

# ale

Cambridge & District Branch Newsletter

Issue 363

Autumn 2013



**CAMPAIGN  
FOR  
REAL ALE**

**The Portland Arms -  
one of Cambridge's  
best loved pubs**





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# Pub News

As has become the habit with Ale magazine I will open Pub News with some sombre stuff – thankfully less than in previous issues, but sombre never the less.

Planning permission has been sought to turn the demolition site that used to be, the **Rosemary Branch**, Coldham's Lane, into residential houses and flats. Cambridge CAMRA has objected, stating the obvious fact that far too many pubs have been lost in the very populated Cherry Hinton area.

The **Rupert Brooke, Grantchester** is on the market at the staggeringly high asking price of 850,000 pounds. Once called The Rose and Crown, the sellers state that the high asking is price due the romance of it's current name.

I am also concerned for the future of **The Tree, Stapleford**. Once a thriving community pub, some villagers think that owners, Greene King, have little appetite for restoring it to its former glory.



But let's get on to better news.



Congratulations to **The Black Bull, Balsham**, which has been voted as Best Pub in the Region in an award given by

The Publican's Morning Advertiser.

I like this pub, I also like its sister pub, **The Red Lion, Hinxton**. Unfortunately, in the opinion of our surveyors, the quality and condition of the beer has not



## Branch Diary

Don't forget that all Branch members are very welcome to attend the monthly business meetings.

Those upcoming are (all 8pm)

Tue 8-Oct: 8:00, Open Branch Meeting, Bank, Willingham

Tue 12-Nov: 8:00, Open Branch Meeting, Six Bells, Covent Garden

Tue 26-Nov: 8:00, Annual General Meeting, University Social Club, Mill Lane

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# Pub News Continued...

been consistently good enough for either to register in the CAMRA Good Beer Guide. However, both are worth a visit and I wouldn't fault the quality of the food they offer.



Congratulations also to **The Kingston Arms**, Kingston Street, deserved winner of Cambridge MP Julian Huppert's search for the city's best independent pub. Mr Huppert quoted by the Cambridge Evening News as saying, "I would

encourage everyone to visit our independent pubs... they are such an important part of our communities that we must make sure future generations can

enjoy them." and was seen taking his own advice when later that evening he was spotted in the Cambridge CAMRA Pub of the Year, **The Flying Pig**, Hills Road. Well done, sir!



Meanwhile, it's business as usual at **The Kingston** who have told me that they will continue to hold a beer festival every two months and still offer one of the best priced pints in the city

Further congratulations to Hayley and Steve



who celebrated their second year at **The Hopbine**, Fair Street, with a well attended beer festival in

aid of the Macmillan Cancer Support charity.

Their other pub, **The Portland Arms**,



Mitcham's Corner goes from strength to strength. It continues to be

a premium venue for local bands, is one of the few Greene King pubs in our area that offers Greene King XX Mild as a regular beer, and is holding a week long beer festival beginning 26th September

There is good news for city centre drinkers. Greene King have finally woken up to the success of the real ale selection in **The Mill**, Mill Lane and have announced that the nearby **Anchor**, Silver Street is to be added



to their Real Pub chain. According to the Real Pub website this chain purports to offer a

"complete pub experience", and colleagues who have visited other pubs in the chain (all of which are based in London) tell me that they can be very good. Let's hope that the Real Pub sign is better designed than the awful, and anonymous "Flame and Grill" sign, which has now replaced the traditional sign outside **The Boathouse**, Chesterton



Road. On the other hand, the "Flame and Grill" sign does reflect the American

style service of managed, rather than tenanted, Greene King city pubs. You just know that if you order food in one of these pubs you are going to be asked, "Do you want sides with that?"

Outside the city, **The Willow Tree, Bourn**, dismissed a few years ago by Cambridge CAMRA as a pub uninterested in providing good ale has



surprised us by holding a garden party and beer festival over the August bank holiday. Intriguingly called "The Enchanted Garden Party", the event featured beer from local brewers including **Lord Conrad** and **Moonshine** breweries.

Hello to Sandra Ramsey, who has been selling fine ales in the **Jolly Millers, Cottenham** for just over a year and to Greg Mourn who is celebrating his first month at the **Chequers, Cottenham**, which has also become the latest edition to our Locale list, serving **Fellows** beers on a permanent basis.

Our local breweries have featured in a number of village festivals, notably **Fellows Brewery** in the Cottenham Village Festival, and **Black Bar Brewery** in the Lodestar Festival.

Talking of breweries, there have been some notable successes for East Anglian brewers in the CAMRA Champion Beer of Britain awards. **Buntingford Brewery** (Hertfordshire) won the silver award in the Golden Ale category with Polar Star 4.4%, but topped that by winning the over all Champion Beer of Britain silver award with Twitchell Golden Ale (3.8%). **Bartram's Brewery** (Suffolk), was awarded silver in the Champion Winter Beer of Britain category with Comrade Bill Bartram's EAIS

Stout (6.9%), and **Growler Brewery**, Suffolk won Gold in the Speciality Beers category. Ale from these breweries can be found as occasional guest ales in most Cambridge free of tie pubs, including, **The Maypole**, Park Street, **The Cambridge Blue**, Gwydir Street, and **The Devonshire Arms**, Devonshire Road.

The CAMRA Champion Beer of Britain winner was **Elland Brewery** 1872 Porter (6.5%), from West Yorkshire.

From our correspondents;

Paul Treadaway reports further good news for city centre drinkers: **Pint Shop** has announced that they will be opening a new pub at 10 Peas Hill Cambridge this winter.

Fred Laband has told us that, with strong backing from brewer Batemans, **The Red**



**Lion, Swaffham** **Prior**, is to set up a new membership scheme. The scheme is still at the planning stage, but

initial thoughts include, T-Shirts, 10% reduction on food and an annual open night for members only, to include free beer!

**The Five Bells, Burwell**, is holding cinema evenings on



Mondays. The pub also hosts occasional Saturday music and BBQ evenings, the next

featuring "The Accidentalists" on 28<sup>th</sup> September.

Fred also mentioned **The Anchor** in



**Burwell** where he found the Tolly Roger Sunrise Ale (4.2%) from **Cliff Quay Brewery**,

# Pub News Continued...

**Ipswich**, very much to his liking. The Anchor holds a number of food events. Their Fish Supper weekend, beginning 20<sup>th</sup> September will see fresh fish on the menu for the whole weekend.

Ali Cook got on his bike and visited The Blue Lion, Hardwick and The Three Tuns, Fen Drayton.



He reports that **The Blue Lion, Hardwick** now has two guest beers to accompany

the Greene King IPA.

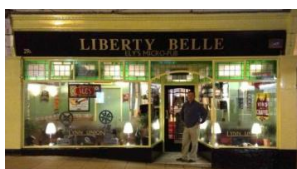
At the **Three Tuns, Fen Drayton** Paul and



his wife, and pub licensee, Sam, made Ali very welcome. The building is suffering

serious structural problems caused by an infestation of death-watch beetle. However, landlords Greene King are doing the right thing and are funding the restructuring. The pub remains open whilst building works continue and has five hand pumps. It's got to be worth a visit!

Steve Linley recommends a visit to **The Liberty Belle**, a new micro pub in Ely.



When he visited four real ales were available: "...including TWO dark ones, Yay!!"

## Ale Trails

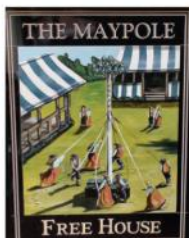
Well done to all of you who successfully completed the Cambridge CAMRA 2013 Ale Trails. Once again we had a great response, with lots of positive comments about the pubs visited. Many people told us they had discovered and enjoyed pubs they had not visited before – which is of course the whole reason for doing the trails. Ale Trail T-shirts should now be waiting for you in your requested pub.

Congratulations to Mr D.C.Pask who managed to visit every pub on all three of the trails and was the first name drawn to win this year's special prize of a meal for two and 6 bottles of Belgium beer kindly donated by **The Cambridge Blue**, Gwydir Street.



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# The Portland Arms



Fred Laband visits one of Cambridge's best loved pubs.

It is mid-August, we are hungry and thirsty and we know exactly where to go. Every couple of months we have a need for a jolly good burger and a decent pint, and The Portland Arms has never failed us before...

The Portland Arms is situated on a busy corner of the Cambridge ring road, not far from town in the area known as Mitcham's Corner. The pub is a local landmark; its exterior is classic neo-Georgian in style and is largely unaltered from the 1930's. The interior is comfortable, yet impressive. The lounge boasts original wooden panelling from the floor to the high ceiling. The pub nevertheless feels modern.

On entering, the gentleman behind the bar immediately attends and pours the drinks. There are 5 beers on today (usually there are 6). Greene King Abbot Ale, IPA and XX



Mild are available as are 2 guests: Elgood's Indian Summer(4.8%) and Growler brewery Umbel Ale, which is one of my favourite tipples. I am in a quandary as one of the reasons I visit this pub is that it is a rare outlet for Greene King XX Mild (3.0%). The dark stuff wins, and I choose my usual mild. It is full of flavour – licorice, damsons and quite treacly, yet not at all too sweet. I believe that this is what an expert would call a "well balanced beer".

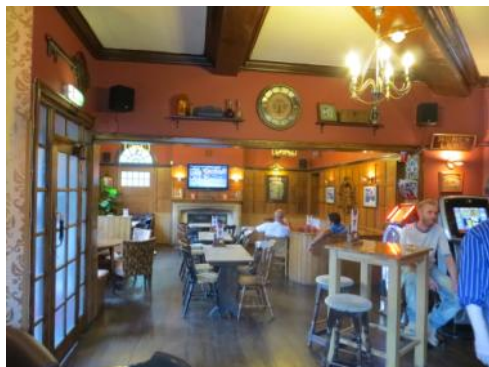
I confess that 5 or 6 years ago, I started to seek increasingly hopped ales, often from more and more obscure breweries. Only 2 years ago I actually went into one pub and was so disappointed that they only had Adnam's Bitter, Shepherd Neame Spitfire and Woodforde's Wherry that I left! I have nowadays seen my folly and rejoice in the average or balanced beer...

Nicola, driving, is easier to please. She enjoys a sparkling diet cola with ice, lemon and a straw.

The owner of the pub, Steve, has introduced a loyalty card scheme. It costs £5 to join. The card holder is then entitled to 10% off the price of the first round on each visit. Also, every 11th pint is free. The loyalty card owner will also benefit from promotions and offers in due course. I join and immediately recoup 50pence.

The lunch menu, is in our opinion, one of the best pub menus around. Not for the first time, Nicola chooses The Cajun Big One at £7.95 and I go for the Portland Big One, which is only £1. Yes, at lunchtime, the second meal (with a couple of exceptions) is always just £1. Both burgers are tremendous. The beef is succulent and thick and the chicken is covered in herbs and spices. Each burger also contains crisp bacon, lashings of mature cheddar, onion





apparently normally a quiet month for touring live music, but there is still a busy programme of music and Friday evening comedy.

Not wishing to stand still, Steve, with help from a relative or two has just completed rejuvenating the courtyard to the rear of the pub. It has quite a Hawaiian feel to it. In celebration, the pub is hosting a party with cocktails, free BBQ and music and games.



On the same weekend, Steve is organizing a beer festival to celebrate the 2nd birthday of The Portland's sister pub, The Hopbine in Fair Street near the Grafton Centre. Steve also tells me that The Hopbine is beginning to have more food specials. Fish Friday is, he tells us, very popular where the lucky drinker can obtain 2 fish and chips meal for £9.95.

Before leaving, I decide that I just can't pass up the chance to have a quick half of Umbel Ale. This beer is sold as "The Special Coriander Beer" at 3.8%. It has a bubbly head and unsurprisingly a herby aroma. The tasting is great. Initially quite biting with an apple or even blackberry crunch, there is a more lasting but subtle coriander freshness. I am pleased.

As we anticipated, The Portland Arms did not fail us.

rings and 2 hash browns. Yes, the hash browns are IN the burger! All of this is secured by a vertical steak knife. Nicola refers to these as "The Murdered Burger". A thin layer of burger sauce does not intrude. As if this isn't enough, the accompanying chips are thickly cut with skins left on. The side salad is lightly dressed and contains a mixture of leaves, tomato, cucumber, peppers and pleasingly plenty of thinly sliced onion. In other pubs, we often feel that there is not enough onion... We both tell everybody we know about these burgers. They are the best pub burgers we have ever had. The value for money is outstanding. (Dear reader, you are duly challenged to advise me otherwise!)

Steve is rightly proud of his food and beer, but there is a great deal more to this pub. A few years ago, a fair amount of investment cemented The Portland Arms legendary status as a venue for live music. August is



# Good Beer Guide Pub Selection

Have you wondered how CAMRA selects pubs for the annual Good Beer Guide? Each CAMRA branch is responsible for the entries in its area within the county and each listed pub must consistently serve real ale (and real cider if offered) of good quality.

To help us do this, we collect beer quality information through CAMRA's National Beer Scoring System (NBSS) in which members are asked to contribute scores for pubs throughout the year. It is easy to score your beers in NBSS. Log in to CAMRA's online pub guide, WhatPub (whatpub.com), using your membership number and the same password that you use to enter the CAMRA national website. Search for the pub and enter a score for each

beer that you drank in the Submit Beer Scores panel on the right of the screen. There is plenty of help and information about NBSS in the Beer Scoring area of WhatPub. A version of WhatPub optimised for use on a smart phone is due to be launched in September and a downloadable app will appear later, so you can score your beer in the pub while you drink it!

If you don't have online access at all, then ask your NBSS Coordinator at a branch meeting for paper forms and we will enter your scores for you.

Having collected thousands of beer scores over the year, we generate a report in January giving the average, best and worst scores for each pub and a confidence factor based on the number of scores received.

The Branch Committee uses these data to draw up a list of eligible pubs with the highest average score, supplemented by other sources of information, and then visits them to update the pub details ahead of a selection meeting in February. All branch members are invited to that meeting at which we select our quota for the next Good Beer Guide.

To make this work better, we need many more members to enter their scores. We value the opinions of all members whether active or not and we need as many opinions as possible for as many pints in as many pubs as possible. This is so we can have confidence in the statistics. We ask members to score the pubs continually not just once or twice. NBSS works across the country not just in our branch. If you are not a member but would like your opinions of beer quality in pubs to count, then join CAMRA!

## PUBS that Offer Discounts to CAMRA Members

The following local pubs offer a discount on production of a signed and up to date CAMRA membership card:

- The Maypole, Portugal Place, 10% off a pint
- The Mill, Mill Lane, 10% off a pint
- The Cambridge Brewhouse, King Street, 10% off Cambridge Brewing Company Beers
- The Hopbine, Fair Street, 10% off a pint.
- The Kingston Arms, Kingston Street, 50p off a pint
- The Pickerel, Magdelene Street, 10% off a pint
- The Fox, Bar Hill, 10% off bitter.



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# Ale Aboard!

Fred Laband travels by train, but no more than ½ an hour from Cambridge.

## Brandon (254)

Brandon is about 30 minutes by train, and is well worth a visit for the real ale drinker. The flint encrusted buildings here house some hearty beer and eating!

The main road up into town has the **Ram Hotel** on the right, which has 4 beers on tap. I go for a Rusty Bucket (4.4%), which is fruity and hoppy in equal measure, and is brewed just over the road at the **Brandon Brewery**.



Further into town, The **Flintknappers** stands proudly at the main junction and offers great value to the traveller. The Greene King IPA at 3.6 % (£2.55) is served with a frothy head and is clear as a bell. The other pump has



Abbot, but John Smiths and Guinness are strangely available in cans. The food is a bargain. For £5.25 the chicken burger consists of a well peppered butterfly breast, chips and crunchy onion rings, but there is a salad bar, where you can add fresh onion, peppers, coleslaw, etc. as you wish. For a further £2 you could choose the Yabbadabbadooburger... The oak beamed ceiling is around 400 years old, which is a good effort seeing as the pub was built in 1933! This pub had been boarded up earlier in the year and it is reassuring to see it flourishing. I am tempted to join the group soon to depart on the coach to Newmarket

rates, but decide my money would be better invested in a few bottles from the brewery on the way back to the station.

## Royston (234)

I have always had a soft spot for Royston. About 15 minutes from Cambridge by train, it is a good sized town for a quick visit. A few years ago, Woolworths left, the toy shop closed and Royston looked worryingly empty. However, in recent times the odd boutique and coffee shop has breathed new life into this pleasant market town. On arrival at the station in mid-October, I head



south along Kneesworth Street. The **White Bear** is on the left. This pub is part of the Oakademy; I have a super

pint of the very light yet citrusy Endless Summer (3.4%).

The town has a small market each Saturday - the fruit and veg stall is very busy. From an adjacent stall, it is advisable to bag a few Royston sausages, which possess a real meaty kick. Just to the side of the market square is the WI market with temptingly priced cakes and jams... I buy some biccies.

The real jewel in Royston's crown is the Thai Rack Glasshouse, which is my favourite restaurant in the entire world! The architecture is beautiful, the service excellent and the food tastes as good as it looks. On returning, there is just time to pop into The White Bear for a golden pint of **Buntingford Brewery's** Twitchell (3.8%). Just before entering Cambridge, I can't help nibbling one of Mrs. Peregrine's melt in the mouth chocolate drizzles.

## Thetford (205)

This is the next stop after Brandon. Provided you go on the right Saturday, the Dad's Army Museum will be open. The volunteers that staff the museum are very friendly and can answer pretty well any question. The 2010 statue in memory of Captain Mainwaring is well worth a pilgrimage. (He seems a little lonely!)

Thetford also has a newly opened pub – JD Wetherspoon's



**The Red Lion.**  
The pub I feel is a bit of a mishmash. It is full of light, which is something that I like. Furniture

and furnishings dominate a little too much for me – there are all kinds of glistening light fittings hanging from a rather garish pea-green ceiling. I also cannot quite fathom why a picture of Ayrton Senna is at the far end of the bar. (While driving for Lotus he once spent time living in Attleborough but not Thetford.) I am disappointed by the range of beer on offer from the 8 or so handpumps as Ruddles, Abbot, Hardy's & Hanson and Old Speckled Hen are all now brewed in Bury St. Edmunds. I choose a pint of Golden Jackal (3.7%) from the local Wolf Brewery, and am not disappointed by its crisp zest; a super session beer.

## Ely (449)

Perhaps the easiest rail trip from Cambridge is that to Ely. The cathedral is one of the seven wonders of the medieval world and is a breather from any viewpoint. Ely is not a huge place; it has no out of town "megamalls" (yet) and so is home to many excellent independent shops. Toppings bookshop is rightly renowned for its breadth of titles and has regular literary speakers. If you travel to Ely

on the correct alternating Saturday, you will also find the award winning farmers market, home to Ely Gin Company. Ely has a small handful of pubs, each very different. My



favourite is the **Townhouse** in Market Street. Oakham's beers are excellent in this pub. This is the only pub in which I have encountered Three Witches (4.5%) from Oakhams; no doubt this will reappear next Halloween!

The other 3 pumps provide unexpected treats from various microbreweries. Buntingford Brewery is well represented here but on my most recent visit I have Hip Hop Columbus (4.3%) from Art Brew in Dorset.

Lunchtime is a close call between 2 restaurants on Fore Hill. The Gourmet Plaza (£6.10 Chinese buffet lunch including ice cream/jelly/fruit!) offers a wide choice, yet all of the dishes are cooked in small batches so are always freshly made. Directly opposite is Le Spice, (not French) an Indian restaurant where lunch is a bargain £5.95. A light starter of salmon tikka refreshes before the garlic chilli chicken, which is full of vegetables, assaults the taste buds.

There are other pubs of note in Ely. The **Fountain** is often home to London Pride, Adnams and Wherry, which can be supped in the dentists chair if you are that way inclined. I find the Adnams Bitter (3.7%) a bit too cold and wait for it to warm up before



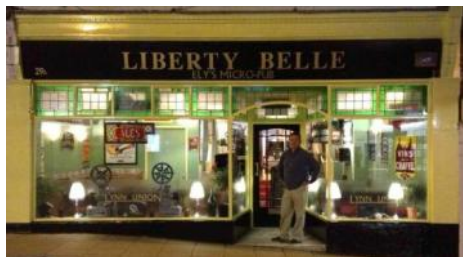
stepping along Silver Street to **The Prince Albert**. This classic community pub always

has the superb Greene King XX Mild (3%)

# Ale Aboard! (continued)

as one of its 6 beers. (Titanic brews are often found here too.) I am delighted to try Green Jacks Orange Wheat Beer (4.2%). Orange beers seem to be everywhere at the moment!

A welcome recent real ale addition to the Ely pub scene is **The Liberty Belle**, a new



micropub opened in June on Forehill. There are 5 constantly changing beers usually from local breweries. The beers are all served straight from the barrel. My pint of Bitter Old Bustard (4.3%) was remarkably nutty and smooth. I had previously never even heard of this brewery and it is certainly one to look out for! The owner, Martin is justifiably proud and excited in equal measure about this pub that is like no other I have ever been in.

## Bury St. Edmunds (368)

Actually 40 minutes by train, I have often been to Bury and been disappointed with the pubs, but perhaps I have been going to the wrong ones! One exception has always



been **The Masons Arms** which always serves GK beers well. This pub has recently been transformed, now with 9 handpumps. Most of the beers are from Greene King but there is always a guest or two on. I opt for Oakham's JHB (3.8%) which is good. The

food, in particular the chilli which is hot, is excellent. I unfortunately break a tooth, but the food is not to blame... every pub has different memories! On this visit I tried 3 new pubs...

The **Old Cannon** is a bright interesting



open plan pub with red paintwork. (Is the brewer an Arsenal fan?) Of 6

handpumps, 3 beers are brewed on site, and I opt for Old Cannon Best (3.8%) at just under £3 a pint. Also available are Adnams and Colchester "Diesel".

Next up is the newly opened



Wetherspoons, which is accessed by stairs or lift as it forms the top floor of the central **Corn**

**Exchange**. Being upstairs, with great areas of sky above, it has the feel of an enormous greenhouse, even more so with the number of miniature trees sprinkled about the pub.



The 10 pumps dispense 8 different beers. The Nethergates Lemonhead (4.1%) is more ginger than lemon and from Ipswich the Cliff Quay Best (3.4%) is sparkling. There is also Woodfordes Nelson Revenge



(4.5%) and 3 beers from Adnams on tap. I try Adnams Flame Runner (3.9%) which has hints of orange and ginger and is a great session beer. The only negative to such a fine new pub is the number of children running around.

After some shopping it is time to head home, but there is one more jewel to visit:

Altogether a more sedate pub is **The Beerhouse** which is on the roundabout near the rail station. This pub also brews its own and has 3 Brewshed ales



available. The handpumps dispense 8 different microbrews, many of which I have not heard of. 2 beers are from Brentwood – I choose “Marvellous Maple Mild” (3.7%) which unsurprisingly is both malty and syrupy. This is followed by a quick half of Inkie Pinkie (3.7%) from Inveralmond Brewery before catching the train home.

Bury St. Edmunds is a thriving town if the state of its pubs AND three breweries is anything to go by... Such a shame that there is only an hourly rail service.

## St. Ives (289)

Not strictly a train ride, but one that is guided by a hands-free driver! On the instruction of a resident friend, we meet at



**The Oliver Cromwell** which sits in the back streets between town and the river. Arriving in the

dark in early November, I know that this pub

is going to be something special as I walk past the chapel on the bridge. I have never seen this lit up before and find it haunting and charming.

The pub has a wrought sign hanging



between the 18th century cottages of Wellington Street. The pub itself has 6 hand pumps and also

appears to be something of a haven for the cider drinker, with 3 (or more) barrels on display.

Nicola is tempted to try the ginger cider at 6.5% and is bowled over by the intense flavours! Jane has a Carlsberg in a very attractive glass that must be about 15 inches tall!

Adnams Broadside and Southwold Bitter, Woodforde's Wherry and Oakham's JHB (3.8%) are all regulars, but I opt for one of the 2 guests. From Bolton, Bank Top Brewery's Flat Cap (4%) is a very orangey pale ale and so good that I have a second.

Between 5pm and 7pm, the pub has a “Happy Hour” system such that each time I buy a beer I receive a 50p token to redeem whenever I want. This is a clever variant of a happy hour as it ensures that I will have to return with my token. The bar has numerous bowls of cheesy biscuits, peanuts, crisps and cashew nuts free to all and lots of newspapers. I find that this pub ticks all the right boxes and I will surely return soon (with my 50p token.)



# Ascot

## CHEERS!

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# Midlands Taverns

Matt Miller continues his real ale diary with a return trip to Birmingham.

April 2013.

We arrived in Birmingham for the Easter weekend and took refuge in one of the many Travelodges in the city centre. That evening we headed for the **Old Fox Inn** on Hurst Street, on the edge of China town approximately 5 minutes walk from New Street station. This is a great Victorian style pub with a high ceiling and central bar, which connects the two rooms together. 4 hand pumps were available. We sat in the smaller room, the one facing the Hippodrome Theatre, and started with the Titanic Stout (4.5%), nice beer served at the correct temperature. This room was full of drinkers and had a number of the taller tables designed for people to stand by and perch at. In contrast, the larger room provided a lounge area with the more usual softer style seating.

Next door we had a brief look in **The Dragon Pub**. Entering by the back door we were led into a corridor, which opened up into the main area of the pub. This stretched across the block to the street on the other side of the building. It's a long winding place with a variety of spaces. A range of real ale was available, but on this occasion we decided to have a look elsewhere as nothing stood out or looked interesting to us on this occasion.

We headed back to New Street and found the **Wellington** (situated on Bennets Hills). This is one of my favourite establishments in Brum and I've dropped in many time before. This was still the same cracking drinking establishment with the traditional pub feel that I remembered. Up

to 16 hand pumps serve real ale with a good mix of local and national ales available. Beer orders are requested by stating the pump number, which is shown on a series of TV screens around the pub and is updated as soon as a pump is changed. OK, so that part isn't too traditional but the system works well. No food is served on the premises, except for the usual pub snacks, but you are allowed to bring in your own food; plates and cutlery are provided. Pig on the Wall (4.3%), from the local Black Country Brewery was our favourite beer on the list. We also bumped into another couple from Suffolk who'd made their way here for the weekend from Haverhill. This looks like a popular destination to escape from the Suffolk scenery – we certainly noticed the difference!

Back on New Street we stumbled upon the **Post Office Vaults**, visible through a small doorway that leads to a downward staircase. Although from the outside it looks like a place you would tend to avoid, we braved the staircase. Once inside it was choc-a-block full of people. A below street level room, with people crammed in every corner and a small bar with staff efficiently serving a continuous flow of customers with a continuous flow of ale. This was another drinker's only pub, with many real ales available and a huge range of bottled Belgium beers. We found out that the place had only been open a few weeks and was already going strong.



The following day took us to the **Old Joint Stock**, formally a large bank complete with the traditional tall windows and high ceiling. The bar is located in the centre of the room with access from all sides. This pub belongs to the

Fuller's chain and has their full range of beers and is rumoured to sell more Fuller's London Pride than any other pub in the country (despite being over 100 miles from the Brewery). After tasting the quality and freshness of the beers, it doesn't take long to understand why. The ESB topped our list for the favourite beer at 5.5%. This is also one of the few pubs to have remained in every edition of the good beer guide for at least the past 15 years.

The **Lamp Tavern** down in Highgate was next on the list. Although situated in Highgate it's only a few minutes walk from The Fox Inn and still close to the city centre. A small back street pub, this little establishment is run

by Eddie who has been managing this pub for the past 22 years. He keeps 5 or 6 real ales on with one brewed on the premises - on the roof! This is the place to talk to the locals and catch up on all the gossip. It's also recommend for tips on the latest pub developments and it was suggested that we checkout The Craven, another pub that has just been bought and is now operating as a free house. The breakfast / lunch menu at The Red Lion in the Jewellery Quarter is also worth checking out, apparently.

So it was that we moved on to **The Craven**, easy to find once we picked up the CAMRA map, which shows 105 pubs worth visiting in and around the city centre. So much beer and so little time! The Craven itself looks like a good old traditional pub, standing in an area of new modern high-rise buildings, thus giving the area the little character it has. Inside is one large room, formally 2 smaller ones according to the locals. We found a balanced range of ales, including a porter and a stout from the Black Country brewery. Real Perry was also on the drinks

menu.

On our final day we visited the afore mentioned **Red Lion**. We found a small, cosy pub with a large front bar and a small back room accessed by a narrow corridor. We opted for the back room where 4 pumps were available. The food menu offered 1 pound burgers complete with various toppings (bacon, egg, stilton) and, although tempting, it looked too much for a snack and there was nothing smaller on the menu!

We then went to **The Queens**, a brief stop situated nicely between the jewellery quarter and the city centre. We had a warm welcome here; this pub has many TV's showing live sport, presumably to attract the local students in.

On to **The Sack of Potatoes**, an appropriate match for the pound burgers, perhaps? To reach it we took the short cut through Aston University's campus. Situated on the far side of the city centre this is, predictably, an all round student bar with surprisingly good quality ale. Perhaps Aston's students are a little more discriminating than we have come to expect of their peers elsewhere? The Sack is a large pub but still has a traditional feel to it and is also a GBG entry.

Finally we returned to the **Post Office Vaults** to finish the evening off with a few pints of ale and a series of Belgium beers. For anyone that has not been to Birmingham, it really is a gem, with plenty of real ale drinking outlets and still the opportunity to neck 2 pints of ale for under £5 without compromising on quality. The pubs on this trip only scratch the surface on what Birmingham has to offer. So why not give it a go – even if, like me, you do get teased as the person who went on holiday to Birmingham.



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