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Issue 130  
Spring 2026

# the Oxford Drinker

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Royal Blenheim in Oxford and Crafty Pint in Witney  
voted Oxford CAMRA Pubs of the Year

The free newsletter of the **Oxford** Branch of CAMRA  
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Cover: Steven Lyne of City Pub of the Year the Royal Blenheim and Melanie Cassidy of Town and Village Pub of the Year the Crafty Pint. Report on page 6.

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# Welcome

...NOT! to the £7 pint of real ale

**AFTER YEARS OF** warnings that the pub industry can't make ends meet at a time of economic hardship and ever-increasing costs, has the tipping point finally come? Let's hope not and that the increases to business rates kicking in from April don't result in a lot more closures.

We can't say we haven't been warned. Thanks in no small part to CAMRA, the plight of the pub industry has been heard loud and clear in Westminster and in the media, but CAMRA describes relief offered by the Chancellor as "short-term and short-sighted".

Most pubs will face a massive increase in business rates from April on top of increases in employers' National Insurance rates, the minimum wage and all the other inflationary pressures including rocketing alcohol costs with new rates of duty, and food inflation.

Many pubs argue that they can't pass on these increases, but those that can are already doing so. Back in November we railed against Oxford's Turf Tavern for charging £7.05 for some pints of real ale, the most expensive in our annual city centre survey. But other pubs are now approaching £7 too and this could be the norm in the city centre by the year end.

In these circumstances, we should salute pubs that are significantly cheaper, and not just J.D. Wetherspoon which has around 800 pubs and vast economies of scale.



In particular, I would mention the White Rabbit where I enjoyed an excellent £3.90 pint in February, and pubs offering a CAMRA discount such as the Royal Blenheim (50p discount vouchers) and the Chequers (20% CAMRA discount).

Talking of Wetherspoon, it not only fulfils a vital role in bringing affordable drink and food to the public, but also runs excellent real ale festivals in Spring and Autumn. I had great pints in the Swan & Castle and Four Candles during the last festival and really look forward to the next, especially international collaboration brews.

There's plenty more good news in this edition, including a new brewpub, the fantastic support given to a Community-Owned pub after suffering a £4,000 loss, and our two Pubs of the Year for 2026.

Our columnists have been busy too bringing you their views, and in this issue we are proud to welcome Jess Dixon, of the Red Lion in Yarnton, as our first lady columnist. Yes, I know, it's long overdue – but busy landladies (and landlords) need a lot of persuasion. With reports on pubs in Abingdon and Reading, and even a vicar commissioning a Whitsun beer, there's something here for everyone.

**DAVE RICHARDSON**

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[www.oxforddrinker.camra.org.uk](http://www.oxforddrinker.camra.org.uk)

# Davina and Goliath

**RULE NUMBER ONE** – Never Underestimate the Importance of Being Lucky.

I count myself very lucky that half a century ago, a small group decided to fight the iron economic law that powerful companies always win. They stood up to the corporations that wanted to end cask beer.

In a decades-long fight, that small band became hundreds of thousands of Davids (and Davinas) and they beat the Goliaths. CAMRA's fight to save cask ale has been won. This wasn't guaranteed, but the result of lots of people asking questions and making demands the powers that be saw as unreasonable.

My luck was made by those people before me. I'm really grateful to them, but the threat to good beer has evolved and we need to again generate the luck for the generations to come.

We only have cask ale because we have good pubs. The Oxford branch alone has lost more than 100 in the time I have lived here. Just as we made demands that saved cask ale, we now have to make demands to save our great pub heritage.

The recent government U-turn on business rates still leaves a massive increase in tax on pubs. The truth is they



*Image Pinterest*

can be saved. The key is to look at the circumstances of every pub and dare to ask better questions than those being asked.

We also need at every opportunity to make demands. Some will say these are unreasonable. Most solutions are called unreasonable by vested interests.

First, we need short term to not increase the burden of business rates for hospitality, and in the medium term to end it. It is morally bankrupt for global corporations to pay no tax while the social hubs of our communities go under because of increases in business rates.

Second, break the beer tie. Pubs being forced to take

## Chair's Chatter

their beer from only one supplier ensures almost all profits end up with global companies and the wave of pub closures accelerates. We need to fight this law as it is an existential threat to the future of beer choice and pubs.

Third, turn duty and VAT upside down. The UK is virtually the only country in Europe that doesn't give hospitality businesses a lower rate on VAT. The discounts vary but everywhere else appreciates that hospitality makes a happier society. We should demand we do the same. Tax-wise it is mad that supermarkets pay less than hospitality. This actively incentivises people to drink alone at home. We should flip this so that there is much lower duty on alcohol in hospitality venues.

Fourth, we need significant public money to save community spaces, including pubs. There are some provisions to help protect community assets, but often there are not funds to protect these venues. They are the backbone of our communities and vital to activities and well-being.

Be unreasonable, demand more, and don't accept that only the rich have a voice. We can make a difference. Be Lucky!

**JOHN WINNEY**



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# Pub News

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The Royal Blenheim (left) and the Crafty Pint.

## Royal Blenheim wins back City Pub of the Year title

Crafty Pint in Witney is Town and Village winner for the second year

Voting for our two Pubs of the Year 2026 reached a record level with 85 members voting, choosing from a shortlist which included the best scoring pubs appearing in the *Good Beer Guide* this year. Attention now turns to the pubs to be included in the guide for 2027, with voting to be completed by 20 February.

Many times winner of the City Pub of the Year title, the Royal Blenheim, won back the award this year having narrowly lost it to the Grapes in 2025. The Grapes came second this year, with the Mason's Arms in Headington Quarry again coming third.

The Royal Blenheim offers a wide choice of real ales from Titanic Brewery, which operates it, ranging from very pale to dark including the famed Plum Porter, and many seasonal offerings. But it also has three or four hand pumps for guest ales.

The Grapes, run by Morgan Pub Collective, has an ever rotating range of around six real ales and ciders, the only regular being "house biter" Sussex Best, from Harvey's. The Mason's Arms is also a genuine free house, being in the experienced hands of the Meeson family for over a quarter of a century. Real ales here also rotate, with beers from Timothy Taylor (often Boltmaker), Rebellion, Kirkstall and Siren often seen.

All pubs on the ballot received at least some votes, and other contenders for the City award were the Lamb & Flag, Rose & Crown, Star, White Hart in Headington, White Hart in Wolvercote, and White Rabbit.

Turning now to the Town and Village award, micropub the Crafty Pint in Witney retained the title it first won in 2025 with another previous winner, the Brewery Tap in

Abingdon, coming second. The Red Lion in Yarnton won third place, a major achievement bearing in mind that it won a place in the guide for the first time this year.

The Crafty Pint has double the reason to celebrate as it has also been chosen by branch members to go forward to the Oxfordshire Pub of the Year competition. Only one pub from the branch can go into this, and usually the choice alternates between the City and the Town and Village winners, with the Grapes being chosen last year.

Opened in 2023, the Crafty Pint has two hand pumps selling mainly local real ales, and six keg lines for local, national and international independent brewers.

Owners Ian Walton and Melanie Cassidy said: "We're incredibly proud of what we've achieved since opening in 2023. To win the Town and Village award for the second year running and then be named Oxford CAMRA Pub of the Year overall is beyond what we imagined. This recognition belongs as much to our customers and supporters as it does to our team."

# Original Swan up for lease

What might appear to be one of the most neglected pubs in Oxford has been made available to let by Swindon brewery Arkell's. Occupying a prominent position on the corner of Between Towns Road and Oxford Road in Cowley, the Original Swan may need considerable investment.

The lounge bar alongside Oxford Road was disused for years, but the pub does a brisk trade in keg beers and lagers in the public bar at the rear where live sports are shown. Real ale has not been offered for a long time, but there may be an opportunity for a fresh start.

Arkell's describes it as a "favourite haunt" of Cowley locals for decades – and literally the favourite haunt of the resident pub ghost for about 50 years.

During the mid-19th century there were two pubs with the name Swan at Temple Cowley. The present pub was



Photo Arkell's

originally built in 1854 and changed its name to the Original Swan in 1880 to avoid confusion (even though the other Swan was built first). The pub was rebuilt in 1930 and was bought by Arkell's in 1997.

Arkell's has two other pubs in Oxford, both leased to Dodo Pub Co. The Rusty Bicycle in East Oxford and the Ricketty Press in Jericho both serve Arkell's real ales, but not usually guest beers.

## Partners add 3 pubs in a year

The Talkhouse in Stanton St John is the latest of three pubs taken over by Mark Miles and Stephen Williams in the past year. Their first pub was the Plough in Witney, and they have since added the Chequers in Weston-on-the-Green and the Talkhouse, both in villages to the east of Oxford and both owned by Fuller's. They have also added the Fox Inn in Boars Hill, owned by Heineken's Star Pubs division.

The pubs serve Bretons Burgers, which was famous for

quality burgers in Cowley Road going back to the 1980s, and also operated a take-away close to Oxford station.

## Rose & Crown, Oxford

This much-loved traditional pub in North Parade Avenue has installed a new retractable roof over its patio which will make it warm and cosy in the winter, unlike under its previous roof. It effectively doubles the space available year-round, with outdoor drinking and dining in fine weather.

## Oxbrew to return?

Aaron Baldwin, co-founder of Oxbrew before it was merged with Little Ox, is planning to open a new brewery and taproom at Osney Mead, West Oxford.

According to the *Oxford Clarion* news feed, he has applied to operate the Oxbrew Taproom at Symm House, saying: "It will be more than just a place to enjoy excellent beer and locally sourced food prepared freshly on site; it will be a cornerstone for social interaction, community engagement and fostering new business."

## Pub News

# Pub bounces back after £4,000 loss

The Community-Owned White Hart in Wolvercote is continuing to recover after a thief stole around £4,000 on 11 January. The “Big Hart Weekend” at the end of that month was supported at the rate of double its normal weekend turnover as customers, suppliers and performers all weighed in.

Matt Todd, of the community group running it, said: “There was no break-in, but we are classing it as a robbery as the thief used a key to access the pub and knew how to access the safe and steal the CCTV equipment, including the hard drive with the recording.

“On the positive front, the community response has been tremendous and heart-warming. The weekend fundraiser had Godstow Soul, and a shanty festival with Man Choir Mutineers, the Jolly Grogstas and Short Drag Roger all donating their time and singing.

“Our suppliers 434, Twisted Tree Brewery, Oxford Brewery and Carlsberg all donated



From left: Katie Haynes, Jude Campbell and Teresa Hall.

barrels of beer. We received donations approaching £2,500 from well-wishers and customers over the fundraising weekend, as well as £106 from our Warm Space group. All in all, we were only around £500 short of covering our estimated loss of £4,000.

“This has been a mighty blow to the business, but not a fatal one. Investigations are ongoing to bring the culprit to justice, but we are moved

and energised by the pulling together and support of our local Wolvercote community, both intermittent and regular pubgoers, our suppliers and all those far and wide who have shown their support.”

Teresa Hall, one of the pub’s volunteer directors, stood in as acting general manager, assisted by Katie Haynes and Jude Campbell.

## National Pub of the Year winner

Micropub the Tamworth Tap in Tamworth, Staffordshire has won CAMRA’s National Pub of the Year 2025 title, winning the award for an unprecedented third time.

Home to Tamworth Brewing Company, the multi-award-winning pub boasts a range of eight cask beers from both local brewers and

across the UK. It is the centre of its community, hosting a huge range of events from craft clubs, painting nights and faith groups to sell-out tutored tasting sessions.

## Greene King seasonals

The brewer sold more than two million pints of seasonal cask beer in 2025. Its 2026

Fresh Cask Releases calendar features 12 limited edition beers, such as Fireside, the 4.5% ruby winter beer and Abbot Reserve, the 6.5% premium ale.

Scrumdown, a 4.1% golden ale, returns during the Six Nations Rugby tournament and will be available until the end of April.

All seasonal cask beers are available in firkins and smaller pins (36-pint units), giving pubs greater flexibility.



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## Pub News

# Scarlet River hopes to open in late March

The delayed opening of Witney's new brewpub is now expected during the last weekend of March.

Scarlet River Brewing Company was set up by former Tap Social head brewer Jason Bolger and his partner Niki Sibson, an eminent scientist and medical researcher. They had hoped to open before Christmas 2025, but only signed the 10-year lease in February after construction delays.

Seating up to 50 inside and 30 outside, the brewery, taproom and cafe occupy a unit in the Marriotts Walk shopping centre that has never been used since the complex opened in 2009. It is next to Marks & Spencer and adjacent to two restaurants and a cinema.

Although its output will be mainly craft beer served directly from tanks, it will have one hand pump which Jason describes as "cask style" as the ale does not undergo secondary fermentation in a barrel.

The five-hectolitre (500-litre) brewing plant will have a lager, IPA, Session IPA and stout as its core range, plus two other seasonal beers and two more on rotation, giving plenty of scope for experimentation. Its entire production will be sold on site but eventually it hopes to have a canning line.

"There's something very special about an amazing pint of real ale, but budget and space constraints are against it," said Jason. "We brewed some cask at Tap Social and CAMRA has been nothing but supportive. Tap has been supportive of me too but I did what I wanted to do there and I'm ready for something new."

Scarlet River will open from 9am daily and hopes to attract a wide range of customers with



*Jason and Niki at the new brewery.*

many activities and events ranging from croquet to music. The couple hope to work closely with army and Air Force veterans in key roles.

"We're hoping our main employees will come from a services background and we've been in touch with various organisations," said Niki. "Some service people have difficulty with the transition to civilian life, but we can offer that support."

## QUICK ONES

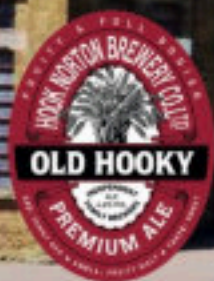
📍 The village of Islip was left without a pub when gastro pub the **Swan Inn** shut its doors. The Red Lion has been closed and for sale for some time, while the Swan's closure – despite having a Michelin and AA rosette listing – indicates the difficulties faced by gastro pubs.

📍 Greene King is seeking new tenants for the **James Street Tavern** in East Oxford, a major student and live events pub run for the last few years by Crafty Belle group which also operates the Old Bookbinders in Jericho. Other Greene King pubs in Oxford listed as to let are the **Royal Standard** in Headington and **Cricketer's Arms** in Temple Cowley.

📍 The **Evenlode** has got rid of its four hand pumps, which used to serve rotating ales mainly from Little Ox in nearby Freeland. The large pub and hotel on the A40 outside Eynsham has had a makeover as the Firehouse BBQ & Bar.

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# Parish Ale tradition re-established in Wantage

On Saturday 9 May, Wantage Parish Church will celebrate its second annual event reviving the ancient tradition of the Parish Ale.

Brewing Parish Ales was widespread in medieval England and generally took place at Whitsun, to raise funds for church repairs. The practice was suppressed after the Reformation. But as late as the 17th century, poet Francis Beaumont could declare that:

*The churches must owe, as we all do know,*

*For when they be drooping and ready to fall,*

*By a Whitsun or Church-ale up again they shall go*

*And owe their repairing to a pot of good ale.*



*Katherine Price, Vicar of Wantage, pours a DiscipAle at last year's Parish Ale event in Wantage Parish Church.*

DiscipAle has been created by Kevin Brady at Indigenous Brewery in Chaddleworth, West Berkshire, in consultation with the parish. The brew blends Maris Otter and Light Crystal grain with Perle, Fuggles and Goldings hops and the branding features an icon-based drawing of St Peter, one of the patrons in Wantage, and St James, patron in Chaddleworth.

The event in Wantage Parish Church on 9 May will include a lunchtime session from 12 noon, with performances by the Icknield Way Morrismen and Mabel Gubbins (an all-women traditional sword dancing side); and a Cakes and Ale Ceilidh at 7pm with Oxfordshire folk band Melobo. For more information, see [wantageparish.com](http://wantageparish.com) from March.

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## Brewery News

# Not all rain in Dry January

Hook Norton celebrates the re-opening of its stable block, and 10th birthdays at Little Ox and LoveBeer, reports **Patrick MacMahon** (below)

This year, Dry January has been anything but, with breweries gearing up for a big year in beer and patrons seeking refuge from the deluge in the county's cosiest pubs. Breweries have been busy, and here's sweeping look at what's happening in Oxfordshire and beyond.

This year, **Little Ox** celebrates its 10th birthday, a huge achievement for a brewery that has battled Covid, rising costs and a competitive market since the day it opened. The ethos of the brewery remains as strong as ever, not only producing excellent beers but integrating itself into the community from the get-go.

Reaching into the archives, the brewery will resurrect Oddbod to honour the occasion – a 4% Premium Bitter, classic, rich and balanced. Long overdue a comeback according to some, it will be available in both cask and can but is likely to fly out the door, so stay alert. Other upcoming delights from the stable include a Pacific Pale using a sumptuous Antipodean hop blend, a Little Ox White Ale with a twist in the tale, and another tasty wheat beer with a citrus kick.



Monthly open days will soon start in earnest, giving locals the opportunity to try the freshest beers and hear about the brews in detail from the brewers at Little Ox. The first will be held indoors on 27 March, moving outdoors for the late April sunshine. As before, a heady mix of local live music, artisan food producers and a full line-up of beers on tap make for a perfect day out. And a final note on the quality of those beers – the brewery has achieved the SIBA FSQ (Food and Safety Quality accreditation) and all beers remain gluten free and vegan.

The new beer theme continues at **Hook Norton**, which has teamed up with Oakham to produce Hooked Up, showcasing some super exciting new hop varieties. Modern UK hop varieties Jester and Harlequin combine with brand new US hop Karma, the result of a collaboration between UK hop farm Charles Faram and renowned hop growers Puterbaugh Farms. Karma is a daughter of Mystic, grandmother is Jester and great-grandmother, Cascade.

Make of that what you will, but quite the lineage I dare say. The result: soft lemon and vibrant orange flavours underpinned with resinous spice and a clean, grapefruit-bitter finish. One to watch.

Hook Norton's shire horses, Balmoral, Brigadier and Cromwell, along with the dapper Nicholas Carter and Alyster Mills, celebrated the re-opening of the historic 1894 Victorian Stable Block following its devastating fire 18 months ago. The horsebox bar opened on Valentine's Day to serve fresh beers made with love and with all proceeds going to the Firefighters Charity.

Equestrian activities continued at lovely local Hooky pub, the George in Lower Brailles on 5 March, to launch seasonal cask ale the Pad-dock's Pouruth, with the brew-



*Hook Norton head coachman Nicholas Carter and shire horses at the re-opening of the historic 1894 Victorian Stable Block following a devastating fire.*

ers on hand to elaborate on how the wonderful beers came to fruition.

Rises in alcohol duty are set to hit the industry hard, as Milton (near Didcot) brewery **LoveBeer** emphasised on ITV last month. Founder Jim Southey emphasised the impacts an increase in alcohol duty will have on small businesses already struggling to survive.

LoveBeer was set up by Jim 10 years ago and has recently cut costs as much as possible, including the installation of solar panels to cut energy bills. Pubs are also unable to absorb further price rises with margins already extremely stretched, particularly on cask ale. Local MP Oilly Glover has raised the issue in Parliament, but it seems there

is a long way to go to get any support from the government by way of relief.

The sentiment was reinforced by independent brewers group **SIBA** last month, which warned of a 2026 survival crisis as its SIBA UK Brewery tracker reported a 37% spike in brewery closures compared with the previous year. This perhaps does not take in the effects of wider consolidation of brewery brands and production at companies such as Keystone – which was incidentally rescued from administration earlier this year – and Sunrise Beverages, but is nevertheless a concern for the industry. SIBA chief executive Andy Slee was quoted saying that demand was not the issue for breweries – rather the

tax burden and access to local markets.

For all the well-documented pressures facing breweries and pubs, however, there are also genuine reasons for optimism in the cask world. **XT** will revisit old recipes (more on that next time), as the trend for traditional styles continues at both micro and macro scale and in cask and keg alike.

Across the country too, established family brewers such as **Wells & Co** and **Theakston** are reaffirming their commitment to traditional ales with new and revived cask releases. That kind of long-term investment in heritage styles suggests confidence in the enduring appeal of a well-kept pint. Cheers to that.

## Beer Heroes

# Craft, community and a spring-fed vision

**SET AGAINST THE** gentle countryside of South Oxfordshire, Amwell Springs Brewery is the kind of enterprise that feels rooted in place. It is not simply a brewery that happens to be rural, but one that draws its character directly from the land on which it stands.

Since its founding in 2017, the brewery has grown from a personal ambition into a respected local business, producing beers that are increasingly well known across Oxfordshire and neighbouring counties. At its heart is owner and founder Andrew “Gibbo” Gibbons, whose practical outlook and enthusiasm for good beer have shaped both the brewery and its relationship with the surrounding community.

I met Andrew at the brewery and was given a warm welcome. It is a beautiful setting with one of only around 200 chalk streams globally, with water filtering over decades to produce a natural source for brewing with no adjuncts such as chlorine. Andrew is a very likeable person, and his lively social skills add to the fun side of brewing.

“I have always been interested in brewing beer from an early age and use the finest British products: Bramling Cross, East Kent Gold and Target hops as well as Marris Otter malt,” Andrew explained.

Amwell Springs Brewery came into being in the sum-

**Pete Flynn** profiles Amwell Springs Brewery



*Amwell is a beautiful setting, with one of only around 200 chalk streams globally.*

mer of 2017, born out of Andrew’s long-standing interest in brewing and a desire to create something distinctive on family land near Cholsey. Unlike many start-ups that must search for the right

premises or water source, this venture received help from a natural asset: a clear spring rising on the farm itself. That spring would go on to define the brewery’s identity, supplying untreated water



Andrew Gibbons (left) and Amwell Springs head brewer Adam Strudwick. (Photos Amwell Springs)

that is integral to every beer produced.

Unlike so many brewers, Andrew honed his skills by reading a book, supplemented by meeting brewer Dave Maggs, founder of what was West Berkshire Brewery and is now Renegade. “An important transition,” Andrew told me.

The Gibbons family has farmed locally for decades, and that connection to the land strongly influenced the direction of the business. Rather than chasing trends or rapid expansion, the early focus was on learning the craft, refining recipes, and producing beers with balance, consistency and character. From the outset, quality mattered more than scale.

Amwell Springs’ approach to brewing is grounded in simplicity and control. Carefully selected malts and hops are

combined with spring-fed water to produce beers that are approachable yet full of flavour. There is a deliberate emphasis on drinkability: beers designed to be enjoyed by regular pub-goers as much as by committed beer enthusiasts.

Over time a core range has emerged, including pale ales, golden ales, amber ales and IPAs, each with its own personality but united by a clean, well-judged finish. Names such as Mad Gaz, Eazy Geez, Stay Jammy and Rude Not To reflect a sense of humour and accessibility that mirrors the brewery’s down-to-earth image. While the recipes may evolve, the aim remains consistent: beers that people are happy to return to pint after pint.

Andrew gave me a sense of the humour: “Chairman Dave (Extra Pale Ale) is a

cheeky nod to my father who was head of a veterinary group but never qualified as a vet.”

From modest beginnings, Amwell Springs has steadily expanded its footprint. Its beers are now a familiar sight in many pubs across Oxfordshire and Berkshire, often appearing as guest ales and increasingly as regular lines. This measured growth has allowed the brewery to build strong relationships with landlords and drinkers alike, rather than overstretching production or compromising quality. The brewery is niche, operating as a six-barrel plant with two full-time employees.

A significant development came with the introduction of an on-site pop-up bar and shop, opening seasonally and making the brewery itself a destination. Visitors can sample beers just yards from

the spring that supplies them, often alongside food vendors and informal outdoor seating. This move has deepened public engagement, turning the brewery from a behind-the-scenes producer into a social space where people can connect directly with the product and its maker.

Conscious of local sentiment, Andrew mentioned: “As a residential area we are highly dependent on our pop-up bar between April and October, as the winter months would not be favourable with our local residents.”

Local support has played a crucial role in the brewery’s success. Amwell Springs has been warmly received by nearby villages and towns, where there is a strong tradition of supporting independent producers. Word-of-mouth recommendations, positive feedback from beer festivals and interest from CAMRA members have all helped build its reputation.

Crucially, the brewery feels approachable. Andrew is frequently present at events and pop-up openings, happy to talk about brewing, farming or simply the merits of a particular pint. That visibility fosters loyalty and trust, and many supporters feel a sense of shared ownership in the brewery’s progress.

Having visited the pop-up bar during the weekly Friday afternoon sessions from 3pm onwards, I can vouch for the amazing bucolic setting. Just remember to splash on insect repellent and sunscreen, and wear a hat.

Beyond producing beer, the brewery contributes to the local economy and social fabric in several ways. It supports local pubs by offering distinctive, locally made



beers that set them apart from national brands. The pop-up events draw visitors into the area, benefitting food traders and encouraging people to explore the surrounding countryside.

Sustainability is another important element. Brewing by-products are repurposed where possible, with spent grains often going back into the local agricultural cycle as animal feed. The use of natural spring water and the brewery’s small-scale operation align well with broader environmental values common in rural Oxfordshire.

Like many independent breweries, Amwell Springs has faced its share of challenges. Scaling up production while maintaining consistency is a constant balancing act, particularly in a competitive market where consumer tastes can shift quickly. Equipment costs, staffing demands and distribution logistics all place pressure on small producers.

The future appears cautiously optimistic. There is scope to expand its visitor offering, increase production slightly, or introduce more limited and seasonal beers

without losing the qualities that have earned local loyalty. Any growth, however, is likely to remain measured and purposeful rather than rapid.

At its core, the brewery’s ambition seems less about becoming big and more about becoming established: a long-term presence that locals can be proud of. By continuing to focus on quality, community engagement and sustainable practices, Amwell Springs is well placed to strengthen its role as both a producer of good beer and a valued part of the local landscape.

In many ways it represents the best of the modern British craft brewing movement: rooted in place, shaped by personal commitment and supported by a community that values authenticity. From a simple idea and a natural spring, Andrew has built a business that reflects its surroundings and contributes positively to them. Whether enjoyed in a local pub or beside the spring itself, Amwell Springs beers tell a story of patience, pride and local connection – and that story is still unfolding.



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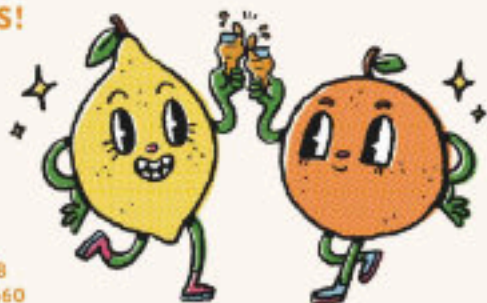
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**HELLO, OXFORD DRINKER** readers! My name is Jess and I run the Red Lion in Yarnton. I've worked in hospitality for nearly 15 years and been involved in all things "pub" for six. Although I still feel pretty new to the game, how could I decline the opportunity to write for *the Oxford Drinker* after being an avid reader for so long?

There's a heck of a lot of topics to talk about and I love a good gossip, but I thought, as this is my first article and the first edition of 2026, I would talk about how pub dynamics have changed over time and contributed to the diverse pub scene I have grown to know and love.

### Events and families

Who remembers the days of "family rooms" or simply sitting in your parents' car while they had a relaxing beverage sans family? I don't myself but have been told many a story about pubs seeming to be a parent-safe haven without the family to cramp their style.

And considering children under 14 were prohibited from entering public houses prior to 1995, and pubs only allowed to make their own policies only from 2003 due to changes in the licensing act, it's not really surprising that children in pub environments can be a bit of a divisive topic.

Being a village pub means families, and lots of them! It can be quite entertaining at times when you have small children demanding a straw with their apple juice, paired with older gents just trying to get a relaxing pint in across the bar.

Acting as a community hub with such a wide range of ages is good fun while simul-

## Yarnton Yarns

# Pubs are for everyone

In the first of a new guest writer spot, **Jess Dixon** (below) of the Red Lion Yarnton considers the wide-ranging appeal of the pub



taneously feeling like solving a public relations-themed Rubik's cube. How can we create a welcoming environment for all, that also fits the vibe we want to create?

Some opt for high chairs on demand and play sets in the garden, others fruit shoots and a game of Jenga

(all low-noise activities of course).

One thing I've found always works to maintain the family melting pot status quo is a good old event in the garden, with some live music and a few garden games. We're really lucky to have a Yarnton village band full of people of all ages that kicksS off our annual May beer festival, which really sets the tone for the day.

I know not every pub may be fit for a family-friendly lifestyle, but if it is, there's nothing quite like watching people of all ages enjoy a sunny pub garden with a fresh pint or J2O in hand.

### Women

Another factor in pub dynamics is the role of the "Leading Lady" and women's involvement in pub culture over time. Historically, brewing was a female-led practice. In the period when ale was safer to drink than water, "ale wives" provided a valuable service. This was one of the few jobs accessible to unmarried women and widows, as it was all done in the home with domestic appliances.

Public houses were then formed by simply leaving the



*The Antwerp Arms in Tottenham celebrated its 10th anniversary as a Community-Owned pub in 2025 when it was packed full of men, women and children. (CAMRA photo)*

front door open with a sign outside to let people know ale was available; everyone would then pop in for a pint by the fire and a chat.

After this start, the pub became more of a stereotypical male environment with most positions in management and brewing still disproportionately held by men.

However, this is shifting! In recent years, we've seen plenty of breweries producing quirky beers in the name of International Women's Day (8 March this year), programmes to get women into brewing and increased opportunities for women who want to take on senior roles.

More women than ever before feel comfortable coming into pubs on their own. Gone are the days of "men-only" establishments or women confined to snugs away from the buzz, drinking half pints as they're "less masculine". Women popping in for a chat or a decompress in their local is becoming the norm, and makes me happy to see.

### **Low or no options**

And of course, I can't look at shifts in the pub scene without touching briefly on alcohol consumption as a whole. I feel most publicans don't go a single day without selling some form of low or no alcohol option, with these nearly doubling over the last seven years and 44% of people now aiming to limit their intake.

Not only do people opt for healthier alternatives and fewer hangovers, as the recent proposed changes to the drink-drive limit will also push people towards lower ABV beers, alongside 0% options.

An initial worry can be that pubs will get less footfall through the door, and what this will mean for the industry as a whole. But beyond this I see a challenge, a chance to create a new space within the pub dynamic.

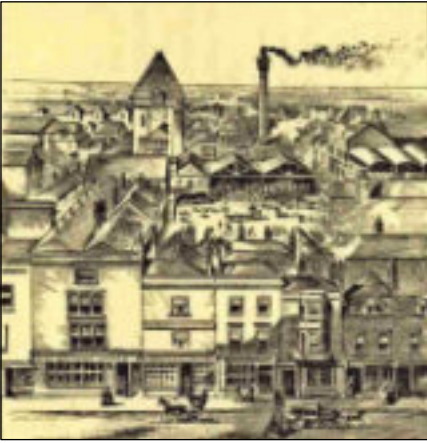
How can we expand on exploration and invention? How can we create options that appeal to our ale drinkers? How can we maintain

the beauty that is the body and flavour of a beer, and offer non-drinkers a pint just as good as their peers?

Lower ABV ales such as Milds that were popular in the 17th century for their deep colour and depth of flavour, although 3-4%, have seen a resurgence – a sign of good things to come! Gone are the days of sub-par alternatives, and with all the investment in research and development in this new market, there is no excuse for a lack of inclusive options.

I recognise the irony in writing a column on the diversity of the pub scene and only mentioning three notable groups, but this highlights my point further. I had set myself an impossible task – covering a topic that knows no boundary and is ever evolving. The "pub" is not just for you and me, but for everyone else in between – every pub-goer who steps through the door is as important as the first and the last.





Left: The offices of Hanley & Company's City Brewery in Queen Street, where Waterstone's bookshop is now. Right: The brewery in the 1890s behind the offices, part of which still remains and is now the Museum of Modern Art in Pembroke Street. (Photo Oxford Preservation Trust)

## Lost Pubs of Oxford

# City centre south

In the southern part of the city centre, Queen Street and St Aldate's were once less peaceful than now (to put it mildly).

**Steve Thompson** reports

**QUEEN STREET IS** now dominated by shops and restaurants, building societies and banks, and has no pubs at all, but it once had no fewer than 11 drinking establishments. It even had its own brewery, where Waterstone's bookshop is now.

Hanley's City Brewery was first set up as a brewing business by Daniel Hanley in the 1840s. It later passed to Charles and Edmund Augustine Hanley, who in 1890 turned the business into a company, trading as Hanley & Co from the City Brewery at 20 Queen Street.

The brewery extended all

the way to Pembroke Street, where the **Royal Blenheim** was its brewery tap, and the fermentation room still exists in the Museum of Modern Art next door.

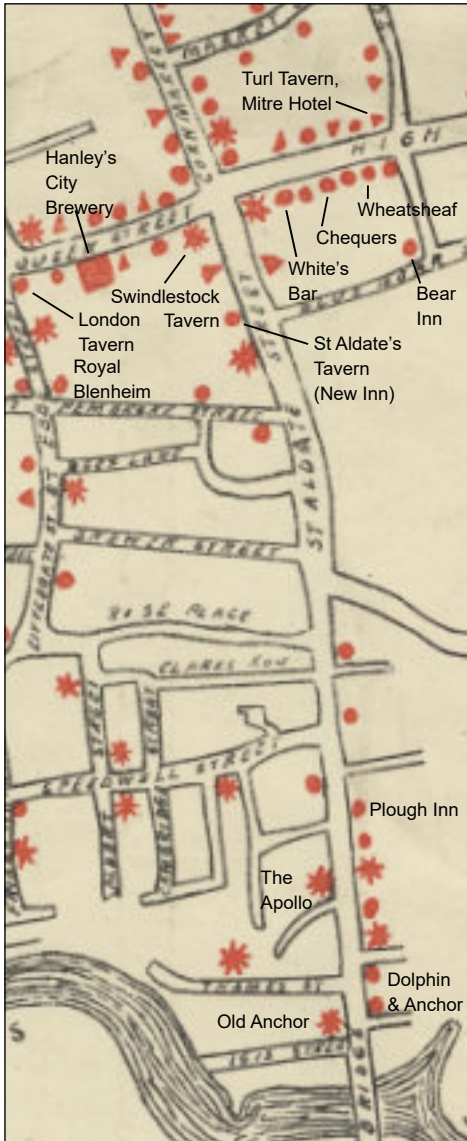
Hanley's was acquired by Hall's Oxford Brewery with 100 public houses in 1898. Hall's concentrated production there until 1925 then sold it to the city corporation in 1928.

At least two pubs disappeared to make way for the development of the Westgate Centre and Bonn Square in 1970-1972 – the London Tavern at 24 Queen Street and the Sherbourne Arms at 1

Castle Street. As Derek Honey observes in *An Encyclopaedia of Oxford Pubs, Inns and Taverns*: "Nothing now remains of either pub, the site being a pedestrian walkway through to St Ebbe's Street."

Bonn Square was named after the city of Bonn in Germany, with which Oxford is twinned, and formally opened in 1974. The Tirah Memorial at its centre commemorates a British military campaign in 1897-1898 on the northwestern frontier of India, in which several local officers and men were killed.

Still (briefly) on the theme of death, at the other end of Queen Street is the **Swindlestock Tavern**. Many pubs have a dark past, but few can have led to



*This detail is taken from the Drink Map of Oxford published by the Oxford Temperance Union in 1883. Red stars indicate beer houses, red dots full licensed houses and red squares breweries. 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).*



*Oxford Drinker editor Dave Richardson outside Santander Bank in Carfax, showing where the Swindlestock Tavern once stood. (Photo by Phil Gammon)*

the violent deaths of almost 100 people.

On Tuesday 10 February 1355, St Scholastica's Day, a group of students drinking in the Swindlestock Tavern complained about the quality of the wine and threw a quart pot at landlord John Croydon. Croydon called for assistance, and church bells were rung by both sides to summon supporters.

Derek Honey: "Petty as it seems, the riot was the accumulation of centuries of discord between the two sections of the city, the university having gained more importance in the town."

There followed three days of riots between Town and Gown, in which 2,000 citizens entered Oxford through the West Gate armed with bows and arrows.

Finally, order was restored, several leading citizens, including the mayor and bailiffs, were sent to the Tower of London, and King Edward III gave the university a new charter with even more power than before.

In 1955 – the 600th anniversary of the riots – in an act of conciliation, the city's mayor was given an honorary degree, while the university's vice-chancellor was made an honorary freeman of the city.

There were once about 20 pubs in St Aldate's, but now there are only two, St Aldate's Tavern and the Old Tom.

Confusingly, another pub in St Aldate's was named St Aldate's Tavern, but not at the same time. The "other" St Aldate's Tavern was further down the road at 61 St Aldate's and is no longer a pub. Best known as the **Apollo**, it ran from about 1866 to 1994, when it was renamed

St Aldate's Tavern. (The current St Aldate's Tavern at 108 St Aldate's was then known as the New Inn, from 1716 to 1965.)

Customer Simon McGurk recalls the Apollo in the 1980s: "The Apollo was a very lively gay pub, full of characters such as the landlord Derek, who often put on drag shows, swinging from a trapeze from the ceiling or arriving in front of the pub be-decked in a feather boa on the bonnet of a customer's Rolls Royce. All this right in front of the police station!

"Derek's mother lived above the pub as I remember. The Apollo had a great community vibe and some weekends I remember motorcades of customers driving to the Greyhound club in Slough after closing."

If the Apollo at 61 St Aldate's was near the police station, the **Plough Inn** at 23 St Aldate's (the street had a quirky numbering system) was actually on it! Or rather the Plough closed in 1936 to make way for the Central Police Station (now St Aldate's Police Station) which was completed in 1938.

Derek Honey, whose illustration is opposite, writes: "The pub was on city property by Floyds Row [which still exists], and leased to Hall's Brewery, but the date of the lease is unknown. An attractive pub, the ground floor was of red brick with a central entrance, while the upper floors retained the wood framing with white plaster."

Down near Folly Bridge at the southern end of St Aldate's were two other pubs with similar names, the Old Anchor and the Dolphin & Anchor.

The **Old Anchor** was originally located on Folly Bridge



*The Apollo at 61 St Aldate's. (Pub photos © M.J. Crook)*



*The Plough Inn in St Aldate's. (Illustration by Derek Honey)*

and moved to 44 St Aldate's on the corner of Isis Street in 1828 when the river course was changed. The building was sold to the city for redevelopment in 1973.

The **Dolphin & Anchor** at 43 St Aldate's was first mentioned as a pub called the Anchor in 1667. Derek Honey writes:

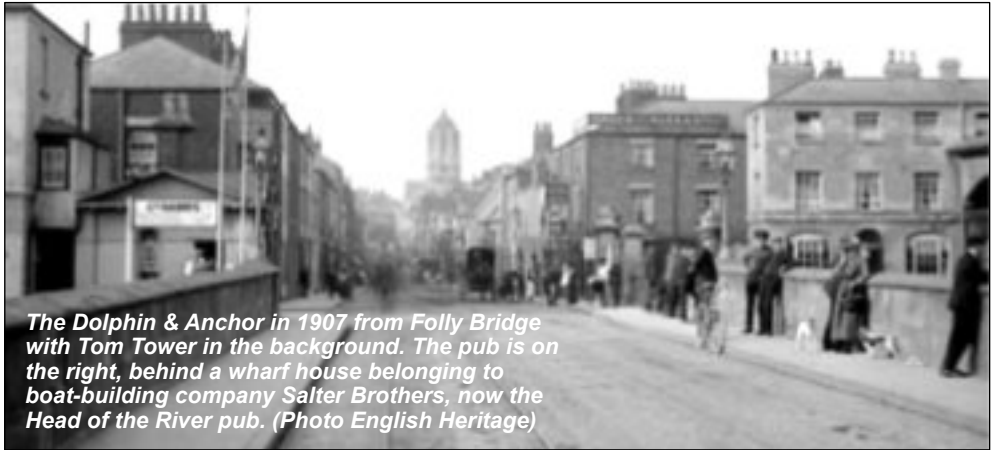
"It was one of several beerhouses located in the Folly Bridge area, and this pub was thought to have been actually



*The Old Anchor at 44 St Aldate's.*

on the old bridge. When the present bridge was built in 1827 the pub was pulled down and the licence transferred to the Dolphin a few metres to the north, with the names incorporated.

"The first landlord was Thomas Dolley, his son William becoming famous as the licensee of another Anchor in Hayfield Road." Hence the popular name of that canalside pub in North Oxford, "Dolley's Hut".



*The Dolphin & Anchor in 1907 from Folly Bridge with Tom Tower in the background. The pub is on the right, behind a wharf house belonging to boat-building company Salter Brothers, now the Head of the River pub. (Photo English Heritage)*



*The Turl Tavern at the Mitre Hotel.*

Back in the High Street, **White's Bar** was located in a passageway near Carfax. In 1934, it took over the first-floor Long Bar at 134 High Street as a private club. According to Derek Honey:

“By the war it was the sole reserve of American servicemen, and the bar was re-designed as an American bar diner with thick carpets. No Englishman dare set foot inside the place, and the GI police waited outside for any trouble to finish.

“In the 1970s, it became one of Oxford's first disco pubs, all pretence as a club

long gone. It closed shortly after and is now an Indian restaurant.”

Probably the oldest pub in Oxford, the **Mitre Hotel** in the High Street is a sad loss. As Dave Richardson wrote in *the Oxford Drinker* in 2022 before it became a Gusto Italian restaurant:

“Although functioning mainly as a restaurant for many years prior to closure in 2019, it retained a bar selling real ale where you could just go for a drink – although the Turl Tavern, at the rear of the building, became part of student accommodation around 20 years ago.”

Stephanie Presdee remembers the Turl Tavern at the Mitre Hotel:

“Later I ran the cellar bar in the Mitre and had a great time with Balliol and Oriel students. Also frequented by characters like Pete the Poet, a graduate, who had fallen on hard times. They would order halves of lager and add their own cider from bottles they had brought in themselves... ‘snakebite’ which pubs were not allowed to serve as it meant incomplete half measures of lager and cider.

“There was rivalry between Town and Gown too, and some lads from the Corn Dolly [in Frewin Court off Commarket Street, now closed] turned up one evening and after last orders would not leave. So I went down to the end of the bar where the wrought iron stairs went up into Turl Street. They had set the fire alarm off, so I upturned their drinks onto the floor.

“I was so chuffed when they left, but when I turned around Balliol Eights team were stood on the steps behind me, in a row, arms folded! My bouncers!”



*The Bear Inn (left) and the New Inn (now St Aldate's Tavern).*

Many of Oxford's best-known pubs – it's no exaggeration to say some are world famous –

are still with us. In the city centre, the **Bear Inn**, the **Chequers**, the **St Aldate's Tavern** and the **Wheatsheaf** are all thriving. Perhaps the best known of all, the **Eagle & Child** in St Giles (where the

Inklings, a literary group who included J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, met regularly from 1939 to 1962), is closed now but under extensive renovation and expected to reopen in 2027.



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**A FEW YEARS** ago, a landlord I know was keen to show me his new fireplace.

“Look at that!” he exclaimed excitedly, pointing over to the fire, the kind that uses gas flames to imitate a real coal fire. “Those four students over there by it, they’ve been there over an hour, half a pint of coke each. Now watch this,” he said, and produced a remote control, pointed it at the fireplace and turned the fire off. You could almost hear the students’ sighs of disappointment as the heat disappeared.

“They’ve only got themselves to blame. Should have bought more drinks if they wanted the best seats in the house,” he said. I have to agree with him on that.

I bring this story up to illustrate a different point, so keep it in mind and I’ll come back to it later. (It’s true, by the way. I shall not name names, even though I suspect everyone reading this article will entirely side with the landlord in question, but safe to say he still runs an excellent pub and is, I suspect, still very proud of his remote control fireplace.)

A question I get asked a lot nowadays in the pub is “Do you have Wifi?”, and the simple answer is no. And it’s a lie.

Obviously, we have Wifi. It would be pretty difficult for any modern business to function without it. The days of a good old-fashioned till, the kind which took a genuine effort to ring anything into, which didn’t do the maths for you and probably now shows up on Antiques Roadshow worth several thousand pounds, are long gone.

It’s all digital touch screens now, with back-office software capable of doing everything from stock takes to filing your

## Gardener’s World

# On different wavelengths

**Paul Silcock** (below), of the Gardener’s Arms in Plantation Road, Oxford, on Wifi in pubs



*Photo MorrisOxford (morrisoxford.co.uk)*

VAT returns. I sound like a Luddite, throwing my shoes at a Spinning Jenny, but I’m not at all. Everyone hates a stock take. Everyone hates their VAT return. The till system we use is fantastic.

But it needs Wifi. Obviously, it does. I can access the till from laptop or phone from anywhere. Card payments? How do you think they’re communicating with the banks? Probably every pub in the country uses some form of streaming service for background music. Jukeboxes now have access to artists’ entire back catalogue,

which must be a nightmare. It was hard enough making a choice when there were 200-odd songs to choose from. The queue for the jukebox now must be half the pub long. People desperately trying to remember that song, you know, the one that goes da-nah-nah-na, by that band who almost had a Christmas number 1 back in 1990, or was it 1992? You get the idea.

I honestly believe if I tried to deny my staff access to Wifi there would be an open rebellion. Every one of them needs WhatsApp, Insta,

SnapChat, and that strange dating game called Hinge or Bumble that they all seem to be addicted to. Even though its only function seems to be to make them miserable, or have to run off to the bathroom for some odd reason.

In fact, Wifi is so necessary I actually have two networks in the pub. Just in case one of them goes down I can switch everything over to the working one, and keep serving and taking payments and telling the staff to put their phones down and get back to work. The fact that my wife works from home (in the flat above the pub) also makes two networks essential, but that's not the point.

So why do I say no when customers ask me if we have Wifi? Let's go back to that story at the start of this article. It's not to be a big old meany who likes nothing better than to spoil everyone's time. It's because there will always be people who take the piss. There will always be people who treat the Wifi like the fireplace in that pub. Get the most out of the establishment while putting the least in. Taking the biggest table for the fewest people with the lowest spend.

It's a tricky thing though. Maybe I could just offer Wifi at lunchtimes? I could implement a system whereby a customer has to buy a drink every half an hour, say, in order to use the Wifi, like some sort of old meter system where you had to put a 50 pence piece in to make the telly work. But then what if one customer buys a pint of Erdinger and the other customer buys half a lime and soda? I can't expect everyone to buy alcohol, especially if the reason you need Wifi is to



Photo Pinterest

do actual work. Then again, I really don't want a pub where at 8.30 every other table has a laptop on it and an air of studious concentration.

Honestly, I'd rather people just came to the pub to be sociable, and leave the working world behind. Unplug and unwind from our increasingly digital lifestyles.

Studies show just how much damage 24/7 access to the world through our devices has on mental health. You pick up your phone only to be shown alerts and pop-ups of the latest breaking news showing what a mess the world is in. It's no wonder anxiety levels are rising so sharply.

It's almost impossible to escape everything going wrong in the world, and while we can't put our heads in the sand and hope Nigel Farage chokes on his porridge, we also cannot function in the overwhelming flood of information and misinformation that is fed to us from our devices.

By the way, while I mention Farage (barred from this

pub for being a terrible representation of a human being), have you ever noticed how quickly Fascists co-opt the words Freedom and Liberty to their causes? An almost dictionary definition of Irony. Please bear that in mind in the coming months. I know I've said a pub should be non-partisan, but I was wrong and sometimes you need to draw a line in the sand.

Back to the Wifi matter though. Look, I get it, most people are happy to not have Wifi in the pub, until they're not. Because you need Wifi for just about anything nowadays. Ordering a cab, checking your bank balance when a payment doesn't go through, hunting that rare Pokemon (apparently). At the height of the Pokemon Go craze, one customer tried to come behind the bar to catch some rare Pokemon or other. Behaviour so daft I could say no to Wifi requests for the rest of time.

So what's the solution? Sometimes, I'll give people the Wifi code. Usually based on frequency of visits to the pub, need to transfer money between bank accounts to pay for the round they just ordered for 12 people, or to get a cab home at the end of the night. Of course I'll let you use the Wifi for that. Just less so if you plonk a stack of books down on a table for four, get a laptop out and order a coffee.

And if you think that's unreasonable, then you're probably part of the problem and you should go away and have a think about the difference between a pub and a library. They're both brilliant establishments, but in very different ways. Try ordering a pint of bitter in the Bodleian and see what happens.



**Tony Goulding**  
goes walkabout  
in the historic town

**A SIMPLE GUIDE** to the pubs of Abingdon – all 18 of them – is long overdue. Greene King dominates with 10, not helped by its acquisition then closure of the town's Morland Brewery over 25 years ago.

We will start with Greene King pubs. The **Roaring Raindrop**, a re-naming of the **Midget** in Preston Road, serves up to three of its cask beers including Morland Original. The renaming came after what I think were totally uncalled-for and small-minded complaints concerning the word midget with the pub sign depicting the MG car of that name, MG being founded nearby but closed in 1980.

On our way into town from here, almost the first building in Ock Street is the **White Horse** serving up to six cask beers including a couple of guests from the Greene King list and a couple of boxed ciders. In the town centre near the shopping mall is the **Black Swan**, now a sports and drinkers' bar with no cask beer.

In Bridge Street leading to the river is the **Broad Face**, which until recently would serve six ever-changing beers to local CAMRA members and all. Following a business failure, the pub has a new tenant working hard to regain some of its former glory, but with three cask beers including guests from the Greene King list. Back around the corner by the old County Hall is the **Punchbowl**, a pleasant two-bar local drinkers' pub serving Morland Original and Taylor Landlord.

Up into the northern suburbs, on Northcourt Road, you

Tony's Travels

# Pubs aplenty in Abingdon



*The Punchbowl. (CAMRA photo)*

will find a really old-fashioned, comfortable pub the **Spread Eagle**, serving up to four cask beers which on the day included Morland Original, Belhaven Bitter and a Loose Cannon.

Back on the main Oxford road in a very prominent position is the busiest Greene King pub in Abingdon, the **Boundary House**. This large 1960s family food pub serves IPA and up to three guest ales from the Greene King list, typically Taylor Landlord, St Austell Tribute and a Loose Cannon.

On the Peachcroft estate is the **College Oak**, a typical 1960s estate pub. This com-



*The Midget, now the Roaring Raindrop. (Photo by Andrew Ffrench, courtesy of Oxford Mail/Oxford Times)*



*The Brewery Tap. (CAMRA photo)*



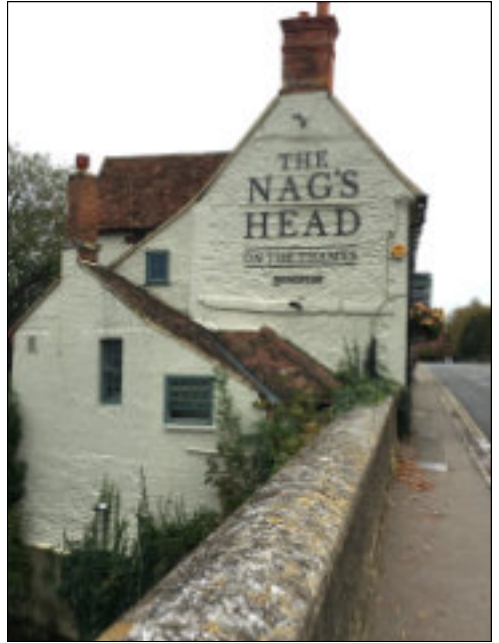
*The Loose Cannon Brewery shop and taproom. (Photo by Pete Flynn)*

fortable local serves two cask beers including Old Speckled Hen plus another from the Greene King range.

Back in town on St Helen's Wharf is a very old, interesting and comfortable pub, the **Old Anchor Inn**, leased until recently to Greene King but now a free house. It is owned by Christ's Hospital and still serves one Greene King cask beer.

Back out off Drayton Road is **Loose Cannon Brewery**. Its beer is available in some pubs locally, and up to four casks beers are served in the very popular taproom.

One of the most popular and successful pubs is the **Brewery Tap**, originally part



*The King's Head & Bell and the Nag's Head on the Thames.*

of Morland's offices and converted to the present pub in 2003. It now operates as a free house and is almost permanently a *Good Beer Guide* entry, and frequently Oxford CAMRA's Town and Village Pub of the Year. Five changing cask beers are served along with interesting bottles and cans.

Just a short walk away in Coxeter House is the town's newest offering, the **Earl of Abingdon**. This sports-led free house serves two cask beers typically including Sharp's Doom Bar, and would not be frequented by persons of Earl stature. Many of the customers used to drink in the now closed **Grapes** in the High Street.

In the High Street you will find a typical "Spoons", the **Narrows**, serving the usual selection of Wetherspoon cask ales plus up to four

guests. Converted from the main Post Office, the pub takes its name from what this part of the old High Street is known by.

Another free house near the old County Hall is the **King's Head & Bell**, a rambling old building serving up to three cask beers, on the day these being Hook Norton Old Hooky and Mild. In Bath Street is the **Blue Boar**, a free house which has recently re-opened and did not previously serve cask beers, busy with a younger clientele.

A short walk to Bridge Street will bring you to the **Crown & Thistle Hotel**, which a few years back served a very good selection of cask beers. Recently purchased by very professional pub and hotel chain Brunning & Price, this centuries-old rambling building serves two cask beers.

Our last pub is owned by the Brakspear Pub Company, Brakspear Brewery having closed in 2002. The **Nag's Head** on the Thames has its own island in the river and in recent years has held very busy beer festivals. It's still a busy place to sample Brakspear Oxford Gold, Gravity and up to five guest ales.

Unlike Witney, which I covered in the Autumn 2025 issue, Abingdon is awash with former pubs converted into convenience stores, shops, flats and houses. A mention could be made of the two clubs off Ock Street, **Conservative** and **Royal British Legion**, both of which offer good value cask beer. Finally, another club now a sort of pub is the **Croft Bar** on the Peachcroft estate, a friendly community house that serves at least three cask beers.





# THE BEAR INN

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



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**READING IS A** historic town in Berkshire with a rich and fascinating past. Originally a Saxon settlement, it grew around Reading Abbey, founded by King Henry I in 1121. The abbey became a major religious and political centre until its destruction during Henry VIII's reign. Reading thrived in the medieval wool trade and later became known for brewing, baking (Huntley & Palmers biscuits), and seed growing. The town played

roles in the English Civil War and both World Wars. Today, it's a vibrant place blending history with modern life, with



landmarks, museums and festivals that celebrate its unique Berkshire heritage.

My first call today was to the **Greyfriar**. This opened in 2014, taking over a spot that used to be the Tudor Arms, then the Malthouse, just down the road from the station. Its name comes from the nearby Greyfriars Church, built by Franciscan monks way back in the 1200s. That church has had quite a history – it's been a town hall, a prison, and was finally restored as a church in the 1800s. The pub may be new, but the name links it to one of Reading's oldest stories.

From the outside, it has a clean, classic look that fits in with the old-meets-new feel of the area. Inside, it's cosy and full of character.

I received a warm welcome in a pub with an impressive range of cask and keg beers, with more in the fridge. I opt for Addition +4 from local Phantom Brewing Co, a New England IPA hopped with

# Micropubs and more in Reading

Blogger **Scott Spencer** of Micropub Adventures (left) visits a town just 25 minutes from Oxford



*The Greyfriar.*

Citra, Nelson, Mosaic and Strata.

Next up was the **Blue Collar**, a laid-back open-air food and drink venue built from a repurposed yard, offering a rotating selection of street food

vendors and a well-stocked bar with craft beer, cider, wine and cocktails. Spread over two levels with a rooftop terrace, beer garden and indoor seating, the space accommodates seasonal changes with covered and heated areas. The venue regularly features



*From top, the Blue Collar, the Nag's Head and the Castle Tap.*

independent food traders and hosts DJs, events and themed food festivals.

The bar at Blue Collar is perfect for a cold drink with friends, with 10 taps, mostly local craft beers and ciders from Double-Barrelled Brewery, plus a decent line-up of cocktails, wine and coffee. It's the kind of place where you can try something new or stick with a classic pint.

I went with a beer from local Double-Barrelled Brewery – Springs is a refreshing, tasty and easy drinking New Zealand Pale Ale. A good mix of hops gives some great peach, nectarine, apricot and mango flavours.

A short walk brought me to the **Nag's Head** in Russell Street. This has been part of Reading's pub scene since at least the mid-19th century. Tucked away just outside the town centre, it has long served the local community, from workers in the nearby biscuit factories to generations of residents in the surrounding streets. The pub has kept its independent spirit over the years, even as many others have changed hands or closed down.

Inside, it's friendly and full of character. There's a big open space where people chat, play board games or darts, and just enjoy the relaxed atmosphere. Out the back, there's a cosy little beer garden with covered seating that's open year-round.

Another warm welcome here and a choice of cask and keg options from local brewers and further afield. I opted for a beer from a new brewery to me, Hello My Name's Pi-

geon from Alton-based Ten Tun Brew House, a juicy New England IPA.

Next up was the **Castle Tap** in Castle Street, part of the town's history since the 1800s. Originally called the Castle Hotel, it changed names and roles, eventually becoming the Castle Tap in 2014. While it's had a few make-overs, it's kept its charm and connection to the community. Known for its laid-back vibe and regular events, it's a spot where locals still gather, as they have for over a century.

It stands out with its classic brick exterior, large windows, and traditional pub frontage that fits right into Reading's town centre. Step inside and you'll find a warm, relaxed space with wooden floors, mismatched furniture, and quirky décor that gives it a lived-in, welcoming feel. There's a spacious main room with cosy corners, a small stage for live music, and a tucked-away beer garden out back.

There was a great selection of cask and keg beers to choose from. OG from Love-Beer Brewery was a light and refreshing extra pale ale, very sessionable and easy drinking.

Next was **Phantom Brewing Co.**, which started in 2013 when two homebrewers decided to turn their love for beer into something real, focusing on bold, tasty beers with good ingredients and old-school brewing skills. People around town loved their fresh and flavourful ales, and over time, they mixed their line-up with everything from hoppy IPAs to rich stouts. The brewery grew and got noticed all over the UK.

The taproom has a modern, industrial vibe with white brick walls and plenty of nat-



*Three microbreweries: From top, Phantom Brewing Co, Double-Barrelled Brewery and Siren RG1.*

ural light when the front doors are open. The space feels open and airy, with wooden tables and comfy seating. There's a cool mix of rustic and contemporary touches. You can peek into the brewing area, giving the taproom a behind-the-scenes feel. Overall, it's a welcoming, stylish spot that's as much about the atmosphere as the beer.

There's a great line-up of 12 keg lines to choose from. I went with Phantom's Splash Zone, a delicious New England IPA, super hazy and super tasty hopped with Citra, Hallertau Blanc and Citra.

Next was a short bus ride out to **Double-Barrelled Brewery**. This started in 2015



when Mike and Lucy Clayton-Jones turned their honeymoon beer adventures into a real-life brewing dream. What began in their garage soon grew into a fully-fledged brewery, officially opening its doors in Reading in 2018. The name comes from their double-barrelled surname and their joint effort to build the business. Known for bold, modern beers, especially



*The walls and ceilings of the Alehouse are absolutely covered in old pump clips from thousands of beers they've served.*

hoppy ones, they've built a strong reputation for quality and creativity.

The Double-Barrelled tap-room is a laid-back spot in the heart of the brewery. It has an industrial feel with long tables and fairy lights. It has a great line-up of 12 keg beers, and even more choice in the fridges with an array of cans. I went with one of its sour beers, Peach Bellini, inspired by the classic cocktail and full of peach flavours. Super tart, sour and tasty.

Then on to **Siren RG1**. Siren Craft Brew started in 2013 in Finchampstead, Hampshire, founded by Darron Anley to bring more creativity and flavour to the UK craft beer scene. What began as a small team of three has grown into a thriving independent brewery with over 60 staff. They've earned a strong reputation both locally and internationally for their innovative approach and commitment to quality.

While the brewery is near Reading in Finchampstead,

Siren RG1 opened in the town in May 2024. Inside, the vibe is modern and cosy with lots of natural light from big windows. The space has clean lines, natural wood and comfy seating to relax on your own or with friends.

On the bar were two cask ales and 26 keg lines with many different styles. Slammer was my choice, a sour beer inspired by the Hawaiian POG Juice, giving a great variety of tropical fruit.

Last up was the **Ale-house**, which has a long and fascinating history. It has been a pub for centuries, originally known as the London Tavern before becoming the Hobgoblin in the 1990s. Locals still sometimes call it that. In the early 2000s, it became the Alehouse and started focusing on real ales and ciders. Over the years, it has built a strong reputation among beer lovers, celebrating its 10,000th unique beer in 2022. It's also picked up several CAMRA awards, in-

cluding local Pub of the Year in 2023.

Inside, it's all about the beer and the atmosphere. There's no music or TVs blaring, just people chatting over pints. The walls and ceilings are absolutely covered in old pump clips from thousands of beers they've served, which gives it a cool, lived-in feel. It's cosy, a bit quirky, and full of little corners to settle into. It's a no-phone zone too, which encourages proper conversation.

The line-up includes eight cask ales alongside a keg selection and a wide variety of European and other bottles. A new brewery for me to try today was Sherfield Village Brewery, whose IPA25 is a strong IPA full of flavour and easy drinking.



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# Heritage matters!

**Bryan Brown,** president of the Friends of Abingdon Abbey Buildings Trust, sets the scene for the Abingdon Beer Festival from 1-3 May

**HERITAGE IS A** key factor in beer, brewing, pubs and the Abingdon Beer Festival. The festival is held in one of the most important heritage buildings in the country, the remains of the great medieval Abbey of Abingdon, founded in the 7th century. The existing buildings are over 800 years old, now nationally scheduled and Grade One listed.

Brewing and malting have taken place at Abingdon Abbey from that time, initiated by the monks for their own consumption. Up to a gallon (eight pints) a day were consumed – the amount we hope will be drunk by visitors to our beer festival! Shortly after King Henry VIII's Dissolution, the remaining buildings were developed as the Abbey Brewery, including a major malt house. Beer continued to be brewed on the site for some 300 years until it was merged with Morlands in the late 19th century.

Beer of course has a rich heritage, with evidence of brewing from 400 BC. By medieval times, beer had become a staple, often safer than water. Ale made with malt, yeast and herbs was distinct from "beer", introduced from the Netherlands in the 14th century which used



hops, first cultivated here in Kent. Today, many established breweries have a heritage brew, often made from recipes many hundreds of years old.

We all love heritage pubs, buildings and time-honoured interiors of great character which feel so appropriate for drinking. Generally, we don't like our pubs over-modernised. The favoured formula for many is heritage beer drunk in a heritage location.

The Abingdon Beer Festival is a tradition revived and organised with the support of Loose Cannon Brewery, itself a revival of the Abingdon brewing tradition. The festival is held in the remaining Abbey Buildings. Although the buildings are wonderfully atmospheric and include the only theatre in town, the Unicorn, there is much to do to make them more accessible and functional.

Like all heritage buildings they need to pay for themselves, so all profits from this beer festival go towards maintaining them. Our predecessor trustees unbelievably

saved the buildings from demolition, and our Trust has owned and maintained them for over 80 years. They have developed into a very valuable town centre social and community hub, providing a great venue for weddings and events which include drama and music in the Unicorn Theatre.

We have been working for over 10 years on a plan to restore the buildings and we are now within sight of raising the budget of £5.4 million. Following a fantastic grant of £4 million from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, and grants from local councils and heritage trusts, we are just £100,000 short of our goal.

So, do come and join us in these atmospheric buildings for an unusual experience while enjoying over 30 ales and beers. What could be better than sampling some wonderful beverages and helping to save our precious heritage?



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# ABINGDON BEER FESTIVAL

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SATURDAY 2<sup>ND</sup> MAY | 5PM - 11PM

SUNDAY 3<sup>RD</sup> MAY | 1PM - 4PM

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HERITAGE  
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Tales from the Nose & Frown

# The Nose goes to war!

**I NEVER KNEW** how Joe got his ideas. Considering his consumption of Clinch's prize-winning Mild from the Eagle Brewery in Witney, never

mind the "specials" that came out when he was really getting going at the Nose & Frown, it's a marvel that his brain worked at all. But it did,



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**Graham Shelton and Grenville Reeves**  
record the gory details

and with a level of intelligence and creativity England's finest brains would struggle to match.

I suppose that living in the countryside and having access to an old muzzle-loading hammer gun and plenty of black powder, the opportunity was always there for him to explore what could be done with them beyond supplementing the meat ration with a few rabbits.

So there we were one evening in the Nose & Frown, and he looks at me with that wily expression on his face when you know he'd had an idea. "What do you reckon this is, lad?" he says, handing me a heavy metal object a bit like an iron cricket ball. I says, "I 'opes you ain't plannin' to use this on Sunday in the match against the Fox." He ignored my remark and went straight on with my education. "This 'ere," he said, "is a cannon ball. There's lots of 'em around 'ere, buried deep in the soil. They go right back to the English Civil War, when the Roundheads were knocking seven bells out of the Royalists. That wuz afore my time, o' course [*Ed: about 300 years!*], but they fought 'ard over the river crossin' at Newbridge and left a tidy lot o' these be'ind."

I was still trying to process where he was going with all this, and looking puzzled, because I knew he hadn't brought it up just to show off his knowledge of history.

"I'll tell 'ee what we'm agoing to do," he said with a big wink, when he saw my blank expression. "We'm goin' to fire it! Come down to Pin-



*Troopers of the English Civil War surprised by a mounted soldier as they drink outside a tavern. (Watercolour painting by William Barns Wollen, 1900, National Army Museum Online Collection)*

nocks on Saturday and I'll show 'ee." After that, he'd say no more, and soon a game of shove-ha'penny, and quite a few more pints, took all our attention, what there was left of it.

Come Saturday, there he is in the Pinnocks front meadow with a stubby little piece of pipe, like a short, thick drainpipe welded up at one end, which his friend Amos the blacksmith had fashioned. "Stand be'ind me," he commanded, and proceeded to fill a paper bag with black powder. Must have been about half a pound, I think. He pushed it right down to the welded-up breech where there was a little touch hole. Next, he rammed into

the muzzle what looked like one of his old shirts as tight as it would go for a wad. Then came the cannon ball. He shoved one of his wife's knitting needles into the touch hole until it punctured the bag of powder and then filled up the hole with more black powder. Finally, he got the whole thing balanced at about 45 degrees. " 'Ave a care!" he shouts, and immediately touches a lighted taper to the powder in the touch hole.

How it was the entire thing didn't burst on the spot, killing us both with shards of hot metal, I don't know, but after a short pause there was a colossal explosion and an enormous cloud of white smoke. We couldn't see

where the cannon ball went, as it was completely obscured by the smoke cloud, but we went looking and found it over 300 yards away, nestling at the bottom of the cannon-ball-shaped tunnel it had bored in the ground.

"Now," said Joe, "we'm goin' to declare war on Standlake."

And he did too, albeit a re-enactment, encapsulating the very best of the Civil War, but with more booze. Joe insisted on being a Royalist, his wife Jude making him a very convincing Cavalier costume. We had plenty of willing participants in Standlake, and they started constructing weapons of their own. Pretty soon it became clear that we would have to have some sort of rules, if we weren't to have multiple fatalities. So the rule was no cannon balls, only beetroot, and no sharp-edged blades. Despite Joe's protestations, rape and pillage were

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*"Now," said Joe, "we'm goin' to declare war on Standlake." And he did too, albeit a re-enactment, encapsulating the very best of the Civil War, but with more booze.*

*Despite Joe's protestations, rape and pillage were also frowned upon, even though it was for charity.*

also frowned upon, even though it was for charity.

Well, this "war" went on for some years, and every winter was spent in the Nose & Frown plotting against the dreadful Standlakians. Both sides built war engines of increasing sophistication, but at the end of each fight all animosity was forgotten and the ale flowed freely. What could possibly go wrong?

Well, there was one dry August, and the battle was to be on the stubble left over from the harvest at Pinnocks. There weren't so many cars in them days, but what there was were all parked at one end. Platoons of soldiers from both sides marched onto the battleground, and Joe signalled the start of hostilities by

discharging his new eight-foot-long mega-cannon which used old carpet as wadding.

This proved one innovation too far, however, because the black powder explosion in the mega-cannon caught the carpet alight and it started smouldering underneath the Rector's Austin 7. In a flash, the straw caught fire followed by the Rector's car and a deafening explosion as the petrol tank blew up. One at a time, each of the other cars caught and blew, the grand finale being the doctor's prize Alvis.

It was spectacular! But John, the local bobby, was adamant: no more wargames. It's not recorded what the car owners said.



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## Branch Diary

Tuesday 3 March 7pm  
**Oxford CAMRA Branch AGM**

St Aldate's Tavern, 108 St Aldate's, Oxford OX1 1BU

Wednesday 4 to Sunday 15 March  
**Wetherspoon Spring Beer Festival**

The Four Candles and the Swan & Castle, Oxford  
Up to 30 beers, 28 new to Wetherspoon, including five international brewers

Friday 1 to Sunday 3 May  
**Abingdon Beer Festival**  
Abingdon Abbey Buildings, Checker Walk, Abingdon OX14 3JB

Friday 5-11pm, Saturday 5-11pm, Sunday 1-4pm  
Entry £5

Saturday 2 May 11am-5pm  
**Witney Beer Festival**  
(Branch Social from 11am)  
St Mary's Church, Church Green, Witney OX28 4AW

Saturday 23 and Sunday 24 May  
**Perch Beer and Cider Festival**  
The Perch, Binsey, Oxford OX2 0NG

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

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# The Four Candles and The Swan & Castle, Oxford

# BEEER FESTIVAL

Wed 4 – Sun 15 Mar



Up to 30 beers | 28 new to Wetherspoon  
Including 5 international brewers

The list of festival beers varies by pub and is subject to availability at participating free houses. Illustrations for guidance only.  
Offer is subject to local licensing restrictions. J.D. Wetherspoon plc reserves the right to withdraw/change offers (without notice), at any time.  
See website for full details: [jdwetherspoon.com](http://jdwetherspoon.com)

For the facts  
[drinkaware.co.uk](http://drinkaware.co.uk) | [jdwetherspoon.com](http://jdwetherspoon.com)