these parts), Little Ox Yabba Dabba Doo, and Oakham's Citra.

# Pub, Brewery and Festival News

## Plough at 38, Oxford

City Pub Company is to operate its third outlet in Oxford and 44th overall after acquiring Oxford's "newest oldest" pub from local entrepreneur Chris Mulhall. First recorded as an inn in 1656 but closed as a pub in the 1920s, it later becoming a branch of tailor Austin Reed but re-opened as a pub in December 2018.

The Plough at 38 made a successful start, with a pub/café atmosphere on the ground floor and a restaurant upstairs. The quality of its ale (mainly XT/Animal) resulted in inclusion in the 2022 *Good Beer Guide* but by 2023 its opening hours were restricted, as Chris negotiated with companies wanting to take on the lease.

The publicly quoted City Pub Group, already operating 43 pubs in southern England, has run St Aldate's Tavern in Oxford for many years. It also operates café-bar George Street Social in central Oxford (not a real ale venue). The Plough was also attracting interest from a national brewery and pub chain and remained closed at the time of writing, with no indication of a re-opening date.

## Lamb and Flag, Oxford

October 6 marked 12 months since re-opening of the Lamb and Flag on St Giles, which very quickly re-established itself as one of the top real ale pubs in Oxford. In the first 12 months it sold 144,172 pints of local beer, which roughly equates to one pint every 1.7 minutes it has been open. It has also sold over 2,000 sausage rolls but no longer serves meals.

It has hosted beer launches for Siren Craft Brew and BMAN Brewery, and has lots more upcoming beery events in the calendar. Up to eight hand pumps are in use, mainly for local ales but also including one real cider.

## Expansion for Oak Taverns

The Thame-based independent pub chain has been confirmed as new owner of the Red Lion in Yarnton, which it plans to re-open in time for Christmas. This is its third acquisition in less than a year following on from the Sun in Wheatley and the Crown in Marcham, which re-opened at the end of September having been closed for over a year.

This brings its total to 10 in Oxfordshire and 16 overall, all of which concentrate on real ale and none of which serve food, although most of them welcome independent food vans which park outside at busier times. An unsuccessful



Laura Goodwin and Ricky Dawe at the Crown in Marcham.

community buy-out bid was mounted for the Red Lion in Yarnton, closed since August 2022, but it is now in safe hands.

Oak Taverns managing director Simon Collinson said: "We want to replicate the success of the Crown at Marcham, which has been very busy since it re-opened, and garner the support of villagers in Yarnton. We have a tried and tested formula, and the success of the Crown gives us confidence as Marcham is a very similar village."

The Crown's real ale choice on a recent visit included XT4, Animal Brewing Heron, Loose Cannon Number of the Yeast, and Timothy Taylor Landlord. The couple running this pub, Laura Goodwin and Ricky Dawe, said they were enjoying working for an independent company having previously worked for Whitbread and Greene King.

For more on Oak Taverns see page 15.



## REAL ALES BREWED IN SOUTH OXFORDSHIRE

Try our range of over 12 beers  
at LoveBeer Brewery.  
From light to dark, from 3.7% to 5.6%  
In cask or bottle, the choice is yours!



## Come see us for...

- The Dogs of Lovebeer
- Festivals at the Brewery
- Private parties & events
- The DogHouse pop up bar

Fresh Ale Friday (FAF) at the brewery

Visit our website-  
[www.lovebeerbrewery.com](http://www.lovebeerbrewery.com)

Facebook-  
@Lovebeerbrewery

Google Maps-



LoveBeer Brewery Milton OX14 4EJ





# Pub, Brewery and Festival News

## Wychwood Brewery, Witney

The home of Hobgoblin closed its doors in November after Carlsberg Marston's Brewing Company (CMBC) swung the axe on yet another once independent brewery. Production of Hobgoblin will now be concentrated at the group's huge brewery in Burton-on-Trent, and the future of the Witney site is unclear.

The news was long awaited following the closure of CMBC-owned Jennings brewery in Cumbria, and the decision to sell off Ringwood brewery in Hampshire. CMBC has also sold off the former Charles Wells brewery in Bedford to Spanish brewing giant Damm. The group's other major production centre is the former Banks's brewery in Wolverhampton, which has taken over brewing of the Brakspear beers produced in Witney since Brakspear's Henley-on-Thames brewery closed in 2002.

## Ampleforth Arms, Risinghurst

After several years leasing this estate pub in Headington from Star Pubs and Bars, Community-Owned group Amp Community Pub has decided to pull out, with new tenants taking over from 1 December. It was unusual for a Community-Owned group in leasing the pub rather than owning it outright, a model also followed by the White Hart in Wolvercote.

The group said in a statement: "It's hard for us to say but we ended our lease with Star Pubs. We thank you for all your support over the last nine years from a boarded-up, closed pub to a fully operational, fantastic pub at the



*Ampleforth Arms, Risinghurst.*

heart of Risinghurst for all to enjoy. Selva and his team will take over from 1 December. Please help us in welcoming them. We know they will do a lovely job with enhanced food choices."

## Good Beer Guide changes for 2024

Two highly contrasting pubs in Oxford make their first appearance in the guide for 2024 – Teardrop, a tiny bar converted from a stall in Oxford's Covered Market, and the Jolly Farmers, a historic, traditional pub whose main client base is the LGBT+ community.

Returning to the guide for the first time in over 20 years is Greene King pub the White Horse in Ock Street, Abingdon. However, two of the pubs selected for 2024 closed down after the guide went to print and have been removed from the electronic version: Drummers Bar in Witney, and the Cricketer's Arms in Little-

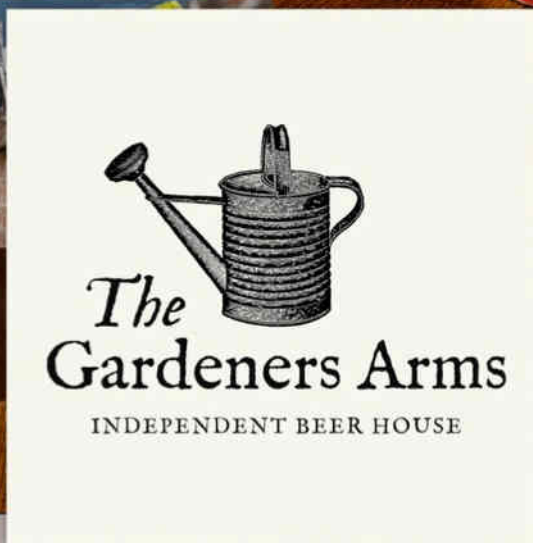
worth. Drummers has since re-opened as the Crafty Pint but doesn't qualify for inclusion.

## Red Lion, Northmoor

The popular couple running this Community-Owned village pub near Witney have announced their intention to leave after 10 years, when their tenancy ends in April 2024.

Ian and Lisa Neale said in a Facebook post: "It is very unusual for pub tenants to stay for 10 years, and we have had an amazing time at the Red Lion, a beautiful pub in a truly special community. It hasn't been easy for anyone in the hospitality business, with the devastating effect of the pandemic and the hefty increases in the costs of utilities and supplies in recent months. So for us it's time to move on. We haven't got a plan yet, but we are looking forward to having a break before looking for new opportunities."





8 North Parade Avenue  
Oxford, OX2 6LX

[www.thegardenersarmspub.co.uk](http://www.thegardenersarmspub.co.uk)

# Pub, Brewery and Festival News



## Harcourt Arms, Oxford (above)

Fuller's has undertaken a major refurbishment of this back street pub in Jericho without altering its character, proving that the pub company is not only interested in larger food-led venues. The Harcourt is a drinks-only pub, and the same approach has now been taken at the Butcher's Arms after Ian Stuart, landlord of the Harcourt, took over this Fuller's pub in Headington when previous tenants Paul and Pippa Hitchcock moved on.

## White Horse, Stonesfield

The long-closed village pub is now in community ownership, and is already opening in a limited way at weekends prior to full re-opening with draught beer next year. It had previously met the asking price of the private owner but had its bid rejected, leading to fears that redevelopment was planned.

The community group is now rallying support as it

pushes ahead with repair and upgrading work in the building and grounds, while discussing options for maximising the potential of the pub and ascertaining the availability of further funding.

## Crafty Pint, Witney

This is the new name for the former Drummers Bar micro-pub, which re-opened in October having been closed abruptly on 23 July. This is its third identity in only five years, having opened as Oxbrew in 2018 but renamed Drummers after Oxbrew brewery was merged into Little Ox. The bar's previous owner, Simon Scamp, has now exited the pubs business with former manager Melanie Cassidy and Ian Walton taking over.

Regulars at the then-closed pub rallied round to remove a conservatory, put up without planning permission, and get it ready for re-opening. Ian explained: "The new name Crafty Pint suits it as we do craft beer, but we also sell the usual wines and

spirits and still have Henry Weston's cider. The aim is to keep the bar as it was – after all, that's why we drank there in the first place. We have had a chat with the planning team and things look good to replace the front with something more in keeping with the conservation area we are in."

## Boundary House, Abingdon

This large Greene King pub on the edge of the town has re-opened after a major revamp, with a greater emphasis on real ale and a much wider food offer. The new bar has a "feature barrel" designed to highlight cask ales and there is also a dedicated area for sports fans. The garden revamp includes a new heated pergola and two new outdoor TVs, and there is a new undercover Aunt Sally area. The refurbishment has created 27 new jobs.

## Plough, Appleton

New landlords Rob Filbrandt and Will Hutchinson have re-opened the village pub off the A420 near Abingdon following refurbishment by Admiral Taverns. Closed for about a year, it now offers real ales including Timothy Taylor Landlord and Sharp's Doom Bar, and it hopes to serve some local ales.

## Old Anchor Inn, Abingdon

Closed since May 2023, this riverside pub has been put out for lease by Fleurets on behalf of its private owners. The former Morland pub was leased by Greene King for many years but is now offered as a free house.

# THE GRAPES

— OXFORD —

The Grapes independent beer house offers an excellent array of draught and bottled beer, fine wines and small batch spirits, freshly prepared food and a very warm welcome.

## WEEKLY OFFERS

### BURGER MONDAY

Any burger + beer, wine or soft drink £14.95

### RIB TUESDAY

BBQ baby back ribs, 'slaw, fries  
+ beer, cider, wine or soft drink £17.95

### WINE WEDNESDAY

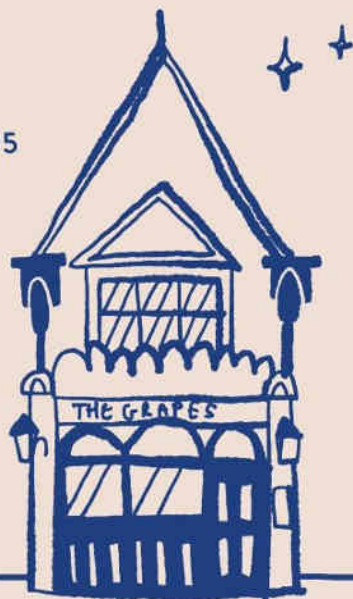
£5 off all bottles of wine & fizz all day

### STEAK THURSDAY

Steak, fries, sides, sauce, salad  
+ beer, cider, wine or soft drink  
Ribeye £17.95 – Fillet £18.95

### TAPAS FRIDAY

4 small plates  
+ a bottle of house wine £29.95



**NOW OPEN!**



# Wheatley pubs past and present

**John Winney** looks at the pubs scene in this village to the east of Oxford

**THERE WERE ONCE** at least 17 pubs in Wheatley. Public drunkenness was such a problem that in 1834 the Vestry (parish) built the “lockup” to hold those intoxicated overnight. First good news, it’s no longer in operation.

When I arrived in 1997 Wheatley was down to eight pubs – still a high number for a village of under 4,000 people. This piece is about those eight. Like almost every village in the country we’ve continued to see further pub closures, but the other good news is the three excellent ones that remain.

It is obvious even before you step through the door of the **King and Queen**, open since 1579, that it has centuries of history. Offering front and back bars with stone open fireplaces, a warm welcome can be expected. The local landlady Tracy Lafford, who previously ran the Railway pub here, keeps an excellent cellar with up to four real ales available from Greene King or guests (pumps in the back bar). It has a good beer garden and is so child friendly they even get free soft drinks. At the time of writing, work is just being completed on the kitchen re-fit. By the time you read this, the plan is to be serving pub classics rather than being wet-led, with opening from 12pm



*King and Queen (above), and “lockup”. (Photos by John Winney)*

each day. There is a darts team, quiz, meat draw and a book club. Yes, it is haunted – and those who believe will argue whether the ghosts are just former humans or include a canine. Well-behaved non-spirit dogs are welcome. It was featured on the reality TV show *Most Haunted*, raising £18,000 for charity.

Once the local courthouse and jail, the **King’s Arms** – open since 1756 – is a food-





*King's Arms.*

led Admiral Taverns pub that tries to go beyond a pub classics menu. It survived a large fire at the end of 2019, in no small part due to its proximity to the wonderful Wheatley Volunteer Fire Station. The £300,000 refit gives it overall a modern feel, but many more original features were retained than might have been expected. With three separate areas and outside space, it's larger than it looks. It normally has one or two real ales from Loose Cannon, and Maria O'Brien has just marked 20 years running the pub.

Having spent a time as a café/bar, the **Sun**, dating from 1780, switched back to a pub in 2022 thanks to acquisition by Oak Taverns which promotes food trucks at its growing stable of excellent wet-led pubs. Though it opened in the 18th century, it is the new kid of the three remaining Wheatley pubs having been serving for less than 250 years! I re-

member in the early 2000s the landlady descending onto the cellar to draw perfect Old Speckled Hen direct from the barrel, but the refit means four lines now feed the hand-pumps, saving time and effort. A range of ad hoc activities from live music to art classes draw in a diverse crowd and the landlord Dimi Cernisevs is keen to make the Sun a well-coming home-from-home, with children and dogs welcome. He stresses that if you have a problem, tell him and he will sort it. It has a good beer garden and wood burners inside keep the chill at bay in winter.

Opened 1881 and closed 2023, the **Cricketer's Arms** in Littleworth, on the edge of Wheatley, saddened a lot of people by its closure. For years it had served excellent beer and even made the *Good Beer Guide*. For a time it only served beer brewed within 36 miles (an over of sixes!). Ultimately, lack of on-

site parking probably did for what was a well-run local pub, had Aunt Sally and ran a popular beer and sausage festival with sausages from the excellent local butcher Cricks.

The **Plough**, opened in 1774, closed in 2019. Its location almost beyond the edge of village meant this small pub with a big garden was struggling for customers for decades. That it made it into the 21st century is testament to the hopes and efforts of the various people who tried very hard, including a time serving Indian food. Ultimately, it proved to be the wrong pub in the wrong place. Now it's used as a sales office for Mobbs builder's merchants, whose yard is just behind. As you drive past it still looks like pub.

Opened in 1864 and closed in 2016, the **Railway** was my local when I arrived in Wheatley. When run by Tracy (now at the King and Queen) it was fantastic, with a great



*The Sun.*

garden and large function room. It served the best ESB I have ever tasted and won multiple awards including Fuller's Pub of the Year in 2002. In the late 1990s, the quality of the Railway proved too strong competition for both the White Hart and the Common Room. Ultimately, Fuller's priorities made life impossible for Tracy and Peter Lafford, and after some years with other landlords Fuller's decided to take their profit and sold the site to developers to become 18 up-market retirement homes. In a changing world, such a large village pub certainly faced challenges to make a big return, but those that knew it in its heyday still feel it was a special place.

I never drank in the **White Hart** (opened 1577, closed 1999) as within two years of my arrival in the village it had become an Indian restaurant and more than two decades later, Cinnamons is a much-loved village asset. While in principle any pub closure is sad, many in Wheatley think

that in this case it worked out well.

Originally called the Railway Tavern, the **Common Room** (opened 1871, closed 1999) changed its name in the 1980s to Sandpiper to attract younger customers, before finally becoming the Common Room. In its final years it struggled to win customers with the excellent Railway, King & Queen and Sun so close.

From eight pubs down to three is a dramatic decline, but the remaining pubs keep evolving and there is every reason to hope they will all be successful in the years to come. We have car parking and we're on the 400, 280 and 46 bus routes, so pop over and give us a visit.

PS: Technically not a pub, but on the site of the former Red Lion, the **New Club** is Wheatley's other popular bar, with two cask ales. It benefits from a large function room and has lots going on including indoor Aunt Sally (during winter).



*Gone but not forgotten. From top: Cricketer's Arms; the Plough; the Railway; White Hart; Common Room.*



# Hearts of Oak

**Pete Flynn and Nick Clements** describe our second branch tour of Oak Taverns pubs, mainly in the south of the county

**REGULAR READERS WILL**, hopefully, have enjoyed our article in Issue 119 (Summer 2023) focussing on the successful Oak Tavern pubs in the east of Oxford. On this occasion we were looking forward to visiting those in the south and west and to also include that most idyllic of pubs, the Bell at Aldworth, Berkshire, erst-while winner of the prestigious CAMRA National Pub of the Year competition.

We were not disappointed as 15 parched drinkers stood eagerly on the doorstep of the **George**, Sutton Courtenay, the first of our stops on a glorious day out on the minibus. With a flurry of excitement, right on midday, and to the amazement of our host who was not expecting such a large party, the door opened and in we traipsed.

Antipodean landlord Rodney Parker and his wife Hannah have been running the pub since 2019 and offer a selection of local real ales of which I tried one from Love-Beer, and good it was too. Rodney, a former employee of Young's Brewery, is a long-time landlord having worked in London during the 1990s and latterly at the Six Bells in Thame where he was approached by Oak Taverns boss Simon Collinson. "Would you like to run your own pub?" he was asked, and since then



*The George, Sutton Courtenay.*

he and Hannah have not looked back.

The George is very much a locals' pub and although not serving food, offers a full range of assorted deli provisions at the entrance to the pub. Furthermore, a food wagon is in situ once a week providing mouth-watering menu choices to locals and visitors alike. With a super garden at the rear, the gazebo settings provide a satisfying way to enjoy a pint or two of cask ale in a quiet setting.

It was time for us to leave and venture forth to our next pub: the **Cross Keys**, Wallingford. Another proper pub, I thought, as I looked at the contented faces of the customers sat around the cosy rooms. Four cask ales are normally available, including house beer Keys Amber, brewed by XT. My choice was a special beer brewed by XT for the Dead Brewers Society: LX Ale, a recreation of an IPA brewed by

Halls Brewery around 1906. Some Oak Taverns pubs were formerly owned by Halls: the Swan, Faringdon; the Greyhound, Whitchurch; the Angel, Bicester; and the Sun, Wheatley.

Chatting to landlord Dave Howse, who operates the Cross Keys with his wife Emma, was very enjoyable. His passion and enthusiasm are infectious. Prior to taking over the pub 18 months ago, he was associated with a company dealing with decontamination. Jokingly I suggested that he would be a master at keeping beer lines clean, with such unique experience. It was while undertaking bar work at the Red Lion, Chinnor, that Dave was approached by Ian Collinson, the now retired father of Simon, and asked if he wanted to run a pub. "We are doing good business with a real customer focus on providing beer that people want to

drink, while going above and beyond what our owners expect," was the underlying message that Dave is getting across.

The recent Wallingford Bunkfest held annually in the field opposite was a testament to the success of the pub, with the rear car park providing much-needed added space in a marquee, with live bands and food wagons adding to the complexion of the occasion. With locals and dog walkers patronising the pub, and quiz and ukulele nights proving popular, the Cross Keys is a wonderful hub for the community. A recent charity Aunt Sally event raised £500 for a firefighter's charity.

Our next watering hole was the **Greyhound**, Whitchurch which is a quintessential English village nestling beside the River Thames. The village even boasts a toll bridge linking it to Pangbourne, which we managed to circumvent saving us £4. Waiting for our happy throng was a fine selection of ales including two from an eponymously named Broadtown, a small village to the south of Royal Wootton Bassett: Weissse Horse Wheat Beer at 5.8% and Hugellandschaft, a dark Belgian Ale at 6.2%.

I was served by Charlotte Luckman, part of the friendly team running the pub, who told me it was a failing Punch Taverns Inn until Oak Taverns acquired it in July 2021. It is very much a locals' pub and well supported too, which was evident from how busy it was on a Saturday afternoon. Lottie Mitchell is the landlady and her experience of running pubs extends to a two-year stint at the Bird in Hand, Princes Risborough, which featured as an Oak Taverns pub in our previous article.



*Broadtown Brewery beers available at the Greyhound, Whitchurch.*

Our next stop was the **Bell** at Aldworth, not an Oak Taverns pub but independently owned. But alas, our usual route was disrupted due to closure of the bridge at Streatley which delayed our drinking time by about 20 minutes as we headed northwards to the alternative river bridge south of Wallingford. The Bell is such a wonderful pub that I would willingly be delayed double this time, and as usual I was not disappointed.

I met Hugh Macaulay who found time to chat with me and said, "It's always chaos when I'm here!" Rightly so as it was as hectic as ever, as I jostled for a taste of the delicious beer on offer. I settled for a



*The Bell at Aldworth (top) and the gregarious Hugh Macaulay (above).*

pint of Five Giants which is brewed by his son, who has been operating a small brewery at the rear of the pub for about a year. When I asked Hugh if he runs the pub I was told, "Whisper that quietly, my mother is within earshot." Apparently, the pub has been in the same family for 270 years so they must be getting something right, as Hugh mentioned jokingly.

A former CAMRA National Pub of the Year on two occasions, this worthy winner is a timeless portal to days gone by, welcoming to both locals and visitors, the latter evidenced by a troop of Harley Davidson motorbikes parked at the front. **PETE FLYNN**



*The Swan, Faringdon,  
and the Crown, Marcham.*

Hopping back aboard the minibus, we drove 14 miles north from the Bell, with some expansive views across the Berkshire Downs, crossing back into Oxfordshire and into the familiar territory of Wantage. There are a few pubs worthy of a visit in this busy market town but today we were sticking to the Oak Taverns theme and hopped off the bus into the **King's Arms** in Wallingford Street.

Apart from the distraction of a large white shutter to the side, it's an attractive building with a black-and-white frontage and an old Morland ceramic sign in the brickwork at pavement level. Previously a Greene King establishment, the King's Arms was taken over by Oak Taverns in 2018 which transformed it into a destination to attract beer enthusiasts. It currently has the accolade of being the White Horse branch Pub of the Year and Cider Pub of the Year.

Beer-wise, its website states that the aim is to get "stuff you don't see at every pub". And it was indeed a cracking cask selection: Arbor ZZ Hop, Verdant Penpol pale ale, Red Willow Reckless, Thornbridge Arti-



san and a re-appearance of the Dead Brewers Society LX Ale. We spread out throughout the smartly furnished rear room to enjoy our picks – my Arbor hoppy ale being on excellent form.

A 20-minute journey took us to Faringdon where we stopped on the edge of the centre at the **Swan**. This was busy with a good early evening crowd spread throughout the two distinct areas, proving it's possible to pull in the custom without food or sports on TV.

Despite the signage still stating this is the home of Faringdon Brewery, the brew kit has sadly remained unused for a fair few years now. Nice as it may have been to have a home-brewed ale, those on offer didn't disappoint. Oxfordshire and neighbouring Bucks and Berks were represented by XT4, Renegade Good Old Boy, Hook Norton Hooky, Little Ox Dark and Seedy, and White Horse The Don's Dark Ale. I opted for the dark, malty, full-bodied White Horse ale, paired with the lesser-seen curried eggs which were on offer with proceeds going to a local charity.

The daylight was quickly fading and we had just one pub remaining on our itiner-

ary. This was in the village of Marcham, just to the west of Abingdon.

The last time the **Crown** appeared in the *Good Beer Guide* was in 2019 when it was an Admiral Taverns inn, listed as serving Bombardier, Doom Bar and Loose Cannon beers. It closed in the summer of 2022 and was the subject of an application to be run as a Community-Owned pub. That application was denied, but the good news is that Oak Taverns has stepped in, carried out a refurbishment, and opened the doors on 28 September, two days before we arrived.

The smell of fresh paint was in the air when we entered, finding both the pub and garden full of happy customers, enjoying the return of their village pub. You could take your pick from Loose Cannon Gunners Gold, XT3, Renegade Good Old Boy, or the rare appearance in Oxfordshire of draught Bass. I was over the moon to finish the trip with a pint of Bass – a beer I'm always very happy to find – even more so at the end of a great day out in a thriving, revitalised village pub.

**NICK CLEMENTS**





## Beer Heroes

Cryne  
into  
your  
beer

**Pete Flynn** meets  
CAMRA stalwarts  
Christine and John  
Cryne

**A SUNNY AFTERNOON** sat outside the Swan Uppers, Cookham, with a pint of Rebellion Brewery's IPA, was a memorable occasion to meet CAMRA power couple Christine and John Cryne, who were the driving force behind the progression of CAMRA during the 1990s.

Meeting 50 years ago while both were studying at Reading University, they found a joint interest in beer that nurtured their relationship. Also at Reading, Chris was branch chair of the Reading and Mid Berks branch, helping to run the Knowle Hill beer tent. Studying physics, science and maths at university prepared her for employment with Unilever, specialising in food research and product development, mostly dairy and ice-cream. Dealing in foodstuffs, you begin to see an affinity with beer.

This meant moving to Bedfordshire where they both became grandees of the local

CAMRA branch, while John joined HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC), which he hated. After six years in Bedford, it was Chris securing a job with Cadbury Schweppes that led to a move to London where she once more embarked on a role in product development. Settling in North London enabled them to join the local CAMRA branch, where they both remain active to this day. Chris has served on CAMRA's National Executive twice and helped to identify training needs within the



Christine Cryne.  
(Photo *The London Drinker*)

organisation. She explains: "Let's not forget beer tasting is as individual as your palate."

Chris became involved in CAMRA publication the *London Drinker*, where she continues to write articles about London pubs. "I learned at the coal face all about beer tasting and managing a beer festival," she told me. "I was tasked with finding a venue for our annual beer festival, which became known as the *London Drinker Festival*."

Securing the space at Camden Town Hall was a master stroke, and after many

successful years the final festival was held in 2018. I recall attending a few of these, and on opening day Chris would always extend a warm welcome to everyone. Paradoxically, it was not the huge success of the beer festival that led to its termination, but the building was due to be demolished. It was near on impossible to find a replacement venue in a part of London close to three main railway terminals.

The *London Drinker* has been a showcase of good beer since 1985, mostly representing ales from across London, and there is no doubt that it helped to revitalise the revival of brewing in London. Back in the 1980s, there were only a handful of brewers left in the capital, and such famous names as Charrington, Courage, Manns, Trumans and Youngs had either closed or were about to disappear.

It is the commitment of the remarkable John and Christine, and the success of the *London Drinker* (perhaps their greatest achievement), that we have to thank for the beer revolution in London.

This early experience gave Chris the impetus, aptitude and authority to run CAMRA's Great British Beer Festival (GBBF) and she became the first woman to do so. She describes herself as a tutor and master trainer, and being a member of CAMRA's London tasting panel helped her to provide descriptions for the *Good Beer Guide* London pub selection. More accreditations were to follow with Chris becoming a member of the European Beer Consumers Union, training Wetherspoons on beer tasting while also judging for the Society of Independent Brewers (SIBA).



*Christine and John Cryne with Pete Flynn (centre) at the Oxford Beer and Cider Festival in November.*

Membership of the British Guild of Beer Writers was a further honour and she began training on beer and cider at a London college where she lectured for three years. "Only one in four people know the four ingredients of beer," she told me, and she has trained Des de Moor, a favourite beer writer of mine.

Chris has also been involved in the Beer Marketing and World Whisky Awards, using her expertise in raising funds for charitable events and team building courses.

A highly anticipated and stand-out competition at GBBF is the Champion Beer of Britain (CBOB), when judges decide on winners from a selection of hundreds of differing beers and styles. It was after discussion with a technical director of CAMRA that Chris was asked to change how the beers are judged, and a panel was formed to discuss the procedure. The process was supported and aided by the sagacious Roger Protz

who, writing a column in *The Guardian*, had become a respected and knowledgeable beer connoisseur. I had the privilege of meeting Roger a few years ago when he agreed to be a judge at our CAMRA Oxford Beer Festival. Today we take it for granted that CBOB is what it is, and the professional manner in which beers are judged and the categorisation of beers is accredited to Chris.

While acknowledging that Chris has played a huge role in the development of beer choice in London, it would be remiss of me not to mention the many achievements of John, who is secretary of the London Brewers Alliance working with CAMRA's London branches. John is poacher-turned-gamekeeper having worked for HMRC before becoming a director at accountancy firm PwC. He began working with his local branch, holding various roles before becoming CAMRA's National Chairman, a position he held

for almost nine years after stepping down in April 1998. I asked John about his achievements and he stated: "I helped to sort out the finances, which were in a mess before I took over and, with Chris, established a clear strategy for the organisation. I had to trim down the bureaucracy and change the way the National Executive operated, taking the decision to involve regional directors more fully. The beer industry hated us, and we were shunned by the *Morning Advertiser* (the trade portal for the industry)."

With an industry award by Scotch whisky producer Glenfiddich, and nomination by the Parliamentary Beer Club as Beer Drinker of the Year, the first CAMRA member to receive such a salutation, John had some justification in stating that CAMRA had turned a corner by the end of his stewardship. But he never remained complacent.

John recognises that a vast number of CAMRA members have high skill sets which can be used successfully across the gamut of areas in which we need to excel, such as managing beer festivals, marketing, IT and liaising with government departments.

I had enjoyed my afternoon in the sunshine listening to the power duo, reflecting on some lighter moments as John told me of an evening tasting vintage port with beer supremo Tony Ruddle (of Ruddles Ales), while not forgetting falling off the side of a sofa and keeping a pint of beer intact. Oh, and the time he spoke to an audience of CAMRA members while stood precariously on a table, much to the chagrin of the regional director!



# Festival a success but some left disappointed

**Dave Richardson**  
looks back at the  
24th CAMRA festival  
at Oxford Town Hall

**WHEN THE MANY** volunteers gathered just before opening of the festival at 4pm on Thursday 9 November, no one really had any idea what to expect. Would we get back to the high number of nearly 3,000 visitors who used to crowd out the Town Hall, mainly on Thursday and Friday evenings? Or would we again have the more modest attendance figures of 2022, our first year back after the pandemic?

Final figures have yet to be totted up, mainly because people were able to book online in advance for the first time, but we did see an increase in numbers and a lot more beer was drunk. So

much so, in fact, that the festival had to close early having run out of beer by mid-afternoon on Saturday.

Predicting the attendance, and how much beer and cider to order, has become much more difficult since the pandemic, with some older or more vulnerable people put off crowded gatherings, possibly for good. The availability of volunteers is also of some concern, although this year that didn't turn out to be a problem.

This year we had a reduced beer order of 100 barrels from about 60 breweries, and a reduction in cider to about 20 mainly local casks. We were fairly confident we had enough, although we opened for three days rather than two days as last year, with the encouragement of the Town Hall. We erred on the side of caution, as last year

we had to pour a lot of beer away and came close to making a loss, which would have put the future of the festival in doubt.

But although we could still pour beer from over 40 barrels when we opened on Saturday, it was all gone by mid-afternoon and people had to be turned away at the front desk or by security personnel at the St Aldate's entrance. For this we apologise, but those who booked in advance can claim refunds by emailing [contact@oxford.camra.org.uk](mailto:contact@oxford.camra.org.uk) quoting their reference number from ticketing portal Tkty.

Despite this early end to the festival, it's fair to say that a good time was had by all and that our many volunteers turned up as usual not only to serve beer and cider and perform many other tasks, but also to do the heavy work of setting up the festival on Wednesday and taking it down on Sunday.

The Beer of the Festival judging panel met on Friday to consider the best local beers, with the winner declared as Maharajah IPA from Renegade. Runners-up were Trinity from Oxford Brewery, Konic from White Horse and Ambassador from Wiggly Monkey.

Thoughts are now turning to the 2024 festival, which might have to be held at an earlier date due to availability of the Town Hall. We thank them and in particular Councillor Ed Turner for their assistance.



*The Beer of the Festival judging panel met on Friday to consider the best local beers.*





Volunteers, from left, John Winney, Mark Geeson and Paul Anderson.



Pointing the way at the Town Hall are, from left: Councillor Ed Turner, deputy leader, Oxford City Council; Tony Goulding, Oxford CAMRA chairman; Grahame Allen, festival organiser; and Dave Richardson, Oxford Drinker editor.

## On the Front Lyne

# Real ale versus craft ale: Friends or foes?

**WITH CRAFT BEERS** becoming ever more popular in recent times, do the two distinct categories compete against each other and steal sales from each other? Or is there a bigger picture?

I think we are spoiled for choice when it comes to beers available in the UK. It's certainly not the same in other countries. I remember when I first started working in pubs here, confidently going up to pull my first pint of real ale during my trial shift. Of course, I hadn't mentioned that I had never seen a cask ale in my life, and I promptly covered myself in beer as I was a bit too keen on the first pull! Thankfully I have gotten a little bit better since then.

When I first started in hospitality over in Ireland, the drinking scene was a tad different. While it has got significantly better in a very short period, most bars are still chock full of lagers, stouts and craft ale on tap, with a real ale on cask very hard to find. And it's similar in Europe and the US. When people visit us here, they are often perplexed by what real ales are and what to expect.

They seem to be familiar with the styles of beers, your IPAs, porters, bitters and what not. However, people are sometimes confused as to what the differences really are. And with seasoned drinkers in the UK, we publicans

**Steven Lyne** of Oxford's Royal Blenheim finds the two categories help each other along much more than just a few years back



can receive mixed signals as to what people associate with the two beer categories. One group often refuses to drink the other. So, is there anything we can take from these situations and see the current state of cask versus craft ale in the UK?

One of my favourite instances in the Royal Blenheim occurs throughout the year but is most prevalent during the summer. You watch someone slowly enter the pub and walk up to the bar to ask: "Do you sell any beer?" I always have a little giggle as I look at the 20-odd options they have in front of them, but I normally always respond with, "Well, what type of beer are you after?"

It is always revealing hav-

ing a conversation with a customer who is new to real ale. Most tend to be familiar with their craft counterparts, but now they have an opportunity to try something different. Cask and craft share many similarities, but also have key differences. What we try to do at the Blenheim (and I wish more places took this approach) is work out not only what customers are after, but also what they like about what they drink. This way, you not only give customers a drink they like but guide them in a new direction at the same time. Sometimes you get them to try something they may not have considered or even seen before. That's how you get people excited about beer!



*There is a change towards a more vibrant industry, which promotes high quality beer alongside a more traditional brewing approach.*

Overall, both real ales and craft ales offer unique and enjoyable drinking experiences. Plenty of craft drinkers enjoy the crisper and more effervescent mouthfeel the style has to offer. Real ales, with their more traditional methods and ingredients, lead to that wonderful softer, smoother, more natural feel in the mouth. Ultimately, it comes down to personal taste as to what your tastebuds prefer. When customers can try both craft and cask beside each other, we often see a pleasant surprise on their faces.

So, looping back to our original title, are the two categories friends or foes? I think in the current climate they help each other along much more than just a few years back. With the explosion of craft breweries all over the country, we have seen some superb craft beers coming onto the market in the past decade. Compared to typical mass-produced beers, a far greater level of creativity and

experimentation goes into each craft brew.

With this level of creativity, not only do craft breweries give us some excellent real ales from their expertise, but also more traditional breweries experiment with their cask ales and go down a similar route. Some excellent re-imaginings of traditional styles and improvements to our firm favourites inevitably lead to even better beers on our bars.

On another note, something I've spoken about in previous articles often comes up in the debate between craft and cask: the lovely word "premiumisation"! With the current cost-of-living crisis increasing beer prices left, right and centre, premiumisation of real ales is becoming a key attribute of getting our real ale selections right. Both beer categories require immense skill, equipment and time to make the beers we love. So, in some respects, higher prices for real ales to put them

alongside premium products is probably the best thing that could happen to cask at present. We are starting to see a bridge between two different markets that wasn't there before.

With cask ales creeping into this more premium market, traditional breweries are starting to adjust their image with more creative marketing that takes a leaf from craft beer's book of successful advertising. There is a change towards a more vibrant industry, which promotes high quality beer alongside a more traditional brewing approach.

Long may the battle between cask and craft continue. We are starting to see a greater shared interest among the two types of drinkers, with each paying more attention to the other. With the improved quality of beer produced on both sides, I look forward to what exciting beers we have on the horizon.





**A PUB COMPANY** (pubco) is simply a company that owns pubs and there are literally hundreds of them, many with only a handful or even just one pub. We'll concentrate here, though, on the bigger companies which, between them, own over half the country's pubs.

### **Stonegate (4,800)**

Founded in 2010 with the purchase of 333 pubs from Mitchells & Butlers, Stonegate grew quite slowly over the next 10 years, making a series of acquisitions including brands Slug & Lettuce, Walkabout and Be At One, until its pub numbers totalled 765. All the pubs were managed houses. A seismic change came in 2020 when Ei Group was bought for £1.27 billion, making Stonegate the largest pub company in the UK with 1,270 managed pubs and, as a result of the Ei purchase, 3,200 leased and tenanted businesses.

Ei itself had been founded, as Enterprise Inns, in 1991, initially with 333 pubs from Bass. The company built up its estate, gaining 2,200 pubs in batches by buying them from other companies or taking them over. In 2002, 1,864 pubs were bought from Whitbread and in 2004, 4,054 from Unique. By this time, it owned nearly 10,000 pubs and was in the FTSE 100 list of top companies. However, it was loaded with debt and the 2008 financial crash required a good deal of retrenchment. Ei also started building up its managed estate, including pubs on retail agreements under the Craft Union brand (we'll look at this operating model in the next article). By the time of the sale, it was down to fewer than 4,000 pubs.

## Pubcos

# The nine who control over half of all pubs

In the second of a series of articles on pubcos, **Paul Ainsworth** surveys the major players

### **Punch Taverns (1,300)**

My first article (Issue 116) included a brief history of Punch to illustrate the volatility around pubco development. In summary, it grew quickly to around 8,000 pubs, suffered under the crash, sold a lot of pubs including its managed division and was taken over in 2016 when 1,900 pubs went to Heineken and 1,300 to Patron Capital, which retains the Punch brand. At takeover time, all pubs were leased or tenanted but it's also now pushing retail agreements (which it calls management partnerships). Some pubs were sold but in June 2021 it announced the purchase of Young's tenanted division, bringing the current total to 1,300.

### **Admiral Taverns (1,600)**

Admiral was founded in 2003 by two families and grew quickly to 2,300 pubs by 2007, many being "bottom end" houses disposed of by other pub companies. The financial crash had the usual consequences for over-extended businesses and numbers were down to 1,700 by 2011 and continued to fall. By 2017, it was

in the hands of Cerberus Capital Management who sold up to a joint venture by Magners cider makers C&C Group and estate investor Proprium Capital Partners, by which time there were 845 pubs. The acquisition trail was hit in 2019 with 137 pubs coming from Marston's and 150 from Heineken. The big one arrived in July 2021 when Admiral bought 674 Hawthorn pubs from property firm New River, taking the estate to over 1,500.

Admiral's pubs are all tenanted or leased, and tend to be wet-led community operations. It has a relatively good reputation in the trade though there's certainly no aversion to flogging off pubs as "development opportunities".

### **Star Pubs & Bars (2,400)**

In 1995, Scottish & Newcastle, one of the original "Big Six" breweries, bought another of them, Courage, making the combined group Britain's biggest brewer. By 2011 the pub arm, then known as S&N Pub Co, had 1,500 tenanted pubs and 600 in management. Come 2008, Scottish



*Landlady Kerry Skrzypiec at the Chequers in Oxford, which is a Mitchells & Butlers pub. (Photo by Phil Gammon)*

Courage was gobbled up by international brewer Heineken and the pub business re-branded as Star Pubs & Bars. Many pubs were sold but then, in 2017, as previously mentioned, 1,900 were snapped up from Punch. Again, there were disposals and the estate currently stands at 2,400.

Star vigorously promotes its retail agreement scheme, Just Add Talent. In 2020, it was fined £2 million for breaches of the Pubs Code (which we'll cover in a later article).

#### **Greene King (3,100)**

In 1995, Greene King (GK) was a long-established fami-

ly brewer with 900 pubs, nearly all in East Anglia and the South-East. It then embarked on a ferocious acquisition trail, swallowing up many breweries including Morlands, Belhaven, Morrells and Hardy & Hanson, and other pub companies. GK itself is now owned by a billionaire Hong Kong property developer. It has some 3,100 pubs, restaurants and hotels, of which 1,200 are tenanted or leased. Its strategy seems to be to move in the managed direction and the "Pub Ready" retail agreements are pushed hard. GK was once renowned for not letting other people's beers in its pubs

but now has a more enlightened attitude.

#### **Marston's (1,700)**

The company was known as Wolverhampton & Dudley until 2007 when it rebranded as Marston's, one of the many breweries it had taken over in recent years. At that time, 2,500 pubs were owned but the total is now down to 1,700. The tenanted estate, in particular, has been reduced through sales such as 200 to New River in 2013 and 137 to Admiral in 2019. In late 2020, the company took on the running of 156 Brains pubs in Wales. Also that year, Marston's merged its brewing operations with Carlsberg but this does not directly affect the pub business.

#### **Mitchells & Butlers (1,700)**

Formed originally out of the old Bass estate, Mitchells & Butlers (M&B) has 1,700 pubs and restaurants. Brands include Ember Inns, Toby Carveries, Nicholson's and All Bar One – as can be seen, the emphasis is on food. Pubs are mostly managed although around 50 are on a lease arrangement.

#### **J.D. Wetherspoon (850)**

Since opening its first pub in 1979, 'Spoons has expanded to 925 pubs and 50 hotels, all managed. Plans for 18 new pubs are in the pipeline.

#### **Wellington (850)**

Owned by the billionaire Reuben Brothers, the company leases all its 850 pubs on a free-of-tie basis.



**To read previous articles in this series, go to the *Oxford Drinker* website and search for "Ainsworth".**

## Gardener's World

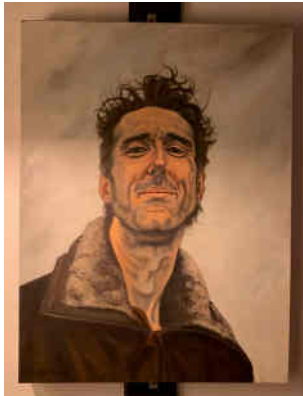
# Two decades of ringing changes

**Paul Silcock** (below) of the Gardener's Arms in Plantation Road, Oxford, celebrates 20 years as a publican

**AS I WRITE** this I am rapidly approaching an anniversary as a publican, and I'm reminded of a quote by the late American comedian Bill Hicks: "I've been doing this for 10 years, so bear with me while I plaster on a fake smile and plough through this shit one more time." And he'd only been doing his shit for 10 years.

I'll have been at this for 20 years come New Year's Eve. Sometimes I know exactly what he meant, and I'll defy any publican in the country not to identify with Bill Hicks' sentiment. Not every day, but once in a while. Every now and then we'd all much rather be on the other side of the bar having a few drinks instead of pouring them.

Now this isn't going to be a grumble column. I mean, who'd stick a job for 20 years that they hated? No, it's a good job, particularly as it doesn't have very many early mornings. I came from IT to running a pub, partly for a change, but mainly because I was rubbish at IT and my days in the office were certainly numbered. Feeling it couldn't be long before I was handed my P45, I eagerly



agreed to help a mate out and look after his pub (now my pub) for a couple of months while he went on to do other things. That was almost 20 years ago.

So, big question, because I've got a lot of column to fill here... what are the big changes over the last 20 years?

### **IPAs are here to stay (until they aren't)**

Okay, so that's slightly misleading as a starting point. After all, IPAs have been around for almost as long as the idea of putting hops in beer, nearly. But at some

point in the last 20 years IPAs went from just one style of beer among many, to the dominant form of brewing. So dominant in fact, the name IPA has practically surpassed the name Bitter in terms of what we reluctantly have to call "brand recognition". And it comes from the rather annoying fact that our American cousins took an idea, decided to misunderstand it, and then had the temerity to sell it back to us. Even more annoyingly, they seemed to have made it, if not better, at least more popular. Which might be better than actually making it better, from a capitalist standpoint anyway.

Then Brewdog saw what the Americans had done, joined the party, exploded, and IPA couldn't have become more popular if it actually did make you richer and more sexy. But IPA at this level of popularity can't last, as every generation rightly rebels against the trends of the previous generation. Want proof? See the increasing swing back to smoking in teenagers as they swerve away from the vaping habits of their parents. Even now, I see customers asking which beers on my bar are dark, or what's the least hoppy if they understand flavours a





*Gardener's staff, from left: George Rowland, Andris Wood and Joby Leighton.*

little better. Which neatly leads me to the next change.

### **Best bitters are dead (until they rise again)**

A few years back a Marston's rep, who shall remain nameless (mainly because I have forgotten his name), revealed they were rebranding their best bitters. Market research had found that young people (those swine!) equated Best Bitter with flat cap-wearing, pipe-smoking old men in working men's clubs, so they were rebranding in order to attract the younger market. They didn't so much rebrand, as give the beers names that

wouldn't have sounded out of place in a cheap superhero movie.

Ringwood's Best Bitter became Razor Back! (I added the exclamation mark, but you can easily imagine the marketing meetings where the inclusion of an exclamation mark was hotly debated). Jennings Bitter became Night Vision. Marston's Best became Saddle Tank (okay, so that would be a pretty rubbish superhero name). Marston's weren't the only fools to fall for this trick. Think about how rarely you saw the once ubiquitous Best Bitter. But now the word Best is creeping back on to pump clips. Breweries

seem to have run out of naff superhero names, possibly because they have realised they just can't keep up with the ever more ludicrous names coming from the craft brewing quarter.

### **Brewing became craft!**

See how neatly I led into that one? Seriously though I swear no one, anywhere, used the term "craft brewing" 20 years ago. Here is what the *Oxford English Dictionary* has to say about Craft – *craft, n. An occupation or profession requiring technical skill and know-how, esp. one which involves using the hands; a manual art or trade.*

Nowhere in that sentence does it say anything about fermentation vessels. Are we to believe that craft beer is created by individuals holding small handfuls of wort until it ferments into beer? No, because I'm being facetious. As a verb the OED says this about craft – *To make or devise (something) with skill, expertise, or ingenuity.*

That's fair. But it does kind of suggest that beer prior to the craft brewing craze was just chucked together by barely skilled pit workers, and you were lucky if they didn't drool into the vats while they did it.

### **New Year's Eves are not packed out**

There was a point years ago when New Year's Eves were so popular, even your local pub had to start selling tickets because everyone seemed to want a seat at a pub table for New Year and pubs were standing room only. Then suddenly they weren't. There are still pubs which do get packed out for New Year, but a lot really don't anymore. However, people still think they do all get packed out. Which is why they don't get packed out. Follow the logic there? Because so many people think the local pub will be so full with carousing New Year revellers that they'll never get a seat, they stay away. Therefore they don't see how wrong their assumption is.

But that doesn't matter, because they had a good time at a house party, or with friends, or doing just about anything else and telling themselves how much more pleasant this is than being cramped in a corner of a pub getting elbowed by people trying to fight their way to the



*The Gardener's Arms will be a lot busier on New Year's Eve!*

bar to make sure they've got a drink to toast in the New Year. This belief keeps persisting because no one is going to the pub to discover that actually, it's pretty empty at their local.

If you do want a tip for a good New Year this year, I'll be celebrating the actual 20th anniversary of running the Gardener's Arms in Plantation Road, Oxford. My first ever shift as manager of the Gardener's was New Year's Eve 2003. You're more than welcome to come along to what will be a very full pub.

### **Beer prices will always rise (always)**

Not that this is any surprise to anyone reading this. Really, I'm just putting this last point in here as a neat way of tidying up the end of this column. But just to illustrate this point, the cheapest beer on the bar back on 31 December 2003, when I started here, was

£2.60 for Tanners Jack, a Greene King seasonal. The cheapest pint on the bar this New Year will be £5.20. That is literally double the price. You know your wages haven't doubled in that time. In slightly better news, though, beer prices have been rising more slowly than, say, chocolate. So that's a win.

What hasn't changed though is the nature of the job. It's still about beer, and also more than beer. It's about creating a place with atmosphere, a place that can offer a chance to socialise. Or relax. See bands or watch sports. Eat. Drink. Be merry. Publicans are going to be one of the last jobs that AI will be able to replace, so there's a good chance I'll be writing a follow-up piece in another 20 years' time. Or a chatbot will and I'll just sign my name to it. After all, you do have to roll with the changes. Sometimes.





# GigaFix

# COMPUTER & SMARTPHONE REPAIRS

## SERVICES

- ✓ Liquid Damage
- ✓ Data Recovery
- ✓ Software Support
- ✓ Tech Training
- ✓ Free Recycling



[www.gigafix.co.uk](http://www.gigafix.co.uk) | 01865 69 21 41



Go with the Flow

# Castle Mill Stream

**Steve Thompson** explores a little-known waterways walk through Oxford city centre, stopping at three pubs on the way

**MOST OXFORD RESIDENTS** and many visitors are familiar with the major waterways that flow through the city – the River Thames and the River Cherwell, and the Oxford Canal. Less well known is a tributary of the Thames that runs through the heart of the city from Port Meadow in the north to Folly Bridge in the south, where it rejoins the Thames.

Castle Mill Stream is a microcosm of Oxford history, running as it does past such landmarks as Oxford Castle; Fisher Row, its homes once occupied by fishermen and other workers; and the Nag's Head public house (now the Oxford Retreat), at the start of the Oxford Canal.

I have done this walk several times and prefer to do it south to north (*against* the flow as it were). I'm not sure why but I suspect it's because nothing beats the thrill of pleasure at journey's end when you emerge from the footpath along Fiddler's Island into Port Meadow.

Castle Mill Stream takes its name from the mill which once stood beneath St George's Tower in the castle grounds. Before the Industrial Revolution, fast-flowing water was important as a source of energy, in this case to turn a wheel and so give power to the mill. This was the official town mill, and the miller held a monopoly to grind corn.

Oxford Castle dates from 1071, when William the Conqueror decided to build a cas-



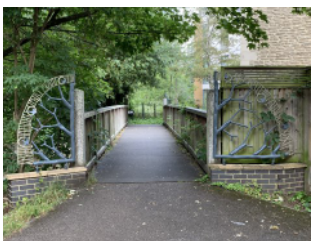
*The Jolly Farmers in Paradise Street, near Woodin's Way bridge.*

tle mound within Oxford's Saxon walls, and name it Oxford Castle. Apparently, there was a mill there even before the castle existed.

At Folly Bridge, I took the Towing Path heading west on the southern bank of the Thames, just after the **Head of the River** pub and Salter's Steamers river cruise compa-

ny. From there, it was only a five-minute walk to Grandpont Nature Park and the Gas Works Bridge across the river to where Castle Mill Stream joins the Thames.

After crossing the bridge, turn left and follow a sign that reads Mill Stream Walk. This eventually takes you across Thames Street and past the



From top: Folly Bridge;  
Gas Works Bridge;  
Mill Stream Walk sign;  
Sign after John Lewis;  
Woodin's Way bridge.



St George's  
Tower from  
Quaking  
Bridge, just  
before Fisher  
Row.

John Lewis department store on your right. After John Lewis, watch out for a sign that points to Oxford Castle. You will soon come to a small bridge named Woodin's Way where you should cross the stream – but first you may like to stop at the **Jolly Farmers** in Paradise Street. (Turn right before the bridge.)

The Rapsallion pub owned by Rob Jordan and Spike Greenwood offers one regular beer, Otter Bitter, and one changing beer that typically includes Chadlington Oxford Blue. In February 2023, the Jolly Farmers received an award from Oxford CAMRA to mark its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary as the city's LGBT+ pub (where all are welcome). It also made it into the Good Beer Guide for 2024.

After the Jolly Farmers (and/or the **Castle** pub, also in Paradise Street), back to Woodin's Way, past St George's Tower and Quaking Bridge and on to Fisher Row (Lower, Middle and Upper). In her book *Fisher Row and the Watery Fringes of Oxford*, Nancy Hood writes: "The three Fisher Rows are a microcosm of life on the two rivers of Oxford. Fishermen, boatmen, bargemen, watermen of every description lived in the Rows."

In Hythe Bridge Street, between Middle Fisher Row and Upper Fisher Row, is the

**Oxford Retreat**, which has successfully rebranded itself as an upmarket nightspot in the city centre, but it was not always so. Previously called the Nag's Head, it was, according to Derek Honey's *Encyclopaedia of Oxford Pubs, Inns and Taverns*, "a typical bargeman's beerhouse, a poor quality building, which probably flooded during the winter".

The novelist Evelyn Waugh drank at the Nag's Head as an undergraduate in 1924. It is even mentioned in his best-known work, *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), as one of several Oxford pubs visited by Charles Ryder and Sebastian Flyte when they "formed the taste for lower company".

After the Oxford Retreat, cross Hythe Bridge Street and continue along Upper Fisher Row with the stream still on your right. You will pass the ruins of Rewley Abbey on your left, and the footpath eventually ends at Rewley Road.

If you thought the first part of this walk was complicated, in the words of seventies rock band Bachman-Turner Overdrive, you ain't seen nothin' yet. To help you, overleaf are snapshots of steps on the way.

The challenge here is how to cross the railway line to reach Fiddler's Island on the other side, and this is the only way I could find.



*Perch bars manager Steve Jones in the pub's outdoor Shed bar.*

Where Rewley Road crosses a section of the Thames called Sheepwash Channel, turn right onto a short bridge, then immediately left onto a footpath. On your left is a railway swing bridge from 1851 with an information plaque at the start of the footpath.

The footpath passes under the railway line, but be warned: It is low and you may need to

duck. After the railway bridge, walk to the end and turn right onto Fiddler's Island.

Fiddler's Island is a long narrow strip with water on either side. Heading north, it leads to the southwestern corner of Port Meadow.

At this point, you are probably ready for a pint at the **Perch** in Binsey village, a little further on.

The Perch has two real ales on tap, which the pub's bars manager Steve Jones told me are Hooky Best Bitter as regular, and a guest ale, in this case Prospect by Oxford Brewery (formerly Shotover). When I visited earlier in August, the guest was by XT Brewery, one of a range of beers under the so-called Dead Brewers Society, reviving recipes used by long-gone breweries.

A major attraction of the Perch in the summer is its beer garden, which Steve told me was voted seventh best beer garden in the UK in a recent poll by *The Times* newspaper.

In summer, customers can order drinks from the outdoor Shed bar, while mulled wine and cider are available in the main bar in winter.

An amusing sign outside the pub – “The Church” on the left (or) “The Perch” on the right – reminds me of another literary landmark, the so-called Treacle Well described by Lewis Carroll in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, where three little sisters lived only on treacle. St Margaret's Well dates from the 12th century and can be found at the Church of St Margaret of Antioch in Binsey.



*From left: Footpath ends at Rewley Road; Footpath passes under railway line; The Church or The Perch.*



**Oxford CAMRA City Pub of the Year  
2004, 2005, 2010, 2014, 2016 and 2019**



## **The Masons Arms**

**2 Quarry School Place  
Headington Oxford  
OX3 8LH  
01865 764579**



## **THE BEAR INN**

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



**6 Alfred Street, Oxford, Oxfordshire OX1 4EH  
Telephone: 01865 728164  
Email: [bearinn@fullers.co.uk](mailto:bearinn@fullers.co.uk)**

## Tony's Travels

# My three days running a pub

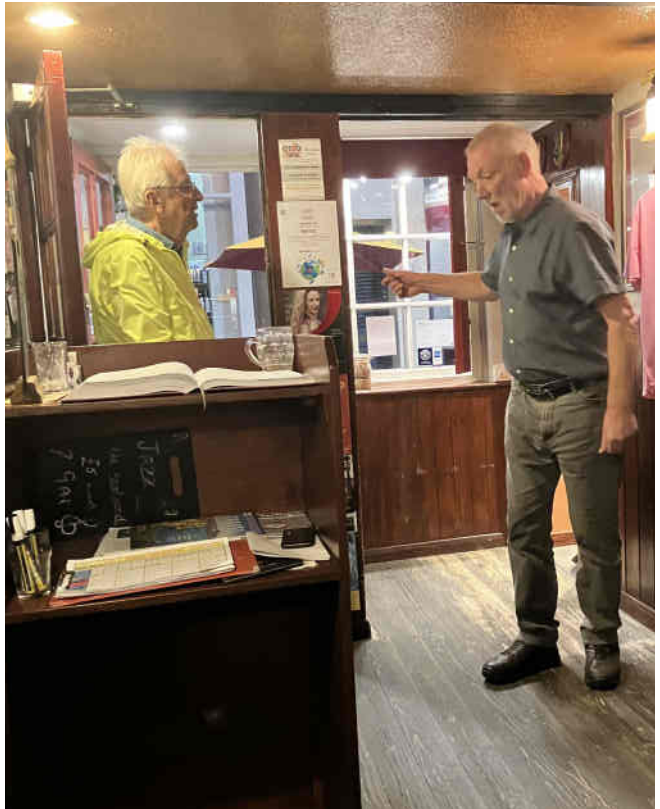
**Tony Goulding**  
"crosses the floor" at  
his favourite local –  
how did it go?

**IT WAS A** real surprise to be asked by landlady Deborah Hall, at the Rose and Crown in North Parade Avenue, Oxford, if I would be interested in supervising the pub for a few days while the family were away on a much-deserved holiday to Gerona in Spain.

Over a couple of weeks, I spoke to landlord Andrew, the wise old soul of the pub. He was full of encouragement for me to take on the challenge. Adam, their son, who effectively runs the business, then arranged for me to take an online course of eight hours over a couple of days and a Zoom examination to qualify with a personal licence to run a pub. This daunting scene did not fill me with much enthusiasm, but the gauntlet had been thrown down.

I must admit I soon lost interest in the online course but with encouraging support from my lady Vanessa Shaw and a determination not to let the family down, I tried hard, took notes and persevered until I had to sit a mock exam with a 70% pass score. I got 75%.

I then visited the Rose and Crown where, in the cottage at the bottom of the pub's courtyard, I was isolated in a secure environment to take a



*Meeting and greeting is what Tony did best – or was this unfortunate fellow being thrown out?*

60-minute Zoom examination. Nobody else was allowed in the room while this took place. I answered the 40 questions in 23 minutes, feeling a bit fed up but quite confident. I passed with 85%.

I popped into the Rose and Crown the day before I

took over to meet Steve Jones, who is the usual relief manager at the pub, whose main job is running the Perch at Binsey. I collected the keys and had a further 90 minutes tuition on running the pub, being briefed on all aspects of bar work, licensing rules and



Tony (right) with bar staff Marvin Herrera and Lydia Lockwood.

the all-important alarm system, activated on leaving and arriving at the premises.

I arrived at 9.30am each

day to welcome staff in and prepare for the day ahead.

Fortunately, thanks to excellent staff, everything ran

smoothly, and I ended up being useful picking up empty glasses and food plates! I thoroughly enjoyed the whole three days, especially the "meet and greet" part of the job. I made a few good friends during my time running the pub.

During the quiet times, I got to know some of the traders in North Parade Avenue. The very busy times involved two pre-wedding parties with no empty glasses left in the pub. It was hard work and long hours, and maybe I am too old now for this business! Nevertheless, I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Would I do it again? Yes – but for shorter periods. This experience has opened my eyes to just how much is involved in running a pub, and how good the social life is.



# Little Ox Brew Co

Brewing outstanding local award winning beer

All our beer is gluten free!

## FREE LOCAL DELIVERY AROUND OXFORDSHIRE

Order online at [littleoxbrewery.co.uk](http://littleoxbrewery.co.uk)



01993 881941



[brewery@littleoxbrew.co.uk](mailto:brewery@littleoxbrew.co.uk)



@littleoxbrew

Unit 6, Wroslyn Road Ind Est  
Freeland, Witney OX29 8HZ



## The Last Drop

# Tales from the Nose and Frown

**Graham Shelton** delves into the history of an unusual sport at his favourite country pub

**ONE OF THE** great things about the gentlemen, for it nearly always was gentlemen, who frequented the Nose and Frown between the wars was a keen and shared interest in

all sporting activities. For the older ones at least, I hasten to add that this interest was mainly that of the spectator, commentator, pundit and/or participant in the pre- and après-sport activities rather than in the sport itself. Age and varying degrees of dissipation precluded anything more energetic.

In pursuit of his interest, my friend Joe (who I told you about last time) read *The Sporting Life* and was an avid betting man, able to calculate odds with lightning speed. This despite the fact that he made much of his simple country origins, and claimed to struggle with money, particularly when it came to paying it out! But where horses and greyhounds were concerned, the bookies quickly learned to treat him with the utmost respect. He'd offer odds on his own account too, for almost anything, from how many pints the newcomer would drink before going outside to the Gents, through to which team would win the Aunt Sally tournament.

It was Roy who came up with the idea of mouse racing, providing not only the excitement and the betting, but also



Join CAMRA here



Visit Oxford  
CAMRA here

[camra.org.uk/join](https://camra.org.uk/join)



Campaigning for Pubs, Pints  
& People since 1971

all the fun (and potential profits) of the trainer, owner and promoter. Roy was the former landlord but two at the Nose and Frown and had a lot more spark in him than Stan and Sue. In particular, he was keen to drum up a bit more Sunday drinking trade, beyond that provided by the moribund crew who usually frequented the Public Bar at the weekend.

Well, we all thought mouse racing was a daft idea, but Roy tried to convince us that mice were very like horses, albeit smaller, and a good deal less trouble. Anyway, he said, it might be a lot of fun. There wasn't much else going on that afternoon, and we

soon got to discussing if it could be done and how we'd do it.

There were some obvious handicaps to overcome, such as having no athletic mice to hand, but Roy said he knew a man who "could supply what we needed". Obviously, the mice would need a track upon which to race. The genius of Roy, of course, was that mice are nice and compact so would only require a small track a few feet long rather than eight furlongs, which we'd never fit in the garden.

A damp beer mat is not ideal for sketching plans, but we did our best. We worked out that we'd need all the mice at one

end, side-by-side and each in his or her own trap, a bit like greyhounds. Joe said he thought he knew where to lay his hands on a decent-sized board, about 4 feet by 8 feet, and we marked out six tracks separated by partitions about four inches high. Each trap was provided with a hole into which to introduce the runner, and there was a slider so all the mice could be set off running at the same time. The track was fitted with a perspex top so all the action would be clearly visible, and the winner would be the first one over the finishing line at the other end of the board. What could possibly go wrong?



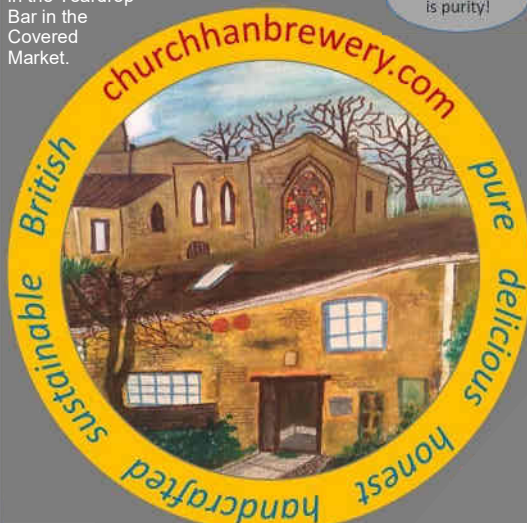
## Church HanBrewery

We sell our beers in the Teardrop Bar in the Covered Market.

West Oxfordshire

cloudiness  
is purity!

churchhanbrewery.com



01993 868 998

[www.churchhanbrewery.com](http://www.churchhanbrewery.com)

[churchhanbrewery@gmail.com](mailto:churchhanbrewery@gmail.com)



OX  
FORD  
BREWERY



**BREWERY & TAP ROOM  
COOPER'S YARD  
MANOR FARM ROAD  
HORSPATH  
OX33 1SD**

**Tel: 01865 604620  
[hello@oxfordbrewery.co.uk](mailto:hello@oxfordbrewery.co.uk)**

*The genius of Roy, of course, was that mice are nice and compact so would only require a small track a few feet long rather than eight furlongs, which we'd never fit in the garden.*

Roy was a good talker, and he soon had some keen interest going about The Great Mouse Race scheduled for the following Sunday. It was a lovely, sunny July day and we set up the board on the back of a trailer in the pub garden, like a stage. Then we rigged up a tent with six bookies for the tote. We had a decent crowd too, including all the ones who'd said it would never work.

Albert was detailed to parade the runners before the race, and did a pretty good job of making up stories about their previous form and wonderful racing parentage as he brought out each mouse and displayed it on his hand. Some were pure white and some a bit more piebald (after the wild ones got in with the tame). So it was easy to tell which was which. Punters could purchase each runner and then be entitled to the winnings (if there were any) and/or bet on the outcome of each race at the tote.

Then the moment came, and Roy took up the commenting. I suppose we thought the mice would simply run from one end to the other but, of course, they didn't. One of them would start off, stop, have a sniff at something and

turn round again. Then another would run almost all the way and do the same. It wasn't quite what we had in mind, but it made it unpredictable and good for the tote. Eventually, the first race was run, winnings were collected, the pub was buzzing and the beer was flowing. The next race and the next made for a wonderful afternoon. Then Joe got his ferret out of his pocket. He had a box with snout-sized holes in the top, and between mouse races we started betting on which hole the ferret which stick his snout through.

All in all, we collected £600 for charity that day. We never found out how much Roy made, but he looked happier than I'd seen him in a while.

PS: I bet you think I made this up, but no one could make up a story like that. The Great Mouse Race really happened many years ago in a pub in Northmoor destined one day to be one of the finest Community-Owned pubs in Oxfordshire. I just changed a few of the names. And the famous mouse racing board, now sadly lost in the mists of time, toured the district for many years – or so I'm reliably told!



#### **Oxford Branch Contacts:**

Chairman  
Tony Goulding  
[chair@oxford.camra.org.uk](mailto:chair@oxford.camra.org.uk)

Secretary  
Steve Lawrence  
01235 525436  
[contact@oxford.camra.org.uk](mailto:contact@oxford.camra.org.uk)

Editor of *the Oxford Drinker*  
Dave Richardson  
[editor@oxford.camra.org.uk](mailto:editor@oxford.camra.org.uk)

#### **Keep in touch with Oxford Branch:**

Get all the latest news and events, and share information about what's happening in your area. To join send an email with "subscribe" as the subject to [events-request@oxford.camra.org.uk](mailto:events-request@oxford.camra.org.uk)

To receive copies of *the Oxford Drinker* by post, please send A5 size self-addressed envelopes with postage to cover 100g letter to **the Oxford Drinker, 25 Chamberlain Place, Kidlington OX5 1SG** and we will send you as many issues as you send envelopes.





*Oak Taverns*

# MERRY Christmas



A FAMILY RUN PUB COMPANY BASED IN THAME, OXFORDSHIRE.

***Cask beer takes pride of place in all our pubs.***



THE RISING SUN,  
HADDENHAM



THE RED LION,  
CHINNOR



THE KINGS ARMS,  
WANTAGE



THE BIRD IN HAND,  
PRINCES RISBOROUGH



THE CROSS KEYS, THAME  
THE SUN, WHEATLEY  
THE GREYHOUND, WHITCHURCH ON THAMES  
THE CROSS KEYS, WALLINGFORD  
THE ANGEL, BICESTER  
THE GEORGE, SUTTON COURTENAY  
THE SWAN, FARINGDON  
THE CROWN, MARCHAM  
THE RED LION, YARNTON

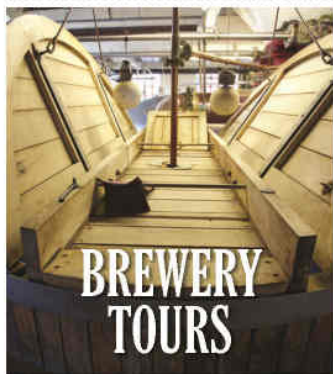


For more information please visit [www.oaktaverns.co.uk](http://www.oaktaverns.co.uk)  
Oak Taverns Ltd, 8A Buttermarket, Thame, Oxon.OX9 3EW



# BREWERY TOURS SHOP, CAFÉ & BEER!

OPEN TAP EVERY 2ND WEDNESDAY OF EACH MONTH – FREE BEER TASTING & MEET THE BREWER!



**OPEN**

MONDAY - SATURDAY  
8.00am - 6.00pm

SUNDAY  
9.00am - 4.00pm



**TO BOOK A  
BREWERY TOUR**

CALL:  
01608 730384

EMAIL:  
BREWERY@HOOKY.CO.UK

ONLINE:  
WWW.HOOKY.CO.UK/BOOK



**HAVING A  
PARTY? BOOK  
THE STEEP OR  
MALTHOUSE**



T: 01608 730384 E: [vc@hooky.co.uk](mailto:vc@hooky.co.uk) W: [www.hooky.co.uk](http://www.hooky.co.uk)

Hook Norton Brewery, Brewery Lane, Hook Norton, Banbury, Oxfordshire, OX15 5NY