

FREE

The Firkin



Campaign
for
Real Ale

Magazine of CAMRA North Bedfordshire • Vol 46 No 1 Spring-Summer 2022

Pub of the Year for 2022



CHAIR'S CORNER

EDITORIAL

**NORTH BEDS PUB AWARDS
2022**

BEERS TO THE FUTURE

PUBS WE HAVE LOST

WHAT IS IPA?

PUB WALKS RESUME

**ASSESSING PUBS IN
FEBRUARY**

The Campaign for Real Ale is a consumer organisation founded in 1971

THE DEVONSHIRE ARMS

*Serving Real Draught
Cider and Fine Wines*

*A local community pub
in the Castle Road area
of Bedford with a warm
welcome and friendly
atmosphere.*



*Lovely courtyard garden
and free Wi-Fi*

*Serving a range of Quality
Cask Ales — Eagle IPA,
Adnams Ghost Ship,
Courage Directors and
range of three guest ales.*

Devonshire Arms Beer Festival 29 April – 2 May

CAMRA North Beds Pub of the Year 2013, 2020 & 2021

CAMRA North Beds Town Pub of the Year 2022

Cider Pub of the Year 2018, Town Pub of the Year 2019

For forthcoming events please view website

www.devonshirearmsbedford.co.uk

32 Dudley Street, Bedford MK40 3TB

Tel: 01234 301170

ORDER
ONLINE AT
OUR WEBSHOP

LEGENDARY BEER FROM HERTFORDSHIRE



VISIT OUR BREWERY SHOP FOR...

- ▶ DRAUGHT & BOTTLED BEER TO TAKEAWAY
- ▶ LIMITED EDITION BREWS
- ▶ EXPERIMENTAL BREWS
- ▶ GIFT VOUCHERS
- ▶ T-SHIRTS & GOODIES
- ▶ GOLDEN TOAD MEMBERSHIP
- ▶ PICKLES & PRESERVES
- ▶ BREWERY TOURS

In 2022 to celebrate our 30th anniversary our Monthly Specials will be raising funds and awareness for Rennie Grove Hospice Care



TRING
BREWERY Co.

Dunsley Farm, London Road, Tring HP23 6HA

☎ 01442 890721 🌐 www.tringbrewery.co.uk



Chair's Corner



Hello, welcome and greetings to you. We received many positive comments about the Firkin returning and I am honoured to be welcoming you to this latest issue.

It was a delight to be able to hold copies of the last issue of the Firkin again, and to visit all the pubs and bars for their delivery. It is always a pleasure to have a chance to pop into all of these different venues, say hello and perhaps have a cheeky drink. Thank you to all of the staff in all of the venues that have been working hard to ensure that

Editorial

The *Firkin* is gradually returning to normal. This year, there will be three issues rather than four. This Spring issue is appearing later than usual. The Autumn issue will be earlier than usual, issued in August, and there will be no Summer issue. So 2023 will finally be CAMRA's first fully normal year back.

In a normal year, our Social Secretary would have the programme of events arranged for at least the next three months, and it would be included in the *Firkin*, but for obvious reasons we are running late this year, and

North Bedfordshire is an excellent place to visit and have a drink.

Speaking of pubs in our area, this edition informs you of our latest awards; a huge congratulation to all of our winners. A special mention and cheer goes to The Fox in Carlton for becoming our Pub of the Year 2022! I am delighted that we have so many great pubs in our area, and it is always a pleasure to have the discussions with our members to decide which pubs get the awards.

You may have seen a 'Call to Arms' as one volunteer described it, from myself via email and social media. We are looking for volunteers to help out with the running of the branch, including writing for this magazine. Please do get in touch if you can help. Thank you to those of you, that have already stepped up to volunteer. This means that our Beer and Cider Festival will be returning for another year.

Thank you for your continued support of your local pub, and let your next glass (whatever your tipples may be) be enjoyable and raised to the future of keeping our pubs alive.

Dan Veal

the Branch Diary is not yet arranged far enough ahead. To find out what CAMRA events are taking place in North Bedfordshire on the near future, go to our website at northbeds.camra.org.uk

This issue goes to press just before our Annual General Meeting. Not all of our committee members will be standing for re-election. I'll still be editing the *Firkin*, though, unless someone challenges me for the position at the AGM!

Fytton Rowland

The Fox at Carlton



North Beds CAMRA Pub of the Year 2022

North Beds CAMRA Country Pub of the Year 2016, 2017, 2020 & 2021

Beer Festival, 2nd – 4th June

18 Real Ales and 6 Ciders. Live music and food
Thursday, Friday and Saturday evening.

01234 720235



[thefoxatcarlton](https://www.facebook.com/thefoxatcarlton)

www.thefoxatcarlton.pub



A quintessential village pub

Real ales - Greene King
IPA & Abbot regular,
plus up to three guest ales

Relaxed charm of a
village local with a
varied menu of quality
home cooked food

*No gimmicks - just a great
British pub!*

Bell, Odell

Horsefair Lane
MK43 7AU

01234 910850



TheBellInOdell

Opening times:

Mon-Thu 11.30-2.30,
5-11; Fri-Sat 11.30-
11.30; Sun 12-10.30



17th century
thatched and
boarded traditional
village pub with
character and
charm

Experience a
relaxing welcoming
environment

Enjoy fine beers and
wines, quality food
and friendly service

Cask Beers:
Greene King IPA,
St Austell
Tribute, Timothy
Taylor Landlord

Welcome to The Three Compasses

Wellingborough Row
Upper Dean
PE28 0NE

(01234) 708346

Open: 4-11 Mon-Fri
12-11 Sat & Sun



thethreecompasses.co.uk

info@thethreecompasses.co.uk

[TheThreeCompassesUpperDean](https://www.facebook.com/TheThreeCompassesUpperDean)

North Beds Pub Awards for 2022

CAMRA's programme of beer festivals throughout the country got only slowly back into its stride, starting in August 2021. North Beds branch's 2021 festival, on its normal early October dates, was one of the earlier ones to return.

But it wasn't just festivals that ground to a halt for 18 months. The annual CAMRA Pub of the Year (PoTY) competitions, its Champion Beer of Britain (CBoB) contest, its local magazines like the *Firkin*, and its *Good Beer Guide* (GBG) are only now, getting back to something like normality. The GBG will be a month late this year owing to the difficulty of getting pub assessment up and running again.

In 2021 we held our local North Beds Pub of the Year contest in the autumn instead of in February, and its results were reported in the Winter 2021-2022 edition of the *Firkin*. Now, in the Spring 2022 issue, we report the 2022 North Beds award winners. Because of the delay in the pub assessment timetable, it was March before we made our choices this year, but even this date is rather close to the 2021 contest!

Anyway, here we go. For North Beds CAMRA's **Pub of the Year 2022**, we have chosen, by a very clear majority at the branch committee meeting, the **Fox at Carlton**.

Its landlady Alison Thompson (nee Brown) is held in very high regard by knowledgeable beer drinkers throughout North Bedfordshire. Although she doesn't drink cask ale herself, she knows how

to keep it very well in the cellar! She has



The Fox

four handpumps; two carry her regulars' favourites, London Pride and Eagle, while the other two serve a changing selection of ales from small breweries, usually not too many miles away from Carlton. Add into the mix that the pub is a classic thatched village pub, albeit extended, that it also serves proper pub food at very reasonable prices, and that it welcomes walking groups for lunch with open arms, you can see why it deserves this award. Alison herself and her staff are all very pleasant, likeable people. You can even get there by public transport from Bedford for lunch on Mondays-Saturdays; the number 25 Grant Palmer bus stops right outside. Alison has had the Country Pub of the Year award from us several times, but for the first time she will be going head to head with the East Beds and South Beds champions for the title of Bedfordshire Pub of the Year. Watch this space!



North Beds Pub Awards for 2022

If our branch PoTY is a town pub, we have a Country Pub of the Year; contrariwise, if we have a country pub as our champion, we nominate a Town Pub of the Year. So this year it was to be a Town PoTY, and here was only one contender – the pub that had been our actual PoTY for 2020 and 2021.



So our **Town Pub of the Year 2022** is the **Devonshire Arms** in Dudley Street, **Bedford**. Another classic, this time a late-Victorian backstreet local in the Wells company's ownership all its life, it is kept by Ronnie and Rebecca Toms, Ronnie keeps the beer and keeps it very well. Six handpumps are in regular use; Tribute, Ghost Ship, Directors, Eagle, Black Sheep, and two or three of the Brewpoint cask ales rotate. Even directly after lockdown, four or five were soon back, and now the pub is back to full steam ahead with all six pumps in regular use. It's that rare thing in modern England, a proper locals' local. With the good fortune to be sited in a heavily built-up Victorian residential area, Ronnie and Rebecca don't suffer at all from their complete absence of car parking. Their customers walk to the pub, as Nature intended!

CAMRA likes every branch to select a Club of the Year, and indeed the North Beds area has some decent clubs. In

some publess villages, a club fills the pub-shaped hole. Unfortunately, during the lockdowns we haven't been able to visit any clubs, and our country pub trips by minibus – reported in this issue – have, since they restarted, concentrated on the candidate pubs for the Good Beer Guide. So we haven't been to any club since 2019. So for this year we have no Club of the Year.

For a different reason, we do not have a Cider Pub of the Year this year. CAMRA centrally has decided to tighten up its definition of 'real cider', and this now excludes two of the most widely available cider brands. So we have hardly any candidates in North Beds for a Cider PoTY. So no North Beds Cider PoTY for 2023 either.



The North Beds **Community Pub of the Year for 2023** is the **Gordon Arms** in **Bedford**. The title reflects the pub's activities in its Ent Shed in the heart of the Castle Road urban village, especially in recent weeks for Ukrainian refugees.

And that's it for now. Our young members will choose their local YMPoTY in a few weeks' time.

Fytton Rowland

Beers to the Future – Our 2022 Festival



After a beer festival organised in a complete rush last October, CAMRA has now started to organise this year's on a more normal timescale. With the title **Beers to the Future**, the 44th CAMRA Bedford Beer and Cider Festival will take place on Wednesday 5th to Saturday 8th October 2022 in the Corn Exchange.

There will be some changes, due to a new Festival Organiser taking over. Here's how she introduces herself:

"Hello everyone. I'd like to introduce myself. I'm Katherine Lilley, and as of Thursday 17th March I have been appointed the new Festival Organiser, and I would like to extend a warm welcome to any new members who would be interested in finding out more about how the festival is organised."

"A little bit about me. I have been a CAMRA member for over thirty years, and I have been active for all of that time. I have run the CAMRA stewarding team at the Bedford festival and at several other

festivals throughout the country. I have been a North Beds branch member for around ten years. I am happy for anyone to contact me if you fancy a chat. If you have been to the festival, you may have also met my husband, who runs the engraving stand and has created the festival logo for several years.

"So please come along and get involved, and help make the 44th Festival a success."

The bars at the 44th Festival will include: the main cask beer bar with a wide range of ales from far and near, many of them not

generally available in the Bedford area; the cider bar with a similarly wide range of real ciders and perries, and also selling a limited range of wines; a mead bar; and a craft beer bar with some British KeyKeg real ales and a small range of draught foreign beers. We will also have meals supplied by an outside caterer available in the Howard Room upstairs as usual.

For the first time, we will be offering a proportion of our entry tickets for advance booking online, at lower entry prices than those payable on the door. Our souvenir glasses will also be available for advance purchase online. The souvenir glasses will be for sale only, not sale or return, and a general selection of older glasses will be available on loan free of charge for those who do not wish to keep their glass. This arrangement will avoid the need for cash refunds at the glasses bar at the end of the evening, which has caused delays to people's leaving in the past.

Fytton Rowland



WHAT?UB



whatpub.com

Featuring over 35,000 real ale pubs

Thousands of pubs
at your fingertips!



Over 96%
of Britain's
real ale pubs
featured

Information
updated by
thousands
of CAMRA
volunteers

Created by
CAMRA who
produce the
UK's best beer
& pub guide

Please support your local pub,
or your community might end up
missing a vital piece.

Find community pubs near you with
WHAT?UB

COMMUNITY
PUBS
CAMPAIGN

Help us power WhatPub



Things are a little different right now.
Help CAMRA keep WhatPub up to
date by using the feedback
form to let us know about
any changes:
www.whatpub.com



Pubs We Have Lost

When the first Covid lockdown arrived in 2020, we heard gloomy predictions for the future of the pub trade. This article is about the ten pubs lost in our area in 2020 and 2021, not all because of the pandemic.

The Cricketers in Goldington Road, **Bedford**, closed at the beginning of 2020, well before lockdown began. A former CAMRA Pub of the Year and a *Good Beer Guide* regular, the building remains for sale, looking much the same as the day it closed. Another **Bedford** town centre bar, the **Wódka Live Bar** in St Pauls Square, closed in Autumn 2021.

The **Star** in High Street, **Clapham**, a friendly community pub supporting local sports teams, and the **Chequers** on the main Ampthill Road in **Houghton Conquest** parish, failed to re-open after the first lockdown in 2020. The **Cranfield Campus Social Club**, also known affectionately as the College Arms and a former CAMRA Club of the Year, also closed with the first lockdown. **The Bedford Golf Club** in **Great Denham** closed down later in 2020, including the Bar 19 clubhouse that provided the only pub in the village.



The **Royal Oak**, a community pub in **Houghton Conquest**, failed to reopen when the 2021 lockdown was lifted. A vigorous local campaign is trying hard to persuade owner Wells & Co to keep the pub open. Good luck!

Other pubs closed in 2021 include the **Half Moon**, a community pub in High Street, **Kempston**, and the **Wheatsheaf** pub-restaurant in **Tempsford**.



The **Railway Steamer** in Clifton Road, **Shefford**, which had become a popular pub under new tenants, also closed last summer.

Pubs regained!

Two closed pubs have been reborn. The **Oakley Arms** in **Harrold** has reopened with new tenants and seems to be doing well. Even more surprising, the **Smiths Arms** in Margetts Road, **Kempston**, which closed in 2019, reopened recently under new management.

We look forward to two other closed pubs reopening in due course. The **Chequers** in **Yelden** closed in 2016 with a promise that it would reopen after new housing was built at the rear, and may reopen earlier. The **Slaters Arms** in **Kempston Box End** closed in 2013 with no promises at all, but after building work is completed is expected to reopen as a new pub-restaurant.

New Pubs!

Two recent arrivals in **Bedford** that haven't previously been reported here are: **Ours** in St Peter's Street, in the micropub premises previously the St Peter's Ale House, but now definitely not a real ale outlet; and **The Burrow at the Blues** in Goldington Road which, unlike the original Bedford Rugby Club bar, has its own entrance from the street and is open to the public full time, not only on match days. More on the Burrow in a future issue.



10 great reasons to join CAMRA

1 CAMPAIGN
for great beer, cider and perry

2 Become a
BEER EXPERT

3 Enjoy CAMRA
BEER FESTIVALS
in front of or behind the bar

4 GET INVOLVED
and make new friends

5 Save
YOUR LOCAL

6 Find the
**BEST PUBS
IN BRITAIN**

Get great
**7 VALUE FOR
MONEY**

8 DISCOVER
pub heritage and the
great outdoors

Enjoy great
9 HEALTH BENEFITS
(really!)

10 HAVE YOUR SAY

What's yours?

Discover your reason
and join the campaign today:

www.camra.org.uk/10reasons



Campaign
for
Real Ale

When is an IPA not an IPA?



Roger Stokes

Answer – most of the time. IPA stands for India Pale Ale. Originally this was beer brewed in England and then transported to India. It

was well-hopped to survive the six-month voyage, and was typically 6% abv or more. The hops are still there, but not the strength.

In the past few years CAMRA has revised its list of beer styles to reflect the range currently available. A beer has to be at least 5.5% abv to be an IPA. Many “IPAs” are under 4.3% abv. Commercial breweries will concentrate on beer which isn’t too strong, so the drinker does not get drunk too quickly, or highly flavoured, so not too many people dislike it. That is sound commercial sense and can be good for a sociable evening with friends.

A brewer can get a wide range of flavours from the four basic ingredients, malt, yeast, water and hops, all of which contribute to the flavour profile. Pleasant as an evening drinking with friends is, that is only part of the pleasure beer can bring us. Another important part is to appreciate the skill a good brewer brings to his art in producing the mix of flavour notes that can be found in a single pint of beer. Why not try something other than your usual pint as a start to exploring more of the wonderful world of beer?

Appreciating those nuances of taste and where they come from needs training, and CAMRA helps members with that. There are tutored online taste training sessions and longer in-person ones. Members who have completed their taster training can join local tasting panels to assess beers from their area, identifying the mix of flavours and writing tasting notes for the Good Beer Guide. This does not use brewery-supplied tasting notes, so the Guide provides a consistent and reliable brief set of descriptions. With longer experience, you could join one of the regional panels judging beers for the annual Champion Beer of Britain award.

Currently there is no tasting panel in Bedfordshire, but we are hoping to form one. The training is enjoyable and helps give a deeper and broader appreciation of beer and of the brewers’ skill. We have a variety of breweries in the county ranging from small one-person operations to large commercial firms. The large firms will tend to concentrate on longer runs of popular beers, but the small brewery has greater scope to produce new, more interesting brews.

Courses tend to be organised in response to demand, and Paul Morehouse, our Regional Tasting Panel Coordinator, coordinates this. I am the County Area Organiser and can also give more details of what is involved. We both have East Anglia CAMRA email addresses. These are [Regional.Tasting.Panel.Coordinator](mailto:Regional.Tasting.Panel.Coordinator@eastanglia.camra.org.uk) and [Bedfordshire.Area.Organiser](mailto:Bedfordshire.Area.Organiser@eastanglia.camra.org.uk) respectively, followed in each case by @eastanglia.camra.org.uk

Roger Stokes

Walking back to Hoppiness

Finally, at the end of November 2021, North Beds CAMRA managed its first pub trip. Minibus trips we had decided to leave until the New Year, so this one was on foot in Bedford Town Centre.

We started, as is traditional, at the **Wellington Arms**, which as usual had lots of handpumps in use. Its lessees are B&T of Shefford, but its brewery has closed and its beers are being brewed under licence by 3 Brewers of St Albans, whose brewery, perversely, is in Hatfield. Here's hoping the Welly continues to be a real ale Mecca. On this cold November Thursday, it offered B&T's Shefford Bitter, D&G, Dragon Slayer, and Golden Fox, together with two beers from Lister's of Arundel in Sussex – Special (4.6% abv) and Gold (5.0% abv) – and one from the Pennine Brewery of Bedale in North Yorkshire, Millie George, a 3.8% blonde beer. Two Weston's ciders were also on handpump – Henry Weston's Cloudy Vintage and Rosie's Pig Rhubarb Cider. Most of us tried Millie George, as it was new to us, and not too strong. Unlike most blonde beers, it was sweetish, not my favourite style of beer, but very pleasant, and of course well kept.



Next stop, the **Flower Pot**. We hadn't been there on a trip for several years, but

we'd heard rumours of a sharp improvement in the beers there and wanted to see if they were true. The pub, said to be Bedford's oldest, has been tastefully refurbished without changing its character. We suspect that the refurb included replacing the beer lines, as the rumour of improvement turned out to be correct. They were offering two Sharp's beers on handpump, the ubiquitous Doom Bar and Atlantic, which is seen increasingly in pubs. We mostly tried the Atlantic and found it very acceptable in quality.

The same could not be said of the **Bear**, our next stop. Previously a real ale house with five hand pumps, it had only one in use, carrying Fuller's London Pride. Which would have been fine, except for the fact it was 'end of barrel' and ran out before your editor could get his half!



Brewhouse and Kitchen

So we moved swiftly across the road to the **Brewhouse and Kitchen**, which had all of its four handpumps in use. Three of them carried their regulars, Banker's Draught, Intrepid, and the dauntingly strong Invarsity, while the fourth carried a 'project' beer (which seems to be the new name for one-offs!) called Heritage, which most tried. It was an unusual dark ale with a lambic flavour. I went for Banker's Draught and found it disappointing –

there was clearly something the matter with this cask.

Our next stop, the **Rose**, didn't disappoint. They had Doom Bar, Tim Taylor's Landlord and Shepherd Neame Bishop's Finger on. Nearly all of us went for Landlord, which turned out to be well kept. Like the other High Street pubs, the Rose was not busy on this cold Thursday evening in November. The Welly and the Flower Pot, not on the High Street, were faring better – it was a Jam Night at the Flower Pot. The general malaise of Bedford High Street seems to have spread to its pubs.

We moved on to Newnham Street with its two pubs – and indeed they were doing better business, but then they are both real ale specialists, and maybe us real ale drinkers are a hardy bunch willing to go out on cold winter nights for our fix.



The **Castle**, a Wells house, offered Wells Origin and Legacy together with Black Sheep Best and Adnams Ghost Ship. The atmosphere was pleasant, the staff

friendly and the beer well kept – what more could you ask for? I had Legacy, my preference of the two Wells ales on, but discussion among the group revealed people had different favourites among the three regular cask ales of the 'new' Wells.



And finally the **Three Cups**, an old favourite where we used to hold our branch meetings. A Greene King Local Hero pub, its lease is held by Kelchner's Brewery of Ampthill. Two GK beers, IPA and Old Speckled Hen, were on, together with three from Kelchner's – the regular Ampthill Gold (4.1% abv) and two I hadn't met before: Half Nelson (3.8% abv) and Parklife (4.2% abv). Also available were two beers from the Milestone Brewery of Newark in Nottinghamshire – Shine On (4.0% abv) and New World Pale (3.9% abv). Rosie's Pig cider – the regular, not the rhubarb, version this time – was also on handpump. Many of the group chose the New World Pale, but I went for Half Nelson, which turned out to be a very acceptable session bitter. And like the Welly, the Cups can be trusted to provide well kept beer.

From there we adjourned, having enjoyed a sociable evening's beer-drinking for the first time in far too long!

Fytton Rowland

Assessing Pubs in February

After a two-year wait, North Beds CAMRA restarted our minibus pub assessment trips in February. The first one started from the **Burnaby Arms** in Stanley Street, **Bedford**, for a journey northeastwards towards the furthest-north pub in the whole of Bedfordshire. The Burnaby is a Wells pub with a warm and welcoming atmosphere, catering mostly to the residents of the Prime Ministers district. It was busy even before our group gathered there at 7 p.m. The cask ales available were Charlie Wells DNA and Origin, of which I chose DNA, at £2.10 for a half. It was in good condition. Our minibus, driven by volunteer driver Nigel, appeared on time, and we set off for the **Plough** at **Bolnhurst**, which regularly gets high scores for the quality of its cask ale. However, it is primarily a place for special-occasion meals, and on this occasion they could not fit our group in for a drink in the bar area, so we left empty-handed.

Next stop was the **Crown** at **Little Staughton**, right on the Cambridgeshire border. This modernish building is a brewpub, and on handpump there were its three beers: Pale (3.7% abv), Beer with No Name (3.8% abv) and Dark (4.1% abv). Dark is a recent addition to the range, so we mostly tried that, and it turned out to be a very drinkable dark mild. Brewing your own is economical, so the price was only £1.75 for a half. We were amused by a sign saying “Prices subject to change according to customer’s attitude”.

Carrying on through the back lanes, we reached the **Three Compasses** at **Upper Dean**, our aforesaid northernmost pub, close to the Northants border this time.



Three Compasses, Upper Dean

A lovely old thatched pub with ancient beams in the bar, it is a free house and offered St Austell Tribute, Timothy Taylor’s Landlord and Greene King IPA on handpumps. Despite its remote location, the Three Compasses was quite busy at nine o’clock. I had Landlord, at a reasonable £2.05 per half. Others tried the Tribute.

Then the long trek back to Bedford started, and we headed for **Clapham** – a three-pub village at the start of



Horse and Groom, Clapham

lockdown but sadly only a two-pub one now. The Star has closed, but the **Fox and Hounds** is thriving as a mostly drinking pub. Lots of customers were watching football on TV. A large, fairly modern Wells house with quite young tenants, it had two cask ales on, Wells DNA and Marston's (formerly Wells!) Eagle. I had my second half of DNA of the evening at £2 per/half; the Eagle was cheaper still, at £1.95/half.

Still in **Clapham**, we called at the **Horse and Groom**, an older pub, which has seen a few changes over the years. One licensee tried to take it gastro, and it is still largely an eating pub, and so by 9.45 p.m. it was relatively quiet, the diners presumably having left. It is a Greene King house, our only one of the evening, and so had GK IPA and Abbot on. I sampled the Abbot and found it enjoyable – the general standard of cellar work on this evening had been high.

Our final stop was at **Bedford's** newest pub – the taproom at **Brewpoint**, Wells and Co's new brewery, a striking piece of modern architecture. It opens until 11pm, but at 10.30pm on a Thursday it was very quiet. Although all their KeyKeg beers were on, rather disappointingly only one of Wells' cask ales, Legacy, was still available. No doubt the other two were being held back for the weekend trade, but on our previous visits Wells had been showcasing all their real ales in their brewery tap. I had intended to try Legacy anyway, so I wasn't disappointed, but at £2.40 per half it was the most expensive drink of the evening for me. As expected, it was in excellent condition.

The minibus then continued to the **Pilgrim's Progress**, our usual terminus, as it stays open until midnight. I didn't go in but headed straight home, but no doubt those who did found a wide choice of cask ales at very reasonable prices in Bedford's remaining Wetherspoon's house.

For the second pub assessment trip we reverted to our usual starting point, the **Wellington Arms** (the Welly) in **Bedford**. It is a B&T pub, but the Welly actually belongs to a real-ale stalwart, Gary Burlison, who is associated with Nethergate Brewery. Not surprisingly, then, the choice on the handpumps was: From B&T, Shefford Bitter, Dragon Slayer and Dunstable Giant; from Nethergate, Venture (3.7% abv) and Essex Beast (6.4% abv); plus Limehouse Porter (4.1% abv) from Lister's of Sussex, and two Weston's ciders, Rosie's Pig and Family Vintage.



Swan, Bromham

Assessing Pubs in February continued

I tried Venture, new to me, and found it a traditional amber session bitter, well kept of course – this was the Welly, after all.

From there our minibus set out for **Bromham**. First stop – the **Swan**. This is a Greene King managed house, but the current manager has been there for several years and is enthusiastic about guest cask ales. As well as the expected GK IPA and Abbot, therefore, he also had on handpump Timothy Taylor's Landlord and, very welcome, Dark Fox (3.8% abv) from local small brewery Horne's of Bow Brickhill. Most of us, myself included, had the Dark Fox, a distinctively bitter dark beer. It was in good condition. There was a blazing log fire in the grate, and the pub, which concentrates on food, was comfortably full of both eating and drinking customers. Altogether a warm and welcoming experience.

Moving on, we visited **Bromham's** other pub, the **Prince of Wales** – or just 'The Prince' on the staff uniforms. More modern than the Swan, it is a Wells house, also with some emphasis on food, though very busy with mostly drinking customers that evening. Eagle and DNA were on the handpumps, the Bombardier having run out. My half of DNA was very acceptable. Overall the Prince seemed less homely than the Swan, though this is a comment more on the layout of the building than on the staff, who were friendly.

Then came a longish trip to **Carlton**, and a favourite of ours, the **Fox**. Landlady Alison is planning a beer festival at the Royal Platinum Jubilee bank holiday weekend in early June. The main bar is

in the historic building with thatch and exposed beams, and a more modern extension houses the restaurant seating. The bar was rather full, so we sat in the restaurant, food service having pretty much finished. Alison had her regular beers, Eagle and London Pride, on handpumps, together with two local brews, DXB (4.6% abv) from the Nene Valley Brewery of Northants, and Rhino (4.5% abv) from the Animal series of XT Brewery of Bucks. We mostly divided our custom between the two guests, and I had DXB, which slipped down deceptively easily given its strength! The beer was of course well kept – it always is at the Fox.

We then crossed the river to Harrold, intending to visit the Oakley Arms. However, it was closed that day,



Bell, Odell

following a sad event that morning. The Muntjac across the road was also closed – more of that later.

So we moved on to the **Bell at Odell**, another Greene King house, where the usual Abbot and GK IPA had been accompanied by another GK beer, the so-called Ruddles Best. The latter had, however, run out, but fortunately Gem (4.1% abv) from the Bath brewery was available too. Gem is a pleasant malty bitter and we mostly drank it. As expected at the Bell under its present licensee, it was in excellent condition. He told us that he is also taking on the Muntjac at Harrold, hoping for reopening at St Patrick's Day following renovation work. For the past forty years the Muntjac has shared its premises with a separate restaurant business, but now he is taking on the entire building, and pub and restaurant will be recombined. Just to keep him really busy, he was temporarily also looking after a managed GK house, the Queens Head at Milton Ernest, until a new manager is appointed there!

Our last planned stop was the **Sun at Felmersham**, a free house belonging to a person in the village. On that evening, it stocked Eagle, Hobgoblin, and Giggle and Titter (3.8% abv) from the Parkway Brewery of Somerton in Somerset. Being unfamiliar with Giggle and Titter, and amused by its name, we mostly sampled it. It turned out to be a traditional amber session bitter, and a very nice one too. The pub was less full than some of the earlier ones – a shame, as it is a very attractive village local.

Having lost one pub off our list, we decided to visit the **Queens Head at Milton Ernest**, which hadn't had a CAMRA visit for a number of years.

Originally a small village local, it has been massively extended, and for some years has been run by GK's hotel subsidiary, Old English Inns. Despite this, the only cask ale available was St Austell Tribute. At 10.30 p.m. it still had plenty of people in, some of them still finishing off their meals. The Tribute was in acceptable condition. (On a subsequent visit I have found Black Sheep on as well.) No doubt GK will appoint a new manager soon, though the licensed trade is suffering staffing problems across the country. Mystery: which Queen is it on the sign?

Then back to the **Pilgrim's Progress in Bedford** once again, from which I strode home quickly before the approaching Storm Eunice could catch me. Pubs had been noticeably busy that Thursday evening, a good thing of course. Maybe people had gone out on Thursday instead of Friday because of the forecast 'worst storm for thirty years' which brought many trees down across the county.



Sun, Felmersham

Assessing Pubs in February continued

Our third minibus tour started at the **White Horse** in Newnham Avenue, **Bedford**, and headed in a generally southeasterly direction. The White Horse, a large suburban Wells pub, has been kept successfully by licensees Steve and Lucie Fuller for some years, but sadly they have decided to leave. They like the publicans' life but find the White Horse too big and are looking for a smaller pub in or near Bedford. (We subsequently found out that their destination is the Polhill Arms at Renhold, a former Pub of the Year of ours.) Meanwhile, the beer at the White Horse continues to be well kept, and on this particular evening the offer was DNA, Eagle and Directors. I hadn't had Directors for a while, so I chose it, and like some of my colleagues found it excellent, though at £2.35/half. It is an eating pub, but at seven o'clock no-one seemed to have turned up to dine. Apart from the CAMRA group the pub wasn't busy – which turned out to be the case in most of the pubs we visited on 3rd March, perhaps because of unpleasant weather.



Greyhound, Haynes

The minibus took us quite swiftly to the **Greyhound** at **Haynes**, the only pub in a

large village, and again an eating pub, this time a Greene King house. The pump clips proclaimed GK IPA, Abbot and Yardbird, but sadly only the IPA clip was the right way round. I'd have chosen Yardbird if I'd been able to; the IPA was in respectable condition, though it's not my favourite beer. The pub itself is an attractive traditional-style village local, now extended for its eating role. The welcome was friendly, and the price right – £1.95/half. The same could not be said at our next intended stop, the **Black Horse** at **Ireland**, a pub originally built to cater for the navvies building a railway in the nineteenth century – hence the name of the tiny village it is in. But we were told “No bar service”, and at our subsequent stops local people said “The Black Horse is a restaurant”.

As a replacement stop we then visited the **Hare and Hounds** at **Old Warden**, yet another eatery, but this time with no problem about being used by drinkers. We could see several diners in the restaurant area, but we were welcomed in the bar, which has a proper pub feel to it. It's a Wells pub and offered DNA and Terrain, the then current Brewpoint



White Horse, Southill

seasonal brew which we hadn't met before. We mostly tried it, and found it to be a pleasant amber ale and in good condition, but £2.40/half.

Our second **White Horse** of the evening, at **Southill**, is a free house but its cask offering was made up of three 'usual suspects', London Pride, Tim Taylor's Landlord and Doom Bar. It's yet another eating place, but it was 8.45 and any diners had left. The licensee explained that they get very little pure drinking trade, and close at 9.30; they are a 'destination pub' for people who have booked a meal. The London Pride had run out but the Landlord lasted out for most of us to try it; good value at £2.05/half, and very drinkable despite being close to the end of the barrel.

The **Crown** at **Northill** is inevitably an eating place once again, but nevertheless has more of a pubby atmosphere. A Greene King house, it had GK IPA and Abbot on, and as it was our first chance to try Abbot, most of us chose it. Again goodish value at £2.05/half. An attractive old pub, at the traditional location next to the church, with exposed beams (Mind your head!) in the bar.



Guinea, Moggerhanger

Our last two pubs are both on my own *Firkin* delivery round, so I am more familiar with them.

The **Guinea** at **Moggerhanger** offers a more personal welcome than formerly, since new manager Josh arrived nine months ago. A large Wells pub with food but not gastro, it had four cask ales on, the largest choice of the evening – Origin, DNA, Eagle and Directors. The DNA was in a very satisfactory condition. Like the other pubs of the evening, it was not busy.

But there was a big pleasant surprise at our last stop, the **Five Bells** at **Cople**. We arrived at 10.30 p.m. to find it busy! It offered only Marston's beers, even though it is a free house. But it was a less usual choice of them. Along with Directors again, they had Pedigree from the Burton brewery and Brakspear's Gravity (3.4% abv) from Witney. The Brakspear's was new to me, and although it is backwards to have the weakest beer of the evening last, I sampled it and enjoyed it. The Five Bells is a splendid old village pub with multiple rooms in the traditional style, and the two ladies behind the bar coped with the busy trade with friendly good humour. A good finish to the night.

As usual I didn't go into the **Pilgrims Progress** but headed straight home to get in before midnight.

Fytton Rowland



Charlie Wells

BEER RUNS IN OUR DNA, IT'S THE ORIGIN OF OUR
STORY AND THE LEGACY WE CREATED



With five generations and over 140 years of family brewing experience,
we've embraced our past and developed our beer for the future.
Proudly brewed & bottled at Brewpoint, part of the Wells & Co. family.



SCAN THIS QR CODE TO HEAD TO OUR
WEBSITE AND GRAB YOURSELF SOME
CHARLIE WELLS BEERS TODAY!