

FREE

The Firkin

Magazine of CAMRA North Bedfordshire • Vol 47 No 3 Autumn 2023



Bedford Town Band at Bedford Beer and Cider Festival

EDITORIAL

CORN EXCHANGE - BUT NOT AS YOU KNOW IT

BRANCH DIRECTORY

BRANCH DIARY

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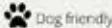
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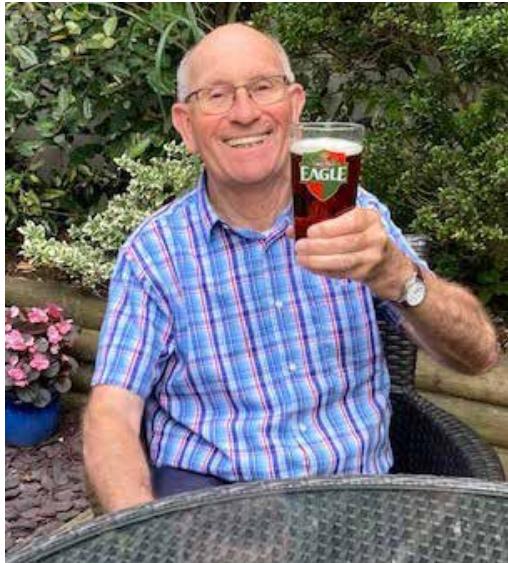
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Editorial



North Beds CAMRA's main event of the year, the 45th Bedford Beer and Cider Festival (BBCF), which took place in early October, is the main topic of this issue. It felt good to work at it as a volunteer once again - I was the Glasses Manager for the second time. We are left with the unanswered question, however, whether or not the 45th BBCF will be the last. CAMRA's National Executive may decide that the financial results were not good enough this year to justify continuing with a festival in Bedfordshire in future years (the Luton festival ceased a few years ago). Without the festival, I fear that North Beds CAMRA would become a much less active organisation. Maybe we'd finish up with just one branch for the whole county.

This question, of course, is merely a symptom of the malaise facing CAMRA as a whole, the cask-ale business as a whole, the licensed trade as a whole, and the economy as a whole. We thought the beer trade had come through the covid lockdowns in better shape than we had initially feared it would. But the second crisis precipitated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine has brought

more and continuing problems - people are buying less beer, so pubs find it harder to justify stocking real ale, which has to turn over quickly. If they do still have it, they stock fewer different cask ales. And indeed, pubs continue to close down altogether, as do small breweries. I have a pessimistic feeling that we are right back to where we were when CAMRA started fifty years ago. Let's hope it isn't as bad as I fear.

Meanwhile, CAMRA life goes on. In January and February, we will be visiting pubs to assess them for inclusion in the 2025 (yes, really) *Good Beer Guide*, and from amongst those chosen, we will also select our North Bedfordshire CAMRA Pub of the Year for 2024. See the Spring 2024 issue of the Firkin, due out in March, for the results of our deliberations.

Fyton Rowland

Musical Pubs!

As we went to press, we learned that Chris Kelly of Kelchner's brewery had given up the tenancy of the Three Cups in Newnham Street, Bedford, which is basically a Greene King pub. His manager there, Chelsea, tells me that she is moving to run the Bear in Bedford High Street, a free house which was closed for a short while.



Finally, the licensees from the Forester's Arms in Union Street, Bedford, a Wells house, are moving to become tenants of GK's Three Cups! No news yet of the new licensee(s) of the Forester's. All of which shows how hard it is for breweries to attract entirely new people into the pub trade.

The Corn Exchange

Regular visitors to the CAMRA Bedford Beer and Cider Festival got a surprise when they walked in to the Corn Exchange for the 2023 festival this October - the hall looked different. For many years the main bar has been in a U-shape down the middle of the hall, but this year the bar ran across the far end of the hall, and tables and chairs occupied the middle. The cider bar occupied the west wall, and our cider

expert Chris provided the usual wide selection of ciders and perries. The beer casks - 97 of them - were arranged three high on the stillage, and this allowed more space for our guests to relax sitting down with their friends as they sampled the beers. We hope you liked this new arrangement.

Foreign beers were upstairs in the Howard Room bar, as they have usually been in the past. This year we offered several from Bedford's twin town Bamberg, which is



famous for its beer. In past years Bedford Borough Council has run its own German Beer Festival at a different time of year, but as they don't do that any more, we try to obtain Bamberg's famous Schenkerla smoked beer. This quickly sold out, as usual. Our food service was upstairs as well - but this too was different. The catering was by Gunns bakery, and comprised their famous Bedfordshire Clangers, plus pork pies and filled rolls. This enabled us to serve the full choice of food all day, not just at lunch and dinner times as had been the case in the past.



... but Not as You Know It!

Despite the changes, the main features were those which CAMRA festivals are famed for - a huge choice of cask ales and real ciders from near and far, including some not seen before in Bedford, served by volunteer bar staff who are knowledgeable about real ale and cider. Very likely this is the only Corn Exchange event in the year that is run entirely by volunteers, though admittedly we do get "paid" with a modest amount of free beer per volunteer!

Entertainment is also part of what we offer, and on this occasion it came from the Bedford Town Band. This was another consequence of the rearranged layout - the seating downstairs meant that we didn't need to put seating on the balcony, and so we could host a larger ensemble than before, by placing the band there. Their performance from the balcony in 'last night of the proms' style was perfectly audible from below.



Leicester CAMRA visitors



On the Saturday the entertainment was of a different kind - the Rugby World Cup! The Corn Exchange's big screen was used to show successively the Wales versus Georgia, England versus Samoa, and Ireland versus Scotland matches to our festival visitors. All the home nations except Scotland won, but whereas Wales and Ireland had substantial leads, England scrambled home by a single point - nail-biting stuff!

For the second time in a few months, visitors from the Midlands visited North Beds CAMRA by vintage bus - this time a single-decker bringing people from Leicester to the Bedford versus Leicester rugby match. Unlike the internationals, this one wasn't on television, so they came to the Corn Exchange first, then left for Goldington Road, and then came back to the festival after the match, unhappy perhaps that their team had lost 47-28 to the Blues, but hopefully still enjoying their beers!

Fyton Rowland

The Firkin

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Branch Diary

CAMRA North Bedfordshire branch business meetings are normally held on the second Thursday of alternate months. Social events are usually held on the third Thursday of each month.

Guests are welcome at social events, but members have priority on brewery visits. For latest information visit the branch website at northbeds.camra.org.uk/diary.

Unless otherwise stated, for all events further details can be obtained from, and bookings made with, Gary Mudd on 01234 741871 or e-mail

socials@northbeds.camra.org.uk

DECEMBER 2023

Thursday 7th - Christmas Social event - details to follow

JANUARY 2024

Thursday 11th - Branch Meeting - venue to be announced

Thursday 18th - Pub assessment trip - meet at the Wellington Arms, Wellington Street, 7 p.m.

Thursday 25th - Pub assessment trip - meet at the Wellington Arms, Wellington Street, 7 p.m.

FEBRUARY 2024

Thursday 1st - Pub assessment trip - meet at the Wellington Arms, Wellington Street, 7 p.m.

Thursday 8th - Branch Meeting - venue to be announced

MARCH 2024

Thursday 14th - Branch Meeting - venue to be announced

Thursday 21st - Branch Annual General Meeting - venue to be announced

One of the three assessment trips will be a Bedford town centre walkabout, the other two minibus trips, depending on the availability of minibuses and drivers.

See the branch website for updates to the branch diary

northbeds.camra.org.uk/diary

RIP B&T

Some of our readers may have noticed the disappearance of B&T (Banks & Taylor) beers, particularly if you have regularly visited the Wellington Arms, Bedford over the years. As CAMRA's liaison officer for the brewery since November 2001, and a friend of the owners for many years before that, I have been asked to write a short article on what happened.

Banks & Taylor Ltd brewery was situated on an industrial estate off Old Bridge Way in Shefford. It was formally launched on 2nd September 1982 at the Stone Jug, Clophill, when Shefford Bitter was available for the first time. I was fortunate enough to be present at the launch. Their first tied house was the Two Brewers, Luton, and the second the White Horse at Deadman's Cross. Others followed, and the estate had reached London, and into double figures, by the early 1990s. By then the size of the brewery premises had been doubled by the addition of the next-door industrial unit. Whilst B&T beers won many awards, a notable one was at CAMRA's 1988 Great British Beer Festival in Leeds, when Shefford Old Strong (SOS) won the best small brewery beer gold award.

Unfortunately, a property crash in 1993 spelt trouble, and in 1994 the original company went under. However, a rescue package was put together and the brewery was saved, continuing under the name B&T Brewery Ltd. The pubs had all gone, but the two founding partners, Mike Desquesnes and Martin Ayres, vowed never again to slip into financial difficulty. So a tranche of tied houses was built up very slowly. Eventually this reached a total of seven. These were: Brewery Tap, Shefford; Wellington Arms, Bedford; Globe, Dunstable; Albion, Ampthill; Elm Tree, Cambridge; Seven Stars, Rugby; and Bricklayers Arms, Hitchin. By now it was the mid-2010s.

So what happened? A combination of manager difficulties and reducing trade saw the last three listed above returned to

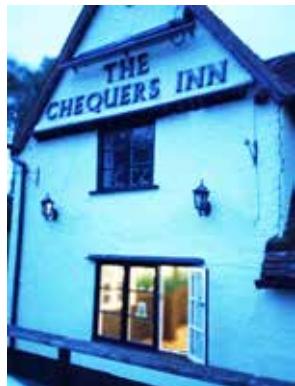
their actual owners, with B&T giving up their leases, before the 2020s were reached. But trouble was ahead. The brewery had had no investment since the last century and was showing its age. In particular, there were problems with both the gas supply and the electrics. On top of that, longstanding brewer John Waters had retired, and a carefully sourced replacement proved less than careful, and left. This meant the two partners were having to do the brewing themselves again, and they too were showing their age! So in early 2020 brewing of B&T beers was contracted out to Three Brewers of St Albans brewery, near Hatfield. At the same time the necessary updating work at the brewery was scheduled – but never started.

So things were beginning to slide. Then in March 2020 came Covid, which needs no explanation, although the help from HMG at least kept B&T going. By now Mike Desquesnes had retired to leafy Farnham. But in the summer of 2021 the remaining partner Martin Ayes became seriously ill and sadly died of Motor Neurone Disease in the September. This proved to be the final straw. Mike came out of retirement to oversee things. Which meant the disposal of the remaining pubs and the winding down of the business. The Globe was sold as a going concern, and the Albion and Wellington Arms leases handed back to their owners, Everards and Burlison Inns respectively. You may notice that this leaves one pub, the Brewery Tap, Shefford. Here B&T has a long lease and a good manageress, and it continues to trade as a real-ale free house, run from Farnham. The brewery equipment was demolished in November 2021 and the lease on the premises surrendered in 2022. So whilst B&T still exists it is now a small company running just one pub. Three ex-B&T beers, Shefford Bitter, Dragonslayer and Dunstable Giant, are still being produced by Three Brewers.

Mike Benyon

West by Southwest

North Bedfordshire CAMRA branch's area extends almost, but not quite, to Woburn, and our September minibus trip covered that 'west by southwest' corner of our area. We started, as usual, from the Wellington Arms in Bedford, but your editor didn't sample any of the Welly's beers that evening as he arrived there just as the bus was loading.



The first stop was the Chequers at Hall End, Wootton, chosen because it closes at 9 p.m. The present licensee is French, and not surprisingly is not a real-ale drinker, but he keeps his cask ale more than

competently. He usually has Eagle on because his regulars like it. It isn't brewed at the Eagle Brewery any more, and in fact we're uncertain where it is produced. At the Chequers that evening it had run out anyway, so our only cask choice was St Austell Cornish Best, a 3.4% session bitter less well known than the same brewery's Tribute and Proper Job. Very pleasant it was, too, a traditional amber beer without a very strong flavour, but which one could sup all evening very happily. The pub itself is a very attractive traditional village local, but is under internal reconstruction, moving the bar counter from its former location, scheduled to become the restaurant, and currently serving from a small bar in another room. The meal prices shown seemed high, and we wondered whether the licensee had gourmet intentions for his reconstructed pub. He was nevertheless very friendly and welcoming to our group.

Moving on we travelled to the furthest distant of our pubs of the evening, the Swan



at Salford. This is a food-led modernish pub which gets lunchtime business from Cranfield University's visitors. On this very wet evening not many people were in, and the cask ales on were Greene King

Abbot and Purity UBU (4.5% abv) from the Purity brewery in Alcester, Warwickshire. Most of us had the UBU, a very drinkable bitter that I have enjoyed a few times before, and it was well kept.



Still in Cranfield University's catchment area, but more of a village local, was our next stop, the Cross Keys in Cranfield village itself. It had three hand pumps in use, serving St Austell Tribute, Young's Special and

Fuller's London Pride, though the Pride had run out. Young's Special was brewed in the Havelock Street brewery when it belonged to 'Wells and Young's', but like Eagle it now emanates from one of Carlsberg Marstons' other breweries. This is a dwindling number, since the new Danish owners have apparently abandoned Marstons' former policy of retaining the various breweries taken over. Nevertheless, most of us had the Special and to me it tasted very similar to the former Bedford-brewed version. I had come to like it while I was a tour guide at Wells and Young's. The landlady was very pleasant, friendly and chatty, and

clearly knowledgeable about real ale. The Young's was in excellent condition. She gave our group free roast potatoes! A first for me, that. The free house was a fairly conventional pub, neither beautiful nor ugly.

Next, an 'only pub in the village', for a rather large village, too, the Bell at Marston Mortaine. It seemed wet-led, with no evidence of any emphasis on meals, and it was gratifyingly full on this nasty night. Originally an old-fashioned village pub it is now considerably extended. The Purity brewery turned up for the second time in the evening, this time with Mad Goose (4.2% abv), which most of us chose. It was in very drinkable condition. The other option was the very standard Sharp's Doom Bar.

No more pubs, as our final stop was Stewartby, originally a 'company town' for the brickworks, whose owners disapproved of alcohol and didn't permit a pub. There is a way around everything, and the

Stewartby Club is thriving. Much larger than the average village pub, nevertheless with a pub-like atmosphere, it had plentiful customers on this wet evening. Their cask beer offering was Side Pocket for a Toad from the Tring Brewery (3.6% abv), Old Speckled Hen and GK Abbot. We all went for the Side Pocket (where on earth did Tring get that name from?), a justly popular amber session bitter, which proved to be as well-kept as all the other beers we'd sampled that evening. Social Secretary Gary Mudd had chosen his destinations well!

Then back to the Pilgrims Progress in Bedford, our usual finishing point for these trips as it stays open till midnight, and people can have a final half while waiting for their taxis home. As for me, the rain had stopped, so I didn't go in but walked straight home as usual.

Fyton Rowland

Gordon Arms Wins CAMRA Design Award for its Refurbishment



The Gordon Arms in Castle Road, Bedford, has won CAMRA's Pub Design Award for 2023 in the

Community Local category, rewarding the design of the recent total refurbishment by its owners, Wells and Co., who now run it as a managed house with a full offering of food. In September the pub was presented with this national CAMRA award by Andy Shaw, a former CAMRA National Executive member and former Bedford resident, who sat on the CAMRA panel that made the award. The photo (right) shows Andy making the award to the staff member who was in charge that evening; as Chair of the North Beds branch, your editor also took part in the presentation.



August Pub Assessment and Social Trip

After a period of few trips due to lack of driver and bus availability, it was great to meet at the Wellington Arms, Bedford, for a group night out. Whilst waiting for the bus to arrive, we took the opportunity to check out what the Welly had to offer. With Bavarian Dragon from Leighton Buzzard, Nethergate's Venture and Eon Milk Stout, Adnams Southwold and Thornbridge Jaipur on tap, we had a good choice. I tried the Stout



which was flavourful.

We set off for serious work, stopping first at the Pheasant in Kimbolton Rd, Bedford, a Wells pub that has had a Brewpoint facelift, which we've not been able to get to. DNA and Origin were on when we arrived but the Origin ran out. Both of these cask ales have since been discontinued by Wells and Co.



The DNA was o.k.

We moved on to The Kingfisher Pub, Bedford (the refitted Barns

Hotel), now a smart Wedding Venue and Restaurant (which was full). After an initial raised eyebrow, they were happy to let fifteen drinkers to the bar, and there was a

pleasant airy drinking area to sit in. Beers on were Otter Bitter and Vale's Brill Gold, both very nice if slightly cold. It is good to see a restaurant that serves interesting beers (the third pump had held Tribut,e but it was sold out). A word of warning the beer is a little pricey at £5.10 a pint, and if you pay by cash they require the exact amount, as they don't carry much float. Nearly all their customers make card transactions.

Now, being more of a social trip, we ventured into East Beds CAMRA's territory to the Cock at Broom (East Beds branch's Rural PotY), a three-star Heritage Pub on CAMRA's inventory of historic pub interiors. Full of nooks and crannies, and one of only seven pubs remaining in the country without a bar. Beer is served by gravity straight from the cellar. Greene King IPA and Abbot were on, along with Tring's Brock's Bitter, which we mostly went for. And very good it was too! We finished our evening at the March Hare in Dunton (East Beds branch's Pub of the Year for 2023), an excellent village pub, now with the added advantage of its own brewery. Beer is brewed by the landlord and sometimes by locals at one of his monthly brewing sessions. The resulting beer from the sessions goes on the bar to be critiqued by the customers!

We had March Hare's Bitter No.1, O'Bird Stout (to my mind a little dark mildish at 3.5% but very good), and Pea Souper (a smoked London porter). Also on were Digfield's Fool's Nook, and some intrepid souls tried a third of Nene Valley's Imperial Stout at 11% abv. We had an enjoyable time and to celebrate our driver, Nigel, driving us on his birthday we toasted him and presented him with a mini cask to celebrate at home. We were dropped off very late at the Pilgrims Progress to call our taxis. A few of us tried Hullabaloo (4.2%) from Loddon Brewery as a nightcap! Very good.

Gary Mudd

Cycle and pub tour around Bedford

I thought others may be interested in our journey by bike around the outskirts of Bedford. This took place on Friday 29th September, when four of us took a cycle ride around Bedford incorporating twelve pubs. The plan was to have half a pint in each pub, stopping for about thirty minutes before moving on. We were lucky to have a very warm day with little wind. Don't let the length of the journey put anyone off, as we are not spring chickens, all around sixty and not regular cyclists. To start we all met at the Toby Carvery, Goldington Green, at 10.30 a.m. to have a cooked breakfast to set us up for our trip. Generous portions, so we were well fed and watered. For £8.48, a help-yourself buffet with refillable coffee or tea was excellent value.

The first pub to have a drink on our trip was the Kingfisher (formerly the Barns Hotel). A choice of two beers, Otter Bitter and Vale's Wychert. We chose the Wychert Ale, which was in good condition. The distance from the Toby Carvery was 2.28 miles and most was via cycle paths through Priory Country Park, avoiding roads. It took us twenty minutes to complete. After a quick half, we then made our way to the Five Bells at Cople. Although this took us towards the bypass on a busy road, we made use of the path to be safe. Once across the A421, it was a nice quiet country road that was pleasantly flat. Wainwright Golden was one of the beers on offer and we had that. Strangely the distance to the Five Bells was 2.28 miles again. The next pub was one we had passed earlier, the Kings Arms at Cardington: a short cycle ride of 1.14 miles to there. Adnams Ghost Ship was enjoyed outside in the beer garden.

The road from Cardington took us through the back lanes to Harrowden and from there on a path under the bypass and all the way off-road to Elstow. A distance of 2.9 miles, but again on very flat terrain. Sharp's Doom Bar was the only beer on offer at the Red Lion. From Elstow we headed into Kempston to the Maypole Farm - 2.34 miles, and the only time we had no choice but to follow roads. Fortunately, they weren't too busy and motorists gave us plenty of room. Greene King IPA was enjoyed, again sitting outside. Our next port of call was Wootton, where four pubs awaited us. You can get all the way from Kempston to Wootton via footpaths connecting the two. Only 1.7 miles,

which was shorter than if we went by road. The first Wootton pub was the Fox and Duck which also had Otter Bitter on, so we had that. Very friendly staff in the pub. We could see our next destination from the benches outside the pub. Some walked, others cycled, but as it only yards across the road we were soon there: the Cock, which had Southwold Bitter from Adnams. Again, the warm late afternoon sun meant we could enjoy our beer in the large garden. We spotted two goals and a rather flat football so had a quick game of two a side much to the amusement of families enjoying the play equipment. Sat at one of the largest tables we've come across - it can seat eighteen people.

After the Cock it was a short ride to The Chequers, Wootton, where we were able to enjoy Hook Norton's Hooky. An eccentric landlord, but again we were able to enjoy our beer outside. Unfortunately, despite an excellent pub, we found this was the most expensive beer on the trip. Our last pub in Wootton was the Legstraps, which was very busy early on a Friday evening - good to see. However, they had no real ale on offer, so we had Shipyard which was better than nothing. The next leg of our journey was the longest on the route at 3.98 miles. Apart from Ridge Road, the rest was on cycle paths and village roads. The night had started to draw in when we reached the Three Tuns in Biddenham. A decent drop of Timothy Taylor's Landlord, and again still nice enough to enjoy in the garden. Our last pub of our journey was the Pilgrims Progress, Bedford, where we enjoyed a well deserved Ruby Mild from Milestone Brewery and a bite to eat. Only 1.96 miles from Biddenham on cycle paths.

All in all a very pleasant day, starting at 10.30 and finishing at 20.35. Blessed with the weather and surprised with the lack of hills, which meant the cycling was nice and gentle and at a leisurely pace. We were able to sit outside in every pub, so cannot comment too much about them. We have given the timings of our journey below together with the map above should anyone fancy giving it a go in the future.

*John Frost, Steve Hobbs,
Tim Wade and Dave Newman*

The Fox at Carlton



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