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Issue 129  
Winter 2025-2026

# the Oxford Drinker



**On the move  
at Tip Top Tap**

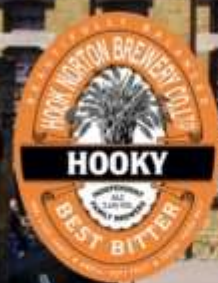
INSIDE

- New Witney brewpub
- Rural pubs tour
- City £7.05 pint shock

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

# WELCOME TO HOOKY COUNTRY

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Cover: Tap Social has promoted Ben Addison (left) to head brewer to replace Jason Bolger who has left to set up his own business. (Photo by Chris Cox.)

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)

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# Welcome

...to bright spots locally amid the winter gloom

**I'M WRITING THIS** on the day the Chancellor announced her Budget, and as widely predicted there was very little for pubs and breweries to celebrate as they geared up for the festive season. By the time you read this it might well be New Year, and January/February are usually the bleakest of times for pubs as the cash-strapped public stays at home, so make sure you go out and support them.

But there are bright spots. The Broad Face in Abingdon is one of the latest pubs to re-open after a period of closure, while in Witney a new brewpub is opening in the very capable hands of former Tap Social head brewer Jason Bolger. We continue to have some excellent country pubs as our villages tour proved, but others are closed and subject to bids to convert them into private houses, including the White Hart at Wytham.

Mounting costs forced its closure in 2022, and it would be a brave person who takes on any pub now that costs have increased yet further. But there are examples of other village pubs that have been brought back from the dead, with community ownership working well in some cases.

CAMRA, which is suffering financial hard times itself, is clearly disappointed by the outcome of the Budget although this does not affect our local activities. We had to cancel the Oxford Beer Festival in 2025, but costs were only one of the reasons. Our social programme carries on, and thanks to our advertisers this issue of the *Oxford Drinker* is one of the



largest ever.

CAMRA national chairman Ash Corbett-Collins described the Budget announcement as “a dark day for UK drinkers, pubs and breweries”, adding: “Instead of offering a bold package to save and support the UK’s pubs, the Chancellor has chosen not to help with VAT, energy bills or Employer National Insurance contributions. Pubs and breweries can contribute to economic growth, but only with proper support from the Government on sky-high costs which are making it impossible for many pubs to survive and thrive.”

The only bright spot was permanently lower business rates for hospitality from next May, but alcohol duty has been hiked including on draught beer and cider, when CAMRA had argued for a cut. Employment in pubs is already being reduced, and bar work is often a first job for young people.

Who pays? The customer, of course. Our survey of Oxford city centre real ale pubs found a £7 pint for the first time so thank goodness for Wetherspoon and other pubs that keep prices low, including the White Rabbit. Whatever you can afford, please support our pubs in January/February when they need you most, as we don’t want to see more signs on closed pubs like the one pictured.

**DAVE RICHARDSON**

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

# Hard times

## for an honest man (or woman)



**ALL PUBS HAVE** been facing serious challenges for a decade plus as living standards have stood still. Don't get me started on energy prices, cost of living etc, but here I'm going to rail against the harm done by the Botley Road/Oxford Station "works".

From the start, this project has been run with insufficient regard for its impact on local people and businesses. There are three pubs that have been majorly hit: the **Porterhouse**, specialising in steak, but still a pub; the **Punter**, its quality vegetarian cousin; and the **Holly Bush**, where Radiohead had their first gig. The "works" have hit each hard.

The authorities' offer in the summer was a fund of less

*Porterhouse duty manager Alan Stotter explains that the pub has rotating real ales on tap, from breweries such as XT and Greene King.*

than £1 million, not just for these pubs but for all the businesses impacted. This is for three years when trade has been reduced by likely between a third and half. It's an insult to all those impacted. I've visited all three of these pubs this year and the teams in each continue to make them welcoming places well worth a visit. We can hope all the businesses will eventually get proper compensation, but sometimes that feels like shouting at the wind. We can help now by heading to them for a pint and maybe a meal.

## Chair's Chatter

This kind of links to my second thought. We are all creatures of habit. Much about that is a good thing, but it can lead to missing out. A long time ago my local was the **Chester Arms**. It was terrible back then, so once I moved I didn't return for decades. Now known simply as the **Chester**, it's a fabulous pub with great food, and well worth the short walk from the bus stops in Iffley Road. It's also just five minutes from the also worth visiting **Fir Tree** or **Magdalen Arms**. Old assumptions, my loss.

Abingdon has seen new management at the much-loved **Broad Face**. As creatures of habit, we tend not to like change, but when I visited they had five beers on, all in good condition. In these hard times I believe it's important we do what we can to support those brave enough to take on a new venture.

My suggestion for you in 2026 is to visit an out-of-the-way pub, either one you've never visited before or not been to since you can't remember when. They need your support, and you never know, it might be a lot of fun.

**JOHN WINNEY**

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We're proud to be named both CAMRA Pub of the Year 2025 and Oxford Mail's Pub of the Year 2025!

A huge thank you to everyone who's supported us – since the last Oxford Drinker, you've helped us pour an incredible 5,765.5 pints of real ale and cider, keeping the spirit of cask beer alive in Oxford.



THE GRAPES

## WHAT'S NEW AT THE GRAPES

**SECOND NITRO LINE** – More variety coming to our guest wall.

**CAMRA VOUCHERS WELCOME** – We now accept paper vouchers from the CAMRA magazine.

**LIVE MENUS** – Check our in-house screens for up-to-date real ale, cider, and food menus with accurate pricing.

**ALE & KEG FLIGHTS** – Launching at the end of November, perfect for sampling and discovering new favourites.

**GRAPES MERCH** – Exclusive Oxford-inspired designs now available! Treat yourself or a beer lover – CAMRA members get a pint and a tee for £20.

**MEET THE BREWER EVENINGS** – Starting in January. Join us for relaxed sessions with some of our favourite head brewers.

*Thanks for being part of Oxford's best beer community - here's to great pints, great people, and great times at The Grapes.*

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# Pub News

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## New Witney brewpub Scarlet River to open in New Year

Former Tap Social head brewer Jason Bolger and his partner Niki are opening a brewpub and café in Witney called Scarlet River, close to Marks & Spencer in the Marriotts Walk development on the edge of the town centre. It is due to open during January selling mainly craft keg beer and cider, but Jason pushed for more cask production while at Tap and is having one hand pump on the bar.

“Our kids are named Scarlet and River, and our goal with the brewery is to work with and support veterans,” he said. “My partner Niki found a beautiful poem called *Where the Scarlet River Flows* by J. Alexis-Hagues about remembrance, and we thought it seemed like a really good fit.

“I am not a veteran but everyone in my family has served, and my uncle retired as a Lieutenant-Colonel in the US Airforce. Helping veterans has always been something I have wanted to do, and Niki shares the same passion.

“We are local to Witney, which has a really good nightlife and award-winning pubs like the Three Horseshoes. It’s a great place for food and drink, and we hope the local and surrounding community will enjoy what we offer – a wide range of lagers and ales with a core range, seasonals, and specials that will change with every brew.”

Jason worked at a brewpub chain called Iron Hill and then Northville Brewery and Winery in his native USA, where he also made cider. Once he moved to the UK he started at Brewhouse & Kitchen in Portsmouth and then Southbourne, before joining Tap Social on its formation in 2016.

While Tap Social is dedicated to helping ex-prisoners back into jobs in civilian life, Scarlet River has a similar mission to help and support ex-servicemen.

Opening of Scarlet River means beer will be produced in the town once more. Jason added: “Niki and I are excited to be bringing



brewing back to Witney, as it has a long history of breweries serving local communities. We hope to continue this and welcome everyone very soon.”

The brewpub and café is the second bar to open in a shop setting in Witney, as the Crafty Pint micro pub (formerly Drummers Bar and Oxbrew) operates in the town centre. It is Oxford CAMRA’s current Town and Village Pub of the Year, and is *Good Beer Guide* listed.

Witney’s history of commercial brewing goes back to the 1830s when Clinch & Co’s Eagle Brewery opened. It had 74 pubs when bought out by Courage in 1962 and closed down, including some of the pubs still trading in Witney today and a couple in Oxford.

Its former maltings were later used by Glenny Brewery from 1983, which changed its name to Wychwood in 1989. In 1994, it moved back to the original site at the Eagle Maltings before becoming part of drinks distributor Refresh UK. Marston’s bought it out in 2008 and the Carlsberg Marston’s Brewing Company closed Wychwood in 2023, when it had a successful brewery tap. This ended nearly 200 years of brewing history in Witney... until 2026.

# Prices up but real ale holds its own in city centre

Highest price for a pint hits over £7 for the first time, writes **Dave Richardson**

The number and variety of real ales in the city centre is holding firm, according to a survey of 24 pubs taken on the afternoon of Saturday 8 November by 12 members of Oxford CAMRA. But there is renewed concern over the steady increase in prices, with one pub – the Turf Tavern – breaking the £7 ceiling for a pint of real ale for the first time and an average price of £5.62 compared to £5.42 last year.

Oxford CAMRA secretary Steve Lawrence, who organised the survey, said: “The headline this year is that there has been very little change in terms of number and variety of real ales available but inevitably the average price has gone up, and the first sighting of a (fairly ordinary) pint at over £7. There are now 24 real ale pubs in the OX1 area bounded by Magdalen Bridge, Folly Bridge, the railway station and the junction of Banbury Road and Woodstock Road.

“We found 114 beers on sale (113 in 2024) with some duplicated, so the number of different beers available was an impressive 86 (85). The most frequently found beer was Oxford Brewery Prospect (five), then Greene King (GK) Abbot with four, and GK IPA, Sharp’s Doom Bar, Fuller’s London Pride and Timothy Taylor Landlord with three each. Oxford Brewery has



*The lowest price in the city centre was £3.90 at the White Rabbit.*

come from nowhere last year to take the lead.

“Unsurprisingly, the most common brewery was Greene King with 10 different beers although four were one-off ‘specials’ for the Turf Tavern. Titan supplied five, and four different beers could be found from Fuller’s, Marston’s under various guises, and Hook Norton.”

Regarding prices, the figures exclude the two Wetherspoon pubs (the Four Candles and the Swan & Castle) where real ales all cost £2.59 except GK IPA at £1.89, a slight change from 2024 when real ales all cost £2.49 with IPA at £1.99. Also just to complicate things the White Rabbit was selling a weak 1% ABV beer from Twisted Tree for £1, so that is not included either.

The average cost of a pint

overall was £5.62 (£5.42 in 2024), while the highest price was £7.05 for both Chadlington Brewery beers at the Turf Tavern. Last year, the highest priced real ale was £6.55 at Fuller’s Head of the River. The lowest price was £3.90 at the White Rabbit (up from £3.80 last year) but the number of pubs where you could not get a pint under £5 has gone up from 12 to 15. In both Fuller’s pubs (the Bear and the Head of the River) you couldn’t get a pint for under £6.

Worthy of note is that an impressive 19 pubs had gluten-free beer available from keg, can or bottle, with three pubs having gluten-free real ales. Some local breweries, including Little Ox and Loddon, now produce all their real ales gluten-free.

## Pub News

# Winners feted at Hooky Awards for outstanding pubs



*Mick "The Hat" Weston (centre) celebrates the Peyton Arms' two awards with James Clarke (left) and "the Dogfather", Graeme Hall.*

Five pubs won seven awards at Hook Norton Brewery in October as it brought together pub owners, staff and community members of its tenancies and managed houses for a night of recognition and celebration.

Guests were greeted upon arrival by the brewery's magnificent shire horses, Brigadier and Balmoral, immaculately turned out by head coachman Nic Carter. Attendees then enjoyed a reception with drinks and canapés in the newly restyled Heritage clothing department before proceeding down a red carpet to the awards ceremony, followed by dinner. The awards were presented in the brewery's function room, The Steep, by renowned TV personality "the Dogfather", Graeme Hall.

"It's a privilege to cele-

brate the hard work and dedication of the people who make our pubs the heart of their communities," said James Clarke, the brewery's managing director. "Each of our winners represents the best of what a great British pub can be."


The 2025 Hooky Award winners are:


- Pub of The Year: Bell Inn, Adderbury
- Best Newcomer Award: Bell Inn, Adderbury
- Best Pint Award: Eagle Tavern, Witney
- Best Community Pub Award: Coach & Horses, Shipston-on-Stour
- Customers' Choice Award: Peyton Arms, Stoke Lyne
- Pub Personality Award: Mick "The Hat" Weston, Peyton Arms, Stoke Lyne
- Pub in Bloom Award: Butcher's Arms, King's Sutton

## QUICK ONES

 The **Fox Inn** at Boars Hill was due to re-open on 29 November after a refurbishment costing around £250,000. It is owned by Heineken's Star Pubs division and run by chef Stephen Williams who pioneered the Brets Burger brand in Oxford and now also runs the **Plough** in Witney and **Chequers** in Weston-on-the-Green.

 Reader Chris Dicks writes: "Seeing your article online about the £7 pint now in Oxford, I visited the recently re-opened **Six Bells** in Kidlington which offered a friendly welcome and an excellent few pints of Tribute on draught for just £3.50 a pint. The pub could still do with a little more TLC and nicer lighting, but I hope people will support it. It's nice to have it back on form and an alternative to the great **King's Arms**."

 A notice was fixed to the door of the **Golden Ball**, Littlemore in November saying the business had ceased trading and enquiries should be made to the Official Receiver. It was listed as To Let on the Admiral Taverns website with zero business rates, and described as a "well run community pub". It has had several changes of management in recent years.

 A planning application to convert the closed **Woodman** in North Leigh into a house has been re-submitted soon after the first application was rejected by West Oxfordshire. Oxford CAMRA has objected to the application and urges others to comment at [publicaccess.westoxon.gov.uk](http://publicaccess.westoxon.gov.uk)

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## Pub News

# Broad Face re-opens

but Craftsman closes after only six months

The Broad Face in Abingdon re-opened on 20 October in a tenancy deal between Greene King and the Healy Family Group, writes *Pete Flynn*. Healy operates two other GK pubs in Abingdon, the Black Swan and the Punchbowl, plus the Red Lion in Drayton within its small portfolio of about 15 pubs.

The Broad Face will only be selling cask beer within the range offered by GK for the first 12 months, including guests. It typically offers Wadworth 6X, Hardy & Hansons bitter (GK), a St Austell beer and GK Abbot. The kitchen was due to re-open in late November.

Annual rent was advertised as £25,500 plus 5% of weekly net

sales, with entry costs of £22,625. Annual turnover was estimated at over £500,000.

The quality and wide range of independent ales previously offered made the pub a favourite with real ale fans, winning Oxford CAMRA's Town and Village Pub of the Year award in 2023 and securing a place in the *Good Beer Guide*. For now the range is reduced, but new manager Agnes Wisniewska brings plenty of experience in the pub trade following stints at the Fox & Hounds in Uffington and the Prince of



# Red Lion not a sports bar!

Correcting an item that appeared in the Tony's Travels column in the Autumn edition, landlord Luke Livingstone has written to say that the Red Lion in Witney is not a sports bar and does serve food. He took over in September 2024 when the name was changed from the Rocket back to its traditional name.

"We have a great menu that we worked very hard on," he said. "We are a community hub

of entertainment and with the addition of the Barn cocktail lounge we have firmly established ourselves as a unique place to experience in Witney. We are an event-heavy community pub, with a new, cosy atmosphere. I have been asked to speak at Greene King roadshows on how to put on successful events, which I considered an honour given I had only been running a pub for one year."

Wales in Shrivenham.

In other Abingdon news, the Craftsman Tap micro-pub in Stert Street pulled its last pint on 31 October after the couple running it decided to concentrate on building up their small brewery, also called Craftsman. Justin and Sam Evans opened their micro-pub on 1 May, and the shop has now reverted to being the Added Ingredients deli.

The Old Anchor Inn, re-opened in September after being closed since May 2023, was closed briefly in October due to staff upheaval. The pub is no longer leased by Greene King but sells only GK beers.

# Thriller in Manila?

We apologise to followers (both of you?) of Tony's Travels for the absence of his column this time. Tony Goulding was given leave of absence to travel to the Far East and sent this festive picture posing with the *Oxford Drinker* in the Philippines. "No, I'm not here for a lady, but for interesting aircraft," he points out. We wonder!



# ORANGES & LEMONS

PROUD TO BE IN THE  
GOOD BEER GUIDE 2026!



We're raising a glass to our first-ever Good Beer Guide entry – a huge thank you to everyone who's supported us, shared a pint, and helped make The Oranges & Lemons a true Oxford favourite for great beer and good times.

## A VERY CAMRA CHRISTMAS

Wednesday 10th December – All Day

To celebrate and support a group close to our hearts, we're hosting a festive day just for CAMRA members.

**ENJOY £3.50 ALES ALL DAY LONG** – our way of saying thank you to those who champion real ale and the pubs that pour it.

Join us for a relaxed festive pint, a proper catch-up, and a great atmosphere.

*(Don't forget your CAMRA membership card!)*

## NEW MENU NOW SERVING!

Our kitchen has launched an all-new menu featuring fresh, seasonal dishes and modern takes on classic pub favourites – perfect for a cosy meal, a quick lunch, or sharing with friends over a pint.

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## Brewery News

# Head brewers on the move

Indian investment for Chadlington Brewery, new head brewers at Renegade and Tap Social, and awards success for local brewers, reports **Patrick MacMahon** (below)

Indian craft beer giant Kati Patang has entered the UK market with a 23% acquisition of **Chadlington Brewery** and the Tite Inn near Chipping Norton in West Oxfordshire. A new lager making facility, crucial to allow the beer conditioning time to clarify and flavours to round and complete, attracted the shareholders to take the plunge.

Kati Patang is available in every state in India and is the standout of a craft beer scene still emerging and up against the dominance of Kingfisher, which has a 50% market share. The flagship Saffron Lager will be available at a range of pubs and restaurants across the county along with Chadlington's traditional cask beer range – all of which are vegan and gluten-free to align with the company's ethos.

The Indian arrival is not the only new creation as 3.59, a 4% lager made in homage to Roger Bannister – first man to run a mile in under four minutes – will hit taps in time



for the Christmas rush. A 0.5% lager, Zero Gravity, reflects a booming year for no and low alcohol beers.

Hitting hand pumps this month is seasonal brew Good Elf and a delectable Tiramisu stout at a quaffable 4.5%, which will be available in the local area but also as far away as Davey's in London in a more national push from the Chipping Norton outfit. In a

busy autumn for Chadlington, Anthony Bourade, pictured, joins the brewing team with over 20 years of experience with Vocation brewery, and will help drive the business forward at an exciting time.

There's more movement over in Berkshire where **Renegade** (formerly **West Berkshire Brewery**) has replaced head brewer Will Twomey with Hugo Fullerton, taking up the mantle after seven years of training in the team, from cutting his teeth cleaning casks to operating the 60hL kit. The pride of his work so far is Renegade Master, a key contribution to the Renegade range. The recipe combines a light but prominent malt backbone with Cascade and Nelson Sauvin hops to bring a citrusy twist on a classic Pilsner. This continues the pattern of traditional cask breweries leaning into lagers to diversify their range and maximise opportunities for tap space in an increasingly competitive market, both in the county and regionally.

The first job for the new team will be preparing for the return of a festive favourite Santa Claws, adding to the growing range of seasonal brews. Expect a classic nut-brown colour with notes of molasses, fig and blackcurrant. The brewery team is also working exceptionally hard on a packed 2026 specials calendar, set to bring more unique and interesting cask ales to pubs across Berkshire and Oxfordshire.

Local breweries were well represented at the SIBA Indie Beer Awards 2025-2026, with **Twisted Tree** taking home gold for Overall Champion of Cask and Cask IPA (over 5.6%) with The Bark Side, a 6% Black IPA combining the



*Anthony Bourade joins the brewing team at Chadlington.*

intense roasty character of a stout with the citrus bite and resinous finish of an American IPA.

**Loose Cannon's** Abingdon XB went one further and bagged three medals, collecting the bronze in the same category and two golds in the Cask and Keg Imperial and Strong categories. **Loddon Brewery**, profiled in this issue, also took home gold for Cask British Dark Beers with Hocus Pocus, a 4.6% old ale.

The SIBA Indie Beer Awards, formerly called the SIBA Independent Beer Awards, are run by the Society of Independent Brewers

and Associates (SIBA) in the UK and seek to celebrate the very best beers being produced independently.

*Dave Richardson adds:* **Tap Social** has promoted Ben Addison to head brewer following the departure of Jason Bolger to set up his own business (see story, page 6).

Marketing manager Brian Spencer said: "We're gutted to lose Jason. As the guy leading our beer programme since day one, he has clearly had such a massive role in our growth over the years, and beyond that we'll just miss having him around. At the same time, we're really

happy for him and excited to see all the great things he'll do with his new brewpub in Witney.

"As sad as we are to see Jason go, we're equally thrilled to have Ben stepping up from senior brewer to be our new head brewer. He brings a great deal of experience, ingenuity and forward thinking to the role. Having worked closely with Jason over the past few years, he also brings seamless continuity to brewery operations at a time when we're fortunate to be growing.

"I've worked with Ben at Tap for several years now and am so stoked for him to have earned this opportunity. He's a great brewer and even better person, and he really is the right person to build upon everything Jason accomplished and keep us moving in the right direction."

**Tap Social** will open its fifth Oxfordshire community venue, Day Release, in early 2026 at Signal Yard in Milton Park, near Didcot – a purpose-built space on the business park with all new vendors. Bringing together all its brands under one roof, Day Release is a cafe and taproom offering its full range of beer, artisan coffee, sourdough, and Proof Social Bakehouse pastries freshly baked on site. It will also be the new home of Tap's Brew School, where it will host hands-on brewing sessions on a 20-litre kit for corporate team building, birthdays, private events and aspiring home-brewers

**Tap Social will host a party of its own at The Taproom on Saturday 13 December. Tickets at £10 are available on [wegottickets.com/](https://wegottickets.com/) [tapsocial](https://tapsocial.com/).**

**CHRISTMAS IS COMING**, and whether or not your goose, turkey or nut roast is getting fat, this is a good time to look at books about Oxford pubs as there are more than you might think with another one set for publication in 2026. Most of the following are listed on Amazon, eBay or both, but not all are available – the more recently published are the easiest to find. But if you're determined you can find most or all of them, somewhere.

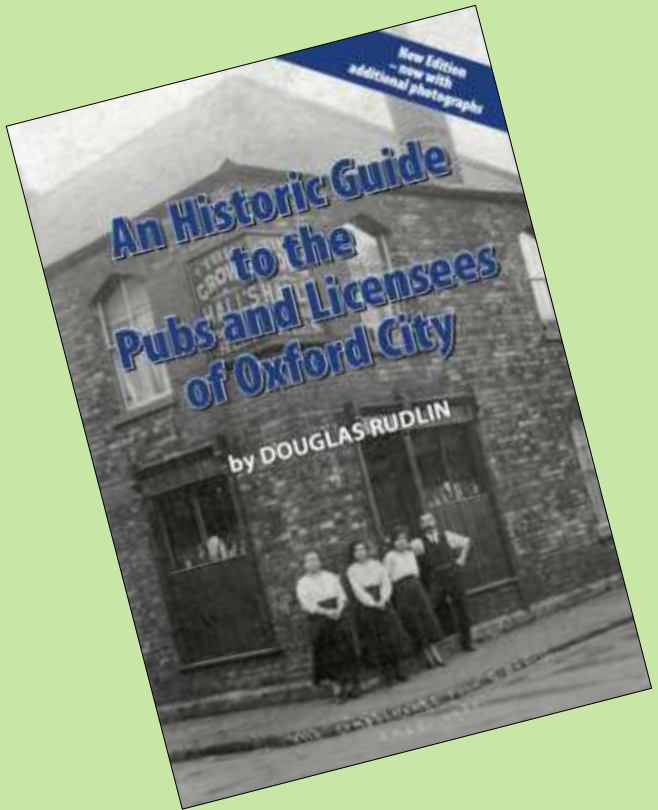
Looking at them in reverse order of publication, the most recent (2024) is *An Historic Guide to the Pubs and Licensees of Oxford City* by CAM-RA member Douglas Rudlin, who has also written books about pubs in Witney, Chipping Norton and Charlbury. It was inspired by the 1883 *Drink Map of Oxford*, republished by the Bodleian Library in 2019, extracts of which have appeared in *the Oxford Drinker* in recent years.

"This was not a map intended to guide drinkers to places to sample or buy alcohol however – this was produced by the Temperance Movement, and its purpose was to show that licensed premises were most densely located in the poorer areas of the city," says Douglas. "The accompanying text on the reverse of the map begins by stating: 'This makes bare the fact that few, if any, other towns in the kingdom are so liberally supplied with houses for the sale of intoxicants as this ancient city.'"

He adds: "I was inspired to write this guide in an attempt to give a name and address (both old and current) to each licensed premises, as none of the locations marked on the map are identified. Out of 268

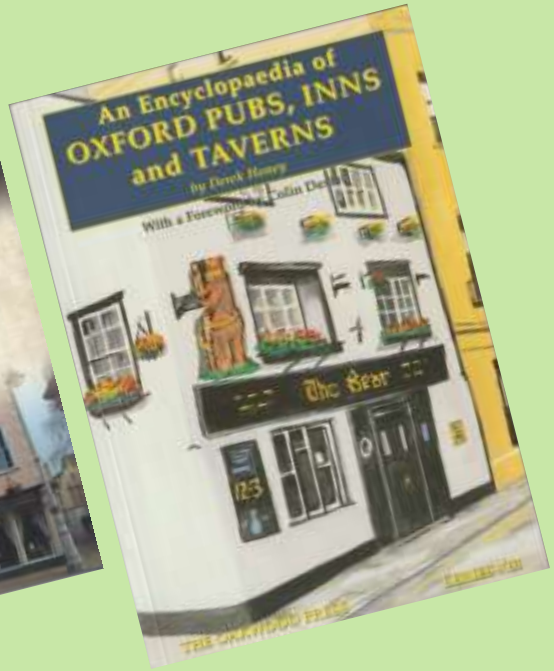
# Something for your Christmas stocking

**Dave Richardson** – himself one of the authors  
– reviews books about Oxford pubs



'Full Licensed Houses' and 'Beer Houses' I have identified 246. Many entries include the first historic reference to the premises, changes in name, details of their sale/purchase,

and a list of many of the recorded licensees up to around 1939 (often including other profession, with spouse and family information if known). Details on whether the premises



es was demolished, redeveloped (and what stands on that location today) or if it still exists as a pub also appear.

“This guide is a unique record of the rich beer drinking history of the City of Oxford at a time when the number of licensed premises was at its peak – and it would make the perfect companion to use alongside the *Drink Map of Oxford*.”

My own book, called simply *Oxford Pubs*, is part of a series by Amberley Publishing which covers many locations up and down the country. Published in 2015 and in colour throughout (except for old black-and-white photos from the *Oxford Mail* archive), it is still widely available including from the Town Hall shop and other local outlets, with signed copies direct from the author ([oxfordpubhistory.co.uk](http://oxfordpubhistory.co.uk)).

This does not set out to be

a complete guide but instead selects 46 of the most historic pubs in the city centre and suburbs, describing what makes them special and giving a flavour of their contemporary ambience. I find it very heartening that only a few of these pubs no longer exist today, as during the last decade so many pubs in other places have fallen victim to developers or simply disuse.

While three of the pubs described were no longer used as such in 2015 (including the Swindlestock Tavern, closed in 1709!), only four have closed since. The Eagle & Child is under long-term renovation with re-opening planned for 2027, while the Mitre has become the Gusto Italian restaurant. The General Elliott in South Hinksey has become housing, while the former Old Gatehouse and White House in Botley Road, latterly The One Asian restau-

rant, stands empty.

The hardest book to find was published by Oxford CAMRA itself – the *Oxford, Witney and Abingdon Pub Guide*, covering not only the city but other towns and villages in our branch area. All pubs and bars are covered in this 2011 publication, edited by Matt Bullock, with comprehensive maps. It describes the pubs as they were then rather than giving much history, also describing CAMRA, types of beer and with a section called “The great pub crisis”, bemoaning the conversion of pubs into other uses and listing many of the then recent casualties. Some of these pubs, however, have since re-opened.

A book called *Pubs of Oxford and Oxfordshire* appeared in 2009, written by Paul Medley and John Dougill, describing 17 pubs in

the city and 15 around the county. But you have to go back to 1998 for when the previous book was published, this being *An Encyclopaedia of Oxford Pubs, Inns and Taverns* by the late Derek Honey, a local historian who also wrote about Witney pubs.

This is often regarded as the “bible” for historical dates and facts, listing all the pubs in alphabetical order by at least one name by which they were or are known. It is illustrated with black-and-white sketches rather than photographs and is an essential reference book for anyone interested in the subject, but only the city centre is covered by maps.

The first book to be published (as far as I’m aware) is



more like a booklet – *Oxford Pubs Past and Present* by Paul J. Marriott, self-published in 1978. This is also an alphabetical guide with black-and-white sketches but is much

more pithy than Derek Honey’s book – 52 pages rather than 128. Brief details are given of name, sign, the building and notable events.

Into this crowded market in 2026 will come yet another book – *Discovering Oxfordshire Pubs: Oxford City*. Author David W. Bretherton has already written pub books about Thame and parts of Lancashire, and the Oxford book – to be reviewed here on publication – promises to be a worthy successor to Derek Honey as a comprehensive guide of 200-plus pages, bringing the story of still-open pubs right up to date.

Happy Christmas reading and don’t overcook the goose.



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## Beer Heroes

# Dragonfly soars

**Pete Flynn**  
tells the story  
of Loddon Brewery

**DUNSDEN GREEN, A** wonderful rural setting a few miles from trendy Henley-on-Thames or Reading, is the home of Loddon Brewery situated in a 300-year-old barn. It's an integral part of a privately owned farming estate, and where I met general manager Shane Willoughby and head brewer Tara Magee with a view to finding out about this delightful brewery and its charming connection with local heritage.

Loddon was founded in 2002 by Chris and Vanessa Hearn following the closure of Brakspear's Henley Brewery, bringing their ability and tradition to a new operation. The brewery began with Steve Brown as head brewer, and the hole in the barn roof at the outset was just one of many challenges they faced, which shaped its identity and mission for quality and inclusivity. Interestingly, in its 23-year history, the operation has only had three head brewers; more of that later.

After a huge capital investment which involved buying casks, for example, the brewery flourished from a fledgling family operation into a successful regional brewery. The business underwent a rebrand about five years ago and Shane explains: "Our dragonfly motif, which some say is a little quirky, became more prominent. The beer label colouration became synony-



mous with the beer style, so the bottles were more easily recognisable."

Shane introduced me to Tara, and I was at once drawn to her pigtailed evoking memories of ruby slippers and Kansas skies, but behind the familiar silhouette is a woman who is clearly self-confident and a creative brewer with a unique narrative. Tara had always lived locally and was a friend of the earlier brewer Jake Bartley-Perry who encouraged her creative spirit and interest in science.

"I decided to pursue a Masters in Brewing and Distilling at Herriot Watt University, Edinburgh as this would give me a clear path into the job of my desire," she says. "I saw it as an opportunity to pursue a viable career locally once Jake had decided to return to his native Yorkshire."

Since age two, Tara has suffered from coeliac disease, an inflammatory condition that includes gluten intolerance. With a nod to inclusivity, all Loddon beers are gluten-free

which is an encouraging trend. With almost three years of brewing under her belt, Tara is keen to explore innovative ideas and concepts in brewing.

I asked her about the philosophy behind the recently introduced New Wave IPA. "Loddon will always stand for tradition, yet we always need to be mindful of meeting the needs of all our customers, and a GF hazy pale ale is my idea to embody that concept and broaden our customer base," she explains. Clearly Tara has influenced Loddon's product development while keeping classic styles, and it is the dynamic teamwork that keeps Loddon thriving.

Loddon has a breadth of styles – classic bitters, golden ales, seasonal specialities, and modern keg brews. Award-winning Hocus Pocus is a classic old ale with a rich, smooth and ruby red appearance featuring traditional English ingredients, using Golding and Fuggle hops alongside pale and dark malts and a touch of invert sugar to create complexity.

I asked Shane how the brewery adapted during Covid as it was during the second wave that he took up the role of GM from his earlier role as a driver. "We had to transform very quickly, and I was delivering about 90 times a day. This set the scene for an entirely new range of customers who remain loyal to what we have to offer," he says. "Our brewery taproom and yard,



*The Loddon crew, including Shane Willoughby (front left) and Tara Magee (back left).*

which started with a few tables and chairs, must be the best place to drink our beer with four cask and four keg lines on permanently. While we can provide staff training to those pubs that stock our beer, you cannot control the quality of the output. Pubs are susceptible to high staff turnover which may have an impact on cleaning the lines, for example."

The impact of Covid changed the business markedly with 60-70% of revenue now generated organically, that is to say from internal operations. There is value in this as distribution costs are minimised and quality measurement is maintained. All brewers are faced with increasing costs, such as utilities and raw ingredients, so being able to control costs in other areas is paramount.

The taproom and yard are very flexible; during winter the canopy provides

cover and the area is heated, while in summer the roof converts to an open area. Loddon also has a shop selling local produce as well as its full beer range.

Sitting in the taproom is a welcome experience as Shane explains: "People on their own love to be here as we are a good team and very friendly. I often get invited to sit down and have a chat and customers appreciate that. Offering a community hub, supporting trade and direct customer relationships with

quizzes and food pairings means repeat business from loyal customers will usually follow. Our demographic has changed since Covid with young families made to feel very welcome.”

Loddon has a comprehensive website which details opening times for the taproom and information about the beer range: [loddonbrewery.com/our-beers](http://loddonbrewery.com/our-beers)

My favourite is Black Darter, a 4.3% smooth drinking English stout with roasted malt, caramel-coffee notes and a dry bitter finish – ideal for the chilly months.

The website also provides information about membership clubs, and Shane told me about the gold scheme: “We have about 150 members of the club, and for a one-off cost of £650 members receive generous annual benefits



including a case of beer, five free social nights per year, discounted beer offerings at the brewery shop, and six free pints. Full details can be found on our website.”

Tara returned to our meeting after checking on the progress of a brew, and was keen to emphasise the “no half measures” initiative she has introduced: “The campaign is focused on promoting full-pint pours and celebrating

the integrity of traditional British beer, while also supporting community engagement and transparency in hospitality.”

She clearly has a vision for the future of Loddon, explaining: “We are a traditional brewery and none of that will change. A big push of mine will be to go for craft beers, changing people’s perception of what beer is and using my knowledge to understand balance. We will be looking at introducing a canning operation next year.”

Although Tara may wear her hair in pigtails and there is a touch of Dorothy in her stride, do not mistake nostalgia for simplicity. Here is a woman whose story is stitched with grit, grace and a voice that is entirely her own as she brings a kind of magic that does not need ruby slippers to shine.



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**GETTING CAMRA MEMBERS** to do beer scores for out-of-the-way pubs is always a challenge, but each year we aim to visit some of them with a view to their inclusion in the *Good Beer Guide* (in this case the 2027 edition), where beer scores are important for which pubs are chosen. Although some of these pubs can easily be reached by public transport, others are not.

### Red Lion, Yarnton

Landlady Jess Dixon looked a bit surprised when we banged on her door a couple of minutes before 12 noon opening on a late November Saturday, but soon gave us a warm welcome. This pub is new in the 2026 *Good Beer Guide*, but many of those on the tour hadn't been before although Yarnton is on the S3 bus route from Oxford. They soon found out what they were missing as it's a strong supporter of local real ale and has a big choice of up to seven or eight boxed real ciders.

On this occasion, three of the four hand pumps were in use for Hook Norton's Hooky, Goffs' Black Knight (a ruby red porter) and what is now the pub's house bitter, Trunk IPA from Twisted Tree, a new brewery near Bicester. I'd had the Trunk IPA before and was pleased to try it again, as at a flavoursome 4% it's more like a traditional bitter than the type of over-hopped beer that so many new wave IPAs generally are.

This large village pub – also with an extensive grassed garden overlooking the fields – was saved from possible closure by Oak Taverns, a Thame-based independent pub company with 16 pubs in Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Berkshire. Pre-

On tour

# Oxfordshire's Wild West

**Dave Richardson** joins a branch minibus tour in search of our best village pubs



*The Red Lion in Yarnton.*

viously owned by Admiral Taverns, it was closed and put up for sale in 2022 when an unsuccessful community buy-out bid was launched. It's now in safe hands as a drinkers' community venue, as Oak Taverns doesn't serve food at any of its pubs although food vans visit many of them. The Turnpike, a pub just outside Yarnton on the main A44 road, fulfils that role.

### Harcourt Arms, Stanton Harcourt

Food is very much part of the offer at this lovely old pub and hotel in a village further west,

where we pulled up after passing the Fox on the edge of the village, which closed in 2012 but still has the name on the side. Until a few years ago, the Fox still had its name on the pub sign – I wonder if people knocked on the door hoping for a beer?

The Harcourt – not to be confused with a pub of the same name in Jericho, Oxford – proved to be quite a find, as it also serves up to four real ales including two that are hard to find around here, Wherry (a 3.8% amber ale) and Nelson's Revenge (4.5%) from Woodforde's brewery in Norfolk. The brewery has a close relationship with a small



*The tour group at the Harcourt Arms in Stanton Harcourt.*

group of country pubs including this one, the Plough at nearby Kelmscott, and the Ebrington Arms near Chipping Campden.

It's always good to see quality real ales at a food-led venue, and I enjoyed both my halves of Wherry (named after a Norfolk Broads boat) and Nelson's Revenge, and with more time I might have sampled the third real ale on today, Purity Gold. The 17th-century building (which has a modern but "in keeping" guest room extension) is full of character, low-lit and with arm-chairs, sofas and log-burning stoves in ancient hearths. The menu wasn't over-pricey with main courses from £18 to £27, and having enjoyed a venison cottage pie here a few years ago my eye was drawn to the game pie (£20) and roast partridge (£27). But with only about 45 minutes in each pub there was no time to eat.



*For more on this gentleman, turn to page 37.*

### **Red Lion, Northmoor**

This is a favourite pub of mine, being Community-Owned for over a decade and a regular in recent years in the *Good Beer Guide*, only dropping out after a change of tenancy in 2024 due to CAM-RA rules. It now has its sights set on returning to the guide for 2027, and has a strong case. Up to four real ales are on offer, mainly from local breweries, although the Fuller's London Pride on the bar today was a surprise.

Most if not all of us opted for one of the two more local ales, an excellent Greedy Goose winter ale from Hook Norton (4.2%) and Top Notch session bitter from Cotswold Lion, a brewery near Cheltenham named after a breed of sheep.

I took my Greedy Goose and sat down among the locals, one of whom was the officially elected Village Idiot! (See more in this issue.) It seems there used to be an old pub around here known as the Nose & Frown, and indeed there was another called the Dun Cow which is still identified as such, although it's now a private house having closed in the 1980s.

As I listened to the Village Idiot's tales, I thought that Northmoor – which can only be reached down single-track roads and has no public transport – is just the sort of place where you might find a pub called the Nose & Frown with its own much cherished "idiot". Being rather isolated, Northmoor has done very well

not only to buy its last remaining pub but also to make a go of it with real ales and good value pub food, even installing shepherd's huts if you want to stay overnight.

### Morris Clown, Bampton

Bampton is a small town rather than a village, with four pubs – but only one Morris Clown. An established entry in the *Good Beer Guide*, this early 19<sup>th</sup>-century hostelry is owned and run as a free house by one of the great characters of the Oxfordshire pub trade, Steve Mace, famous for his wit, banter and for wearing shorts throughout the year. During lockdown, he cycled around delivering real ale to his customers, in his shorts, in all weathers – see *the Oxford Drinker* Online and search for “Mace” if you want to read more.

Two real ales are generally available and Butts' Barbus Barbus, produced by Cheddar Ales, is often one of them and was my choice today. An easy drinking golden ale named after a fish, it took its place on the bar alongside Loose Cannon's Abingdon Bridge. I enjoyed it while taking in the atmosphere of this very “locals” pub, where a good crowd of Bampton folk were gathered to enjoy the “craic” and watch a rugby match on TV. I always enjoy chatting to Steve and seeing whose name is on the “Barred” list behind the bar, usually for misdemeanours such as being unable to play cricket – the names of V. Putin and L. Truss have also featured.

You can enjoy the beers and banter while studying the French-inspired murals painted by Steve's stepmother, and wondering about the pub's name as Morris dancing



teams have a fool rather than a clown. Check opening times before visiting.

### Double Red Duke, Clanfield

Some pub names always intrigue me and that's certainly true of this lovely old hotel, formerly called the Plough, in a village near Faringdon. Usually, you can find out about a name after a few minutes online, but even in this age of rampant AI (now there's a name for a modern pub!) I'm none the wiser. I have heard that it's a book or a flower but answers, please, on a postcard – preferably from the

Steve Mace at the Morris Clown in Bampton and his (in)famous “Barred” list.

hotel, inviting me to stay!

What I do know is that this country hotel and gastropub is, like the Harcourt Arms, really into its real ales with a particular liking for Uley brewery of Gloucestershire whose beers have porcine associations (Old Spot, Cheeky Swine, Pigor Mortis... the things you learn in *the Oxford Drinker!*) Two of the four real ales were from Uley (Pale and Pig's Ear), plus Hook Norton's Hooky and, continuing the meaty theme, Ramsbury's Deer Stalker. My half of the Pig's Ear (5.9%) was very tasty if a little too cold, and while sipping it I discovered that the company running the pub, Country Creatures, owns the Mason's Arms next door and a restaurant in Bicester Village, also called the Double Red Duke.

The ales were all priced at between £5.90 and £6.40 a pint, not over-expensive for a venue that positions itself as a Cotswold retreat with events such as flower pressing and



*The Double Red Duke in Clanfield.*

calligraphy. The 17<sup>th</sup>-century stone building (with new conservatory extension) has many nooks and crannies where louche characters could be seen – and this was just our contingent. I had a shock when I looked at the specials menu, however – a dish costing £300! The Wagyu Cowboy beef cut might have been 1.2kg and feeding about six, but veg were probably extra.

**Mason’s Arms, Clanfield**

It’s described as the Double Red Duke’s “naughty brother just over the road”, so I went across to see just how naughty, thinking it might be spit, sawdust and village idiots. No – but this very old stone building, dating from 1610, has more of the atmosphere of a village pub. Previously known as the Clanfield Tavern, it reverted to its original name in

2024 after purchase from Marston’s and renovation by Country Creatures.

The relationship with Uley continues here with Old Spot one of the real ales available, but Hook Norton’s Hooky is the regular beer. It was very busy for 5pm on a winter Saturday afternoon, with a cosy atmosphere created by real fires, flagged or wooden floors and candles on tables. Meals are better value here, with mains from £18 and pub classics such as ham, egg and chips for £17. My half of Old Spot went down well but I still don’t know why this brother (little brother?) is naughty.

**Greyhound, Besselsleigh**

There was time for one more pub on our way to the Abingdon and Oxford drop-off points, but we can’t consider this one for the *Good Beer Guide* as it’s not in our branch area but White Horse. It’s beside the A420 a few miles

west of Oxford and one of about 70 venues run by Brunning & Price, which describes itself as “a group of pub restaurants”. That pretty well describes it but it’s also known for real ale, with its own badged bitter brewed by St Austell, Sharp’s Doom Bar, Loose Cannon Abingdon Bridge and two real ales from Little Ox – Ox Blood and Hufflepuff.

The view around our table was that the ales we tried weren’t in peak condition, and the badged bitter was changed while we were there. It’s one to try another day.

So which pubs would I go back to? Most if not all of them, as we’d seen a great variety of beers and atmosphere. I might return to one of those with accommodation for a special occasion – as long as the Village Idiot doesn’t come knocking!





Gloucester Green in about 1880, with the Blue Pig pub facing the cattle market. In the background are the Ashmolean Museum (left) and the Randolph Hotel. (Photo from *The Changing Faces of Oxford City Centre* by Julie Kennedy)

## Lost Pubs of Oxford

# City centre north

In the northern part of the city centre, there were two groups of pubs, in Gloucester Green and Cornmarket Street. **Steve Thompson** reports

**GLoucester Green** is best known today for its coach station and its regular open-air market, but previously it was a market of a different kind – cattle (and pigs). At various times, it was served by five inns – the Blue Pig, the Gloucester Arms, the Greyhound, the Red Lion Hotel and the Welsh Pony. The Old School House was much later, founded as a school on the site in 1871 but becoming a pub only after 1987.

The oldest was probably the **Blue Pig**, present in 1794 (although the Greyhound was rebuilt in 1800 on the site of an earlier pub). It took its name from the porcine section

of the market and was the meeting place for farmers and dealers who visited the cattle market.

In his *Encyclopaedia of Oxford Pubs, Inns and Taverns*, Derek Honey writes: “Its three-storey building was of rough stone with two west-facing entrances and a large dormer window. Its sign was a blue pig in stained glass with a wooden frame. Situated in Red Lion Square, on an island facing Gloucester Green, it closed in 1931 but was not demolished until 1935, despite a petition to the local council for it to remain open. The pub and three tenements were held on leasehold by Morrell’s, and the site is now

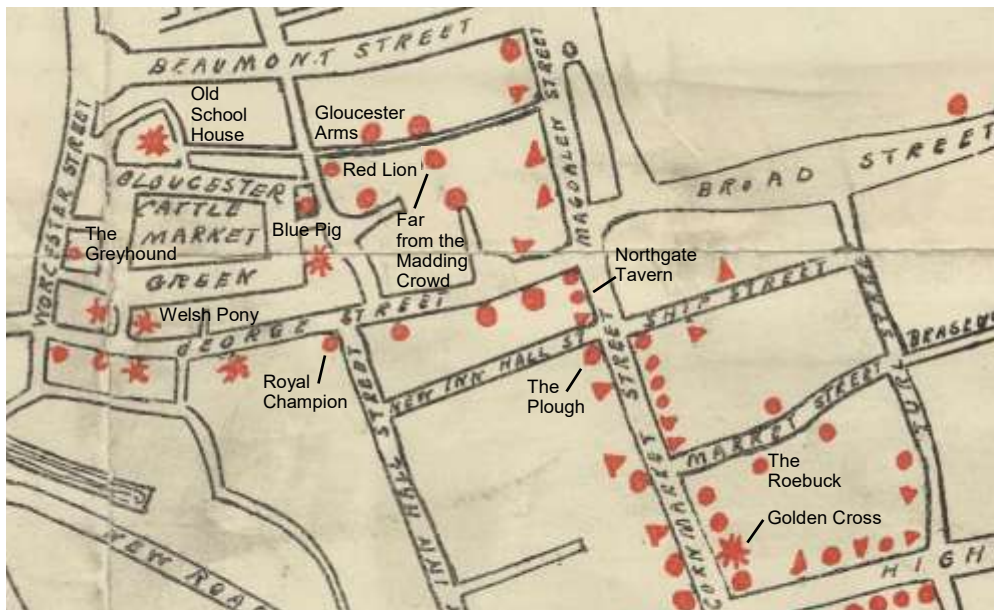
a large Ladbroke’s betting shop.”

Its demise was probably related to the decision to close the cattle market, which moved to Oxpens in 1932.

The **Gloucester Arms** in Friars Entry closed around 2013 and reopened soon after as the White Rabbit. Located between two theatres, “the Glock” was popular with actors who performed there.

Madeleine Vose remembers working there in the 1990s:

“My first bar job was in the Gloucester Arms in 1994. It was an era when the regulars defined the pub, and the Gloucester Arms had an incredible group of regulars who



This detail is taken from the *Drink Map of Oxford* published by the *Oxford Temperance Union* in 1883. Red stars indicate beer houses and red dots full licensed houses. Copies of the map are on sale at the Bodleian Weston Library Shop in Broad Street at £10. To order maps online, visit [bodleianshop.co.uk/collections/map-room-1](http://bodleianshop.co.uk/collections/map-room-1). The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, C17:70 Oxford (7).

you'd see in there at least three times a week. Most people worked and would be in there for a few after work or out for the night on Fridays and Saturdays.

"For me as an 18-year-old, it was an amazing time. The daytime regulars tested you when you first started, made sure you could handle a joke; once you were accepted, it was like family. There was always something to talk about, joke about, someone else to get to know.



*The Greyhound at 10 Worcester Street. (Pub photos © M.J. Crook)*

"And considering it was a drinker's pub (unless you consider a microwaved pasty dinner), there was never any aggro, never any punch-up while I was there. Just easy-going, good-spirited people."

The **Greyhound** was situated between Worcester

Street and the coach station. It was present by 1794, closed in the mid-1980s and has now been converted into apartments.

Andrew Whitehead, who was a student at Oxford in the mid-1970s, recalls the Greyhound:

"On one evening in the week there was an open session of political song in a room on the first floor. The evening was presided over by two Catholic priests (though not wearing dog collars) and the songs – sung with great gusto by those present – were broadly left wing and Irish Republican. The evening usually ended up with *Bandiera Rossa* (*The Red Flag*) – and there would be a competition between Communists and Anarchists to out-sing each other in the concluding lines: 'Evviva il comunismo/ anarchismo e la libertà.' ('Long live communism/anarchism and freedom.')

The **Red Lion** was enlarged in 1880 from a smaller earlier pub first recorded in 1842. Demolished in 1904, the present large semi-oval building took its place. Then called a hotel (though it probably never took in residents), it became popular with actors visiting the nearby theatres. In 1983, the building was stripped down to its shell and completely refurbished inside, reopening in 1984 as central Oxford's largest pub at that time.

It then went through several incarnations, becoming the Oxford Bakery & Brewhouse, then simply the Brewhouse, then the Fuggle & Firkin in 1996, finally reverting to the Red Lion in 2008.

The **Welsh Pony** was present by 1870 and was previously the Corn Exchange Hotel. It was named after the Welsh ponies used by drovers from Wales, who often passed through Oxford on their way to London to sell their cattle.

Derek Honey writes: "The original building was in Gloucester Green, but Morrell's bought the George Street frontage before World War 1 and it became a two-entrance pub." The old public bar in Gloucester Green was six steps above the rest of the pub, and was mainly used by travellers waiting for buses on the green. Honey describes it as "a strange pub, being a mixture of a Belgian beer café, a Spanish tapas and an English tavern".

The Welsh Pony closed in about 2000, later reopened as the Eurobar and is now the OXO Bar.

The **Old School House** closed as a pub in 2008, but the building is valued for its unusual design and is now Sichuan Grand Chinese restaurant. Originally a boys' school founded in



*The Royal Champion in 1900, looking west down George Street. The steep-pitched roof of the fire station can be seen on the right. (Photo courtesy Oxfordshire History Centre)*

1871, it was rebuilt in 1900 by Leonard Stokes, with the unusual feature of a central hall with classrooms leading off. The school closed in 1934, and the building was used as a waiting room for the bus terminus outside.

In about 1987, the building was converted into a large open-plan pub, with naturally a school theme. At one time, the bargirls dressed in school uniform!

Much later than the Gloucester Arms in Friars Entry was **Far from the Madding Crowd**, which opened in 2002 and closed in 2015. It was run by Morrell's managing director Charles Eld.

A regular *Good Beer*

*Guide* entry, it offered one of the best choices of real ale and cider in the city centre. It was Oxford CAMRA Pub of the Year in 2009, 2011 and 2012.

The **Royal Champion** pub stood opposite Gloucester Green, on the corner of George Street and New Inn Hall Street. A pub of that name was first recorded in George Street in 1823.

The pub closed in 1904, and the site is now occupied by the George Street Social restaurant.

The other main concentration of pubs in the northern part of the city centre was in Cornmarket Street, where, according to the 1883 Drink



*The Roebuck in Market Street (above) and the Northgate Tavern in Cornmarket Street.*

Map of Oxford, there were one beer house, 13 full licensed houses and three other licences – and a brewery around the corner in Queen Street! Today, there are only two pubs, the Crown and the Plough.

The **Northgate Tavern** in Cornmarket Street was named after the city gate which once stood outside in the road. It opened in about 1908 and closed in 1971, but there had been an inn on the site since 1772.

Mike Campbell worked at the Northgate during three

summer holidays in the late 1960s. He writes in the informative but ad-plagued website *Lost Pubs in Oxford*:

“The landlord was Richard Farrell, a hugely popular Irishman. The pub was extremely busy, being popular with visiting summer school students from all over the world at lunchtimes and locals in the evening.

“It was the home of the Northgate Militia, a motley collection of regulars who annually commemorated the relief of the City of Oxford (sometime in the distant past)

with a flag ceremony and march to the river for a day’s cruise. It was really just an excuse for a booze up.

“Richard Farrell moved to London when Ind Coope finally closed the pub.”

The relief of Oxford occurred during the English Civil War (1642-1651) when the city was held by Royalist forces loyal to King Charles I and besieged by the New Model Army of the Parliamentarians. Terms of surrender respecting the ancient rights of Oxford and safeguarding the departing Royalist garrison were finally agreed in June 1646.

There is a blue plaque at **Cromwell House** in Old Marston, where the surrender of Oxford was negotiated.

The **Plough** in Cornmarket Street once was “lost” – for more than 80 years! – but now is found. It was first recorded as an inn in 1656, but closed as a pub in the 1920s, later becoming a branch of tailor Austin Reed. When that closed in 2016, the building became derelict until it reopened at the end of 2018 under its original name of the Plough, with “at 38” added as the number on the street.

City Pub Group took over the pub in 2023 and the name reverted to simply the Plough Inn.

The **Roebuck** in Market Street was first recorded in 1623 and took its name from the crest of Jesus College opposite. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it became a major coaching inn on the London to Gloucester route, and “Old Gurden”, the licensee, always greeted arriving coaches and guests in a full powdered wig and high hessian boots. In 1850, it acquired frontages in Cornmarket Street and Market Street and built a hotel.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Roebuck became popular as a traditional pub, attracting traders and shoppers from the Covered Market next door. Sadly, it didn't last and went through a number of name changes in the 1980s and 1990s before becoming Wagamama Asian restaurant in 2007.

The **Golden Cross** in Cornmarket Street was once, probably, the oldest inn in Oxford. The Grade 2 listed building bears the date 1193, when Osney Abbey granted a licence to Mauger the Vintner, who ran it as an inn named Mauger's Hall. The earliest parts of the present building date from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and it adopted the name Golden Cross in 1764.

The name Golden Cross may be connected to a long-lost golden cross Oxford's



*The Golden Cross in Cornmarket Street.*

Jews were made to erect in 1269 to punish them for having broken a wooden cross during a religious procession.

The inn closed in 1988, but the name lives on in the Golden Cross "Shopping Cen-

tre", a small group of shops and cafés between Cornmarket Street and the Covered Market. They include the Piz-za Express restaurant, which has some wall paintings from the 16<sup>th</sup> century discovered in 1949 and now protected by glass casing.



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



# The Masons Arms

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Gardener's World

# How's business?

**Paul Silcock** (right) of the Gardener's Arms in Plantation Road, Oxford, says the pubs are all right

**DO YOU KNOW** the question I get asked the most as a publican? It's not about what beers we have, what's the best seller, it's not even people asking where the toilets are. (Although at this point I just want to give kudos to the lass who humorously asked me the other day, "If I was toilet, where would I be?" In 20-odd years of this job, that's by far the best toilet/direction question I've ever been asked.)

But back to my point, the most common question is...

"How's business going?"

Because so many people love a pub, and because so many people are aware of the closure rates of pubs across the country, people ask how the business is going from a place of genuine interest.

I cannot hope to speak for every publican in Oxford, let alone the country, when I try and answer this question to the best of my means. I can only speak for my business, and I really hope I'm not jinxing myself by saying:

"Yeah, it's alright, y'know? Could be better, but can't grumble."

*(Side note: I'm writing this two weeks before the Chancellor announces the Budget, and the day after pub landlords demonstrated in London, so I'm crossing my fingers about that answer.)*



Hardly the most reassuring answer for the future of pubs, but just remember as I try and dig into that near-dictionary definition of Vaguely Optimistic that was my answer. I really am only speaking about the view from my bar, not in general for pubs across the county or country.

By the way, if you ever see two publicans talking about their respective businesses, it can be like watching a pair of Georgians duelling for sport, neither willing to give away too much information, yield ground, but nei-

ther prepared to deliver a killing blow by revealing that, in fact, their pub is flourishing over another's struggling business.

"How's business?"

"Not too bad, how's yours?"

"Yeah, alright, steady."

"Yeah, steady, we had a really good Friday."

"Ah, Friday was a bit dead for us."

"Hmm, Saturday wasn't good for us."

"Yeah, it's a bit unpredictable isn't it?"

"Yeah, unpredictable."

"Guinness sales are going

# Hanging in there since 1810



## No half measures!

**Publican:** “I read sir an advertisement from your office that for a guinea premium you would inform publicans how they might sell more porter than usual – there sir is the guinea – and now let me know the secret.”

**“Genius”:** “I will tell you sir in three words it is simply this: Fill Your Pots.”

*Advice to a Publican, or a Secret Worth Knowing by Thomas Rowlandson, 1810. (Print from the Elisha Whittelsey Collection, the Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1959. Photo Wikimedia Commons)*

through the roof though.”

“Yeah, mine too, what’s that all about?”

And so on, you get the idea.

The fact is though, that the faint aftershocks of the pandemic have pretty much faded, and experienced drinkers have been able to return to their habits. In particular, drinking in large groups is back. That took a long time to return, the rule of six seeming to have embedded itself in public conscience. Or maybe it just took time for people to return to being sociable again and reconnecting with others?

Spare a thought for a whole raft of students who began their academic journey at the start of the pandemic. They never seemed to get the hang of drinking in large groups. They started their degrees, the country went into

lockdown, and even after three years of their degrees had passed they never seemed to have shaken off that early experience of drinking in small groups in pubs.

The new batch of students coming through my pub since the last academic year seem to display no such reservations. It helps that pub crawls and other social events have been organised for the start of the academic year, giving the students a good grounding in drinking.

Those who weren’t students through the pandemic though had so many other concerns besides missing out on pub crawls. Anyone with a wallet can’t have helped but notice the rising price of everything, from the very obvious, the huge hikes in utility prices, to the insidious little price rises on everything that goes into a

shopping trolley. Oh, and rent. And rates. And so on. Unless you're one of the top 3% of earners, you'll have felt the squeeze.

It speaks to the importance of the pub, and socialising in general, then, that it's possible for me to say that business is alright. There have certainly been changes in business, and drinking practice, most notably in the new batch of students that come through ever year. Your old school drinker will still come to the pub at their usual hour, whether that's on the way home from work, or an after-dinner drink with a couple of friends. Many students though seem to be favouring the later drink. Three years ago, we'd regularly be pretty quiet by last orders (which you never seem to hear shouted as often as you used to; it's

just assumed everyone has the right time on them, I guess). But now I'll often see several new tables of drinkers coming for a last couple of pints.

Drinking habits are changing though. The new batch of drinkers are more aware of the harmful aspects of drinking. When I started drinking, the harmful effects were considered to be falling over or being sick on yourself. The idea of units per week was just a distant glimmer in the minds of physicians. I'm not going to quote some of the latest statistics I've read, as honestly they didn't make much sense, predicting doom and gloom for alcohol while couching the statistics in the vaguest terms.

Okay, I am going to quote you one stat, just to highlight this: "One in three pub and

bar occasions don't feature an alcoholic drink."

Seriously? What's an "occasion"? A wedding? Birthday? Define "occasion" better. I've never arranged to go to the pub for an "occasion" with a couple of mates. If the survey is implying that a trip to the pub only involves a beer two times out of three, just take a look around you the next time you make an "occasion" to the pub and you will see that is blatantly wrong.

Look, it's never going to be the business it used to be as even in the 22 years I've been in it, I've seen massive changes. Like everyone, our profit margins are being squeezed, but bless you, you all still want a drink, and while that carries on it's possible to say: "Business? Hanging in there."



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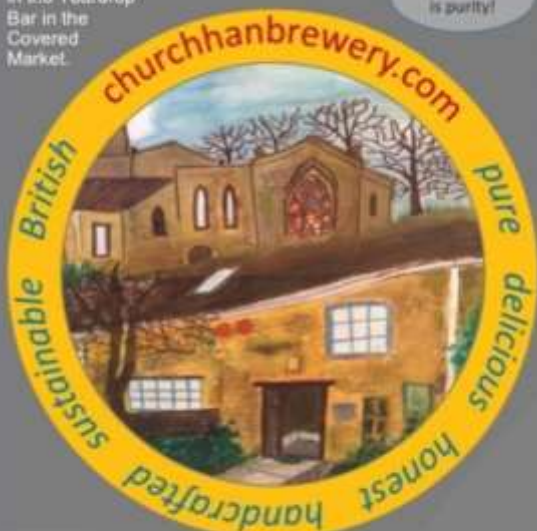
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# “Pubs aren’t only about food, you know”

**DID YOU KNOW** that? It’s a quote from a visitor’s review of a “pub” not that far from my Cotswold home, though not too near, thank the stars. I am hardly likely to go to a pub started by a rather mouthy media personality who was sacked by the BBC for thumping the producer of *Top Gear*. However, dogs are welcomed there, I gather. The following picture of a pub sign is not from that pub, but I like it and the Two Fat Blokes who produced it kindly gave me their permission to use it here. You can find more of their excellent signs at twofb.com.

Now, I really thought I knew what a pub was – after all, I have spent a significant proportion of my adult and teenage life in them. Why, I even came quite close to running one once, and both my wife, Margaret, and I have served behind bars. Ha!

But perhaps I’ve got pubs all wrong, so I looked up the definition in that source of all knowledge: Wikipedia. And this is it: “A *pub* (short for *public house*) is in several countries a drinking establishment licensed to serve alcoholic drinks for consumption on the premises.”

Hmm, so perhaps the reviewer is correct and pubs

**Rob Walters** considers the different ways that define people’s experience of pubs



*Photo courtesy The Two Fat Blokes*

are not all about food. Following that, the Wikipedia article quotes CAMRA, an organisation that started in the 1970s and which should know a little about the pubs of today. CAMRA states that a pub has four characteristics:

- It is open to the public without membership or residency
- It serves draught beer or cider without requiring food be consumed

- It has at least one indoor area not laid out for meals
- It allows drinks to be bought at a bar (that is, not only table service)

I would add this to that last point “...and perhaps consumed there while chatting to the bar staff, other customers, and anyone else willing to indulge in alcohol-infused conversation”.

Often when I am in non-alcohol-infused company, the conversation turns to pubs and I listen to these interchanges carefully. The basic format is something along these lines:

“Have you been to the Loyal Oak?”

“No, what’s it like? Is the food any good?”

“It’s really nice, the chairs are comfortable and the service is good.”

“And the food?”

“Excellent, they have a famous chef there now, you know that chap who comes on the telly talking about grilling acorns.”

Then someone (me) intrudes on the conversation by asking: “What about the beer? Do they have handpumps?”



The “Loyal Oak, Oxford”. (Pub photo © M.J. Crook, inn sign photo by Ken Baker)



Did they have a guest ale or are they tied to a brewery? Are dogs allowed?”

They both look at me shocked and, after a puzzled silence, the person who had been to the Loyal Oak replies: “Well, I don’t really know. We don’t drink much – driving, you know. Just a glass of red or white with the meal perhaps. Oh, and we don’t have a dog.”

It is odd to recall that most pubs did not serve food in the past – a bag of crisps or a pork pie if you were lucky. Eating out for most people was a rarity and took place in a restaurant or a hotel or café, often for birthdays or a wedding anniversary.

When we first moved to the Cotswolds (actually *back* to the Cotswolds for Margaret) the nearest pub was the Cold Aston Plough, and my wife informed me that in the 1960s this was the first pub in the area to serve food: that much remembered delicacy called “chicken in the basket”. By the 1990s, when I briefly became a local there, it was very much a food destination until we drinkers arrived later in the evening. The then landlord told me that it was a soulless

place before the drinkers arrived, no sound to speak of except the clinking of cutlery and muffled conversations.

So what did that man who wrote in his review, “Pubs are not all about food, you know,” refer to? No, it wasn’t beer or alcohol or dogs. Pubs, he claimed, are “about how they make you feel”.

Now I thought this was what the alcohol was for! It makes you feel good, gets you talking rubbish to other drinkers and lets you go home happy. However, I must now concentrate more on my feelings – or get a dog.



**This article first appeared on Rob Walters’ blog. For more, visit [robsbookshop.blogspot.com](http://robsbookshop.blogspot.com).**

Tales from the Nose & Frown

**Grenville Reeves**  
and **Graham Shelton**  
explain all

# The only democratically elected Village Idiot



Join CAMRA here



Visit Oxford  
CAMRA here

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



**THE IDEA OF** having a Village Idiot competition would probably be considered deeply inappropriate these days, being offensive both to villages and to those with less troubled minds than the rest of us. This was not the case, however, between the wars when the Nose & Frown was the go-to pub in our village.

Under the watchful, if bleary, eye of landlord Bert and his common-law wife Sue, every night was an essay in home grown entertainment of one sort or another.

The cornerstone of that, of course, was the beer. The Nose was a Clinch's pub with mild served straight out of a barrel balanced on a bench out the back. At fourpence ha'penny a pint, the locals had nothing to complain of, working hard in the fields and gravel pits by day and equally hard in the evenings downing pints. They all shared the rounded, rubicund and feathery look resulting from such labours, and they all shared the same perky sense of humour.

As you'll know from previous visits to the Nose in these articles, Joe had his special chair in the corner by the fire.



*Was the Nose & Frown idiot so renowned that a local brewery produced a beer just for him? We think not, and of course this beer is now defunct along with White Horse Brewery. Any similarity to actual persons living or dead is entirely coincidental!*



If there was “something brewing”, you could always rely on Joe to be there egging it on. At least two of his “specials” (half neat spirit, half cider) were required for any serious mischief, of course, and a couple of pints of mild always helped things along.

So now you know the lie of the land, I want to tell you about the year we had the

Village Idiot competition.

Then, as now, the pub had a good garden with plenty of space, and we decided that it would be just the spot for the annual Church fête. We thought it would be no good having it in the graveyard – “all them gravestones takes the edge off the frivolity – and they don’t ave beer at the Church,” as Joe rightly observed.

The cribbage and dominoes were cleared away in the Public Bar, and we set to discussing what stalls to have in the garden when the great day came. We wanted things like “whack the rat”, of course, and it was all I could do to persuade Joe we shouldn’t have a real rat. Joe kept a few pigs down at Pinnocks and offered to donate a weaner so we could do bowling for a pig. We obviously needed a yard of ale contest, Aunt Sally, the

Fattest Baby, Bring and Buy, and a few more “reg’lars” but somehow it still felt a bit flat.

And then Joe had his brainwave: “We’ll ave a Village Idiot competition! There’s plenty of villages with idiots,” he observed, and no-one disagreed, “but we’ll be the only one with our very own idiot elected in a competition.” I suppose it was the alcohol that made this seem like a good idea...

It wasn’t long before the great day came. Joe had an ex-army ridge tent, and we put that up in the pub garden for the Baby Contest and the Bring and Buy. Joe brought his pig and some hurdles to keep it penned in, more or less, and it wasn’t long before word got round about all the excitement at the pub. In no time the place was packed with laughing, happy folk from all over the village, and quite a

bit further afield too. Looking back, it was a magical day!

Highlights for me were the pig contest and the Idiot Competition. Joe's weaner was a good squealer and very fat, so he made a good trade. All the local lads were sure they'd win, but in the end it was a chap from London.

"I can't take that home in the car," he said, "even if you wraps it in brown paper and ties it with string!" It was a bit of a wriggler, it's true, never mind the smell, so in the end Joe had to buy it back. "It's for the Church so I expect I'll get me reward in heaven," he said philosophically.

Then we came to the Idiot Competition.

There were six contenders in the end. Each one had to give a speech and had a tin with his name on placed on the bar. After all the speeches, people voted by putting money for charity in the tin of whichever man they thought

was best. Andy, being clever, generous (and rich), slipped a white £5 note into his tin when no-one was looking, thinking he'd be sure to win.

The Rector comes forward to do the judging. He'd seen what Andy had done so he says, "The winner will be the one with the heaviest tin." The tins were duly weighed and Joe won with a tin full of pennies and few nuts and bolts! Andy was sore about that, I can tell you.

But Joe dined out on the story for years and would tell anyone who would listen that he was the Official, Democratically Elected Village Idiot. They even made a cup for him, and it stands in the bar to this day.

PS: I know this story to be true, because Joe told me himself, and he's a man of undoubted veracity and unimpeachable probity.



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### 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**

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## Branch Diary

Wednesday 10 December  
**"A Very CAMRA Christmas" (Oxford CAMRA Christmas Social)**  
Star Inn, Rectory Road and Oranges & Lemons, where CAMRA members will pay £3.50 a pint all day

Saturday 13 December  
2-11pm  
**Tap Social Xmas Beer Bash**  
Tap Social Brewery, Curtis Industrial Estate, North Hinksey Lane  
4 guest breweries  
Entry £10

Saturday 13 December  
11am-6pm  
**Haddenham Winterfest**  
Banks Park (by the Village Hall), Haddenham, Buckinghamshire HP17 8EE. 40+ real ales, keg beer, cider, lager, food stalls, live music. Supports local charities. Entry £10, ticket link on website [www.haddenham-beer-festival.co.uk](http://www.haddenham-beer-festival.co.uk)

Tuesday 3 March 7pm  
**Oxford CAMRA Branch AGM**  
St Aldate's Tavern (to be confirmed)

To view the full branch diary, visit [oxford.camra.org.uk](http://oxford.camra.org.uk)

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