

# The Firkin



**FREE**

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## **Fox, Carlton, North Bedfordshire CAMRA Pub of the Year 2025**



***EDITORIAL  
NATIONAL PUB OF THE  
YEAR 2024  
JANUARY PUB TRIPS  
HORSE AND GROOM  
CLAPHAM***

***NORTH BEDS PUB OF  
THE YEAR 2025  
NOVEMBER PUB TRIP  
PUBS ALONG THE OLD  
A6***

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

# The Firkin

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## Why our yeast needs to be locked up

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# Editorial



The Annual General Meeting of the North Bedfordshire branch of CAMRA will take place in April 2025. I am retiring at the AGM after fifteen years as editor of the *Firkin*, so this is my last issue. As I write, it seems that it will

also be *the* last edition of the *Firkin*, since the branch has not found a volunteer to replace me. Printed CAMRA branch magazines, available free from pubs because they are paid for by advertising, are a dying breed in this era of digital publications, as it is hard to find sufficient advertising to cover their printing costs. If this does turn out to be the last issue of the *Firkin*, at least I have been able to report CAMRA's national Pub of the Year for 2024 (see below).

So I bid you farewell, my loyal readers. Please go on supporting your local pubs, and scoring their beers, to help your local CAMRA branch choose their Pub of the Year and the pubs to put

into the annual Good Beer Guide. It's easy to input beer scores on the CAMRA website.

However, I do intend to stand for re-election as Chair of the North Bedfordshire branch of CAMRA at the AGM, so I won't be without local responsibilities. I am about to turn 81, and my friend and colleague, the branch Secretary Peter Argyle, has already reached that age. The branch really does need some younger volunteers for these officer positions. If you are a real-ale drinker and a pub regular, perhaps even a CAMRA member but not very active, and a generation or two younger than Peter and me, please consider becoming more active in CAMRA branch meetings, and attend the AGM on 24th April.

Our neighbouring CAMRA branch, East Bedfordshire, has, on the other hand, has just launched a new branch magazine, *Look Yeast*, so if you also visit pubs in the Biggleswade and Sandy area, look out for copies!

*Fytton Rowland*

## CAMRA National Pub of the Year for 2024

CAMRA has announced the winner of the Pub of the Year for the whole UK for 2024. It is the Bailey Head in Oswestry, Shropshire

Nestled near the Welsh border in the charming market town of Oswestry, the Bailey Head is a must visit for beer lovers. The pub has one of the largest beer ranges of any in Shropshire, claiming to have sold over 3,400 different draught beers since opening in March 2016. Six constantly changing cask beers, always including one dark beer, are supplemented by eleven other draught beers, plus four ciders and a perry. The pub also has a substantial range of canned and bottled beers from across the UK and overseas. The Society of Independent Brewers (SIBA) named the pub the UK's Best Rural Independent Craft Beer Pub in 2020, and it has been a finalist for the same award several times since. Regular tap takeovers and meet the brewer events, among other activities, are organised for the local community.

The three runners-up for the PoTY title were: the Black Horse in Preston, Lancashire; the Three B's in Bridlington, Yorkshire; and Little Green Dragon in Winchmore Hill, London.



# The January Pub Visit Season 2025

Each January the North Bedfordshire branch of CAMRA visits a number of pubs around North Beds to assess how well they are keeping their beer (and how welcoming the pub is). This is in order to choose our entries in the next year's *Good Beer Guide*, and also our local branch Pub of the Year (PotY). This issue of the *Firkin* reports those trips. The first one this year was a walk around Bedford town on 16th January, and this was followed on 23rd and 30th January by two minibus trips to visit country pubs.



Our town walk started this year from the **Devonshire Arms** in Dudley Street, **Bedford**. The Devvy is generally in contention for

PoTY, and it's also usually busy, even on a wet Thursday in January. The only concession to the date was a reduction in the number of handpumps in use from six to five – they carried Brewpoint Anchorman, Timothy Taylor's Landlord, Adnams Ghost Ship, St Austell Tribute and Fullers London Pride. I always drink Anchorman in the Devvy, and it was in excellent condition.

A short stroll then took us to the **Gordon Arms** in Castle Road, more of an eating pub than the Devvy, and still serving evening meals at 7.30ish. Often two cask ales on, but only one on this occasion. It's another Wells house, so it was Anchorman again. I decided to skip my half at this stop, but the others said it was in quite good condition but not quite as excellent as the Devvy's.

Next stop, around the corner into **Newnham Street** for the **Three Cups**. It's a Greene King house but had no GK casks on its handpumps on this evening – just Landlord again, plus the Blonde Ale from 3 Brewers of St Albans (which brews in Hatfield!). I had the less usual beer, the 3 Brewers, and found it in very good nick.



A very short walk brought us to the next stop, the **Castle**. Another Wells pub, which in the days of "Wells and Young's" usually featured a choice of Young's beers. Today just one – Young's Original London (3.7% abv), which I tried – was on

along with Ghost Ship, Tribute and Directors (still badged 'Courage' but heaven knows where it's brewed now!). The Young's was another beer in good condition. These pubs on the east side of Bedford town centre all keep their beer well.

The party then moved on to another GK pub – the **Ship in St Cuthbert's Street** – for their final drink of the evening, but as that would have taken me further away from home I decided to skip it and walk directly home from the Castle.



The next Thursday took me on a longer journey from home across town to the **Burnaby Arms** – a taxi ride this time – the start of our minibus trip

northwestwards out of town. Like so many real-ale pubs nowadays, they only had one cask ale on, and it turned out to be Fullers London Pride. Certainly one of the 'usual suspects', but in good condition and enjoyable. In the Burnaby we gather in the open-fire corner, but the licensee had had trouble lighting the fire and it was very smoky!

Our minibus turned up to save us from the smoke and we headed first to the **Cock at Pavenham**. The Cock is an attractive village pub, and this time its fire was burning properly and the pub was pleasantly warm. It had four cask ales on, too: London Pride again, Wainwright, Draught Bass

(rare around here) and Marston's 61 Deep. The 61 Deep came from the last-ever brew of it – it being one of the beers that Carlsberg Marstons is discontinuing, as mentioned in our previous issue. We mostly had our farewell glass of it; a nice pale bitter, and in good condition.

Our next pub was the **Sun at Felmersham**, another attractive village local with a fire burning in the grate, which offered Wainwright Amber and Timothy Taylor's Landlord on handpumps. But – a big but – the Wainwright pump carried the words 'Brewery Conditioned Beer'. In March 2024, Carlsberg Marston's Brewing Company (CMBC) launched 'Fresh Ale'. These are brewery-conditioned versions of their cask range, which are then kegged and served through cask handpumps. They positioned this as a way to 'revive' cask by giving it a longer shelf life. Given that people expect any beer being served via a handpump to be a cask beer, and are likely to miss the pump clip reference to 'Brewery Conditioned Beer', CAMRA considers this to be misleading and has launched a campaign called **Handpump Hijack**. Where we find examples of 'Fresh Ale' then the following warning will appear in that pub's entry on the CAMRA website.

### Misleading Dispense

**This venue has been flagged by CAMRA volunteers as using a misleading dispense method to serve beer.**

This is a 'Fresh Ale' - a keg beer served through a cask handpump. Find out more here **Handpump Hijack**. If in doubt, we recommend that you **Ask if it's Cask** before making a purchase.



Next stop – the **Swan with Two Nicks at Sharnbrook**, a Wells pub that no longer sells any Brewpoint cask ales. Why don't you sell Anchorman, guys? It's a very nice beer! It did offer London Pride (again), Taylor's Landlord (again) and Adnams Southwold. I had the Southwold and found it in very good nick. The Swan was crowded because it was quiz night – it's good to see a lovely village pub well patronised. The villages to the northwest of Bedford are very fortunate in having pubs that keep their cask ale well.

**ASK, "IS IT CASK?"**

The launch of 'Fresh Ale' by Carlsberg Marston's Brewing Company (CMBC) is a handpump hijack, which misleads consumers into thinking they will be served a cask-conditioned beer – which is far from the case.

Serving so-called 'Fresh Ale' though a handpump also boots a genuine cask beer off the bar, depriving consumers of choice.

CMBC claim to champion cask beer but have instead closed breweries and removed cask lines from bars.



On to the **Oakley Arms at Harrold**, another old village pub now quite heavily into food – and it had some different cask ales on, hooray! This licensee

had chosen Timothy Taylor's Boltmaker instead of the usual Landlord from the same Yorkshire brewery, and I chose it. Boltmaker has been CAMRA's Champion Beer of Britain in the past, after all. The other choice was from the Tring Brewery, and I'd not heard of it before: Going Loco. Described as a "creamy classic bitter" at 3.9% abv, those who tried it found it enjoyable.

Next stop, another pub doing very well on a cold January Thursday, and another of North Bedfordshire CAMRA's favourite pubs – the **Fox at Carlton**. (A few weeks later we chose it as Pub of the Year - see page 8.) A historic thatched village pub, significantly extended, it offers four real ales, two regulars (Tim Taylor's Landlord and

# January Pub Visit Season 2025 continued



Potbelly Best) and two guests. The guests on this visit were both from the Buntingford Brewery,

their Oatmeal Stout (4.4% abv) and Riwaka Station (4.8% abv), a “New Zealand style” beer. A real-ale stout is something of a rarity so most of our group tried it, but I chose the Riwaka and enjoyed it very much. It was of course well kept, as the cask ale at the Fox always is.

Our final stop was the **Swan** at **Bromham**, another expanded village pub, a Greene King house with five real ales available: GK Abbot and IPA, of course, plus Deuchars (3.8% abv) from GK’s Scottish brewery, and two independent beers, XT 10 from the XT Brewery, a 4.4 % abv stout, and Vale Brewery’s Gravitass, a 4.8% abv pale ale. This time I had the XT stout, and enjoyed it – it was in good condition. The pub was welcoming and warm, with another open fire burning, but not very busy at 10.30 p.m. Heading back to Bedford unexpectedly early, I could have had a half in the Pilgrim’s Progress and caught my last bus at 11.30 p.m., but I decided to walk briskly home instead.

Trip Three on the last Thursday in January started from the **White House** in Newnham Avenue, **Bedford**, a short walk from home for me. Dating, I imagine, from the interwar years, the White Horse is a suburban-style pub with a significant food trade, and indeed I ate there before our group gathered. The menu was mostly typical pub food, and I had steak and ale pie, very acceptable. This was another Wells pub with no Anchorman, and the cask-ale choice was St Austell Tribute and London Pride. I sampled Tribute, a traditional Cornish bitter, and it was also acceptable.

Then on to the minibus for a fairly rapid tour around pubs to the west and southwest of Bedford. First the well-thought-of **Anchor** at

**Great Barford**. Not many diners on this very cold Thursday in January, so our group was served quickly with their choice of Anchorman (hooray!) and Ghost Ship. My Anchorman was in excellent condition.

Then off over the historic Barford bridge to our next stop, **Cople**, and the delightful **Five Bells**, a proper old-fashioned pub with several rooms. A Greene King pub, so I had GK IPA, while the other cask-ale option was the almost inevitable Tim Taylor’s Landlord. The pub was pleasantly full, owing mainly to football on TV. Though it does do some food, the Five Bells is a proper beer-led pub. My half of IPA was well kept.

Next stop, back to a Wells house again: the



**Guinea** at **Moggerhanger**, which like the Five Bells is one of ‘my’ pubs – as CAMRA pub contact, that is. Again no Brewpoint cask

ale, though, and the choice was Adnams Southwold, London Pride, or Doom Bar. I chose the Southwold, which was in excellent shape. It was quiz night in the Guinea, but with the quiz in a separate room, the drinking area had plenty of room for us. It’s also a pub with a big food trade, though the old part is very much a village pub, with bare beams.

Next we drove to **Shefford**, a town with several pubs, and the **Brewery Tap** is (appropriately) the one with real ale available. It is no longer an actual brewery tap, though, with the closure of the B&T brewery. Its owner also owns the Wellington Arms in Bedford (the Welly), and is associated with the Nethergate Brewery in Essex. So two Nethergate ales, Essex Beast (a strong bitter at 6.2% abv) and Suffolk County were supposed to be on, but the Suffolk County had run out, and the Essex Beast ran out before all of our group had been served! I had 3 Brewers of St Albans’ Porter, the only remaining possibility, as all the others had run out. The

others had been Abbeydale Heathen, a 4.1% abv American-style pale ale with mosaic hops, and Ghost Ship. The pub was busy with locals, and the licensee apologised for the lack of choice – he was, of course, going to put new barrels on for the weekend on Friday morning.

And so to our final country stop – North Beds



CAMRA's 2024 Pub of the Year, the **Stone Jug** in **Clophill**. Situated in the aptly named Back Street, it is a

classic village pub with an open fire keeping us

warm. Considering it was 10.15 p.m. on a January Thursday, remarkably busy too, and with a large selection of cask ales: Cotleigh Kiwi Pale, the name tells you its style; Mighty Oak Oscar Wilde, a dark mild; Nuttycombe Snow Leopard, a 'white mild'; 3 Brewers Classic English Ale; and Vale Wychert, a sweetish bitter (3.9% abv), which I had. The atmosphere was pleasant and lively, and we were reluctant to leave! But we had to, and returned to the Pilgrim's Progress in Bedford. It was too close to the departure time of my last bus from the nearby bus station for me to have another half there, so the Stone Jug finished my evening's quaffing.

*Fytton Rowland*

## Horse and Groom, Clapham



The Horse and Groom is the oldest public house in Clapham, and is a Grade II listed building. It was first licensed in 1705, when it

was called the Horse and Jockey; it stands on a large plot of land which goes down to the river's edge. At one time it had a small meadow and a witches' ducking pool at the bottom of the garden. The land also had on it a stabling yard and hovels. In much later times the stables were used for overnight parking of cars.

The Horse and Jockey was a coaching inn during the 1700s and 1800s, and it was a stopping point for the London to Leicester coaches. In the 1760s, the Horse and Jockey was used by the Justices of the Peace and the Deputy Lieutenants of Bedfordshire. The pub cellar held those who were awaiting trial. It must have been a dingy place in those days, as the lighting was only by candles or oil lamps and the heating was by an open coal fire.

From 1813, William Lang was the owner until 1857, when on Tuesday 30th June the land and stables for five horses were sold by auction at the Swan Hotel in Bedford. Adjoining the land at that

time were a large corn barn, chaff house and granary, a cart shed, a cattle shed and piggeries.

In 1874 the pub changed its name to the Horse and Groom. From 1890 to 1922 the pub was owned by Newland and Nash. In 1922 it was taken over by brewers Wells and Winch (no relation to Charles Wells) until 1961, when Greene King bought it along with the rest of the Wells and Winch estate. GK have owned it ever since.

The limestone entrance arch to the old Stables can still be seen to this day. It was left during the refurbishment of the pub, as the top half of the dining hall. During the 1960s the Horse and Groom ran a Sunday league football team called the Groomsmen. It was a good side, but disbanded during the 1990s.



Now the pub is still owned by Greene King and has gone through another complete refurbishment, making it more suitable for diners, and is run by Riverside Dining.

*John Pickering*

# North Beds CAMRA's Pub of the Year for 2025

When it came to choosing North Beds CAMRA's Pub of the Year (PotY) at our branch meeting in February, unsurprisingly our choice came down to five old favourites. Four of those we'd visited on our January trips (see page 4) and the fifth had had a special visit by car by a few expert beer-tasters, as it didn't fit neatly into any of our bus trip routes.



The final vote was very clear-cut this year – the 2025 PotY was once again the **Fox at Carlton**, a lovely old thatched pub, a free house kept by landlady Alison Thompson, whose beer-keeping skills are very highly regarded. Her regular beers are Timothy Taylor's Landlord, a Yorkshire beer very popular in this area, and Northamptonshire's Potbelly Best, while her other two handpumps carry a changing range of real ales from breweries up to twenty-five miles or so from the pub.



As the Fox is a country pub, this year we decided that we needed a Town Pub of the Year as well.

Another of our top favourites won that title, having been in second place in our PotY vote – the **Wellington Arms in Bedford**. The "Welly" has played a key part in developing local interest in real ale and has long been a focal point for local CAMRA members.



For many years it has offered a impressive range of real ales, almost all from independent brewers. Change became inevitable after closure of the B&T brewery in Shefford. B&T surrendered the lease and the pub reverted to owner Burlison Inns in 2022. Fortunately, current manager Liz Sutton was offered a new tenancy and one of our best local pubs became a free house.



These were our only awards this year. Real cider is scarce around here and so there are really no candidates for Cider PoTY. And we had insufficient up-to-date evidence on local clubs to nominate a Club of the Year either. The Fox goes into competition with the PotYs of East and South Beds branches to select Bedfordshire's County Pub of the Year for 2025.

*Fytton Rowland*

# An Autumn Evening Pub Trip

North Beds CAMRA's Autumn pub assessment trip in November started at the **Wellington Arms** in **Bedford**, which had, as usual, lots of cask ales available to choose from. From Nethergate came Suffolk County (a chestnut ale at 4.0% abv), Complete Howler (dark ruby, 4.3% abv) and Stour Valley Gold (4.2% abv – but sold out). From Bateman's there were Victory (6.0% abv) and 5G (4.2% abv); from Burnt Mill brewery came Sea Echoes, a cloudy pale ale (4.6% abv); and from Wentsum was 1381, a session pale ale at 3.8% abv, which I tried and found very drinkable and in good condition.

Our bus headed first for the **Horse and Groom** at **Clapham**, a historic pub mentioned in other articles in this issue. It is a Greene King pub and I had GK IPA. The beer was very acceptable, and our large group was served very quickly by the pleasant staff despite the fact that the H&G is now an eating pub and was quite full with diners when we arrived.



We headed next to the **Bedford Arms** at **Oakley**, an old village pub extended and refurbished so that, as one of our group

commented, "It doesn't feel like a pub". Again, more an eatery. Two cask ales on, though, Doom Bar and London Pride. I had the Pride and found it acceptable, but those who had the Doom Bar were less impressed.



Next, we moved on to the **Falcon** at **Bletsoe**, a Wells pub with a problem – it stands across

the A6 from its village, with no speed limit or pedestrian crossing. I'm not sure I'd use it in the evenings if I lived in Bletsoe, given that I'd have to cross 60 mph traffic after a couple of pints.

Along with Taylor's Landlord and Adnams Ghost Ship again, this time we were offered Brewpoint Half the World Away, a dark beer at 4.5% abv, a seasonal ale from Wells. Most of us tried the Brewpoint beer, so it was running low by the time we'd finished with it.

Proceeding to **Carlton**, we tried the **Royal Oak** but no cask ale was on, so we diverted instead to our more usual haunt in the village, the **Fox**. Alison offered Tring Washington, a very pale beer (3.8% abv) made with American hops, presumably to note the presidential election which was on in November. I tried it and found it very nice, and of course well kept. Also on were Landlord (again!), Potbelly Best, and Nene Valley Egyptian Cream, a 4.5% abv stout said by those who tried it to be very good.



Now we turned back towards home, with a stop at the **Three Cranes** in **Turvey**, once a Greene King pub but now a free house

gaining a favourable reputation for cask ale while also serving meals. It offered Timothy Taylor's Boltmaker (a change from Landlord, and CAMRA's Champion Beer of Britain a few years back), together with London Pride, Black Sheep Best, Hobgoblin Ruby (which had run out) and St Austell Tribute. I sampled the Boltmaker and found it in very good condition.



The final stop of the night was the **Three Tuns** at **Biddenham**, another enlarged village pub now

mainly an eatery. It had Landlord and Greene King IPA on handpumps, though at rather high prices. I finally sampled Landlord! It was well kept, and the atmosphere was pleasant.

*Fytton Rowland*

# The Old A6: Ale between Clapham and Elstow

As a follow-up to my article on Old Pubs of Bedford in the Autumn 2024 issue of the *Firkin*, I thought I'd extend my crawl north and south a bit. Clapham is the first village north of Bedford's latest fringe (Brewpoint, Sainsbury's, The Towers...). A growing place, Clapham, with a population of 3,643 as at the 2001 census, then 4,560 in 2011. Pub numbers have dwindled over time, to now just two. Formerly there were The Swan (pub c1829-c2010), The Star (1850-2017?), and The Vicar of Wakefield (pub without a bar, 1868-1978; named after the still popular 1766 novel by Goldsmith). In addition, The Clapham Club and the DERA Social Club (Defence Evaluation and Research Agency; 1995-2001) also welcomed drinkers. Leaving just the **Fox and Hounds** and the **Horse and Groom**, both with identifiably rural titles.



**The Fox and Hounds** is a village pub with two bars, the public bar very busy when I visited, the lounge entirely empty. London

Pride (very acceptable) was the only real ale on, although a seasonal brew was possibly arriving later in the year. There's a neat garden and children's play area, with a marquee behind the public bar. There's an attractive-looking menu. The pub is dog-friendly, and Jasmine and the team saying "I know what my customers like."



**The Horse and Groom**, nearer Bedford, was listed by English Heritage in 1987 as Grade II, of special interest. It

dates from the 17th century and is timber-framed with an old clay-tiled roof. The first reference to the public house is in 1812 under the name of the Horse and Jockey. This attractive old coaching

inn has comfortable, divided seating areas. The Greene King Abbot was very agreeable; GK IPA also available to the very large number of customers at the one central bar. There is a strong emphasis on food, e.g. a roast on Sundays. The patio includes a fine children's play area and a large garden. Dogs are welcome; all very comfy there. See also John Pickering's article in this issue of the *Firkin*.



A little further south, the **Anglers Rest** was a popular resort for me and my Bedford Modern School colleagues until its closure in 2011. It became A Different Brew, an excellent and inexpensive

tea/coffee shop staffed by and supporting young SEN locals.

Coming into Bedford proper, Tavistock Street featured first the **Tavistock Pub and Carvery**, where I had numerous pints and meals. A Wells pub originally called the New Inn, it reopened after a prolonged closure, but sadly has now once again changed – into a fried chicken restaurant.

Next, on the corner of Harpur Street and opposite the Flower Pot, was the **Crown Inn**, 1830s - 2000s, remembered as a bikers' pub in the cellar bar; now a restaurant, it still bears its famous sign: 'Established in the reign of King George the Fourth'.

Lloyd Lugsden reminds us of several Bedford town pubs on the A6 (Bedford High Street) to add to the little list I mentioned last time: The Dolphin and the Olney Arms in volume 1, and the Lion (now the **Slug and Lettuce**), the New Inn, and the Silver Grill, now **Astons** (volume 2). The Bridge was long ago diagonally across from what is now the Mercure Hotel. Leaving town there would have been the Clarence (a gay pub latterly), and the Phoenix, just opposite the Railway Swan across the roundabout. Still

standing, the Phoenix has sadly not risen from the dead. Lugsden also notes that off St John's Street there were at various times fourteen pubs in Cauldwell Street; now there are none.

So just south on the A6 we come to Elstow, population 2702 in 2011, a village much more integrated into the Bedford–Kempston southern fringe within the A421 (plus Harrowden, Bunyan's birthplace). Lugsden notes the former Angel (up to the 1990s, where Oasis played (the first time round!) and The Swan (to 2011), among seven pubs the village used to boast.



The **Red Lion** still roars in Elstow. This large seventeenth-century building has many rooms with

subdued lighting, and televisions and pictures. Vicky and Nick, supported by Tyler, offer Doom Bar and a decent London Pride, with Hobgoblin coming soon and then probably Fireside from

Black Country Ales. There is a lively food trade, and a covered area outside.

A thought about opening times, to judge by their websites (but check this out) – the Red Lion has food and drink at all likely times all week; the Horse and Groom is closed on Mondays, but open all other likely times, less so on Sunday; the Fox and Hounds is similar to that, but open all week, with a later start on Mondays and Tuesdays.

More information on the Clapham pubs can be found in John Pickering's book *An Old Claphamite's View of Clapham* (2002), and in his own article in this issue. I am indebted to his book, and to CAMRA's own David Dupont of Clapham, plus Lloyd Lugsden's *Dead Pubs of Bedfordshire*, volume 1 (2022) and volume 2 (2023), and – again – the always valuable Bedfordshire Archives online.

P.S. The latest, third volume of *Dead Pubs of Bedfordshire* gives more detail on (from north to south) The Crown, the Bridge, the Fountain and The Clarence.

Paul Barnes



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# The Fox at Carlton



**North Beds CAMRA Community Pub of the Year 2024**  
**North Beds CAMRA Pub of the Year 2022 & 2025**  
**Potbelly Best and Timothy Taylor's Landlord permanent ales,**  
**two guest ales changing every 3-4 days.**  
**Home cooked food Tuesday-Sunday lunchtimes**  
**and Tuesday-Saturday evenings.**  
**Live music every month – check Facebook for details.**

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In 2025 our Monthly Specials are raising funds and awareness for The Repair Shed



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