

50 YEARS OF OXFORD CAMRA



1974-2024



Issue 123
Summer 2024



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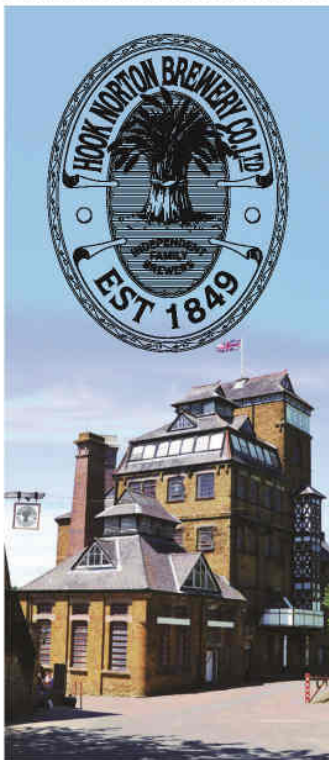
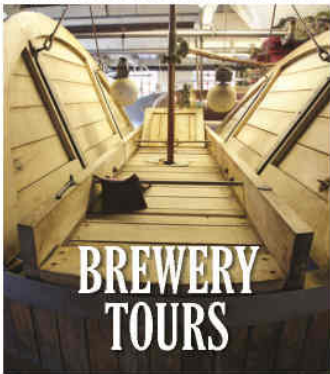


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Cover: CAMRA members have now chosen Oxfordshire's Pub of the Year, with the result due to be announced in June. The contenders are (clockwise from top left) the King's Arms, Wantage; the Cross Keys, Wallingford (photo by Pete Flynn); the White Horse, Banbury; and the Royal Blenheim, Oxford. See page 18 for full report.

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

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

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

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Printed by MRD Digital Print
Email mrddigitalprint@gmail.com

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Welcome

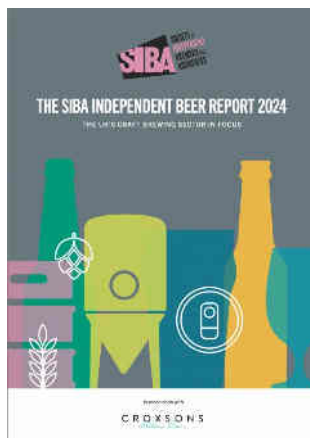
...to a mixed outlook for real ale

ONE OF THE most interesting publications on beer and brewing is the annual *SIBA Independent Beer Report* (right), produced by the Society of Independent Brewers and Associates and free to read on SIBA's website. The 2024 report is no exception, but along with the cheering news that independent beer production is back to pre-pandemic levels are some worrying findings.

The one that really made me pause for thought is that according to a survey by the respected YouGov pollsters, only 30% of 18- to 24-year-olds ever drink beer, while 24% of consumers never visit a local pub. It's well known that many young people don't drink alcohol, and the anti-alcohol lobby is ever more vocal. But even when they do, it seems, they are more likely to drink wines or spirits – while cocktails are increasingly important in our local pubs.

This is a long-term threat to the viability of pubs and breweries, which continue to struggle with the cost-of-living crisis and the long tail of Covid. But SIBA members – who include most independent breweries – have increased production by 14% compared to 2023, and while real ale is up by 10%, it is still below the levels of a few years ago.

"The short-term issue for small independent breweries isn't demand; it's profitability, rising costs and financial pressures such as lingering Covid debt," says SIBA chief executive Andy Slee. "Far too many breweries are simply trying to survive rather than thrive, so whilst there are many positive signs high-



lighted in the report, for now it's cautious optimism."

There's more analysis of the brewing industry in this issue, along with news of pubs, a look at how pub companies operate, and no fewer than six guest writers including three working publicans from Oxford and from Warwick, where the *Good Beer Guide* pubs have launched an ale trail.

We also look at the four finalists for the Oxfordshire Pub of the Year crown, with the winner due to be announced in June. In the meantime, there are many festivals to look forward to, including Tap Social's Change is Brewing on 22 June, Charlbury on 29 June and Maidenhead on 5-6 July. The availability of real ales at this year's Change is Brewing is particularly welcome, showing that even the small, cutting-edge innovators we associate with craft keg are prepared to give traditional ale a try.

Local independent breweries and pubs need our support more than ever, amid signs that some big brewers are moving away from real ale. Don't let more of them disappear.

DAVE RICHARDSON

Pub, Brewery and Festival News

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

So who is the new chair?

John Winney (right, at the 2023 Oxford Beer and Cider Festival) took over as chair of Oxford CAMRA at the annual general meeting (below) at the Lamb and Flag on Wednesday 20 March.

Says John: "I arrived in Oxford in 1984 and moved to Wheatley in 1997. I spent most of my adult life in various IT jobs and was lucky enough to retire in 2022.

"My real ale journey began growing up in Cambridge, and often back then good cask was hard to find. It's easy to forget what CAMRA has achieved!

"My first aim as chair is not to break anything! We can rightly be very proud of our beer festival and the branch has a busy diary, so let's see more of this.

"Since becoming involved

with the branch I've had fun, learnt loads and become a bit more adventurous about the beers I try. While I may always have a bias towards darker, more traditional beer styles, CAMRA has helped me discover many other kinds of great beer. I hope there will be more fun, learning and beer adventures to come.

"It's challenging times for many. Nationally, it seems likely that the wave of pub and brewery closures is far from over. Locally, we have seen some of this trend, but Community-Owned efforts such as the Lamb and Flag, and companies like Oak Taverns and Morgan Pub Collective, have been saving pubs that might otherwise have been lost. Making sure we keep as many pubs as possible, and that they can promote our great local breweries, is at the



heart of what I see the branch should continue to help with.

"Before I was elected, we'd already started to shift branch meetings more towards socials, which we're good at. We've had some great suggestions from people not on the committee of things to do, and the answer to them is yes – with more of what people enjoy, it should be a fun year.

"You can contact me at chair@oxford.camra.org.uk."

Charlbury Beer Festival

The 26th festival will take place on Saturday 29 June – a day of fun, festivity and fundraising for all the family taking place at Charlbury Cricket Club, Oxfordshire from 12-9pm.

The festival will offer around 60 real ales, a variety of craft beers, a range of ciders and perries, wine, gin and Pimm's. There will also be a great selection of food, live music throughout, the Culture Tent with performances and talks, and children's entertainment. It will also feature the 12th World Aunt Sally Singles Championships, when Rob Bradford could win the crown for the third year running.



Change is Brewing festival

Tap Social Movement will stage its third annual Change is Brewing craft beer festival at its taproom in Botley on Saturday 22 June from 2-11pm – with cask ale featuring for the first time. This is in line with Tap Social's willingness to try some of its brews on cask, both at the White House pub in Oxford and at other specialist real ale pubs.

The festival features 15 of the UK's best and brightest craft breweries, who are invited to bring small batch cask ales in addition to keg. The full line-up includes Attic Brew Co (Birmingham), Bluntrock Brewing (Cornwall), BMAN Brewery (Oxford), Cloudwater Brew Co (Manchester), Drop Project Brewing (London), Elusive Brewing (Finchampstead), Howling Hops (London), Mysterious Brewing Co (Reading), Orbit Beers Brewery (London), Phantom Brewing Co (Reading), Pretty Decent Beer Co (London), Siren Craft Brew (Finchampstead), Tap Social Movement (Oxford) and Verdant Brewing (Cornwall).

Early bird tickets are available for £10 from <https://www.wegotickets.com/event/610142>

Hook Norton

Celebrations to mark the 175th anniversary of what is now Oxfordshire's largest brewery continue, with collaboration brews, free "Hook on Tour" beer offers, and a beer with managing director and head brewer James Clarke's face on the pump clip.

This is a Hook Norton special which celebrates James's 33 years at the brewery, available only at its pubs and brewery tap. "I decided to brew a dark mild style beer, a

nod to the style of beer that was our mainstay from the early 1900s to the 1980s," he said.

Called XXXIII, appropriately at 3.3%, it is a dark mild-style cask ale, brewed with Crystal, Chocolate, Enzymic and Maris Otter Pale Ale malts, and hopped with Fuggles and Bramling Cross.



Vale Brewery

Vale Brewery has launched new branding and brand identity to "reflect Vale's commitment to quality, community, and the power of beer to bring people together". Since its establishment as an independent, family-owned brewery in 1995, Vale has been dedicated to brewing high-quality beers under the stewardship of Dave Renton, head brewer for the last 25 years.

The rebrand includes a fresh look for all core and seasonal beers, complete with new designs, tasting notes and stories. In addition, Vale Brewery is re-introducing its ABC brand of one-off small batch brews, catering to craft beer aficionados in pubs, bars and shops.

Wadworth

Based at Northgate Street in Devizes since 1885, the brewery has moved to a 25,000 sq ft brewhouse in nearby Folly Road after an £8 million investment. While it continues to brew cask ales including 6X (first launched in 2023), it has made clear that the "direction of travel" is towards craft keg.

Toby Bartholomew, managing director, said: "Our new Folly Road brewhouse allows us to diversify our beer offer and, in turn, support our pubs and customers more effectively. We will continue to brew Wadworth traditional ales, including 6X, Horizon and Henry's IPA, alongside our new Folly Road craft beer portfolio."

Evolution, a 4.3% Session IPA, is the first craft keg beer to come out of Folly Road.

Royal Sun, Begbroke

Report by Stuart Earp

The newly re-opened Royal Sun in Begbroke offers both English and Indian cuisine and the latter was excellent when I visited with a group of friends. It represented great value with a three-course meal on midweek days costing around £15 (£20 at weekends).

There are usually two real ales on offer and on my visit, the Wye Valley HPA (4%) was the only choice. I have enjoyed Butty Bach from the same stable in the past, but this pale ale was outstanding.

The man behind the venture is Aziz Rahman, who ran the much-missed Aziz restaurant in Cowley Road, Oxford, for many years. Three years ago, Mr Rahman decided that pubs were the way to go. He also now runs the Six Bells in Headington, Oxford.

Pub, Brewery and Festival News

Wriggly Monkey closes down, while White Horse could be struck off

One of the longest established local independent breweries, White Horse, is due to be struck off the Companies House register by 2 June – potentially bringing an end to a name that has been a local fixture for 20 years. Meanwhile Wriggly Monkey announced its closure in early May.

Founder and head brewer of the Bicester-based brewery, Luke Roberts, signed off with a heartfelt message to give independent brewers more support.

“Unfortunately, despite all the incredible efforts of our team, we cannot keep the pedal flat for any longer,” he wrote. “The brewing industry and the wider hospitality sector has faced unprecedented cost increases and significant disruption over the last few years, that have challenged the brewery’s viability going forward.

“Times are tough out there and the pubs, bottle shops and small independent breweries really do need your support. We all need to leave those beers in the aisle at the supermarket and call around the local breweries, pubs and independent shops.”

White Horse, of Stanton-in-the-Vale, was taken over by the much smaller South Oxfordshire (SOX) brewery in late 2022 but appears to have ceased production in January. Last year it had lost key staff including Anneli Baxter and head brewer Gavin Stanton, who both moved to Loose Cannon.

SOX managing director, James Tomlinson, did not



The Jolly Postboys in Florence Park.

respond to questions about being struck off by Companies House, but at the end of April he hoped an insurance company would pay for repairs at White Horse to allow brewing to resume.

According to Companies House, there is an “active proposal to strike off” White Horse within two months of an official notice being published in *The Gazette*, which was on 2 April.

For more on this story, go online.

Jolly Postboys, Oxford

The new management team which took over this pub in Florence Park last year is making a success of it, with three real ales and a real cider usually on offer, and a menu of pub classics. Louis Corcutt, a local resident, stepped in to run the pub when the previous management team moved on, having had experience in the food supply industry.

Although it is owned by

Greene King, the pub has total freedom to choose its real ales with Oxford Brewery Prospect and Little Ox Wipeout being the regulars. A beer from Purity was available on a recent visit, plus Yellow Hammer real cider. The Jolly Postboys is on the 46 bus route from central Oxford and hopes to join an ale trail along this route, taking in Horspath (home of Oxford Brewery), Wheatley and Great Milton, for the Bull Inn.

Bat and Ball, Cuddesdon

A community buy-out bid is likely to be launched for this village pub near Wheatley, after Admiral Taverns put it up for sale. The pub, which had only recently re-opened, closed after the tenant disputed a repair bill with Admiral, and is already subject to an Asset of Community Value order. If the community notifies South Oxfordshire council of its intention to bid, it will have until 26 October to raise the money.



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Beer Heroes

Excellence from XT

Pete Flynn continues his series with a profile of XT Brewing Co

ONE OF THE most attractive and timeless local venues to enjoy a beer while watching the world go by is the Lamb and Flag in St Giles, Oxford. Sitting in the bay window with shards of sunlight illuminating my pint of XT4 session amber ale, I was waiting to meet Russ Taylor of XT brewery. I am privileged to have known Russ for many years, and he has always been very generous in extending a warm welcome to the Oxford CAMRA cohort when we have visited Long Crendon, the small village near Aylesbury where it is based.

Right on time, and with his usual beaming smile, Russ greeted me and unwaveringly chose the same beer. We talked about his earliest beer influences, which began as a 15-year-old youth enjoying a pint of Courage Best bitter on cask at a pub in Buckinghamshire, a county Russ is proud to call home.

From there he studied engineering at Bristol University during the late 1980s with a view to potentially embarking on a career in woodworking, as nearby High Wycombe was synonymous with engineering companies.

"I didn't want to pursue a career in this subject so retrained as an accountant," he told me. This offered him an opportunity to move to Austin, Texas working for a small networking company: Madge Networks. "Austin had a buzzing beer scene and it made me consider that brewing is an area I could explore," he reflected.



The core range at present includes XT3 (West Coast IPA), XT4 (amber), XT17, one heritage beer and Hop Kitty (citra pale).

After time in Texas and an established career in IT he met Gareth Xifares, later to become his business partner. Upon returning to the UK Russ began another career as a brewer at Windsor & Eton Brewery (W&E) and during the intervening period he had kept in touch with Gareth. In 2010, "Project XT" was formed, the initials coming from their surnames Xifares and Taylor.

"W&E are a sensible and pragmatic brewery, very open to questions and remarkably helpful, so it was easy for me to gain experience," he explained. I suggested it was maybe a case of *déjà vu*, as W&E was established by brewers from the closed Courage brewing operation, and Courage was his first taste of cask beer.

XT beers are based on the colour spectrum, and I asked Russ about this. "It's about making yourself different so that you

stand out from a crowd; a simple solution was to brand the beers by their colours," he explained. Having been a home brewer for many years, Russ was able to brew a full mash with wet yeast provided by Rebellion Brewery.

The specialisation with which Russ brews is amazing, with the "Dead Brewers Society" recipes from over 100 years ago currently proving very popular. Modestly, he explained: "While you can't recreate the brewing kit, we are able to replicate each recipe. My head brewer Andy Cramer and Oak Taverns, to whom we supply these beers, are very supportive."

The core range at present includes XT3 (West Coast IPA), XT4 (amber), XT17, one heritage beer and Hop Kitty (citra pale), this being the only beer in the experimental Animal range to become a per-

Continued on page 10

Oak Taverns



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manent fixture. Bottling is contracted out to Arkells Brewery which has an extensive bottling plant.

Russ recognises that there is a huge demand for diversity in the UK beer market with only 15% represented by cask and the remainder dominated by the big brewers who can't be bothered with niche products. The Animal range reflects the possibilities with a multitude of malt varieties. Of the big brewers' rationale, he said: "They can't go too far off the range and use adjuncts of all kinds, as you end up with no beer culture. With all the chat in the cask market you would think it's bigger than it really is."

While hops are seen as essential in the production of beer, Russ makes the point that the different types of barley can be blended to produce different flavours. It is the process of turning the barley into malt (malted barley) by tricking nature to produce the sugars (principally maltose) which are fermented into beer by the yeast which gives beer its base flavour. XT/Animal beers are always flavoursome with a tasty malt sweetness evident, and it's no wonder they are so popular.

OK, so the technical stuff can be somewhat esoteric, and folk mostly want to know about day-to-day operations at XT. Russ threw some light on this: "We are an 18-barrel plant and brew two to three times a week with our beers going out as far as Bristol, Cambridge, Southampton and Birmingham; about a 100-mile radius. Life for the small brewer remains difficult with production remaining at a level 25% lower than it was pre-Covid. We took a massive hit when price inflation took hold



The specialisation with which Russ Taylor brews is amazing.

as our input costs rose significantly, mostly energy, malt and hops."

The XT Tap Room, open from 12-6pm on Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, is very popular in the takeaway trade, while Gareth also operates the subscription-based Beer Club.

XT beers can be found on hand pump as a fixture at the Lamb and Flag in St Giles, Oxford; the Rose and Crown in North Parade Avenue, Oxford; the Cross Keys in Thame; the Red Lion in Chinnor; and at other Oak Taverns pubs in and around Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire. The wonderful team at Oak Taverns is highly supportive of our small and medium-sized brewers, and Oxford CAMRA presented it with a special award at our February

awards evening.

Russ said we have control over a tiny corner of the beer market, and as access to markets is very tough we need fewer breweries but small ones with more clout. "Being a member of SIBA (the Society of Independent Brewers) keeps us all informed, and the Oxford Brewers Alliance enables us to help each other despite intense competition," he added. "For us to get into one pub takes months, and as soon as a brewer takes part of a new market the big boys swoop."

As I was thanking Russ for his time and looking to bid him farewell, he suggested that it was lunch time and we should merely adjourn and enjoy a pizza and more beer at the nearby White Rabbit in Friars Entry. And so my enjoyable afternoon continued.





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On the Front Lyne

Summer Wind (For Frank)

THE WINTER MONTHS are well and truly behind us and as I'm finishing this introduction, the sun is coming out and Oxford is breaking into the 20s again. As people's drinking habits change as the mercury rises, what can we look forward to enjoying in what will be a bumper summer ahead?

It's amazing how much the drinking landscape changes in the UK across the year. With so many breweries churning out superb beers, we are spoiled for choice when it comes to available styles. These breweries produce a huge range of beers all year round. You can walk into some great pubs and bars, and try what feels like a silly choice of beers. What a lovely problem to have!

As summer approaches, we tend to see these styles lean towards the lighter end of the spectrum. People choose lower ABV products and paler ales, as the sun makes every pint even more thirst quenching. So what styles will be popular this summer, and what newcomers will we see based on new trends over the past year?

Summer is one of the most important sales periods for hospitality, with an increase in tourism and improved weather allowing people to enjoy their drinks. This year will be even more challenging with several other factors, as venues struggle to survive the current economic climate. Venues must ensure they stock the correct prod-

ucts, in tip-top shape to keep consumers happy. There will also be more opportunities for pubs and bars to take advantage of the summer season, with a spectacular amount of sport on screens across the country.



With regard to cask ale, it will be a refreshing time of year for pale ale fans. As always, the pale ale range tends to dominate summer because of their refreshing taste profiles. There has already been an increase in the number of pale ales, and expect to see plenty of golden ales in the next few weeks.

One of the great things about pale ales is the sheer variety in flavours, ingredients and techniques that brewers implement. They lean towards the pale and pilsner malts to make a light, golden-coloured beer with a light body. You

tend to get plenty of sweetness from the malt which is quite subtle at times, but always allowing the hop notes to come through. The hops you should keep an eye out for in these beers are mostly the fruity variety: Citra, Cascade and Galaxy tend to be on the podium spots.

There has been a recent trend in White IPAs and New Zealand pales joining the ever varying selection of beers in the UK. NZ pales tend to give similar tasting notes to wines from that country. Expect plenty of floral, fruity and grassy flavours. White IPAs combine flavours of Belgian Wit bier with New World hops. These beers have bright citrus fruit flavours with a slightly spicy note to them. Delicious!

Continued on page 14



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At the other end of the spectrum, what can we expect from darker ales this summer? Well, they may not be going anywhere. The month of May is now associated with Mild, thanks to CAMRA branches celebrating and highlighting this style, and most modern Mild ales are between 3% and 3.6% ABV. These beers, if done properly, can have all the flavour of a stout or porter without the heavier body associated with them. Therefore, this is a style to look out for if you feel the heat but still want that signature dark beer flavour.

What about stouts? According to the *Morning Advertiser Beer Report 2024*, stout has seen a massive increase in both value and market share over the past year, largely thanks to marketing campaigns which have seen stout skyrocket in popularity. With volume up by more than 300,000HI over the previous

year, breweries will continue to produce top-quality stouts to keep up with demand.

One trend in summer is that cask ale fans turn towards kegged products because they are colder. Continental lager is shaping up to be a dominant product, and has been a stand-out performer over the past 12 months. Given that it now accounts up to 27% of the market, expect to see several new premium continental lagers over the summer.

Finally, another area to keep an eye on this summer will be the “low-and-no” alcohol options. As mentioned in some of my previous articles, consumers are ever more conscious of what they are drinking. There are many reasons for this, but in summer drinking occasions tend more towards the daytime than the night-time trade. The increase in family visits to pubs is a main driver towards low-and-

no alcohol sales throughout the summer.

For cask ale fans, two styles to look out for will be the increasingly popular table beers and small beers. These modern styles adopt an approach from historical recipes when drinkers used to enjoy plenty of flavour at a lower ABV. These styles are on the rise again thanks to the modern boom in craft ales, and have emerged as premium products in the low-and-no alcohol range.

There is much to look forward to over the next few months as the pleasant weather continues. With several big sports events on the horizon, there are plenty of reasons to go out and enjoy some of these beautiful brews. We hope pints will flow long through the summer months, and there are a few reasons to go out and celebrate a little on the 14th of July!



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After 10 years of proving itself as an outstanding Community-Owned pub and a regular in the *Good Beer Guide*, the Red Lion at Northmoor, near Witney, is up for rent. Nestled in its own two-acre gardens in the heart of the village, the Red Lion is a little gem, with cosy log fires and beamed ceilings. About 50/50 wet and dry sales and three luxury shepherd's huts in the garden for guests staying overnight.

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ACCORDING TO THE British Beer and Pub Association (BBPA), in 2019 there were 47,600 pubs in the UK – although some more recent estimates put the figure today at around 40,000. Of these, 22,750 were free houses, 15,650 were tenanted or leased and 9,200 were managed. In this article, we'll look at the latter two categories along with a newish "hybrid" model which the BBPA probably counts as a form of tenancy.

Tenancies

As a tenant, you rent the pub premises from a pub company or brewery and acquire the right to occupy the pub for an agreed period – usually two to five years. You will generally be "tied" for beer and other drinks so you can only purchase stock from the owning company – though some companies offer partial or free-of-tie deals (but invariably demanding a higher rent for the privilege).

You are self-employed and responsible for all the staff. Responsibility for building repairs will usually be confined to internal, non-structural work. A big attraction of the tenancy is the relatively low cost of entry, though you still need around £15,000 to properly operate a start-up, and possibly much more.

A downside is that if you build the business up, you may well get no reward from the pub company other than an increased rent. Indeed, the "reward" might be a refusal to renew the tenancy because, for instance, the company wants to take the now-successful pub into direct management. The Pubs Code of 2016 was designed to give tenants and lessees greater

Pubcos

Tenancy or

"Manchise"

means more

choice for landlords

CAMRA's **Paul Ainsworth** on different operating models in the third part of this major series



Hungry Horse, as at the portly White Horse in Headington, is a Greene King managed brand.

protection by requiring fair and lawful dealing by pub companies, and ensuring that tied tenants were no worse off than if they were free of tie. We'll have a close look at how the Code is working out in a future article.

Leases

Having a lease means you're entitled to occupy the pub and run your business for a

fixed term, often between 10 and 25 years. You'll still usually be tied for beer and other products and will be responsible for repairs, maintenance, insurance and other running costs. Unlike with a tenancy, you have the option to sell the business, including a sum for goodwill.

Managed houses

In this model, the pub is owned and operated by the pub company, which employs all the staff on the premises. The manager is likely to be eligible for performance-related bonuses in addition to their salary. Many managed pubs are branded, such as Hungry Horse, Ember Inns and Slug & Lettuce. The obvious advantage to the company is complete control over every aspect of the operation. On the other hand, they incur all the costs and accept all the risks, instead of sharing those with a tenant or lessee.

Companies whose pubs are all or nearly all managed include Wetherspoons, Mitchells & Butlers, Sam Smiths and Loungers. Many other



Most Young's pubs are managed, including the Angel and Greyhound in Oxford.

companies have a mix of models though the overall growth trend is definitely in the managed direction, especially if you include the next arrangement.

Retail agreements

This is the new kid on the block and goes by a variety of names – Manchises (Management Franchises) being an increasingly common term. The model was pioneered by Marston's but most of the bigger companies have now adopted it, each with their own brand name. Stonegate has Craft Union, Star Pubs & Bars has Just Add Talent, and Greene King has Pub Ready.

Unlike in conventional

managed pubs, the licensee is supposedly self-employed. In most cases, their remuneration comes from a percentage (usually 18-20%) of the pub's net turnover. From this, as licensee, you pay yourself and all your staff plus incidentals like employer's liability insurance and Council Tax.

So, what freedom do you have to run your own business? In truth, not a lot. The pub company sets the opening hours and the prices, decides what products you sell, prescribes the menu for any food offer and provides all the equipment. You can also be chucked out at pretty short notice (immediately in the case of Just Add Talent). If there's a stock deficit then

you're charged for it, and these can be mysteriously large.

The advantages for the licensee are the low ingoing costs (Pub Ready requires £5,000), you get a roof over your head, and have a prospect of making money. To do the last, though, you'd probably need to be taking over £10,000 a week. Urban, sports-oriented pubs seem to do best under this sort of regime. There are, though, many disgruntled ex-licensees who found the scheme a quick way to lose their dosh – try googling Sam Peeps Diary Marston's for a flavour.

The current number of these Retail Agreements is unknown but they have certainly been growing rapidly. Many tenants have been effectively thrown out of their pubs so that the company can convert the pub to more lucrative arrangements. You can see why the companies love this model. It frees them from the responsibility of employing staff, whilst retaining full control over what the pub actually does.

However, there's a cloud on their horizon. Early in 2021, the Supreme Court ruled that Uber drivers were definitely not self-employed. The parallels with Retail Agreement licensees are striking and His Majesty's Revenue and Customs is known to be taking a keen interest. Given the amount of control that the companies exert, can they really argue that these licensees are self-employed? Watch this space.



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

Oxfordshire's Top 4

Dave Richardson visits the pubs vying for CAMRA's County Pub of the Year (POTY) title

Royal Blenheim Oxford branch

The decision taken a few years ago not to continue offering food but to concentrate on beer, beer and more beer (plus a range of other drinks, of course) has certainly paid off, as this is one of the essential stops in the city centre. It's kept on its toes by more competition with re-opening of the Lamb & Flag and the Grapes.

With 10 handpumps and a good range of craft keg too, it maintains a range of styles throughout the year. But you're not guaranteed to find a local beer here at present, as the apparent demise of White Horse brewery in the New Year (which used to run the pub) led to an increase in beers from Titanic. An Everards beer still features as Titanic sub-leases the pub from Everards, and the four guest beers could be from anywhere. Titanic's hugely popular Plum Porter is a permanent feature.

Sports are important – especially Rugby – but don't dominate. Wednesday quiz nights are very popular and impromptu music is a regular feature, including folk. It attracts a varied clientele including plenty of students and tourists, and a steady stream of beer enthusiasts who can often be found at the rear of the L-shaped bar.



Lou Hamilton (left) and Linda Brookes at the White Horse.

White Horse, Banbury North Oxfordshire branch

For long regarded as Banbury's top real ale pub, the White Horse is also sub-leased from Leicestershire brewery Everards but without the direct involvement of a brewery, as at the Royal Blenheim. On the edge of the town centre by the main north-south road, it is a large, comfortable pub with separate lounge areas and a small patio.

It normally has five real ales on but had six on this occasion, as it had just celebrated winning POTY when CAMRA members were treated to free pints. Two of the ales were from Mighty Oak in Essex – Oscar Wilde and Captain Bob – while another

came from 4Ts brewery in Cheshire, Azacca, with "explosive hops". Local brewers were represented by Little Ox, with Wipeout, while two Everards beers, Tiger and Nemesis Session IPA, completed the range. A real cider, Stan's Big Apple, was also available.

The White Horse has a very enthusiastic bar and cellar manager, Lou Hamilton, and it was a pleasure to meet someone who so clearly enjoys her job. She was even invited to Everards to brew her own (keg) beer, Lou's Belgian Blonde, at 7.3%.

The pub has a very strong community focus with a noticeboard promoting local businesses, charity bookstall and canine "hall of fame".



Dave Howse at the Cross Keys.

Cross Keys, Wallingford South Oxfordshire branch

The success Oak Taverns has achieved in revitalising pubs has been proven again at the Cross Keys, acquired from Brakspear two years ago, and now a thriving community pub on the edge of the town centre. It immediately became the top real ale pub in the town, and on this sunny Friday evening it was very busy with a big crowd enjoying the extensive garden. A garden bar is planned.

Inside it has a lot of old-fashioned charm, with three small rooms, and feels just the sort of place you'd be welcome any time for a quiet chat. The house bitter, branded as Cross Keys, is in fact XT4, and the other three beers included local brew Chilling Me Softly by Loose

Cannon (badged as a Californian Common Beer and very tasty), a collaboration badged "Vocation and Friends" with an experimental hop, and Aussie Aussie Aussie, by Mad Squirrel of Hertfordshire.

Landlord Dave Howse comes from a family that runs pubs, but this is in fact his first and he's a perfect fit for the role. He said that Oak Taverns' philosophy was that if you get the beer right, everything else will follow – and we couldn't argue with that.

A big part of the pub's appeal at weekends is the eclectic range of food vans coming from near and far – in this case, Punjabi street food from Coventry. Many Oak Taverns pubs welcome food vans despite some licensing issues with local authorities.

King's Arms, Wantage White Horse branch

This pub was totally transformed when taken over by Oak Taverns a few years ago, as before that two pubs in the town – the Shoulder of Mutton and the Royal Oak – dominated the real ale scene. POTY winner for a second time, it now offers an ever-changing range of up to six real ales, with no regular ales at all. Six real ciders were dispensed from boxes, and these have helped the pub win the branch Cider POTY award.

You're almost certain to find something new here, and I had never before seen a beer from West Acre of Norfolk (Another Day Done) or Anarchy Brew Co of Newcastle-upon-Tyne (Midnight Metro). I was pleased to try another beer from Marble brewery in Manchester (Atlas) and Vocation brewery of Yorkshire (Naughty but Nice chocolate stout), while local breweries were represented by Love-Brew with Wookiee.

The King's Arms is a fairly basic drinkers' pub but unless you visit in the warmer months (or at least in daylight) you won't fully appreciate it. It has a substantial heated patio area and also a large grassed garden, quite a revelation for a town centre pub.

So, how do you choose a winner from these four wonderful pubs? All the beers tried were in great or good condition, with a wide range for all tastes. It was a difficult choice but the winner will be revealed soon, going forward to compete against the top pubs in Berkshire and Buckinghamshire to become regional champion. Winner of that contest could become National Pub of the Year.



Cask under threat

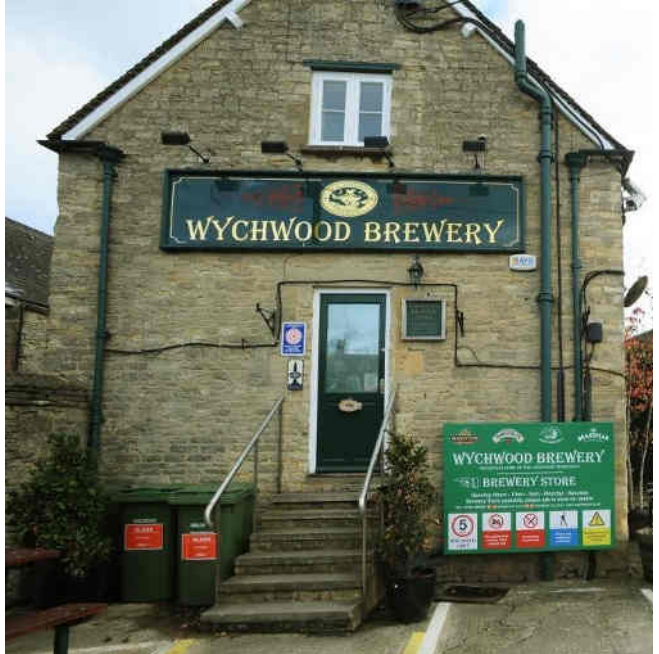
THE LOCAL BREWERY scene appeared to be fairly healthy until a few months ago, but with White Horse remaining closed and Bicester-based Wriggly Monkey deciding to close down in May, it seems we can't resist the national trend any longer. Although a couple of very small local operations had already closed for good in the last few years, it was the demise of Wychwood in Witney last November that started the trend.

Wychwood was different as unlike any other brewery in Oxfordshire, it was owned by one of the brewing giants – in this case multi-national Carlsberg Marston's Brewing Company (CMBC). Wychwood was the latest in a closure spree that started soon after Carlsberg and Marston's merged in 2020, with Carlsberg having the controlling interest. Already closed down since the "merger" were Jennings brewery in Cumbria, Ringwood in Hampshire and the former Charles Wells brewery in Bedford then owned by CMBC, this being sold to Spanish brewing giant Damm of Estrella Damm fame.

It makes you wonder how safe real ale is in the hands of the big brewers, and this is confirmed by latest industry figures (collected by consultancy CGA) showing that total production of cask ale was down again last year to 1.40 million HI (1HI = 100 litres) compared to 2.02 million HI in 2019, before the pandemic.

Independent breweries increased their production, but compared to the big brewers their market share is small. The 2024 SIBA Independent

Some big breweries are moving away from cask ale as an increasing number of closures hit small independents, reports **Dave Richardson**



It was the demise of Wychwood in Witney last November that started the trend. (Photo courtesy of Oxford Mail/Oxford Times)

Beer Report says members increased cask production last year by 10% to 63% of their total, but that is still below the 67% of 2019. More than half of independent breweries now produce lager.

"Rumours of the demise of cask beer seem greatly exaggerated," says CEO Andy Slee in his foreword to the SIBA report. "With global brewers walking away from cask it will be SIBA members' collective action that enables it to survive and thrive over the coming years.

While Carlsberg's brewery closure programme is a huge blow for those directly affected, it creates an opportunity for our members to satisfy local demand."

CMBC has come under heavy fire from CAMRA not just because of these closures, but for describing its top selling Wainwright beer as "a Lake District original" when it's now brewed in Wolverhampton. We understand that Witney's own Hobgoblin beer, a very successful brand



In what CAMRA calls the “Handpump Hijack”, CMBC is now serving so-called “Fresh Ale” (brewery conditioned keg) through handpumps.

launched by Wychwood, is now produced in Wolverhampton too – along with the Brakspear beers originally brewed in Henley-on-Thames, which moved to Wychwood when the Henley brewery closed in 2002.

But this trend is nothing new. Many people continue to drink what they believe is a “local” beer when it is in fact produced possibly hundreds of miles away, and cannot taste the same even if (as in the case of Brakspear beers in Witney) the original brewing kit is still used. The most obvious examples of this locally are Morland Original and Old Speckled Hen, still favourites around Abingdon although Greene King closed down Morland and shifted production to Bury St Edmunds in

Suffolk nearly a quarter of a century ago.

Now Greene King has announced plans to open a new £40 million brewery in Bury St Edmunds in 2027 and close down its existing brewery, which dates back over 200 years. Major savings will be made as a result, but this is being interpreted in some quarters – including the *Daily Telegraph* – as undermining its commitment to real ale. Smaller breweries including Wadworth are also moving to new premises with craft keg being the main beneficiary (see news story on page 5).

Writing in *What’s Brewing*, *Good Beer Guide* editor Roger Protz has this to say about CMBC: “When Marston’s was an independent company it energetically supported its

regional subsidiaries, but under CMBC they have gone down the sluice while it invests £10m in its lager plant in Northampton.

“What will happen to all the beers from the former CMBC breweries? Some will no doubt end up in that elephant’s graveyard, Banks’s brewery in Wolverhampton, where you will find Tetley Bitter. Remember Tetley? It was synonymous with Leeds until Carlsberg came calling and closed the brewery. It also axed the Ind Coope brewery in Burton along with Draught Burton Ale, a beer that helped drive the cask revival in the 1970s.”

Where are Young’s beers brewed nowadays? London Original and London Special certainly aren’t brewed anywhere near London! This is a good question since these beers were evicted from the former Charles Wells and Marston’s plant in Bedford. Wolverhampton? Burton-on-Trent? And what about another CAMRA favourite, Deuchar’s IPA? Heineken closed the Caledonian brewery in Edinburgh and Deuchar’s is now produced by Greene King’s Belhaven brewery in Dunbar. Protz describes it as “a shadow of its former self. Under first Scottish & Newcastle and now Heineken, it lost its lustre as a result of using cheaper raw materials”.

CMBC is under renewed attack for what CAMRA calls the “Handpump Hijack”. It is now serving so-called “Fresh Ale” (brewery conditioned keg) through handpumps, and CAMRA has reported CMBC to Trading Standards and the Business Secretary. Nik Antona, CAMRA national chairman, said:

“Misleading dispense is particularly detrimental to beer

drinkers, as hijacking a hand-pump to serve a keg beer removes a genuine cask product from the bar, reducing choice for consumers.”

In response, CMBC revealed that its sales of cask ales have slumped by 31% in the last four years (not a consequence of these brewery closures surely!) and that Fresh Ale gives publicans the opportunity to sell what it describes as a “cask” ale when they hadn’t done so before, although it has now agreed to badge Wainwright Gold, Wainwright Amber and Hobgoblin IPA Fresh Ales served through hand pumps as “brewery conditioned”.

There aren’t too many Marston’s pubs around Oxfordshire where we need to be on our guard against this, but a recent deal for CMBC to

become the main supplier to Stonegate, a property company that is the UK’s largest pub operator with 4,400 outlets, could mean we see it a lot more. Stonegate warned recently that it may be unable to continue as a going concern as it struggles with over £2 billion in debt, much of it accrued when it took over the Ei Group (Enterprise Inns) in 2019. Closures and sell-offs are a possibility.

The antidote to the move away from cask ales by some big brewers is of course to support independent breweries, especially local ones, as much as possible – a point made poignantly by Wiggly Monkey as it announced its closure (see news story on page 6). We are so, so lucky to have great local producers such as Hook Norton, Loose Cannon, XT or Little Ox,

while even craft keg specialist Tap Social is now producing cask ales too. Let’s hope our local independents survive and thrive, but nationally the number of breweries going bust nearly doubled from 38 to 69 last year, according to auditors Mazars.

Skinner’s of Cornwall, Purity of Warwickshire and Black Sheep of Yorkshire all got into trouble, but survive under new ownership. Long-established favourite Adnams of Suffolk is exploring re-financing options – another indication that the brewing industry is struggling. Maybe there’s a need for the market to re-settle after the huge growth in small breweries over the last decade, but we can’t rely on big breweries such as CMBC to keep cask ale from further decline.



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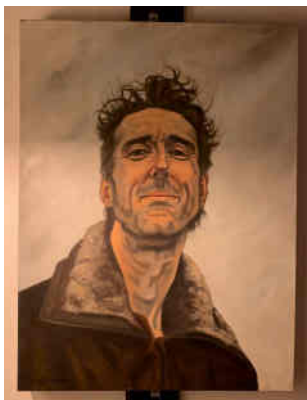
High prices could send pubs up in smoke

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

WHO REMEMBERS SMOKING in pubs? And if you do, do you think to yourself that those were the good old days? Picturing a John Smith's or Fosters branded ashtray in the middle of the table, with a pack of Embassy Number 1? And if you do think those were the good old days, were you a smoker?

I remember being at lock-ins (obviously not at my own pub, officer) and with the front door of the pub not opening and closing with customers coming and going, the cigarette smoke would plume around the ceiling like low flying clouds. Even just thinking about it now makes me feel slightly disgusted, not to mention the smell that would cling to everything. And yes, I think those were the good old days and yes, I miss smoking.

The thought of letting anyone light up inside my pub now seems as ridiculous as letting someone bring a four-pack of their own beer in and chug away. Honestly, it seems so strange now that we let smoking indoors happen at all. I mean, not just in pubs, but restaurants. Smoking tables



right next to non-smoking tables, because that's what stops smoke reaching your food, a four-foot gap.

I particularly remember hearing first the rumours and then the news that the government was going to ban smoking in public places, and thinking that this could be the death knell for pubs. Newspapers ran stories of pub regulars refusing to go to their locals anymore, often accompanied by a picture of Captain Grumpy waving a pack of 20 and looking like a man with a fork in a world of soup.

Yet pubs didn't die. Well,

not all of them, and certainly not all at once. Did the smoking ban stop smokers drinking in pubs? Nope. In fact, for a while at the start of the ban I actually grew to enjoy the communal experience of traipsing outside the pub for a ciggie. "Smirting" even became a thing. Anyone remember *that*? Smoking and flirting, together at last! Asking for a light became an ice breaker. Like in so many things, we adapted and made the best of it.

After all, smoking is pretty stupid. It carries a plethora of health risks and costs a fortune (even back then). It did make you look really cool though. And every smoker and ex-smoker knows that last bit to be true.

So if banning smoking, an at-the-time integral part of the pub experience, didn't kill pubs, could anything actually kill The Pub? Not individual pubs, but The Pub as a recognised institution, across villages, high streets and communities around the country.

Sadly, individual pubs can and do die all the time – 509 pubs last year to be exact, according to the British Beer and Pub Association. That's not even a particularly bad year for pub closures. We've been losing about 500 pubs a year for a while now. There are now 45,306 pubs in the UK, compared to 48,349 pubs in 2017. (Just as a side note, did you know there were 25 pubs listed in Jericho in 1870, compared to six today? I can't even count myself as one of those, as technically I'm in Walton Manor).

So individual pubs can die, but many more can survive major upheavals to tradition, even something once

seen as almost integral to the experience, like smoking. So if so many of us withstood the smoking ban, what could kill The Pub, or is it safe? Can we trust in crossed fingers and horseshoes? Can we relax and just enjoy our pints again?

Well, just enjoying our pints is not a bad way to ensure survival, but try and enjoy those pints in a variety of establishments. Because lack of variety could well kill The Pub.

Let me try and explain that a bit more.

In my time at the Gardener's Arms in Plantation Road, two local pubs have closed (and thankfully re-opened) – the Victoria and the "Other" Gardener's Arms in North Parade Avenue. Those are actually the two closest pubs to me. Yet the periods of them being closed had no effect on my trade. I'd expected to pick up some of their regular drinkers, getting a little bump in trade while those regulars waited for their preferred pubs to re-open, but there wasn't a boost in sales. Not in any measurable quantity.

Which leads me to suspect that when someone's pub of choice closes, they don't go wandering around the neighbourhood trying other pubs. At least most people don't. They stay at home. Maybe not all the time, but certainly more than they did when their local was open. Of course, the other option is that they did all go to other pubs, just not mine, but let's not entertain that idea.

So if they're not going elsewhere, the on-licence beer trade is seeing a drop in sales. It must be, if there are fewer people buying their beer in pubs. So therefore the trade is seeing a drop in prof-



its. Which, given the nature of business, would probably mean an increase in prices. Not at pub level, not to start with, but from the large breweries bolstering their falling profits. Obviously the knock-on effect of that is that the price of beer on tap would have to go up. As we've all noticed, if prices go up too far, the only thing to do is to cut back on what you buy. Which is a drop in sales again, which would lead to... well, you get the picture.

Now beer prices are going to rise every year regardless of how many people drink in pubs, due to that pesky yet ever-present inflation. But fingers crossed wages should rise as well (unless you're in

one of those "unessential" jobs like being a doctor, nurse or teacher). But if the above scenario happens too quickly, if beer prices are driven up due to a lack of sales stemming from a reduction in the number of people drinking in pubs, at what point does a pint of beer cost too much?

That's a question everyone will answer differently, but the outcome is the same. When people feel that beer in a pub is too expensive, they'll stop going to the pub. And that will kill The Pub.

Now that's a pretty extreme take on things. But there will come a tipping point if pubs keep closing at the rate they are doing. Areas like Jericho benefit from there



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

being a variety of pubs, which makes Jericho itself a destination. You can have a good night out doing a crawl around a few of the pubs in the neighbourhood.

What if there was just one pub left in Jericho though? It wouldn't be much of a destination. It certainly wouldn't be much of a crawl. You'd probably stick where you were in-

stead of trekking out to Jericho for its one pub.

So while we have pubs plural in neighbourhoods, to go back to my original point before I rambled off doom-saying, let's celebrate the fact by visiting them. We don't have to visit all of them all the time though. Various people will be visiting various pubs on various nights. Some go here and some go there, according to desire and taste, and trade is spread out. I've written before about how there are certain pubs for certain moods, or events. But if we keep using all the pubs, for the variety of reasons that pubs are there for, it keeps the trade coming in.

And The Pub lives.
For another day at least.



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Tony's Travels

Begbroke, Yarnton and Cassington

Village pubs just to the north of Oxford are the focus this time for **Tony Goulding**

NORTH OF OXFORD off the main A44 road towards Evesham or Stratford-upon-Avon are the villages of Yarnton and Begbroke, with Cassington a little further west towards the A40 road towards Witney. They are very lucky in that they have suffered almost no permanent pub closures in the last 40 years, but some have been under threat.

The pubs in Yarnton and Begbroke are easily accessible by a Stagecoach bus service from Oxford to Wood-

stock and beyond, operating every 30 minutes during the day, and every hour in the evenings and on Sundays.

The **Royal Sun**, possibly the only pub of that name anywhere on the mainland, is situated alongside the A44 at Begbroke. This old 17th-century inn has been much altered since frequented by royalty and important visitors including Sir Winston Churchill on their way to Blenheim Palace. Primarily an eating house for many years, the

pub has gone through numerous changes of landlords, typical of some Punch Taverns houses. Now in the capable hands of the local Aziz group (see news story on page 5), it is still visited by a loyal group of locals to enjoy the one or two cask beers available. On the bar noted recently were Wye Valley HPA and St Austell Tribute.

A couple of miles towards Oxford, just before the railway and canal cross under the A44, you will find the **Turnpike**, renamed from the **Bunch of Grapes**, a former Halls house now owned by Mitchells and Butlers (M&B). This greatly extended 16th-century roadhouse is situated on the old Birmingham road which formed part of the Stokenchurch to Woodstock turnpike, a 17th-century toll road, a reason for the unnecessary renaming. Now a popular dining venue with up to three cask beers served from the extensive M&B guest range, it is well worth a visit especially for the annual spring beer festival.

Across the roundabout from the **Turnpike**, the road takes you into the village of Yarnton and to the **Red Lion**. The original building dating



The Royal Sun (left) and the Turnpike.



From top: The Red Lion Yarnton, the Red Lion Cassington and the Chequers.

from the 16th century was demolished and rebuilt in 1957, creating the pleasant structure on view today. Being owned over the years by Halls, Greene King and Admiral Taverns has taken its toll.

The pub was closed in August 2022 and subject to an unsuccessful Community-Owned takeover bid, but good times hopefully arrived last December when successful local company Oak Taverns acquired the building. It was tastefully refurbished and now serves four ever-changing local cask beers, with no food but only snacks available.

A couple of miles beyond the **Red Lion** is the village of Cassington which abuts the main A40. Another **Red Lion** is on one side of the village green, a former Halls house now owned by Punch Taverns and a real basic locals' boozier, with no food ("proper" drinkers eat at home!), lots of conversation and sports. The pub is supported by an enthusiastic bunch of locals who are served by the landlady of 14 years, Jan Faulkner, and her daughter. In fact, both these Red Lions serve no food and are thriving local pubs.

A short distance away is the **Chequers**, rebuilt about 25 years ago from a former Morrell's house. Once run by Young's, the pub was acquired six years ago by Mr Babu Odedra and his family who offer a popular Indian and British food menu supported by one or two cask beers from Fuller's or Loose Cannon, along with comfortable guest rooms for visitors from far and wide. The original pub played host to a yearly huge gathering of motor-bikes, but this has since moved across to the **Red Lion**.



WARWICK MIGHT BE world famous for its castle, but the town itself has many more accolades – including more than its fair share of treats for today’s ale drinker. For a relatively small town, Warwick is blessed with no fewer than five pubs in the 2024 *Good Beer Guide* (GBG) and plenty more good ale pubs worth a visit. This means the big question when it comes to a pub walk isn’t whether you have enough pubs – more whether you have enough time to get to them all.

To celebrate their inclusion in the GBG, the landlords of the five pubs listed in this highly respected publication joined Sally-Jane Downes from Heart of Warwickshire CAMRA and the official Warwick Court Leet Ale Taster, Simon Garwood, to test out a pub walk around the town, enjoying Warwick’s ale offering first hand.

If you emerge from the train station and are thirsty for a drink, the **Wild Boar**, just a couple of minutes away, would probably be the first port of call. Home to the Slaughterhouse Brewery, the **Wild Boar** is a traditional Victorian pub featuring wooden floors, real fires and a comfortable snug plus a secluded beer garden to the rear. Featuring six hand-pulls including their own and guest beers, it includes craft keg as well as cask. I opted for a pint of Slaughterhouse “Can You Dig It English IPA” at 6% ABV, which lives up to the more traditional style of IPA while being (far too) easy to drink and full of flavour.

Decently refreshed, the group took a walk directly towards the Grand Union Canal, joining that Victorian highway for a stroll towards the

Warwick’s Fabulous Five

The five *Good Beer Guide* pubs in Warwick have got together to launch an Ale Trail, as described by landlord **Tim Maccabee**



From left: Tom Buxton of the Cape of Good Hope, Chris Proudfoot of the Old Fourpenny Shop, Alex Ridgway of the Wild Boar, Sally-Jane Downes of Heart of Warwickshire CAMRA, and Tim Maccabee and Rachel Silverthorne of the Eagle and the Old Post Office.



Oxford CAMRA members visited Warwick pubs, including the Old Post Office, in April 2022.

Cape of Good Hope.

Dating from 1798, the **Cape of Good Hope** is beautifully situated at Cape Top Lock on the Grand Union Canal. With two bars and Warwick's only canal-side beer garden, it's perfect to watch the boats go by. Six hand-pulls feature here, with local ales from Hook Norton, Church Farm and others, and the **Cape** has featured in the GBG every year for over 25 years. I sampled a pint of Wye Valley Butty Bach accompanied by their famous Scotch Egg, which is available all day every day. As at other pubs on the list, there's also a fine selection of craft keg ales plus low/no alcohol alternatives to keep any designated driver happy. There is also a delight-

ful canal-side cottage next door which is available for accommodation.

Departing again, the group headed towards the town centre. There are several routes available, but we found our way alongside the edge of the renowned Warwick Racecourse. Not only a racecourse, it also has caravan and camping facilities for those wanting to make a longer visit, adding to Warwick's appeal as a weekend break spot as well as a day-trip destination.

Next call was the **Old Fourpenny Shop**. Legend has it that when the Warwick section of the Grand Union Canal was being built in the early 1800s, this tavern in Crompton Street was charg-

ing a mere four pence for a cup of coffee and a tot of rum. Other inns were charging an "outrageous" six pence! Still offering food and rooms, the "**4Penny**" won the coveted Pub of the Year award from Heart of Warwickshire CAMRA in 2024, following a lovely refit with possibly the best beer garden in the centre of Warwick. Again, six hand-pulls feature with Hook Norton "Hooky" being the starting point for the regular beers. This time, my choice was Hobson's Spring Break American Pale Ale, which at 3.4% was a nice interlude from the stronger ales of the day.

Just two minutes around the corner is the **Old Post Office**, which was in full swing with its regular Saturday after-



noon music session. Runner-up in the Pub of the Year award (together with the **Eagle**), the OPO is just coming up to its 10th anniversary and has been a firm local favourite for all of those years, winning Pub of the Year or runner-up every eligible year. There's just one regular beer here (Phipps IPA) which shares the bar with four other ales. While North Cotswold and Church End are regular visitors, each of the four guest pumps changes ale with every single barrel, with a good selection of craft and real cider also on offer. A top choice here is the excellently named 4.5% Shagweaver, from North Cotswold brewery.

From the **Old Post Office**, a walk through Warwick's historic West Gate and past the medieval Lord Leicester Hospital takes you through the traditional Market Square to find the hidden gem that is

the **Eagle**. The youngest and smallest of the pubs in Warwick, the **Eagle** is also possibly the oldest! It was established in a historic vaulted cellar back in 2018, undergoing a change of ownership, a complete refurb and a change of name in 2022. Here, the three hand-pulls are made to work hard and in those two years, over 350 different ales have featured – again with a policy of constant rotation. It has a capacity of just 34 people, but summer drinkers make the most of the outside pavement space which is shared with the **Globe Hotel**, just a couple of metres away. Music plays in the background during the day, but rising a little on a weekend evening.

This tour of Warwick's lauded *Good Beer Guide* pubs includes around an hour of walking time, making it more than manageable for most. It also passes near some other excel-

The Old Fourpenny Shop won the coveted Pub of the Year award from Heart of Warwickshire CAMRA in 2024.

lent pubs among the 25-plus that Warwick has to offer, making it a great destination for ale lovers from far and wide. On top of this, many of the hosteries in the town centre have letting rooms available, and the addition of independent shops, restaurants and bars, a Saturday market and a packed events calendar means there is plenty on offer to keep a visitor well satisfied on a short break.



Tim Maccabee is landlord of the Old Post Office and the Eagle.

Warwick is easily reached by rail from Oxford by changing at Banbury or Leamington Spa.



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Tales from the Nose and Frown

Tug o' Wa(te)r

Graham Shelton recalls the characters and games of yesteryear that distinguished his village pub

"IN THEM DAYS there wuz a lot more pubs than what there is now," said Joe, just settling into his third pint of mild in the corner by the fire at the Nose and Frown. He had one of his "specials" already lined up on the bar by Sue, so I had high hopes that there was a good story coming.

"We 'ad the 'Orse, the Bell and the Golden Balls in Standlake, as well as the Rose, the Cow, the Ferry and us here in Northmoor. Each pub had its reg'lar clientele, and we had some fierce rivalry going between us, I can tell you. It was usually all in good spirits, but one or two could get a bit carried away when there was drink taken...

"We 'ad a few good games we played in the local pub tournaments, o' course: Aunt Sally, bowls and cricket in the summer, darts, crib-



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bage, billiards and shuff 'apenny in the winter, never mind the Mouse Racing I told you about last time. Then there wuz the time we 'ad the Tug o' War."

I think most people in the bar that night had heard Joe's "war story" a few times over the years but, being new, I hadn't. So I was "all ears" and he didn't need a second invitation.

"It was back in Roy's time when he was landlord here," he continued, "and the lads at the Bell challenged us to a Tug o' War. It was Chris who suggested we should have a proper long, thick rope and stretch it right across the river. Live dangerously, that was his motto! Well, as soon as he said that we knew we had to do it, and that somebody, maybe the whole lot of us, was going to end up in the

drink! We always had a collecting bucket and a raffle for charity, and this one was bound to attract a big crowd keen on a bet or two and keener still to see who could swim!

"The Lion and the Bell were no nearer to the river then than they are now, o' course, so we decided to have a bit of an outing down to the Ferry. Peter, the landlord of the Ferry, was there even in them days. He was all up for a bit of fun, running both the Ferry pub and the rather unseaworthy craft that he used to ratchet across on a wire from one side to the other to let horses and bicycles across the river. I expect he thought he'd sell a few pints an' all. Anyway, in the back of the boat store he found some good heavy rope easily long enough to stretch right across

the river with plenty to spare on each side.

"But it wasn't long before our lads had hatched 'a cunning plan'. We'd go across to the other side on the ferry with one end of the rope for us to pull. We'd pull on the rope away from the pub, and they'd pull the other way, towards it, with the Rector moored mid-stream to blow the starting whistle and decide the winner: best of three.

"All good, but what *they* didn't know was that Roy had a bit of sash cord in his pocket, and as soon as we were well on the other side, away from prying eyes, he tied his cord to the strongest bit of hedge he could find. You can still see today where he tied it. The other went on the end of the pulling rope and we made a big show of pulling hard until the rope took up the strain.



The River Thames at Bablock Hythe near Northmoor, where the Tug of War took place.

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The hedge on the far bank.

The other team were puffing and blowing but couldn't make us budge. Not surprising because they'd have had to pull up half the quick-thorn hedge as well as all of us! So, first pull we won! Second pull we won!

"Third pull, the Rector looked over to see what we wuz doing 'cause 'e couldn't understand how we wuz so strong, being the codgers that we were. 'I say, chaps!' he said in his cultured voice, 'what's going on in that hedge?' We argued, but the game was up and we had to

untie. Well, Peter made a big show of being upset, and before we knew where we wuz he'd recruited about 10 extra members for the Ferry team from the audience. They'd all had a few pints by then, o' course.

"The Rector blew his whistle and we pulled for our lives. But even though many of the Ferrymen could barely stand, we wuz simply overwhelmed by their numbers. Into the river we went, and it was water not beer we had to drink that afternoon."



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THE GRAPES

— OXFORD —



A Deal A Day

Monday - Burger Monday

Tuesday - Rib Tuesday

Wednesday - Wine
Wednesday

Thursday - Steak
Thursday

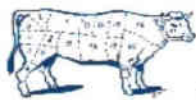
Friday - Tapas Friday

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