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Issue 131  
Summer 2026

# the Oxford Drinker

## Sky's the limit

Rose & Crown  
doubles size  
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### INSIDE

- Oxfordshire Pub of the Year
- "Local" beers? Not really
- Cask ale letter from America



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



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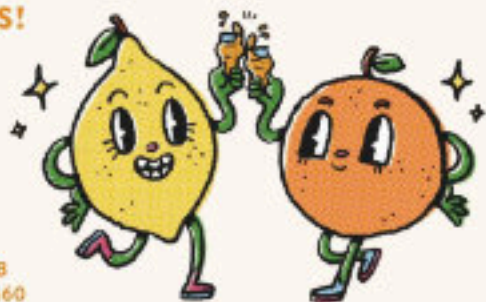
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Cover: The Hall family who run the Rose & Crown in Oxford. From left, Andrew, Adam and Debbie Hall. (Photo by Steve Thompson) Report on page 10.

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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**Advertising rates**  
Full page £180  
Half page £95  
Quarter page £50

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Valuable contributions have been received for this issue from Paul Ainsworth, Kent Bausman, David W. Bretherton, Jess Dixon, Pete Flynn, Patrick MacMahon, Graham Shelton, Paul Silcock and John Winney.

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# Welcome

## ...to a (hopefully) good summer for pubs

**SHORTLY BEFORE WRITING** this I had a dream, about the Rose & Crown in Oxford. Looking forward to seeing its new courtyard roof, I dreamed that the pub had become much bigger, run by different people and with different beers. Most bizarrely, a spa and sauna had been set up in the cellar with lithe figures emerging wreathed in steam.

What complete rubbish! (Like most of my ramblings, I daresay.) But it may show a fear of change to our cherished places. Of course the pub itself remains unchanged, the only difference being that the outside space is now cosy and welcoming year-round, warm in winter and with a retractable roof for the summer.

The Rose & Crown is not the only small pub that can increase business because of outside space. The Bear and White Rabbit both added significant outside space before Covid hit, and since then others have followed even if it's only a few chairs and tables on the pavement.

Every square metre of a pub needs to be used to give them a better chance of turning a profit or at least breaking even, but with industry figures indicating that two pubs a day are closing for good, it's tougher than ever out there with ever increasing costs.

The summer months, especially for those with outside space, offer respite with the World Cup providing a timely boost. Pubs can open until 1am when England play on 20, 23 and 27 June, and many people will be following Scotland too. But if you find the whole thing tedious, there



are pubs that make a virtue of not showing the matches.

There are also many beer and cider festivals to enjoy this summer, with Dan Smaje (above), landlord of the White Hart in Headington, having another success at his festival in May with 20 real ales and 12 ciders.

Pubs and breweries may be battling to survive, but small craft breweries are finding their niche with Scarlet River and BMAN both opening new taprooms, and another launch in the pipeline.

We have another great lineup of guest writers in this edition, including American professor of sociology Kent Bausman who returns to Oxford in July with more students to study English pub culture. We may take our real ale and pub culture for granted, but when you read his article you realise how precious it is, and how much it needs to be protected.

So get out to pubs as much as you can this summer, whatever the weather. I'm dreaming not of the non-existent "spa" at the Rose & Crown, but of relaxed afternoons and evenings in pubs where everyone, including landlords and staff, is content.

As Kent writes: "Cask ales taught me something about lingering. The pubs of Oxford taught me something about belonging."

**DAVE RICHARDSON**



## Chair's Chatter

# A break in the storms

### Good

### news first I'VE HAD THE

real pleasure in the last month to visit our two new local brewery taps. Not only are Alex Berryman (BMAN) and Jason Bolger (Scarlet River) brilliant brewers with great tap-rooms but they are a delight to chat to.

Many of us have been fans of BMAN for a long time. They now have a tap room at their new site near Donnington Bridge. Open Friday evenings and Saturdays, it's only a short distance from either Iffley Road or Iffley. It makes a great place to drop in when out for a stroll, but you may find you decide to stay longer than planned. Just 10 minutes from the Magdalen Arms, Prince of Wales Iffley or Isis Farmhouse, you could say Iffley now has its own great ale trail.

I don't get to Witney as often as I would like. It's a great destination for beer lovers.





### CAMRA Members – Are you Missing Out?

If you're not receiving emails from your local CAMRA branch, you could be missing updates on upcoming events, trips, and social activities happening near you.

The good news – it's quick and easy to fix.

You may simply need to update your communication preferences to allow emails from your branch.

To update your preferences:

-  Sign in at [camra.org.uk](http://camra.org.uk)
-  Click the circle with your initials (top right) → My Profile
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-  Or call 01727 867 201 for assistance.

Stay connected and make sure you don't miss out on what's happening locally.



We've known Scarlet River was coming for many months. The wait has been worth it, and it gives yet another reason to head over to what some call the wild west of the Oxford CAMRA branch. The new taproom has a bright modern/industrial feel to it, and the beer comes direct from the tanks behind the bar!

Having been a big part of Tap Social Movement, it is no surprise that Jason has launched Scarlet River as another social enterprise. Its goal is to help service veterans transition into civilian life. Great beer and a great cause combine again!

### Too late, too late?

It can be a struggle to keep up with everything that is going on, only to hear too late of something you might like to have gone to. The Oxford CAMRA branch sends its members one or two emails a month, just to let them know what's coming up. It's easy for members to opt in to (or out of) emails from CAMRA. A great antidote to fear of missing out. Instructions in the image above.

"Good news" and "Don't forget the emails" – not my normal style of column. Fear not, next edition I'll be back to shouting at the storms.

**JOHN WINNEY**

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# Pub and Festival News

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

## Oxfordshire Pub of the Year chosen

The **Butcher's Arms** in Balscote, a village off the A422 Banbury-to-Stratford road, has won the Oxfordshire Pub of the Year award in a four-way competition. It is a village local owned by Hook Norton brewery, and two or three of the brewery's beers – typically Hooky, Old Hooky and sometimes a seasonal ale – are served direct from casks behind the bar rather than from hand pumps. It has been a Hook Norton pub since 1878 and is North Oxfordshire CAMRA's top pub.

The Butcher's previously won the title in 2023 when it was also selected as one of the top 16 pubs in the UK to compete for CAMRA's national Pub of the Year award. It now goes forward into a regional competition with the top pubs in Gloucestershire, Herefordshire and Worcestershire.

Runner-up, but only after a tie-break, was South Oxfordshire's top pub, the **Cross Keys** in Wallingford, an Oak Taverns house which retains its original layout and has an



extensive garden. Up to four real ales are available – including "Howse Bitter", brewed by local independent Amwell Springs, Dave and Emma Howse being landlord and landlady.

The **King's Arms** in Wantage, the Vale of White Horse branch winner, came third. As at all Oak Taverns pubs, real ale and cider take centre stage with up to six rotating real ales that can come from anywhere. The large garden is a rarity in the town centre.

Oxford CAMRA's choice, micro-pub the **Crafty Pint** in Witney, came fourth. It has built a strong community around its great choice of ales including two hand pumps (serving mainly local ales) and six independent keg taps.

**Note: The Butcher's Arms will be closed for renovation from Monday 22 to Tuesday 30 June.**

## Abingdon Distillery reaches out to brewers

Abingdon Distillery is setting up cask swaps with local independent brewers, and has concluded its first "white label" agreement to sell branded spirits to the new Scarlet River bar in Witney.

In a further example of co-operation between local artisan drinks producers, it will invite local brewers to showcase their beers when it sets up a distillery bar. It started by distilling gin but will be selling its own whisky from September, and also has a range of rum in development.

# GK offloads Old Speckled Hen

In a surprise move given its wide reach and popularity, the Old Speckled Hen brands that originated at Morland in Abingdon have been sold by Greene King to Damm UK, the British arm of Barcelona-based independent family brewer S.A. Damm of Estrella Damm fame.

Old Speckled Hen and its spin-off brands Old Golden Hen, Old Crafty Hen, Old Master Hen and Low Alcohol Old Speckled Hen will continue to be brewed by GK at Bury St Edmunds until June next year. Then they will move to Eagle brewery in Bedford, where Damm operates the former Charles Wells brewery.

Nick Mackenzie, CEO of Greene King, said: "We are proud to have built Old



Speckled Hen into one of the nation's favourite ales over the last 25 years and are delighted to have secured a partner in Estrella Damm who will continue to brew the ales in the UK."

This begs the question of why GK sold Old Speckled Hen, having acquired it in 1999 from Morland which it

closed down the following year. It is still widely available in GK's Oxfordshire pubs and is one of three GK brands in the top ten cask ales by sales volume in 2025, alongside Abbot and IPA.

But at the same time it announced a new strategy to concentrate on "on trade" sales via pubs rather than via retail or export. It will no longer sell bottled, canned or packaged beers from next June, although Damm will continue to sell Old Speckled Hen this way.

GK's new £40 million brewery in Bury St Edmunds is due to open at the same time.

**See also "When is a local beer *not* a local beer?" on page 14.**

## National award for Dolphin

The Dolphin in Wallingford, South Oxfordshire, was the overall winner of Greene King Pub Partners' Pub of the Year Award for tenanted, leased and franchised pubs. Run by the same family for over 23 years, it also won recognition from King Charles III, with an invitation to a Buckingham Palace Garden Party in recognition of community service to Wallingford.

Known as the "Dolly", the pub's real ales on a recent visit were own-branded Dolly Bitter, Old Speckled Hen, Old Golden Hen and guest Leeds Pale.

## Twisted Tree Beer and Cider Festival

Twisted Tree – one of the county's newest breweries, set up in 2024 – is staging a weekend celebration including food, live music and family-friendly fun at its farm base near Bicester (post-code OX27 7SH) on 19-20 June.

Over 40 beers and ciders will be available from producers across the country, and alongside the beer and cider it will have a Gin & Fizz Bar. It will be open Friday 19 June and Saturday 20 June from noon to 11pm, with tickets costing £15 for all weekend including three half pints.

## Charlbury Beer Festival

This year's festival is set for Saturday 27 June, when it will celebrate serving 100,000 pints since it started in 1998. It will offer around 60 real ales, over 20 craft beers, a range of ciders and perries, wine, gin, and Pimm's; and a selection of food, live music and other entertainment, plus the World Aunt Sally Singles Championships. The event, at the cricket club, raised £340,000 for charities last year.

## Pub and Festival News

# Scarlet River opens at last

The long-delayed opening of Witney's new brewpub finally happened in mid-April, on a prime site next to Marks & Spencer in the Marriotts Walk shopping centre. Set up by former Tap Social head brewer Jason Bolger and his partner Niki Sibson, Scarlet River Brewing Company had hoped to open before Christmas 2025, but only signed the 10-year lease in February.

Jason was keen to experiment with cask ales while at Tap Social, although it is primarily a craft keg and can operation. He started by supplying cask ale to the Oxford Beer Festival but later brewed some of Tap's top sellers in cask for distribution to a few

pubs, but not its own tap-rooms.

His interest in "cask style" brews continues with Old Curmudgeon Bitter [Ed: not named after a CAMRA person, surely?], a tasty 3.8% beer. The first brews available, set to become regulars, are otherwise craft keg with IPAs, lagers, a stout, a wheat beer and a Belgian pale. Purbeck Cider is available from Dorset, and a Scarlet River branded gin and spiced rum are supplied by Abingdon Distillery. Wines and soft drinks are also available.

All brewing takes place on the premises in the 500-litre kit behind the bar, being pumped into tanks to mature.



*Jason Bolger and Niki Sibson with their hand pump.*

This is the first time commercial brewing has taken place in Witney since Wychwood brewery closed in 2023.

"We have had some very positive feedback, and have been full at times with 60-65 people seated inside and outside," said Jason. "We are seeing all kinds of customers from youngsters to seasoned ale drinkers."

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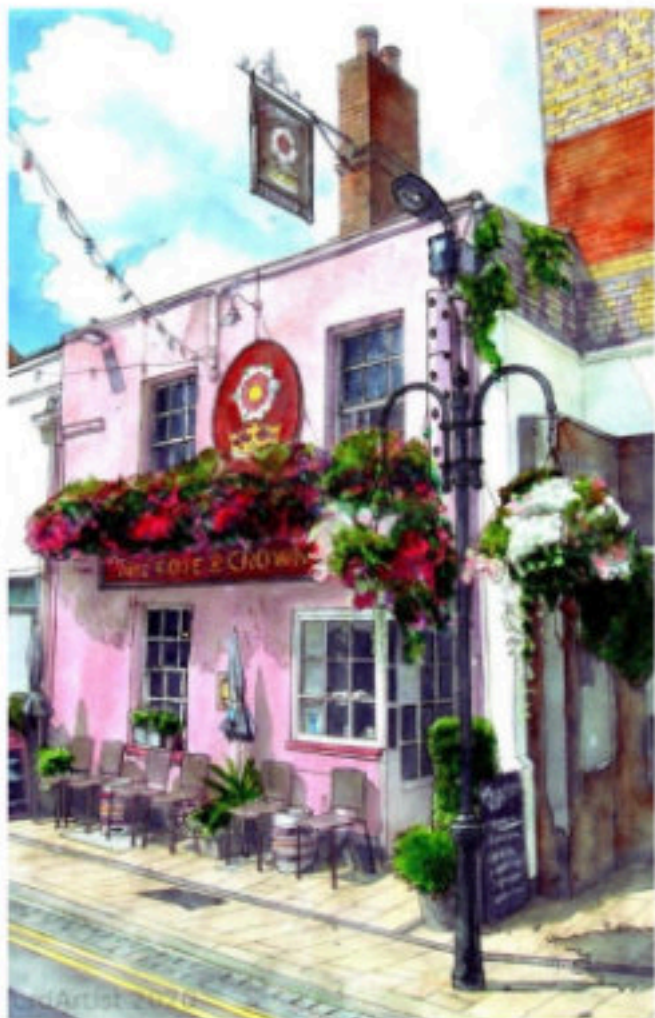
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## Pub and Festival News

### New roof at Rose & Crown

The Rose & Crown in North Oxford has installed a new retractable roof over its courtyard, which has had a general spruce-up to make it a more welcoming space year-round. The pub building itself, to quote an old Banks's advertisement, remains "unspoilt by progress".

Adam Hall, who runs the pub with his parents Andrew

and Debbie, said: "At this time of year the new roof makes no difference, but in the colder months the courtyard is now much warmer and brighter. The roof is more aesthetically pleasing than we expected, and there's only a very small increase in seating capacity. Inside, the pub hasn't changed at all and never will."

### QUICK ONES

Independence (4.6%), a premium pale ale by Bristol Beer Factory, has been crowned CAMRA's Champion Beer of Britain 2026 at the Cambridge Beer Festival. The Silver award went to Wildcat (5.1%), a premium bitter by Cairngorm, and the Bronze award to Alfie's Revenge (6.5%), a strong ale by Driftwood Spars.

The **Black Prince** in Woodstock (below) is expected to re-open in 2027, having closed suddenly in June 2023. New owners of the independent pub promise a traditional atmosphere but with "world class" chefs, and a new conservatory.



The **Black Horse** in Gozards Ford, near Abingdon, has been bought outright by Tom Rainey, who runs the Greene King-owned Punter and Porterhouse in West Oxford. The Black Horse has had a series of tenants in recent years and long periods of closure.

Oxfordshire independent pub group Oak Taverns was voted Best Community Pub Operator in the 2026 Publican Awards run by the *Morning Advertiser* industry portal. It operates 12 pubs in Oxfordshire plus others in Buckinghamshire and Berkshire.

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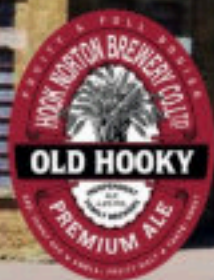
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## Brewery News

# It's summertime, and the drinking is easy

Good news around Oxfordshire,  
reports **Patrick MacMahon** (below)



**AS WE DELVE** into the summer, there's a jubilation around Oxfordshire's breweries, with delicious new drops, whisperings of new watering holes throwing open their doors and some even taking the national beer scene by storm... Your quarterly round up of all things beer is here.

## Tap Social Movement gears up for a huge summer

In a particularly ambitious move, Tap is collaborating with 10 guest breweries to create 10 unique collaboration beers. All of them debuted on draught at the Change is Brewing with Friends festival in Botley on 6 June before being released

nationally in can via Brewser. Another fantastic example of the collaborative nature of the beer industry.

Tap Social is preparing to open its fifth venue, Day Release, at Signal Yard in Milton Park near Didcot, this summer. The new venue promises an all-day cafe, bakery offerings from Proof Social Bakehouse, a full bar, community events, and even an on-site brew school. Get yourself down!

## Hook Norton Brewery celebrates milestones old and new

Hook Norton is never short of things to celebrate, and this summer is no different with an exciting roster of beers and awards to match. Most notably, the brewery has released Days Like These, a limited-edition 3.5% ABV cask ale brewed to celebrate managing director James Clarke's 35 years with the brewery. In a fitting tribute, the beer's ABV mirrors James' years of service, and he has brewed it alongside his son Ed Clarke, now lead brewer, highlighting the continuation of one of British brewing's best-known family traditions.

Meanwhile, celebrations are already underway for Old



Hook, which turns 50 next year. The iconic strong ale has kicked off its anniversary period in style, securing a silver medal at the 2026 International Brewing & Cider Awards, otherwise known as the "Oscars of Brewing".

Hooky Gold celebrates its own milestone this year, reaching 20 years since its first brew in 2006. Hook Norton is marking the occasion throughout June with "golden moments" across its pub estate, competitions, special events and tap takeovers.

Collaborative brewing also continues to flourish. Bristol's Arbor Ales returned in April for another collaborative brew, while Oakham Ales is scheduled to return in July.

No Hook Norton update would be complete without mention of the brewery's famous shire horses, which have



**SIBA chief executive Andy Slee (far right) with Gold Award winners in the 2026 SIBA Midlands & West Indie Beer Awards.**

begun another busy season of public appearances alongside their traditional Thursday deliveries to the Pear Tree in Hook Norton. Upcoming appearances include the Shropshire Show, Bloxham Steam Rally, Fairport Convention at Cropredy and Bunkfest.

### **Loose Cannon scoops top prize at SIBA awards**

Oxfordshire's independent brewing scene was strongly represented at the 2026 SIBA Midlands & West Indie Beer Awards, with Loose Cannon Brewery taking one of the competition's biggest honours. The brewery was named Overall Cask Champion for its 8 Double IPA Cool Name to Follow, praised for its citrus and resinous pine character. The beer also secured Gold in both the keg and bottle and can categories, underlining the brewery's continued reputation for bold, modern beer styles.

Loose Cannon also earned bronze for Abingdon Bridge in the Cask British Bitter category, and silver for its low alcohol Lemonicious. The results highlighted the strength

and diversity of brewing talent across Oxfordshire and the wider Midlands & West region.

### **Chadlington Brewery builds momentum**

West Oxfordshire's Chadlington Brewery continues enjoying a strong run into summer.

Both Chad ESB and Red are performing well, while sales of its Pilsner have exploded as warmer weather boosts demand for lighter styles. The brewery's contract with Kati Patang to brew its signature Saffron Lager continues apace, with a prestigious listing in a London Michelin-starred restaurant demonstrating the appetite for high quality beer in the restaurant trade.

Commercially, Chadlington has secured a permanent line at Oxford's White Rabbit pub, where its Helles Lager is now pouring full time. Summer venues, including the Medley bar and Isis Farmhouse, are also important seasonal outlets for the brewery.

Its summer specials programme is also taking shape. April saw the release of Hazy

Logic, a 5.5% Belgian Witbier described as "softly cloudy and refreshingly perplexing", not so logical perhaps so thoughts on this one welcome. May brought the annual Pride NEIPA, brewed in collaboration with Witney Pride, with 30p from every can sold supporting LGBTQ+ education and celebration across West Oxfordshire.

### **Local beer scene continues evolving**

Apart from openings by Scarlet River in Witney and BMAN at Donnington Bridge in Oxford, there are plans to revive Oxbrew with a new taproom at Symm House in Osney Mead, West Oxford.

### **Challenges remain for independent brewers**

Despite the optimism and activity, the wider industry continues to face significant pressure. Independent operators across Oxfordshire continue to warn of rising costs, with increased business rates, higher national insurance contributions, energy costs and the ongoing burden of 20% VAT all weighing heavily on pubs and breweries alike. Several operators have described conditions as beyond breaking point, highlighting the difficult balance between maintaining quality, investing in growth and keeping pints affordable for drinkers.

We all know that more needs to be done by the government to help local independent brewers and hospitality venues, which represent nothing short of pillars of the communities they operate in. The very least we can do is support them with feet on the ground and pints in our hands, and with some sunny months ahead, why not do just that!

# When is a local beer not a local beer?

As the brewery producing Doom Bar prepares to close, **Dave Richardson** looks at beers that may appear to be local but are not

**CAMRA HAS WARNED** against continuing to describe Doom Bar as a Cornish beer beyond 2026, following a decision by multinational brewing group Molson Coors to close Sharp's brewery in Rock, Cornwall by the end of this year.

Doom Bar may have lost its title as the biggest selling real ale to Timothy Taylor's Landlord, but it is still widely available locally including in Wetherspoon pubs. Some previously brewed local beers carry on long after the breweries closed, which leads some drinkers to believe they are still locally produced.

The marketing power of Molson Coors – owner of brands including Carling, Madri, Staropramen and Aspall cider – ensured that Doom Bar became the best-selling real ale in the UK for many years, only losing that title last year. With Doom Bar sales in deep decline, Molson Coors has now decided to cut

its losses and close Sharp's by the end of 2026, when all production will probably move to Burton-on-Trent. Closure will cause around 50 redundancies at the site and 150 elsewhere.

Since acquiring Sharp's in 2011, Molson Coors has invested more than £20 million to expand capacity in Cornwall, although not all Doom Bar is now produced there.

Molson Coors says it is considering other options such as producing Doom Bar and other Sharp's brands in partnership with a third party. Other cask ales include Atlantic and premium ruby beer Sea Fury.

But the closure is widely seen as further proof that big international brewers are moving away from real ale, following the closure of several previously independent brewers by Marston's, whose brewing operations are now 100% owned by Carlsberg, and Heineken.

CAMRA chief executive Tom Stainer said: "This is just another example of a global brewing giant destroying the nation's cask brewing heritage. Sharp's has been brewing cask for more than 30 years and this will just be dismantled overnight. Trying to

produce iconic Cornish beers outside of the Duchy would be a disgrace.

"We are losing far too many cask brands and the breweries who craft them at the hands of global brewers more interested in profit than our brewing heritage, and making sure drinkers can enjoy authentic products. Not only does it impact our local pubs and consumer choice, but it damages Cornish and UK brewing heritage, culture and of course jobs.

"This once again puts a spotlight on the stranglehold global brewing giants have over our pubs. The government must use its Access to Market Review to ensure that local, independent brewers and cider makers can get their produce on offer at the bar, so the wide range of beer styles that the UK's pubs are known for can be protected and expanded."

Former editor of the *Good Beer Guide*, Roger Protz, wrote: "The global brewers have set out their priorities – to promote their lager brands at the expense of cask beer.

"Molson Coors bought the business in 2011, turning Doom Bar into a national brand. It tinkered with the recipe, much to the distress of



*Sharp's Doom Bar: Brewed in Cornwall – NOT.*

its followers. I was told by a former brewer at Rock that the number of hops was reduced and instead of conditioning for a week, the beer was sent out to pubs as soon as it left the fermenters. Drinkers were being served immature 'green beer', as the taste proved.

"It will now need a new home, presumably the main breweries in Burton that Molson Coors took on when Bass left brewing in 2000. The bottled version of Doom Bar has been brewed in Burton for several years, making a mockery of its claim to be a 'Cornish beer'.

"The history, heritage and popularity of cask is lost on Carlsberg, Heineken and Molson Coors. Their aim is a simple one: to make the same liquid in every market where they operate and to give it a

long shelf life, aided by filtration, pasteurisation and a heavy dose of carbon dioxide."

CAMRA has already called out Carlsberg, and Marston's before it, for describing Wainwright as a "Lake District original" when it is no longer brewed in Cumbria. Likewise, Young's beers are still described as London Original and London Special on pump clips when they haven't been brewed in the capital for 20 years.

Many people living around Abingdon probably think that Morland beers are still local, although Greene King acquired and then closed the brewery in 2000 and moved all production to Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk. Some of the buildings were converted into housing while former offices became the Brewery Tap pub in 1993, and many former

Morland pubs can still be identified by the "Artist" tiled logo on their walls.

Old Speckled Hen, first brewed in 1979 to commemorate 50 years of car production in Abingdon by MG, has become a national brand on draught and in bottles. In 2027, it will be on the move again as Greene King has sold it to Damm UK which will brew it in Bedford, including Old Golden Hen and other similar brands. Morland Old Speckled Hen was named after an old, experimental car that was used around the factory, but the owners of MG, like Greene King 20 years later, had little room for sentiment. The factory in Abingdon was closed in 1980. Morland Original is also available mainly as a real ale.

Brakspear is another very old brewery whose name lives on, not only in beer but as a pub group, although the brewery closed in 2002. Production was moved to Wychwood brewery in Witney, including the original "double drop" equipment, so at least it remained in Oxfordshire. But Wychwood closed in 2023, and production of Oxford Gold and Brakspear Gravity (formerly Brakspear Bitter) was moved to Wolverhampton and then Burton, where Wychwood's Hobgoblin is also now brewed in various styles as well as the original Ruby.

Does the Brakspear pump clip claim "double dropping beer since 1779" still hold true?

If you care where your beer is brewed and want to support genuine local businesses, there are plenty of genuine local brands even though they may be hard to find in pubs. Beware the claims of the big brewers.



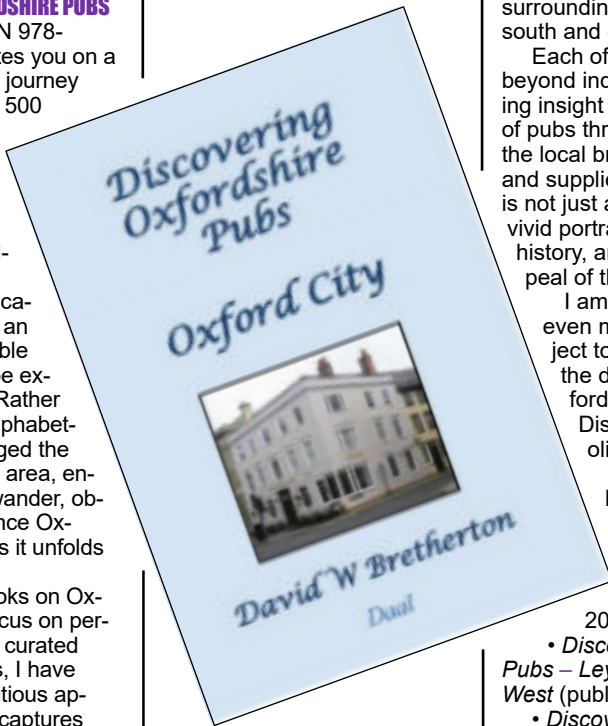
# 500+ pubs amid the dreaming spires

**David W. Bretherton** describes his new book *Discovering Oxfordshire Pubs – Oxford City*

## DISCOVERING OXFORDSHIRE PUBS

– *Oxford City* (ISBN 978-095393313-6) invites you on a rich and rewarding journey through more than 500 pubs – past and present – stretching from Oxford's historic centre out into the surrounding villages. Fully illustrated in colour, this isn't a dense academic volume, but an enjoyable, accessible read designed to be explored as you go. Rather than listing pubs alphabetically, I have arranged the book by street and area, encouraging you to wander, observe and experience Oxford's pub scene as it unfolds around you.

While many books on Oxfordshire's pubs focus on personal favourites or curated "best of" selections, I have taken a more ambitious approach. This work captures every pub I could trace across the Oxford City area – whether long closed, still thriving, or newly opened as part of the micro-pub movement. I have even recorded those establishments that left only the faintest mark on history. Each entry offers a snapshot of the pub's story, often accompanied by a photograph, along with carefully researched details of past landlords where available.



My passion for writing about pubs began over 25 years ago in my home town of Thame, where I and my friend Allan Hickman set out to answer the questions heard in pubs everywhere: "How old is this place? Is it the oldest around?" Our work led to the well-loved *Thame Inns Discovered*, which we successfully revised and expanded in

2020 – and which continues to sell strongly today.

Following my retirement, I dedicated even more time to my pub research, revisiting my youth in the Lancashire villages west of Chorley, resulting in a handy A5 guide featuring full-colour images wherever possible. I went on to document 100 pubs in Chorley itself, followed by another volume covering the surrounding villages to the south and east of the town.

Each of my books goes beyond individual pubs, offering insight into the evolution of pubs through the ages, and the local brewers who shaped and supplied them. The result is not just a catalogue, but a vivid portrait of community, history, and the enduring appeal of the British pub.

I am now working on an even more ambitious project to detail every pub in the district of South Oxfordshire, before the District Council is abolished.

My other pub books:

- *Thame Inns Discovered II* (with Allan Hickman) (published 2020)

- *Discovering Lancashire Pubs – Leyland Hundred West* (published 2023)

- *Discovering Lancashire Pubs – Chorley* (published 2024)

- *Discovering Lancashire Pubs – Leyland Hundred East* (published 2025)



**The books are published by Daal Publishing and are available from good bookshops and from David W. Bretherton via e-Bay ([www.ebay.co.uk/usr/daveb33-71](http://www.ebay.co.uk/usr/daveb33-71)).**

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## Beer Heroes

# A brewery reborn

**A VISIT TO** Renegade Brewery quickly dispels any notion that this is a business merely recovering from past difficulties. Set against the rolling Berkshire countryside in the village of Yattendon, the brewery today feels confident, forward-looking and – most importantly – busy. From the moment I arrived, it was clear this is a brewery that has not only found its feet again, but is striding ahead with purpose.

I was welcomed into the expansive taproom by marketing manager Clare Candy, a long-standing member of the team, before being introduced to head brewer Hugo Fullerton. The taproom itself is an impressive, open-plan space, complemented by an attractive garden offering fine views across the surrounding countryside. A glass partition provides a clear view into the brewing area, and a sign on one of the doors – “positive vibes only” – neatly captures the tone of the place: professional, optimistic and quietly confident.

There is also a strong visual identity at play. Renegade’s cyberpunk, post-apocalyptic branding, complete with bold character artwork, reinforces the sense that this is a brewery keen to stand apart. It’s a striking contrast to more traditional imagery and signals clearly that this is a new chapter.

Yet the story here cannot be told without acknowledging the past. The site was formerly home to West Berkshire Brewery, a name well known to

**Pete Flynn** visits Renegade in Yattendon, the former West Berkshire Brewery



**Renegade head brewer Hugo Fullerton in the brewery taproom. (Photo by Pete Flynn)**

many CAMRA members. Core beers such as Good Old Boy, Mr Chubb’s, Maggs Mild (now rebranded as Misfit Mild) and Maharaja built a loyal following and remain part of the brewery’s output today – an important nod to continuity amid change.

Hugo, who has been with the brewery for almost nine years, spoke candidly about the challenges faced during the final period of West Berkshire Brewery. “Renegade, formerly West Berkshire Brewery, went into administration coinciding with a massive capital investment and some

poor leadership and financial decisions,” he explained. It was, he suggested, a difficult time for a workforce that remained largely committed. “Ninety per cent of the workforce are loyal and hard-working people who had been let down by a few.”

Like many independent brewers, the business was also navigating a rapidly changing market. The Covid period added further complexity. “We managed to get by with a skeleton crew,” Hugo recalled, “and always having spare capacity we were able to brew and package other brewers’



**Left: Pete Flynn at the taproom. (Photo by Clare Candy) Right: Fermenting vessel with funky branding.**

beers. Like many independent brewers we were navigating a rapidly evolving market, with West Berkshire facing mounting pressures.”

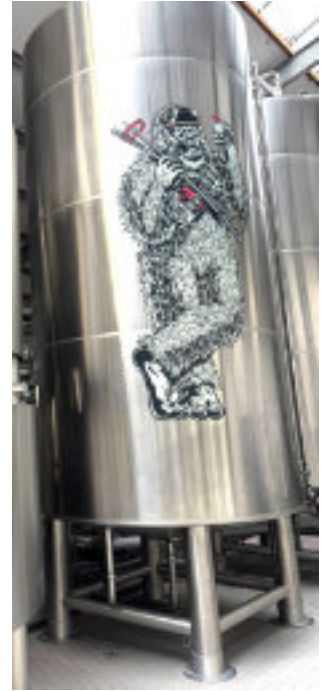
The turning point came with the intervention of the Iliffe family of Yattendon Estates. Their acquisition of the brewery, confirmed on Christmas Eve 2021, provided both relief and renewed optimism. “The announcement was a welcome Christmas present to the employees,” Hugo said.

Crucially, this was not simply a financial rescue. The Iliffe family’s long-standing connection to the local area and their willingness to take a long-term view created the conditions for a genuine reset. Stability, investment, and –

perhaps most significantly – stronger leadership and communication have all played a part in the transformation.

For Hugo, the changes were tangible. “I was very happy with some new kit that enabled me to brew some innovative small batch products via this pilot brew kit,” he noted. That investment in equipment has allowed the brewery to experiment and expand its range, while maintaining consistency in its core beers.

The decision to rebrand as Renegade Brewery marked a clear break from the past. The name itself suggests independence, a willingness to challenge convention, and a fresh start. It is a modern identity that reflects both the brewery’s ambitions and its broader appeal. Importantly, however, the rebrand has not come at the expense of tradition.



Cask ale remains central to the operation – a point that will reassure many readers.

“Some of the big brewers are stepping back from cask ale production,” Hugo observed, “but cask ale is alive and well, with moderate growth forecast within our business plans for the foreseeable future.” That commitment, backed by investment and careful cellar-manship, underlines the brewery’s confidence in the format.

What stands out most in speaking with Hugo is the emphasis on team culture and good practice. “I see ourselves as a family,” he said, “with a great knowledge within the brewery team who I can leave to get on managing new projects.” That trust and cohesion appear to have been key ingredients in the brewery’s recovery. Combined with clearer communication from management – regular updates and a

shared sense of direction – the result is a workforce aligned behind a common goal.

That sense of alignment extends to customers as well. “We are very supportive and appreciate our local customers who supported us continually throughout the difficult times,” Hugo explained. “Our journey has given us a broader reach, although we shall continue to brew the beers we love whilst striving to be innovative.” It is a balancing act – respecting heritage while embracing change – that Renegade seems to be managing with assurance.

The brewery’s ambitions are far from modest. “We want to try and push our volumes up each year, keeping our capacity to full use,” Hugo said. Sustainability is also firmly on the agenda. Solar panels now

provide the site’s electricity, while waste water is recycled into methane for future energy production – practical measures that reflect a responsible, forward-thinking approach.

Innovation continues through the brewing programme, particularly with seasonal and small-batch beers. Hugo spoke enthusiastically about recent successes and hinted at what’s to come, including a pumpkin-spiced stout planned for the autumn – evidence that creativity is very much alive in the brewhouse.

Perhaps most reassuring of all, particularly from a CAMRA perspective, is Hugo’s confidence in the brewery’s backing. “We are fortunate to be backed by such well-known people with good business expertise and valuable connections, with cask ale always going to be there,” he said. It is a

statement that neatly encapsulates the blend of tradition and modernity that defines Renegade today.

My visit left a strong impression. This is a brewery that has learned from its past, embraced change, and put in place the kind of good practices – clear leadership, investment in people and equipment, and a commitment to quality – that make a tangible difference. The result is not just survival, but a genuine success story.

My thanks go to Clare Candy for her warm welcome and for showing me around, and to Hugo for his openness and insight. I look forward to returning – hopefully in the company of fellow CAMRA members, who I am sure will find much to enjoy in both the beer and the setting.



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## Yarnton Yarns

# Pint if we win, pint if we lose

**Jess Dixon** (right) of the Red Lion Yarnton on the importance of sports in pubs

**IT'S NEW OXFORD** *Drinker* time already! I just wanted to say a massive thank you to anyone who has popped into the pub since the last issue and said hi, as I appreciate that Yarnton probably isn't on all of your standard travel routes.

Another brief thank you to all of the drinkers who came to our beer festival on Saturday 2 May. Everyone was in great spirits and really enjoyed the day, even though it decided to rain from 5pm onwards (we can't have it all, I suppose). We had different cask ales and two "funky" craft keg beers on offer, and it makes me so happy to see people trying new beers.

And now on to the actual topic of this edition: sports and a bit of an observation around drinking culture among players and supporters. As unless sport really isn't your thing, it is difficult to ignore the fact that the Rugby Six Nations tournaments have finished but the football World Cup and Wimbledon tennis are about to begin.

### Players

Fish and chips, lime and soda, salt and vinegar... all great combinations, but do they



come as close as sports and a social beverage?

Sports and alcohol have seemingly always been intertwined, with ancient civilisations like the Greeks and Romans consuming wine and beer (depending on your class) during social events including sports.

Nowadays, if you look at high level athletes, you'd probably be disappointed at the supposed lack of a social

beverage on game day.

Sports teams spend hundreds of thousands a year on nutritionists and chefs so players are at their best for games, so when you think of elite athletes on game day, think protein shakes and electrolytes, not a crisp pint. But there are definitely outliers, with some players such as golfer John Daly known to play better after a drink.

I suppose that alcohol is not part of an elite athlete's diet on game day should not be the biggest surprise. After all, alcohol reduces healing times, cognitive function and increases the risk of injuries (not ideal when you're meant to be at the top of your game). But judging by the celebrations after any team wins a significant event or tournament, there is definitely room for a drink or 10 once the hard part is over.

On the other hand, we have the classic grassroots level of sport we're all more familiar with, where most play for fun rather than big titles. Based on my own experience, it's not a huge surprise that studies on athlete drinking behaviour suggest 40-80% of sports people regularly engage in binge drinking during the season. So, we humble players of local sports clearly enjoy a more relaxed ap-



*The quarter finals of the 2010 World Cup in Johannesburg, South Africa. (Photo martha\_chapa95, Wikimedia Commons)*

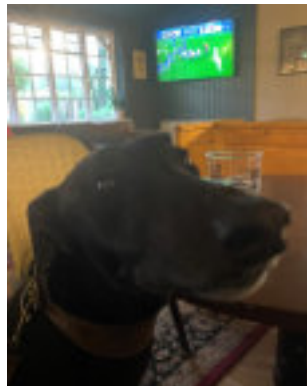
proach to make up for the lack of beverages at higher levels.

Although it's easy to get sucked into the doom and gloom of negative health impacts of alcohol when over-consumed, most of us would also agree a few drinks with your team helps to strengthen bonds and adds a sense of unity and cohesion. Going out with your team mates relieves stress, forms memories and is one reason lots of us continue to play sport. Also nowadays there are so many great "low and no" alcohol options that if you want to regulate your intake, you can.

### Supporters

And of course, where would sports and sporting venues be without the supporters? The people who show up week in week out, win or lose?

Sociologists suggest we choose to congregate and watch sports together from a sense of community and escapism, but where does the desire to drink a beer during a game come from?



*Sport on TV leaves Bear the dog of the Red Lion Yarnton agog with indifference.*

You won't be surprised that the answer is good old-fashioned advertising. After all, three quarters of European football teams are sponsored by at least one alcohol brand. Teams such as Manchester United have their own wine and whisky brand, and Guinness's marketing impressions during the Six Nations reached 122 billion across various platforms.

Brand loyalty and positive associations are strengthened through these advertisements, making you feel part of it all, which makes sense when big companies tell you that pints of their product will "enhance your viewing experience". And if you're there and everyone around you is doing it then you won't bat an eyelid to pay £8 for Guinness and £5-£7 for a pint of lager. You simply want to be included and have a good time.

Alternatively, you may feel like skipping the plastic cup in a stadium and choosing to watch a game in your local pub or bar as there's nothing better than a pub full of people coming together, when the atmosphere can be electric.

So, no matter what you watch or what you drink, the main takeaway is that humans love to create traditions for themselves and find a sense of community through shared interests, and that's important in this day and age.



## Gardener's World

# Future of pubs is in your hands

Only 99.9% gloom, says **Paul Silcock** (below), of the Gardener's Arms in Plantation Road, Oxford

**I'M GOING TO** start off by just warning you this article isn't going to have a ton of good cheer in it. So, before we go any further I'm going to offer you something optimistic, something that should hopefully bring you cheer. An antidote to the black cloud I'm about to drag over your particular skies.

Ready?

Go and subscribe to the podcast "The Good Stuff" with Matt and Phil. Go on, do it now. It'll really cheer up your day. It's almost like they created it to counterbalance this article. You can find it wherever you get your podcasts or at [www.thegoodstuff-podcast.co.uk](http://www.thegoodstuff-podcast.co.uk). Have it ready to clear the air when you've finished reading this article. You'll thank me.

Right, those of you brave enough to carry on? Read on, hardy drinker, read on.

Last week as I write this, various news outlets reported on the closure rate of pubs this year alone. It was a shocking 161. One hundred and sixty-one. That's practically two a day. It made me go back and look at an article I wrote just a couple of issues ago for this very magazine about the future of pubs ("How's business?", Winter 2025-2026). One in which I took a vaguely optimistic tone.



And I'm still not ready to throw in the towel on the British pub, but I think it bears looking at what has happened between then and now to change things.

In my defence, I did write that last article before the government scaled back business rate relief for small businesses, changed the rateable values of pubs, got shouted at by the public, were banned from many pubs, stuck by their guns for less than 24 hours, did enough U-turns to feel dizzy and finally announced a 15% cut. In real-world terms though that's still another rise that unfortunately will have to be, first, passed on to the customer, or, second, absorbed by the business by dropping staff. Flash back to those 161 pubs that

closed this year -- that is estimated to be 2,500 jobs lost.

I'm not trying to be political with that, if it wasn't Labour the Conservatives would have done something different but similar. If I was trying to be political, I'd ask every landlord to bar Reform MPs and councillors. In fact, here's some good news, not one Reformer got elected to the Oxford City Council the other week. So that's pleasing.

What is even more worrying for the future of pubs, though, is the war in Iran. Didn't see that one coming when I wrote the previous article. While it may seem that Iran is a long way away (and it is, I checked. Geography is not my strong suit, as anyone who's been to our pub quiz knows, so I did a quick Google to be sure). The impact of the military action started by the tangerine toupee tosser Trump will have a seriously detrimental effect on everyone's finances. Because oil has just become scarce.

Oil isn't beer. But oil helps the delivery of beer. And the delivery of the bits that make up beer.

It's not just oil, it's everything caught up in that stretch of water that three months ago 99% of you had never given a thought to. Certainly Trump hadn't, given his outrage and surprise at the Iranians closing the Strait of Hormuz. Today as I write this, a snack food giant in Japan has had to change all its packaging to black and white due to the scarcity of coloured ink from the closure of the Strait.

I'm sure you've all noticed how prices have rocketed at the petrol stations. That's going to hit businesses that deliver products hard. Those



A quiet night at the Gardener's Arms.

trucks need fuel, and that fuel is figured into the price of the items those trucks are delivering, so as it costs more to deliver said items...

Look, you know this, I'll stop patronising you with GCSE economics. Sadly, though, this fact is a double-edged shitty stick for retail. Items for retail go up in price for the retailer to buy, therefore the items go up in price for the customer, so the customer has less money to go around.

We need more of your money to stay in business, and you have less money to help us achieve it. That is the simple fact.

So where does that leave us?

Well, not in a good place. There are no two ways about it. With a government unwilling to do anything more than pay lip service to supporting local business, and a power-mad, would-be dictator at the helm of the most powerful na-

tion in the world. I mean, things don't really look good all round, not just for pubs.

So go and listen to that podcast I recommended at the start of this, enjoy it.

And then, try and stop drinking at home. It's a huge ask. It's truly pie in the sky thinking really. But save that beer money. Save it for beer in the pub. Yes, it won't go as far. It'll go nowhere near as far if I'm honest, but it does come with some benefits.

First, sociability. Which is crucial in these times. The effect of isolation on mental health is so well documented I won't go into it here other than to say, wow, it's bad.

Second, a little less alcohol might not be such a bad thing for physical health. Mind you, I *would* say that – I'm a personal trainer on the side, because every landlord needs a second job now.

Look, maybe this government or the next will raise the duty on off-licence alcohol

and drop it for on-licence alcohol. Maybe they'll slash business rates, or ride cash-Pub defecating unicorns through the doorways of every pub, club and cafe in the country. Maybe, and even less realistically than that last idea about unicorns, Trump will have a moment of sanity and sign a meaningful peace treaty with Iran.

If none of that happens, and it probably won't, then the future of the pub lies in your hands. Your desire for these communal places, and your custom at them, will be all that keeps them open. Everyone is in a pinch. Only despotic oil barons will make profits, and they'll spend them on Macallan 25-year-old they'll keep to impress their equally rich friends.

Still, if vinyl can still be around 30 years after the CD was supposed to wipe it out, maybe the pub can too.



**Paul Ainsworth**, CAMRA's national planning and policy advisor, explains a new pub operating model that is being adopted around Oxfordshire

**RECENT YEARS HAVE** seen a significant growth in the number of pubs being run under some kind of franchising arrangement. Various names are used – retail agreements, manchises (management franchises) or just franchises – but the models are all very similar.

Franchises were pioneered by Marston's but the bigger companies have now all adopted this model, each with its own brand name. Stonegate has **Craft Union**, Star Pubs and Bars has **Just Add Talent**, and Greene King has two: **Hive** and **Nest**. Increasingly, smaller pub-owning breweries are also using this approach. Unlike in conventional managed pubs, the licensee is supposedly self-employed. In most cases, their remuneration comes from a percentage (usually 18-20%) of the pub's net turnover. From this the licensee pays themselves and all staff plus incidentals like employer's liability insurance and council tax.

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

# Pub franchises explained



*The Fleece & Flagon in Witney, a Craft Union pub. (Photo by Dave Richardson)*

they are charged for it and these can be mysteriously large.

The advantages for licensees are low ongoing costs (Hive requires £5,000, Nest £3,000), they have a roof over their head and a prospect of making money. To do the last, though, they'd probably need to be taking more than £10,000 a week. Urban, sports-oriented pubs seem to do best under this sort of regime but there are many disgruntled ex-licensees who found the arrangement a quick way to lose their money.

Greene King's Hive scheme offers a somewhat different arrangement in that the franchisee is guaranteed a fee income of £20,000, topped up (if earned) with performance-related bonuses. Staff costs still need to be paid, though. Hive pubs have a food offer with live

sports and events. Nest pubs are wet-led, predominantly in busy high streets, with a pizza and pie food offer, live sports and events.

The current number of these agreements is unknown, but they have certainly been growing rapidly with Greene King already having over 100. Many tenants have been effectively thrown out of their pubs so the owner can convert the pub to what, for the companies, are more lucrative arrangements.

You can see why the companies prefer this model. It frees them from the responsibility of employing staff while retaining full control over what the pub does. Additionally, most of the key Pubs Code requirements don't apply to franchised pubs.

Back in 2021, a cloud seemed to appear on the franchise horizon when the



The White Horse in Abingdon. (Photo by Andrew Ffrench, courtesy of Oxford Mail/Oxford Times)

Supreme Court ruled Uber drivers were not self-employed. The parallels with retail agreement licensees are striking and HM Revenue and Customs is known to have taken an interest. Given the amount of control the companies exert, can they really

argue that these licensees are self-employed? However, nothing has yet come of this and franchising continues to grow.

You may have read recently that Wetherspoon has entered the franchising arena. This, though, is a quite differ-

ent model. It is looking to partner with holiday parks, universities and hotels. As franchisees, the partner has access not just to the brand name but also the company's supply chain, and its training and marketing resources. The financial arrangements aren't clear but presumably the franchisee pays a set fee plus there may be some kind of profit-sharing arrangement.

*The editor adds:* Several local Greene King pubs are adopting the franchise model, including the **White Horse** in Abingdon which re-opened in May under new management as a Hive pub. Also for let as franchised pubs are the **Prince of Wales** in Cowley, the **Bowyer Arms** in Radley, the **Royal Oak** in Didcot and the **College Oak** on the Peachcroft estate in Abingdon.



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# Cheers to another round

American sociologist  
**Kent Bausman**  
discovers the appeal  
of cask ale in Oxford

**THE FIRST TIME** I ever had any meaningful amount of beer, I was 15 years old and given a Coors Light. I was a sophomore beginning the American high school experience. I was invited out by older students who could legally buy and were willing to introduce my younger self who was eager to belong.

The taste was barely a taste at all. There was a thin, metallic, watery way about it. Looking back, you could say it was like someone waved grain over a vat of cold water and called the results “beer”. It wasn’t unpleasant, but that wasn’t the point.

Beer in my adolescence functioned more like a social adhesive. You drank what was handed to you, not because of flavour but because of the social permission it granted and the inhibition it released. Looking back, that’s probably the most American introduction to beer possible.

I grew up on that kind of beer in central Oklahoma. Lower-income background, no travel experience, and no access to the kind of imports that might have introduced me to the wider world of brewing traditions. Even when I was old enough to buy my own drinks, I stayed largely within



*The Royal Blenheim, Oxford.*

the American mainstream as craft brewing varieties in the States had yet to become a thing.

Instead, back then I saw beer as a utility, not an experience. It accompanied a football game (the Americanised version of the term) or a bar night out. It rarely stood on its own as something you noticed, let alone respected.

By the time I finally made it overseas, I was still carrying that narrow sense of what beer could be. So, when I arrived in England for the first

time 12 years ago, I wasn’t primed for any sort of brewing epiphany. I was just a traveller with the drinking habits I’d always known.

The extent of that naivety was first whittled away when I was introduced to the cider tradition here in England, again something that wasn’t common to my youthful drinking repertoire. My emerging fandom for ciders was eventually contained when I wandered into the Grapes, in George Street, and ordered a rhubarb cider.

I assumed “rhubarb” was just a catchy name for the brand. When the cider poured red, I realised I had misunderstood the concept entirely. It was a small moment of realisation, as we sociologists call it, of my gaps in cultural capital, but the humorous kind. It reminds you that travel should be an enlightening experience. I drank it all, partly out of curiosity, partly out of pride, and mostly because I wanted to leave a decent impression of an American. It didn’t spoil me, but it cracked something open.

My awakening to the cask brewing tradition in England began with an article in *the Oxford Drinker’s Winter 2024-2025* edition (Issue 125, available online), reflecting on my takeaways about the value of the pub tradition and why it deserves defending. As an American scholar, I had led a course of students to examine the importance of



*Kent Bausman at the White Hart, Wolvercote.*

pubs in the maintenance of community just that summer prior. I returned again this past summer to introduce another body of American students to the kind of traditional spaces I only wish were in such predominance across the United States.

Through that submission, I became more aware of the role of CAMRA and its initial founding tied to the preservation of the cask brewing tradition. Upon my arrival this past summer, *Oxford Drinker* editor Dave Richardson and I met at the **Royal Blenheim** to develop a planning strategy to introduce the students and myself to the fullest representation of the Oxford pub experience during our four-week stay. Dave brilliantly educated me on the background of the cask tradition and the challenges faced by the changing brewing industry.

The Royal Blenheim, if you know it, doesn't force its charm. It wears its character effortlessly, thanks largely to

its regulars and the genuinely hospitable manager Steven Lyne, who gives the place its pulse. I slipped up to the bar to see what was available. The staff warned me that the chocolate-and-peanut-butter cask ale I was eyeing was "a bit heavy" and offered a small taste.

I learned this is common Oxford courtesy: before you commit, you get a sip. It's an unhurried gesture, and once you experience it, you realise how out of place it would feel in most American bars, where speed and volume rule the day. It's not unheard of in the States, just rare, and usually limited to more upscale spots.

The beer itself was extraordinary, I believe produced by Titanic Brewery. The chocolate came through up front, with peanut butter on the finish. It wasn't artificial or dessert-like. It had that lived-in cask quality that Dave described, gentle, layered. It was a beer that insisted you slow down. It was recognition. Not because of that single flavour profile, but because a cask ale, I would learn, tends

to deliver its promises fully rather than in soft hints. The heavier aspects demand sipping, not guzzling. The taste is the point, not merely a route to a mental state.

When served at room temperature a cask ale isn't flashy, it's foundational. Maryville psychology student Rogan Traver captured it perfectly: "When the cask ale regulars arrived, the pub shifted. The easy greetings and growing conversations made it clear this is a space to catch locals in their routine of devotion to good beer." And it makes sense in Oxford, because Oxford, at least in its pubs, creates the space for a beer like this to breathe.

As I spent more time guiding students through Oxford's pub culture, they unintentionally developed an informal "pub typology". Some places drew them in immediately, especially those with unmistakable social energy or beers that fit their budgets. For them, the pricing at Wether- spoon's **Four Candles** in George Street was a welcome relief, saving money on ales and food.

Maryville occupational therapy student Liv Stransky put it bluntly: "As a college student, I love deals and cheaper prices, and this alone will bring me into this pub again, but it doesn't have the same social atmosphere or hominess as other pubs we visited."

Like Liv, I wasn't as taken with the more generic interiors. However, the fact that it maintains a full array of cask pumps front and centre gives me hope that the pub experience isn't being entirely homogenised by larger corporate chains. I began to realise that the presence of cask ales

isn't just drinks; it's part of the pub's social infrastructure, and its survival in a corporate-managed pub is an anomaly that reflects the long-standing positive efforts of CAMRA.

After my first week, every time I walked into a pub, the first thing I did was scan the bar counter to make sure the traditional hand pulls were there. And they were almost always present, from corporatised Wetherspoon pubs to Community-Owned pubs operating close to the financial margins, most keeping four to six pulls. A few publicans, like the welcoming Rob Yeatman at the **White Hart** in Wolvercote, noted that on hotter days last summer the colder taps moved faster, but that overall, casks never really stop pouring on account of warming temperatures, which, in my opinion, says a lot.

Despite the drift of younger drinkers toward colder, fizzier styles, the gravitational pull of cask brewing still holds. It keeps distinguishing itself, pint after pint. The beer is alive, unpressurised, closer to food than to a beverage engineered for efficiency. The cellar temperature makes sense when you're drinking it in a space designed for conversation rather than refrigeration. A proper cask ale pint sits comfortably on the table the way a pot of tea sits on a kitchen counter, or, as Maryville finance student Josh Fields observed while visiting the White House in Bladon: "Despite financial obstacles, cask ales still sit at the centre of pub culture, a tradition pubs seem thankfully obliged to keep pouring."

Seeing these places through the eyes of my students deepened my own understanding of the continual draw of the British pub, and



*Kent Bausman and students at the White Hart, Headington.*

eventually my insight to the place of cask ales in such institutions. First, my students kept pointing out that nearly every pub we visited from the centre of Oxford to the reaches of southern England operated with a level of accommodation and good humour that felt consistent even when short-staffed. That's not something you can fake. It's cultural muscle memory.

For example, the **White Hart** in Headington sits far from typical Oxford tourist patterns; its appeal isn't spectacle but atmosphere. Maryville cybersecurity student Sean Latta witnessed: "With cosy rooms, a lush beer garden and welcoming staff, the White Hart feels more like the neighbourhood lounge, that rare third space I wish we had more of in United States." That impression was further deepened as landlord Dan Smaje engaged us bigheartedly, sharing the pub's rather risqué history and its place in the broader culture of British drinking spaces.

This is something that matters more than outsiders or

even industry experts tend to realise. The staff culture is remarkably consistent across the nearly 30 pubs we visited. Even in places dealing with heavy foot traffic, the tone stayed steady. My students and I found workers almost uniformly patient, personable, and willing to walk us through the beer line-up, the pump clips, or even the brewing process.

I've read concerns about growing queues in British pubs, and while we occasionally saw that in London, patrons still maintained a patient, cordial rhythm with the staff. That kind of thoughtful, unhurried exchange is what sharpened my understanding of the role cask ale holds in the pub experience. It's the cornerstone, anchoring the room and giving the pub its true identity. This is especially true in Community-Owned pubs, where the steady presence of cask ales isn't just a menu choice but part of the place's identity. In these spaces, you're not merely a customer, you're a temporary participant in a long-standing social ar-



*The group at the Red Lion, Northmoor, with Oxford CAMRA's Dave Richardson (left) and Tony Goulding.*

rangement. The pub feels authored by the people who use it, operating at the pace of a village rather than a city quarter.

Our Sunday roast at the **Red Lion** in Northmoor was a moment several students admitted they “finally got” why pubs matter. A slow meal, plates that felt like someone’s home cooking, the kind of conversation you only have when no one is rushing you to turn a table. I even found myself gathering whatever materials I could about buying a share in these vital community domiciles.

The American bar, by comparison, feels more purposely engineered for a rote outcome. Beer is something you “grab” rather than something you experience. Bright screens, loud music, fast service. Drinks come ice-cold, carbonation doing the heavy

lifting. Then there’s an odd moral code around it all: drinking is acceptable on Friday or Saturday evenings, but frowned upon outside those windows. The beer matches that cultural mood. Light, chilled, crisp to the point of erasing nuance. It asks nothing of you and offers little in return.

When I came back to the States after this past Oxford trip, American beer tasted noticeably thinner, not because the beer had changed, but because my sense of what beer could be had shifted. Even some of the local craft lagers that approach the body of a cask ale lose something when served near-freezing, as most American bars insist on doing. The cold flattens the flavour. The pace of the environment erases the rest.

I’m not arguing for importing British pub culture whole-

sale. That would never work. The pub belongs to its geography, its history, its architecture, its weather, and especially its people. Maryville physical therapy student Jackson Kammien summarised it nicely: “Watching a parent sit comfortably with a young child showed me how ordinary responsible drinking culture is here. It isn’t hidden from kids, it’s simply part of everyday life.”

But experiencing cask ales in Oxford did something simple and important: it reminded me that drinking doesn’t have to be hurried or incidental. It can match the tempo of a conversation. It can fill the space between people rather than drown it out. It can be a small act of connection to a tradition that predates every one of us.

For someone whose first beer was a watery Coors Light at 15, being welcomed as a visitor, an academic, an American into Oxford’s pub culture has been unexpectedly grounding. Cask ales taught me something about lingering. The pubs of Oxford taught me something about belonging. Together, they reshaped what I thought beer was supposed to be, and I believe it did so for my American students as well. Cheers!



**Kent Bausman PhD, who is professor of sociology at Maryville University in St Louis, wishes to thank Dave Richardson of CAMRA for his tremendous assistance and education on cask ales; Dr Alden Craddock, director of Maryville University Study Abroad Program; and Oxford Study Abroad Programme members Tim Moore and Adam Brown.**

Tales from the Nose &amp; Frown

# Marzipan and jelly

Graham Shelton and Grenville Reeves go from silent treatment to the complete opposite



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**IT WAS OVER** 40 years ago that I first came to the village (43 to be exact) so I'm still a bit of a newcomer. Joe says you have to be here for at least 50 years before you count as a local, and I reckon he's about right.

They certainly didn't always take to you right away in them days, and I very well remember going to the Nose & Frown on my second evening in the village.

As I came in, everyone stopped drinking, stopped talking and just looked at me. It was a bit unnerving, but I ordered my pint of mild from the landlady anyway and sat quietly out of the way.

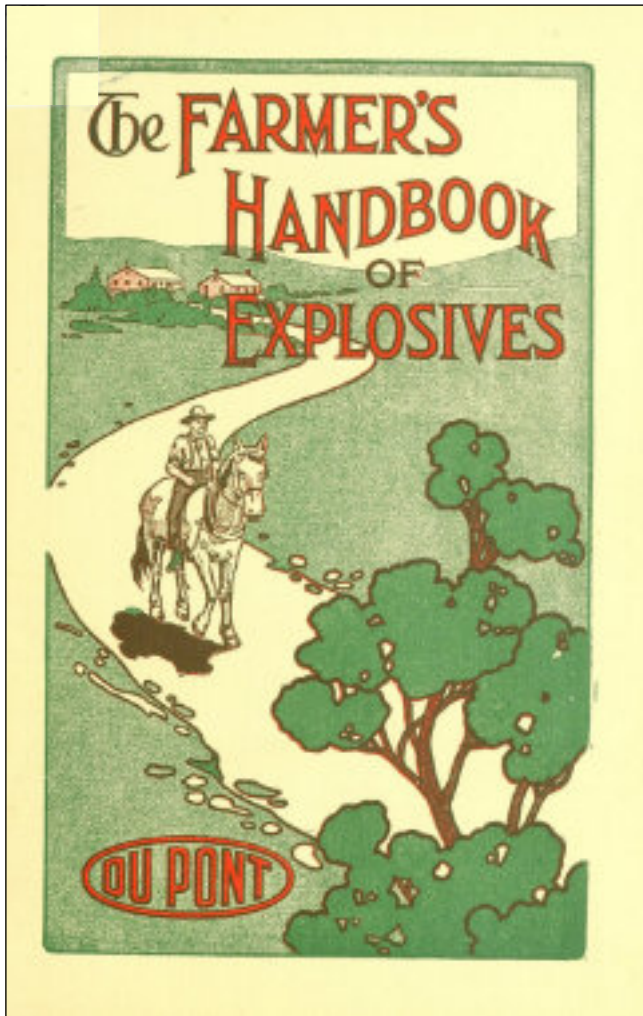
I'd come to the village to start a new job as a farm labourer with old Tom Flowers, and I was determined to find out the lie of the land before my early start the next morning. I was glad I did.

Over in the corner by the fire was a whiskery old chap, who I subsequently found out was called Joe. He soon started the conversation again, picking up where he'd left off. "Well," he says, "it's soft, like marzipan, see, and pretty safe without a detonator."

That made my ears prick up. What sort of isolated rural place was this, were they making bombs, and was this an outpost of the Irish Republican Army?

Joe pulled what looked like a bit of putty out of a small box in his pocket to demonstrate. "You need to poke a hole in the gelignite to insert the fuse," he said, "then crimp on the detonator." Gosh, it really was the IRA!

"I'm going over to Tom Flowers in the morning to blow up them four old elm stumps in the corner of Black's Land\*, you know, by



*The Farmer's Handbook of Explosives, published by E.I. Du Pont de Nemours & Company in 1911. (Photo Wikimedia Commons)*

the Standlake Road. They're in the way of the new winter wheat he's putting in to help the war effort."

Ah, so it wasn't the IRA after all, but whatever it was, he was going to demonstrate it in the morning, and at the very place I was going to work.

I found out later that Joe actually had a proper licence to keep and use gelignite for demolition and related works: the stuff of dreams to my young mind.

He used to drive around the district on an old Triumph Tiger motorbike with the gelignite in his satchel, along with

his thermos flask, and with the detonators in his pocket. Despite this, he never blew himself up, even once – but he always made sure to pray in church every Sunday!

Next morning, I was there early to report to Mr Flowers. "Right lad," he says, "I can't spare anyone today to show you the ropes, but old Joe is coming over to do a job for me, and he'll be glad of a young 'un to help him out." God was surely smiling on me. I'd get to help with the explosions!

Sure enough, along comes Joe on his motorbike looking, if anything, even more disreputable by day than he had done the previous evening in the pub. Off we go to Black's Land, the field with the offending tree stumps. Joe pulls out a huge brace and bit.

"Now we'm agoing to drill some 'oles," says Joe. I had hoped for something a bit more exciting, and quickly discovered, moreover, that what he meant was that I was going to do the drilling into the bases of the tree stumps, while he watched, because it was jolly hard work.

Each stump needed enough holes for enough gelignite to be planted deep enough to blast the stump safely out of the ground. At last, I'd drilled all the holes, and Joe started setting the gelignite with the fuses and detonators. Then he looks at me with a wink and says, "I think we'll put a few more in this last one." So we did.

"When the fuse starts going, we'll need to run like hell and hide behind that bank over there," he says. He lights the fuse and we run. It must have been a good 30 yards, but I was a sprinter at school and made that journey in a personal best time! Joe fol-

lowed on, a bit slower but still with commendable alacrity.

Nothing. All I could hear was my beating heart that clearly thought I should have run a good deal further away. Still nothing.

I was just saying to Joe, "Do you think the fuse has gone out?" and got as far as "gone" when there was an ear-splitting explosion and the first tree stump went up in a hail-storm of earth and turf. Seconds later, the second and third stumps suffered the same fate. Then silence again.

The fourth detonation, when it came, was a showstopper: not so much a bang as a whole-body experience, and a painful one at that. I was a bit dazed and wasn't surprised when the blue sparks sprang up from the hedge. But Joe was. "We need to get out of here," he shouted. "We've just blown up the electric cables to the 'ole village."

Mr Flowers came running and shouting but neither of us could make out much of what he said, as our ears were ringing like church bells. "We'll come back when he's calmed down," said Joe, signalling me to jump on the back of his bike, and I didn't need any persuading.

"Per'aps I overdid that last one a bit," said Joe, when the power of normal conversation had returned to us. "I'd better buy you a pint if we live to the end of the day." We did and he did.

We've been friends ever since, and I never experienced the silent treatment in the Nose & Frown ever again. It was hard won, though.



**\*Editor's note: Almost all fields then, as now, have their own names, often dating back generations, to make it easy to identify where on the farm something is.**

## Branch Diary

### Saturday 6 June 2-11pm Tap Social Movement Craft Beer Festival

Tap Social Brewery, Curtis Industrial Estate, North Hinksey Lane, Oxford OX2 0LX  
12 breweries  
Tickets £13.50 from Eventbrite

### Saturday 27 June noon-9pm Charlbury Charity Beer Festival

(including Branch Social)  
Charlbury Cricket Club, Dyers Hill, Charlbury OX7 3QG  
Entry £20 includes glass and £10 tokens

### Saturday 18 July noon-11pm Hook Norton Festival of Fine Ales

Hook Norton Brewery, Brewery Lane, Hook Norton, Banbury OX15 5NY  
Over 100 beers and ciders, events and entertainment  
Entry £15, all surplus goes to charity

### Friday 4 to Sunday 6 September Headington Beer Festival (including Branch Social Saturday)

Mason's Arms, Quarry School Place, Headington, Oxford OX3 8LH  
40+ casks, keg and cider  
Free entry

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



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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](mailto:events-request@oxford.camra.org.uk)

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# THE GRAPES

— OXFORD —



## A Deal A Day

Monday - Burger Monday

Tuesday - Rib Tuesday

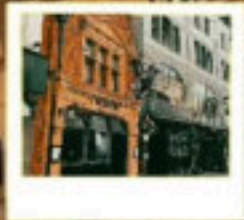
Wednesday - Wine  
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Thursday - Steak  
Thursday

Friday - Tacos Friday

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