

FREE

The Firkin



Campaign
for
Real Ale

Magazine of CAMRA North Bedfordshire • Vol 48 No 4 Winter 2024

Another Successful Beer and Cider Festival!



EDITORIAL

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FESTIVAL 2024**

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Editorial



Just as we went to press, two pieces of news arrived. Both of them came from giants in the brewery and pub businesses – one of them indeed one of the multinational big five – and neither was good news.

Carlsberg Marstons Brewing Company (CMBC), the multinational that now controls a lot of Britain's major and old-established cask ale brewers, announced the discontinuance of a number of cask ales. The list of ales no longer to be available included both Eagle (cask) and Bombardier (keg), the two beers traditionally made by Wells at the brewery in Havelock Street and drunk in the Bedford area. (The brewery itself survives, now in the ownership of the Damm brewery of Barcelona.) Other cask beers to be discontinued are: Ringwood Old Thumper and Boondoggle; Marston's 61 Deep and Old Empire; Banks's Sunbeam; Jennings Cumberland Ale. Keg brands to be lost are Mansfield Dark Smooth and Original Bitter. Banks's Brewery in Wolverhampton will also close. Our fears when Britain's biggest cask ale brewer, Marston's, sold out to Carlsberg were justified, it seems.

At more or less the same moment, Whitbread – once a brewery, now a pubco, announced a number of the pubs attached to its Premier Inn chain of hotels would cease to be pubs where non-residents could drink, and become just hotel residents' bars, presumably open only when some residents wished to use them. Few of these pubs sold real ale, admittedly, and only a minority of the relevant pubs were affected, but clearly this is the thin end of the wedge, and demonstrates that pubs are not safe in the hands of Whitbread despite the proud history of that name in the beer industry.

Better news on the Bedford Beer and Cider Festival front! This issue contains a full report on the 2024 festival from the organiser Kath Lilley, illustrated with photos by Peter Argyle. The atmosphere at the festival felt good, though we thought that the attendance was perhaps a little down on 2023. Well, the financial results are now in, and they were much improved on the 2023 festival, with a good surplus to keep CAMRA nationally happy, so if the numbers were down, the customers must have bought more beer each! Congratulations to our branch (and festival) treasurer Mike Parks for his effective financial management. Pencil in 1st-4th October 2025 in your new diary – if a 2025 Bedford Beer and Cider Festival takes place, which we sincerely hope it will, those will be the dates. Bedford Corn Exchange has already been tentatively booked.

Fytton Rowland

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Another Successful Beer and Cider Festival!

The first week in October saw North Bedfordshire CAMRA's 46th annual Beer and Cider Festival taking place at the Corn Exchange in St Paul's Square. This year again saw some changes; after listening to your feedback we did our best to take it into consideration when planning the festival. By attracting the support of a main Sponsor (Gallagher Development) we were able to make some of the changes you wanted to see. This included being able to revert to sale or return on the festival glasses, and having more entertainment.



We moved into the Corn exchange on the Sunday before the festival, put the carpet down and built the stillaging ready

for the beer to arrive. On the Monday, the equipment delivery arrived and it was all hands on deck to get the load in and set the cooling up ready for the beer. Once the beer was up it needed a couple of days to condition to be ready to serve on Wednesday.

Unfortunately, on Wednesday due to an attack of the gremlins, we got off to a sticky start when the roving mike for the public address system couldn't be found for the opening speech! Not letting this daunt him, he stoically soldiered on and officially opened the festival anyway, for which we extend our grateful thanks. The 'Livebar' had a shaky start as no one was sending the site manager the information on what beers were actually available. On Wednesday evening we hosted Ukulele Bedford for two sets of tradition and modern music, all played on the ukulele. This proved quite popular and entertaining. Our first experience with the new caterers in the Howard room was on Wednesday evening. The fusion of Nigerian and Caribbean food as a description was o.k., but we had yet to taste it and were worried as to whether it would be too hot. We were assured by Ywl the Chef that it wasn't about



heat but layers of flavour, and we were happy that this did prove to be the case. In fact some of you complained it wasn't hot

enough. If he returns next year he assures us he will bring some hot sauce as an add on. We were also paid a visit by 'Flick' from Social Dragonfly, who had been handling our social media on the run up to the festival. She spent the whole open session with us, getting a feel for the festival (Flick is a CAMRA member and organiser of her own beer festival in Grantham). She's taken loads of photos for use in the next festival. On Thursday we the judging panel for the blind beer tasting was made up of Brewers, Publicans and CAMRA members who have undergone taste training, this was prior to the public opening. The winner of this round of the Beer Judging is put forward to the national Champion Beer of Britain competition. After a delay in contacting the winners Woodforde's Brewery, The East Anglian Beer was announced as Woodforde's Wherry, a very good session bitter. On Thursday afternoon the new Children's area opened for the first time, but unfortunately someone forgot to tell the children. On Thursday evening, the entertainment was Inis Eire, a three-piece Bedford based traditional Irish band. They sang some really popular classics that engaged their audience fully. West Highland Way by Loch Lomond Brewery was the first firkin of beer to run out, on Thursday early evening,

The Friday session was graced with the sound of cheers and a ringing bell for the many new CAMRA members were signed up by Laura at the festival entrance. We really hope that some of the new members will get involved with either the branch or the festival, as we really don't bite and would love to get to know you all. New members joining at the festival were able to get two free pints and



the first thirty or so received a free CAMRA book. Due to having a deal with the 'Pewter Scribe', all people joining at the festival

were offered a free name engraving on their festival glass. With the beer flowing freely all day, the firkins started to run out and the reserve beers had to be tapped. The 'Livebar' seemed quite popular, with up to 200 people per day checking the site out. In the evening The Bedford Town Band really raised the roof with a set of classic brass band favourites. For their second set they did a traditional last night of the proms, which proved very popular, with song sheets and flags supplied by one of our volunteers for people to join in. We did get one complaint that the music was



too loud and we should turn the amplification down! (What amplification?)

Saturday and the end of the festival is in sight. The new children's area got its first customer early in the session with a good number of youngsters filling the area for the afternoon. We



had decided if we were to explore the family area option, we needed to do it properly, and so we hired some equipment from Milton Keynes Play Association to make the area more inviting to the children. We also hired a professional children's entertainer to give a magic show. Magic Paul proved to be very popular with the children and the parents, and we received some wonderful feedback

from the attendees. We had arranged a beer tasting with one of Brewpoint brewery's brewers for the afternoon, but unfortunately you were all too focused on the delights we had on offer on the main bar to pry yourselves away. In the evening we were entertained by the Rayban Blues Brothers and they really got the house rocking. The two sets included a lot of favourites from the blues, soul and motown styles, with a complementary 'disco' between the sets.

After the festival closed on Saturday night,



the next task was to get the bars counters down and packed into the van. They were then ready for an early return to

our sister branch at Cambridge, who allow us to borrow them from their store. Cambridge are a much larger branch than North Bedfordshire and a lot more active.. They have a large outdoor festival , which requires the storage of a lot of equipment. On Sunday we continued with dismantling the festival, as everything has to be out of the main hall by Sunday night. Thanks to Tony and his Corn Exchange staff we were allowed to store equipment for collection in the loading bay overnight. On Monday morning a very small, very tired crew of volunteers turned up to load the last of the equipment for return. The provisional dates for next year are 1st to 4th of October. If branch members who are not currently involved are interested in helping us push the festival forward, please contact me at beerfestival@northbedscamra.org.uk. On a very personal note I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to each and every one who not only helped plan and volunteered at the festival, but to you, our wonderful customers, without whom the festival wouldn't have happened. We look forward to welcoming you to the 47th Bedford Beer and Cider Festival in October 2025!

Katherine Lilley
Festival Organiser

First Pub Trip of the Autumn

It is getting harder for North Bedfordshire CAMRA's Social Secretary, Gary Mudd, to arrange minibus trips to country pubs, because some of the volunteer drivers of the minibus that we hire, The Villager, are understandably unwilling to work in the evenings. Fortunately, we were able to ride in the recently arrived new Villager bus for a trip to pubs to the east of Bedford in September.

We gathered at the **Wellington Arms** (the Welly) in **Bedford**, which as usual had a wide selection of cask ales available: Bateman's XXXB (4.8% abv), Salem Bridge Brewery's Salem Porter (4.7% abv), Aylesbury Brewery Company's (ABC) Lazy Days (4.5% abv), Black Sheep Respiré (4.0% abv), Vale Brewery's Wychert (3.9% abv), Purity Gold (3.8% abv), and Nethergate Venture (3.7% abv), though the last-named had run out. Several of these I hadn't met before, and, in view of the fact that this was the first drink of the evening, I chose one of the lower-strength ones, Wychert. It turned out to be a traditional bitter of a dark amber colour, with little aroma and an unremarkable flavour. Like all the others - this was the Welly, after all - it was well kept. Then our bus set forth.



Crown Willington

Our first stop was the **Crown at Willington**, which we were lucky to find open - landlord Vince was on holiday and the substitute was opening only for limited hours. The real ales on were Courage Directors (4.8% abv), once brewed at the Eagle Brewery in



Wainwright at the Crown

Bedford but now brewed, heaven knows where, by Carlsberg Marston, and Wainwright Amber (4.0% abv) from Lancashire, which most of us tried. Intriguingly its pump clip declared it was 'brewery conditioned', which hinted that, though served from a handpump, it might not be real ale. There was definitely no added gas in it. It was another traditional amber bitter and tasted fine - was it microfiltered? Perhaps we'll never know, but this description is one CAMRA members need to be wary of.

The Crown is one of the pubs for which I am CAMRA's Pub Contact, and our next stop was another of 'my' pubs - the **Five Bells at Cople**.



Five Bells Cople

A splendid old pub, smack in the middle of the village and justifiably popular, it has new licensees. They have made it much more of a foodie pub than it was before, but fortunately they still keep the beer well.

Such pubs usually stock 'usual suspect' real ales, and the Five Bells was no exception, with Greene King IPA and Timothy Taylor Landlord on. I had the Landlord and found it very acceptable.



We moved on next to **Sheffield** and called first at the **Bridge**, featured in the Spring 2024 issue of the *Firkin* and recently reopened after refurbishment. As with many Wells houses nowadays, its only cask ale was an Adnams one – Southwold Bitter, at a rather high price. It was served too cold – probably delivered through the same python as the lagers – but was otherwise in acceptable condition. The welcome, by contrast, was warm!



Moving on a very short distance, we then visited the **Brewery Tap** in **Sheffield**. The town's B&T brewery is no more, so it is a true brewery tap no longer, though it still belongs to the B&T company. It's still very much a cask-ale specialist pub, with six handpumps in use on this Thursday evening. The IPA (4.6% abv) of 3 Brewers of St Albans (a brewery situated in Hatfield!) had run out, but we still had the choice of Nethergate Old Growler (5.0%), Adnams



Ghost Ship (4.5%), Bateman's XB English EPA (3.7% abv), Nethergate Mild (3.7% abv), and 3 Brewers Golden English Ale (3.6% abv). As mild is so rarely available, I tried it and found it in decent condition.



Our final stop was North Beds CAMRA's 2024 Pub of the Year, the **Stone Jug** at **Clophill**. Another historic village pub that has been in the same family for many years, it featured Nethergate Old Growler (again!), Horne's Locked Hornes (4.3% abv) and Rocket Brewer's Meteor (3.9% abv). As it was the last stop, I allowed myself two strong halves this time. The Growler was a dark beer, very good and well kept, and Locked Hornes, an amber beer, very enjoyable and in good condition, of course. The Stone Jug was very busy even before our group arrived. Is Thursday the new Friday?

Fytton Rowland

Wetherspoons Autumn Beer Festival 2024



Traditional dates mean that the Wetherspoons nationwide beer festival always follows very soon after CAMRA's own Bedford Beer and Cider Festival. From our point of view as Bedford CAMRA activists, this is a shame, as our own four days of hard work behind the bars at Bedford Corn Exchange have generally left us rather too tired to enjoy the 'Spoons event fully. Not to mention the fact that we may possibly have drunk a little more beer than usual during those four days...

Our festival finished with 'Knockdown Sunday' on 6th October. Wetherspoons' festival started on Wednesday 9th October; however, Jamal Waisome, manager of the Pilgrim's Progress, had invited CAMRA members to a special session on the evening before his festival started, Tuesday 8th October. His generous offer included free tasting of several of the special festival beers, accompanied by free pizza – too good an offer to refuse. (And a good reason for you, dear reader, to join CAMRA before October 2025 if you are not already a member!)

So despite only one free day between our festival and Jamal's, a good number of us trooped along to Bedford's Wetherspoons in Midland Road, and a good time was had by all.

A major feature of Wetherspoons festivals is a range of beers brewed specially for the

occasion by overseas brewers, who visit Britain and brew to their own recipes at a British brewery. These unique and unrepeatabe beers are always at the top of my list to sample!



My first choice was no-brainer – I'd never had a Japanese real ale before! Toshi Ishii of Ishii Brewing in Tochigi has worked in breweries in the USA, Canada, the UK, Norway and the Czech Republic before establishing his own company with his wife Yokiko in 2021. This year, he worked at Banks's in Wolverhampton (one of Marston's sites) to produce Ori Hime Pale Ale (4.3% abv). His success has led to some Japanese farmers growing hops, to replace the imported ones he used before! While it claimed to be an American-style golden beer, to me it had a quite distinctive flavour which I very much liked, and though it was my first beer, it turned out to be my favourite one of the evening.

Next came a New Zealand brewer, Martin Townshend of the Townshend Brewery in Motulka, which is 'in the heart of New Zealand's hop-growing area' and uses the slogan 'Ales of the Unexpected'. He brewed for Wetherspoons at Hook Norton Brewery. Townshend Dinner Ale (4.2% abv) is an English-style amber cask-conditioned ale with 'full-bodied character and a smooth finish', which he's been making for 18 years. It was one of the fist cask ales brewed



commercially in New Zealand. It's certainly English-style – you could have fooled me that it was an English real ale!

Deserting the products of the overseas brewers, I next tried Canberra from the Windsor and Eton Brewery, a 'chestnut seasonal ale with a rich, full and satisfying malt flavour'. I'm not generally a dark-beer fan but at festivals I feel I should go out of my comfort zone, and I didn't regret choosing this dark ale, which was indeed satisfying.



Returning to my more usual golden style, my next beer was Bateman's Salem Session IPA (4.1% abv), a new product from the well-known Lincolnshire brewery. While not of a memorable strong flavour, this was a very acceptable session beer, as it claimed to be, and had I not been at a festival I'd have happily continued with it.

For my final selection I returned to another one of the foreign brewers – Kyle Huling of Urban South Brewery of New Orleans in the



Note the copies of the Firkin!

USA, who coincidentally had worked at Bateman's to produce his Wetherspoons special. I usually leave my strongest beer to the end, and Who Dat was a 5.0% abv golden ale, being brewed in cask-conditioned form for the first time. Interestingly, though he is one of the founders of Urban South, Kyle is not the brewer there – that is Alex Flores – but he was keen to brew a cask ale in England. Who Dat was a very hoppy beer, a style I like, and combined with higher alcoholic strength, the generous hops and a dosing of lemongrass, this made it an excellent beer on which to end my evening at the Pilgrim's Progress festival.

Fytton Rowland

Here's looking at you, Bedford!

First, you might wish to know that I've been working in Bedford since 2019, but I've been living in Birmingham since 1988, though hailing originally from Stockport, with the latter two places great for a day out beer-wise. I was also Birmingham CAMRA Branch Chair 2019-2023, guiding the branch through Covid, and winning a regional award for campaigning work, I felt a bit of a fraud for that, as I thought I was only doing what the role required. If you're a keen reader of other magazines as well as the excellent one in which this article is appearing, you will know I was Editor of *Forward to the Bar*, the Birmingham Branch magazine, for which we won another regional award; sadly, owing to lack of advertisers, we had to stop the magazine a year ago as we were losing money on each edition. Check online if you want to have a look.

Gentle reader, I'd like to offer an outsider's view of your fair town.

I think the people of Bedford have taken me to their collective hearts, but I still feel somewhat of an outsider, as I generally only stay in Bunyanville two nights a week, and as I'm a teacher we are told not to venture out on a school night, which indeed I don't do that often.

That advice notwithstanding, I have in my time in Bedford seen some of the beer and pub attractions in the town. Living on the Birmingham/Solihull border, your county town reminds me very much of Solihull centre, with both being very compact and centred round a few streets. I do have to say that Bedford centre is, if you pardon the pun, streets ahead of Solihull centre, with the latter not really being an exciting place for drinking, unless you venture to the greater Solihull 'country pubs'.

Bedford however is, in my humble opinion, well worth an afternoon or evening ale trail (CAMRA promotes responsible drinking, so 'pub crawl' is not PC, eh?). If your idea of

such a jaunt is a pint in a certain number of pubs, then you are well served here. Or just spend a leisurely session in one or two.

I don't really need to tell which are the go-to places in Bedford, but suffice it to say that The Wellington for real ale and Beerfly for craft beer are on my favourite list, with the Pilgrim's Progress another good shout... Yes, I know, some CAMRA members will be shouting at this article "When I joined CAMRA in the 70s, it wasn't to support keg beer or cheap beer!!!!". Well, it's 50 years on now, folks, and the times have a'changed.

I haven't ventured outside the metropolis, but I hear good things about a number of county-wide pubs. Maybe one evening I'll venture out? Now I am writing this on Thursday 3rd October, having been to your highly esteemed CAMRA Bedford Beer & Cider (and Perry, of course) Festival the previous day. I had a good chat with some lovely people of all ages. It was interesting that one 20-something couple didn't know what CAMRA is, so my good self and a local CAMRA member put them right. By the by, the local member commented to me that he wished that there would be a few stronger beers at the festival; I'd say maybe one or two more, to entice the tickers and/or those who look forward to our (final) nightcap?

I enjoyed your festival, which I've attended every year since 2019, either side of Covid. I did have the feeling last year and this year that attendance is down, so support your local festival!

Well, I hope my article is worth its weight in print. I'm off to crack open my bottle of mead from the friendly Mead Man from Rookery Mead, who kindly sponsored your festival t-shirts, and with whom I practised my Duolingo Scots Gaelic.

Slàinte mhat!

Martin Collinge

CAMRA, the Campaign for Real Ale. The Firkin is produced and distributed by volunteers to most pubs and clubs in Bedfordshire north of a line joining the M1, Clophill, Shefford and Tempsford. We welcome correspondence and any relevant features for publication. Views expressed here may not be those of the Editor, the Campaign for Real Ale, or its North Bedfordshire Branch.

Items for publication in the next issue should reach the Editor by the date shown at the foot of this page. Edited by Fytton Rowland, 73 Dudley Street, Bedford MK40 3TA
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Closing date for next issue 15th February 2025

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

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See the branch website for diary information



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Why our yeast needs to be locked up

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