

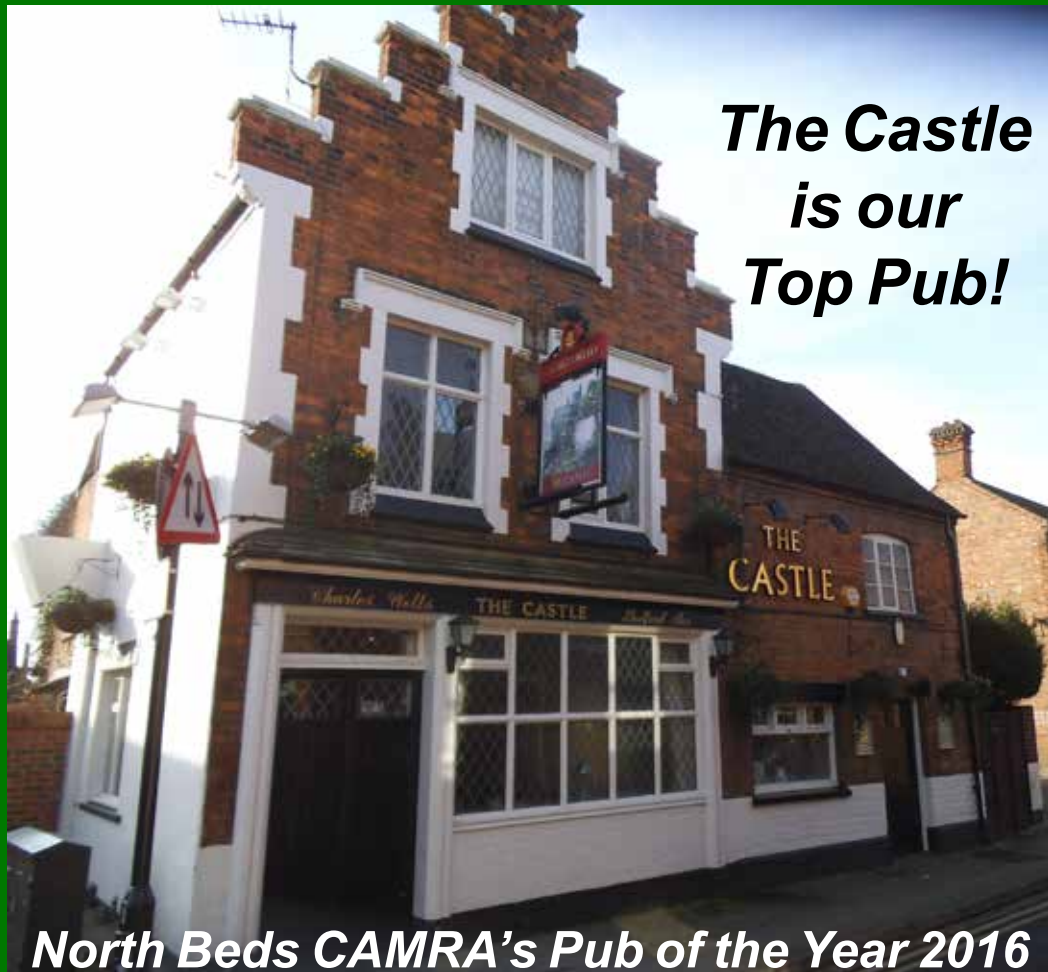
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CAMPAIGN
FOR
REAL ALE

FREE

Newsletter of CAMRA North Bedfordshire Branch Vol 41 No 1 Spring 2016



***The Castle
is our
Top Pub!***

North Beds CAMRA's Pub of the Year 2016

*CHAIRMAN'S CORNER
NATIONAL PUB OF THE YEAR
NORTH BEDS PUB OF THE YEAR
PUB NEWS
SPRING BEER FESTIVALS*

*WINTER PUB TRIPS
NOVEMBER PUB TRIP
BRANCH DIARY
PUBS IN BAYSWATER
MEET THE LANDLORD*

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Chairman's Corner



What makes a good pub? More

particularly, what makes a Pub of the Year? Reliably good beer is essential, but how to pick from such

pubs? At our branch meeting I asked what we should be looking for in making our choice. If I hadn't known already I would have learnt then that opinions differ. One person's ideal would be somebody else's dislike.

This was clear in the discussion we had, as there was something to like in all the pubs we considered. The discussion encouraged me to think more broadly – to appreciate the different ambience we find in our pubs. They say that

travel broadens the mind, and trying different pubs broadens our appreciation of them and what they have to offer.

As we move into spring and (hopefully) warmer weather why not try different pubs and, assuming you're a member of CAMRA, use the beer scoring system to submit your assessment of the quality of the beer. It's quite easy using the WhatPub website, and we consider those scores when deciding which pubs to nominate for inclusion in the Good Beer Guide. Scores from rural pubs are particularly useful.

While the branch tries to visit as many pubs as possible in the course of a year, we can't get to them all and your contribution can help us find some hidden gems.

Roger Stokes

National Pub of the Year



Just three years after being opened on the site of a former nightclub, the Sandford Park Alehouse in Cheltenham has been named the Campaign for Real Ale's National Pub of the Year.

Pub owner Grant Cook put in an offer on the Grade II listed building while on holiday in Thailand – a decision which has been rewarded by the Ale House being named the best pub in the country.

To create his perfect pub, Cook put up extra walls and a Georgian-style stairwell, and converted the main dance floor into a cellar.

On winning one of CAMRA's most prestigious titles, Grant said:

“At every stage of the competition, we've been delighted to get to the next round and, of course, we are thrilled to emerge from the last four on top. Winning the South West round seemed like the biggest achievement because there were so many pubs that we were up against.”

The award-winning pub has ten real ale hand pumps and one dedicated to real cider, which means it is able to cater for a wide audience of real ale lovers. As well as an amazing real ale and food selection, the Sandford Park Alehouse also holds an annual cheese and cider festival.

Champion Winter Ale

Chocolate Marble, a stout from the Marble Brewery in Manchester, is CAMRA's Winter Ale of Britain for 2016.

FLYING HIGH

FOR 2016, ALL OUR MONTHLY BEERS ARE NAMED AFTER DE HAVILLAND AIRCRAFT

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The Castle is at the Top of the Hill!

North Bedfordshire CAMRA branch's **Pub of the Year for 2016** is the **Castle** in **Newnham Street, Bedford**. The king and queen of the Castle, Roly and Kay Keech, have been licensees of this Charles Wells House for a couple of years now, and last year won the branch's Most Improved Pub award in recognition of their first year's achievements. Wells also made the Castle the company's pub of the year in 2014. Now they take CAMRA's top local honour.

The Castle is a real pubby two-room pub just on the eastern fringe of the town centre, five minutes' walk from the High Street. However, it doesn't only serve real ale, it also provides good pub meals every lunchtime and Monday-Friday evenings, and has five recently refurbished ensuite letting bedrooms as well. Roly and Kay are hands-on licensees and are usually to be found behind the bar along with their staff, and there is invariably a warm welcome for all customers – including an open fire in the winter. The pub is always busy, as Bedford people know a good pub when they see one.



The Castle

As a Charles Wells tied house, the Castle naturally features beers from the Havelock Street brewery primarily, but unusually for Wells pubs in Bedford, it gives precedence to the Young's beers, with all three of the regular Young's cask ales – Bitter, Special and London Gold – always available, and Young's seasonals, such as the ever-popular Winter Warmer and the summer beer Hummingbird, featured on the fourth pump in the front bar. The pumps in the back bar carry Wells Eagle and Courage Directors, with guest ales on the third pump there.

The Castle now goes forward to compete in the Bedfordshire county pub of the year contest, vying with last year's county winner, the **Black Lion at Leighton Buzzard**, and the **New Inn Ale House in Biggleswade**.

North Beds CAMRA has made four other awards this year.

The thatched **Fox at Carlton** is our **Country Pub of the Year**. Proprietor Alison Brown arrived a little over a year ago, and she has demonstrated her commitment to cask ale, knowledge about it, and skill at keeping it ever since. Wells Eagle and Fuller's London Pride are the regular beers, and two guest pumps serve ales less often found in these parts. She also holds an annual beer festival (see page 9). (More about the Fox on pages 12 and 13.)

Our **Most Improved Pub** this year is the **Bell at Odell**, another lovely old thatched country pub.



The Bell, Odell

The Bell has been our Pub of the Year in the past, and was featured in some of the Good Beer Guide's earliest editions forty years ago, but it has had its ups and downs recently. Current licensees James and Sally Bolton arrived in March 2015. In the past they ran the old Magpie at Harrold – now an Indian restaurant – but they have been away from the licensed trade for a while. The improvements they have already made deserve recognition.

We don't often nominate a **Cider Pub of the Year**, but this year we chose the **Polhill Arms at Renhold**. Long-serving licensee Paul Smith deserves recognition for his commitment to cider – the pub keeps two real ciders available all year, rising to four all summer.



Polhill Arms

And finally our **Club of the Year** award goes to the **RAFA Club in Ashburnham Road, Bedford**. The RAFA Club is committed to real ale and usually has four handpumps in use with beers from a variety of breweries. CAMRA members are admitted by showing their



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Local CAMRA Awards (cont.)

membership cards, and other non-members of the RAFA Club can pay a small fee for daily membership. The Club recently hosted a CAMRA Regional Meeting successfully, and will

also host North Bedfordshire CAMRA's AGM in July 2016. We wish them luck in the national Club of the Year competition! *Fytton Rowland*

Pub News

Artisan Tap, High Street, Bedford



The former **Bear** re-opened in December as the Artisan Tap, one of a small chain of pub specialising in craft beers. Greene King Old Golden Hen and three guest real ales are served on handpump,

and a wide range of mainly bottled craft beers is available. The modern interior includes high top stools, a white-tiled food service area and retro furniture.

Snacks and light meals are served. The Bear's garden and outside drinking area to the rear are still open. Find it on Facebook or call 01234 401020.

Sun, Felmersham

Licenses Ben and Hannah Just have left the Sun – for full details see page 19.

Old Ale House, Market Place, Woburn

A new micropub opened in January in a former flower shop, next to the Black Horse. Eight local and regional real ales are available on handpumps, plus real cider and perry from Potton Press. The pub also sells artisan keg, canned and bottled beers. Local beers feature heavily on the handpumps. Follow what's happening on Twitter [@The_OldAleHouse](https://twitter.com/The_OldAleHouse)

Wódka Live, St Paul's Square, Bedford

The former **Chameleon Bar** has reopened in a new identity with an apparent Polish flavour and music most evenings. Although the two old handpumps are still on the bar, there is so far no sign of anyone using them to serve real ale.

Clapham Sports & Social Club



This club, tucked behind the Tesco Express on Clapham High Street, has reopened with an open pub licence allowing it to serve any adult customer. Wells

Eagle IPA and Courage Directors are available on handpump, with an occasional guest beer sourced from local breweries. There is a fine view over the river from the rear balcony.

Snooker, darts and board games are popular. Call 01234 350925. *Peter Argyle*

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Spring Beer Festivals

Leicester Beer Festival (CAMRA)

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www.leicester.camra.org.uk

Wellie Spring Beer Festival

Wed 9 to Sat 12 March at Wellington Arms, Wellington St, Bedford. Open normal hours 12-11. 18 real ales on gravity in addition to the usual 12 on handpump, plus extra ciders. For more details visit the pub or call 01234 308033.

thewelly.wix.com/bedford

St Neots Booze on the Ouse Beer & Cider Festival (CAMRA)

Fri 17 to Sat 19 March at Priory Centre, Priory Lane, PE19 6HB (X5 stop 5 min). Open Thu 5-11, Fr 12-11, Sat 12-11. Check website for beer list, admission charges and other details. Regular X5 bus from Bedford.

www.hunts.camra.org.uk/festivals

Coventry Beer Festival (CAMRA)

Fri 15 to Sat 16 April at Coventry RFC, Butts Park Arena, Butts Rd (rail stn 10-15min). Coach parties welcome. Open 12-4, 6-11. Admission £2, Fri eve £3, CAMRA members free. More than 80 beers including local brewery specials plus ciders, perries and country wines. Food available all sessions.

www.coventry.camra.org.uk

8th "Sci Fi" Beer Festival

Thu 21 to Sun 24 April at Sir William Peel, High Street, Sandy SG19 1AG. Over 40 real ales and ciders available, barbecue and live music. Regular 73 bus from Bedford.

www.sirwilliampeel.webs.com

Bedford-Bamberg Spring Beer Fest (provisional)

Fri 29 to Sat 30 April at Harpur Suite, Harpur

Street, Bedford town centre. Open 12-12, admission free. Over 40 German beers, wines, schnapps and authentic German barbecue. Beers include several brewed in Bedford's twin city of Bamberg. Live German band.

www.bedfordcornexchange.co.uk

43rd Cambridge Beer Festival (CAMRA)

Mon 23 to Sat 28 May, under canvas on Jesus Green (X5 Victoria Ave 5 min). Wide range of local and national beers, plus cider, perry, mead, wines and foreign beers. Food includes locally baked bread, pork pies, ham and cheese counter. Regular X5 bus from Bedford.

www.cambridgebeerfestival.com

Devonshire Arms Annual Beer & Cider Festival (provisional)

Fri 27 to Mon 30 May, Devonshire Arms, Dudley St, Bedford. Extra real ales and ciders on gravity as well as the regular range.

www.devonshirearmsbedford.co.uk

Fox Inn Spring Beer Festival

Fri 27 to Mon 30 May, Fox Inn, High St, Carlton MK43 7LA. 18 real ales plus 6 real ciders served from a temporary bar in the garden. Four live bands, pizza, curry and hog roast Call 01234 720435. www.thefoxatcarlton.pub

H&H Beer & Cider Fest

Sat 28 to Mon 30 May at The Hare & Hounds, Old Warden SG18 9HQ. Additional beers and real ciders plus live music over the Spring Bank Holiday weekend. Check website nearer time for details.

www.hareandhoundsoldwarden.com

What?ub

For details of over 36,000 real ale pubs throughout the UK, visit CAMRA's national online pub guide at whatpub.com





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On the Road Again...

We gathered at the **Wellington Arms** in Bedford for a minibus trip to country pubs on 14th January. The Welly had eleven cask ales, too numerous to list, plus two ciders, on handpump. I tried Albion Ale from B&T of Shefford, which turned out to be a very quaffable golden ale, and well kept, as one expects in this establishment.

Then a phone call came in – bus broken down! Quick change of plan. Bus trip the following Thursday, walkabout this week.



So we strolled down the High Street to the **Rose**, now CAMRA-friendly, offering members a discount on cask ales. The

choice was Sharp's Doom Bar, Fuller's London Pride and Oakham Inferno. No contest – Inferno it was, and in turned out to be in good nick. Not many people were in – too early in the evening?



Across the swollen, rushing Great Ouse over the town bridge to the **Kings**

Arms, a barn of a Greene King house, with bare floorboards in the main bar. All the cask ales available at that moment were from GK – IPA, Old Speckled Hen, St Edmunds and Yardbird (4.2% abv). I chose St Edmunds while others went for Yardbird, and the standard of both was very good.

Next to the **Three Cups** in Newnham Street. GK IPA and Old Speckled Hen turned up again, along with two beers from White Park – Oast House (4.8% abv) and That One (4.7% abv) – and Milestone Lions Pride, Bartram's Brewery New Year Daze (a 6.2% abv effort from this quirky brewer), and Cornish Coast from the Joe Thomson Brewery (3.6%). I tried the Cornish Coast and found it a nice light golden ale – it had

been the guest at the Kings Arms too, but had run out by the time we got there. The standard of the cellar work was excellent again, as expected at the Three Cups.

Along the street a few yards to our only Wells house of the night, the **Castle** (see page 5). That evening it was definitely up to scratch. Four Young's beers (Bitter, Special, Gold and Winter Warmer) were joined by Eagle and Directors as usual, plus guests Arkell's 3B (4.0%) and Adnams Southwold. I can't resist Winter Warmer and I found it very good.

A few more yards brought us to the **Ship in St Cuthbert's Street**, another GK house. IPA and St Edmunds appeared again, along with Abbot, Hardy & Hanson's Rocked Out (4.2% abv) and the pub's own beer, All Aboard (3.9% abv). I went for Abbot, and found it well kept.

Our last stop was at Bedford's micropub, the **St Peter's Ale House**. At its opening in October it had had arguably too many cask ales on and they didn't sell fast enough. Now, down to five, more manageable, they all seemed in good condition. Milton Brewery's Justinian (3.9% abv) and Nero (5.0% abv), White Park's White Gold (3.8% abv) and Malt Store (5.0% abv), and Hart Family Brewery's No. 9 (4.3%) provided the choice, and I chose the No. 9. 'Why no beers from owners Red Brewery?', we asked. They had been selling so well that no casks of their own ales were ready yet, came the answer. They would be on at the weekend.

The following Thursday the postponed minibus tour of pubs north of Bedford took place. We met at Wells' **Burnaby Arms** in Bedford's Prime Ministers district, for a change – it had just reopened after a short closure for some building alterations. Only the small front bar was open yet, so our group made things quite crowded! Eagle, Directors and Young's Gold – the regular beers – were on. Owing to the building work, there was no guest ale. The Directors was well up to scratch. And so was the welcome from landlady Lucie.

On the Road Again... continued



The minibus stopped briefly on the yellow lines to pick us up, and then it was off to our first stop, the **Horse and Groom** in

Clapham. This Greene King house, refurbished for the new tenants, who made us very welcome, now has a Farrow and Ball feel to it. The usual Old English Inns food menu is served, but drinkers are catered for in several rooms, and a log fire burned in the grate. GK IPA, Abbot and Hardy & Hanson's Rocked Out were on. I chose Abbot and found it very acceptable.



Fox and Hounds

Then to the **Fox and Hounds** in **Riseley**. Little had changed since our last visit – it is still primarily an eatery

specialising in steaks. There's not usually a lot of room for drinkers, though they are made welcome and there was an open fire. On this cold January evening the place wasn't busy, so we could occupy some of the dining tables. This Wells house offered Bombardier and Young's Bitter on handpumps; 'Ordinary' was in good shape.

On then to the **Bedford Arms** at **Souldrop**. We'd been there in September and little had changed, except the beer quality which was now even better! The handpump choice was Black Sheep Best Bitter (3.8% abv), Phipps Red Star (3.8% abv), GK IPA, Ringwood Razor Back (3.8% abv) and – surprisingly still on – Marston's Christmas Pudding (3.9% abv). Session beers all. The Phipps was in very good condition. An open fire burned in the grate and the licensees were welcoming.

The **Swan with Two Nicks** is a Wells house in **Sharnbrook** High Street. A handsome double-

fronted building, it had had a light modernisation when the present tenants arrived. No fire in the grate this time, but the pub was certainly warm enough. Two cask ales were on – Eagle and Young's Winter Warmer. The Winter Warmer was this winter's slightly smoky version, and in good shape.

Then back to the Greene King theme at the **Bell** at **Odell** (see page 5). Very different from their predecessor, licensees Sally and James were friendly, and even gave us some cake to eat! GK IPA, Abbot, Yardbird and – to the delight of many – XX Mild were on the handpumps, together with Robert Burns Brown Ale (4.2%) from GK's Scottish subsidiary Belhaven. An open fire burned in the grate.

On to another thatched pub, the **Fox** at **Carlton** (see page 5). After recent refurbishment, there is now a contrast between the homely atmosphere of the bar area, and the white walls and bright lights of the dining area. On the handpumps were the regulars, London Pride and Eagle, together with Buntingford Polar Star (4.4% abv) and Fortitude from the Wantsum Brewery in Canterbury. The Polar Star was a light-coloured hoppy bitter of the type I like especially, the Wantsum was a more standard amber bitter but very palatable, and both were very well kept. We finished at the **Bedford Arms** in **Bedford**, where some of us stayed gossiping about Bedford pubs and licensees until almost midnight.

Our final January tour started from the **White Horse** in Newnham Avenue, **Bedford**. This large suburban Wells pub was celebrating Burns Night later in the evening but was quite quiet at 6.45 p.m. Eagle, Bombardier and Navigation Brewery's Britannia were on the handpumps, and the Bombardier was very acceptable.

Then on to our minibus and off to the **Five Bells** at **Cople**, always a Greene King XX Mild stronghold under its previous licensee – and indeed, there the mild was again, alongside GK

On the Road Again... continued

IPA. We mostly had the mild and found it in very good shape. One of our nicest old village pubs, this, with an open fire and low old beams. It now does some food but is not dominated by it.

Food does, however, dominate nowadays at our next stop in **Moggerhanger**, the **Guinea**, where the first thing staff said to us was 'Are you here for a meal?' A Wells house now considerably extended, the Guinea offered us Eagle, Directors, Young's Bitter and Winter Warmer. The Warmer was in very satisfactory condition. The pub was quite full with diners.



Another extended pub now concentrating on meals was our next stop – the **Crown** at

Northill, a Greene King house this time. GK IPA and Abbot were accompanied by Ilkley Brewery's Mary Jane (3.5% abv), but the guest was taken off sale before I reached the front of the queue. So I had Abbot, which was in an acceptable state. Belhaven's Robert Burns Brown Ale took over the third handpump.



A drive through the country lanes brought us to the **Stone Jug** at **Clophill**, a real village pub, with a dominoes evening filling most of the tables. They had their three regulars – Otter Amber (4.0% abv) from Devon, St Austell Trelawney

(3.8% abv) from Cornwall, and Shefford Bitter (3.8% abv) from nearby B&T – together with Ampthill Brewhouse's IPA (4.5% abv) and Mauldon's Silver Adder (4.2%) on handpump. The Silver Adder was in good nick right to the end of the barrel.



Green Man

Another longish drive took us to the **Green Man** at **Lidlington** (see page 15), which had Sharp's Doom Bar and 'Green Man Ale' (3.4%)

on its two handpumps. The landlord gave us some hints about where the house beer came from – it was certainly very palatable – saying the brewery was quite nearby.

Back to the **Bedford Arms** in **Bedford** again, where this time the choice was Bombardier Burning Gold, Young's Bitter, Directors and Vale Brewery's Black Beauty (4.4% abv), a dark beer in very good shape. And so ended our exhausting January pub tour season for 2016!

Fytton Rowland

East Anglian Champion Beers

CAMRA's East Anglian region (to which Beds belongs) has announced its Champion Beers of the region for 2016, which now go forward to compete in the national Champion Beer of Britain competition, held at the Great British Beer Festival in August. The overall champion beer of the region was Mauldon's Black Adder, a stout brewed in Sudbury in Suffolk.



There was good news for Beds brewery B&T of Shefford. Dragon Slayer – a 4.5% abv golden bitter – was judged the champion Best Bitter of the region, with a chance of being national champion in this category.

And in the Old/Strong Mild category, Black Dragon Mild (4.3 % abv) won the regional bronze award. Congratulations to the Shefford brewers!



Bayswatering Holes

This winter's joint London social for the three Bedfordshire branches of CAMRA, began at the **Bayswater Arms** in



Queensway. The pub was festooned in Halloween stuff, and Taylor Walker 1730 was

£4.60 a pint. Also on were GK IPA, Hobgoblin Gold and Adnams bitter.

Our second stop a few streets away was the **Leinster Arms** in Leinster Terrace. The pub was decorated for the Rugby World Cup, and Pedigree New World, Tribute and London Pride, plus Westons Old Rosie cider, were on. Sadly the Cottage Trafalgar IPA was not available.



On to **The Mitre** in Craven Terrace, with Victorian architecture, wood panelling and etched windows. Twickenham Grandstand was £4.25, and there were also Young's

Bitter and Special, Weston's Rosie Pig cider and Truman's Zephyr. One group had a meal here and said it was very good. We strolled through Lancaster Gate, hoping for a glance at the Football Association HQ, but found sweet FA.

We continued to **The Victoria** in Strathairn Place, again finding a Victorian ambience with many beautiful etched mirrors. Ales included Backyard Brewhouse Treason, Fullers Oliver's Island and London Pride, and Adnams Wild Hop. The pick of the bunch was Settle's Porter, and the lone North Beds member present was quick to announce it as the best beer so far.

Mid-afternoon saw us heading east across Edgware Road to the **Carpenters Arms** in Seymour Place. The pub was gearing up for the



Rugby World Cup Final and many tables were reserved. However, some customers took pity and invited us to sit down on the proviso we moved before kick-off. This gave us time to sample Cottage Trick or Treat, Adnams Fat

Sprat, Hobgoblin, or Deuchars IPA, or a house beer from Wooden Hand from Cornwall.

As kick-off approached, we moved on via the back streets to find the **Lord Wargrave** in Brendon Road. Dark Star Pale Ale, Clarkshaws Strange Brew, Trumans Swift and Wells Bombardier were on. The pub began to roar as the rugby started and there was a good atmosphere.

Just around the corner we found the next pub, **The Windsor Castle** in Crawford Place. This pub paid homage to the Royal Family big time – every square inch of the walls and ceilings was covered in photos, particularly the Queen Mum. I haven't seen a pub this cluttered since the Wellie! On the bar were five national beers.

As darkness fell, the group headed to our final stop, **The Royal Exchange** in Sale Place. Only two beers were on, and one, Brakespear's Bitter, ran out as we queued at the bar, leaving only GK IPA.

One group of members headed home, but the rest opted to head by tube to Clerkenwell to the **Craft Beer Company** in Leather Lane. There was a wide range of cask ales – among them the rich, dark Summer Wine Brewery's Ten Malt Teleporter, and Love Me Not, a pale ale – and craft ales.

This is a shortened version of an article by John Goodlet previously published in the Casket, the newsletter of the East Beds branch of CAMRA

A Winter's Ride in Autumn

On one of the first cold evenings of the autumn, a CAMRA party set out on a minibus trip once again.



Bell

Our first stop was the **Bell at Marston Moretaine**, which turned out to be pleasant surprise – warm and welcoming with an open fire burning, quite busy, and with three cask ales on handpump – the ubiquitous Sharp's Doom Bar plus Wadworth's 6X and Timothy Taylor's Golden Best (3.8% abv). Most of us chose the Golden Best and found it very palatable. The Bell is an Enterprise Inn, which may be the cause of its rather high prices.

Next to the two pubs in **Salford**. The **Swan**, under the same management as the Embankment in Bedford, is similarly a restaurant and was quite busy with diners, but was happy to serve us Doom Bar (again) or another Sharp's ale, Cornish Coaster (3.6% abv), from electric pumps. Not surprisingly most of us chose the less familiar beer, and the Coaster turned out to be a very pale golden beer with an agreeable hoppy kick.

Down the road, the **Red Lion Hotel** is a comfortable, homely Wells house with letting bedrooms, which can usually be depended on for a decent pint of Eagle or Bombardier. That evening the Bombardier turned out to be Burning Gold, but it had run out. So we moved on after a very satisfactory Eagle.



Green Man

Lidlington next, and the ancient, thatched **Green Man**. Another surprise – it was a Greene King house, we thought. Not any more – GK has sold it, and the trenchant landlord no longer sells their beers. The only pub in the village is, in his words, 'A proper village boozer', and doing quite well on it, it seemed. He offered St Austell Tribute and Deuchars IPA on two handpumps, and most of us found the Deuchars good. He rotates cask ales and often has Timothy Taylor's Landlord on. He was very proud of having raised £2,100 for the Poppy Appeal, more than the rest of the village put together.

Our last village was **Houghton Conquest**. First we called at the **Chequers**, on the main Amptthill road but in the parish. This is under the same ownership as the Park Pub and Kitchen in Kimbolton Road, Bedford. We arrived after ten, so few diners remained. Doom Bar was on again, and this time we sampled it because both the other cask ales on offer – Brakespear's Bitter and Everard's Tiger – had run out. The Doom Bar was in acceptable condition.

Then on to our last stop, the **Knife and Cleaver**, a well-known restaurant for many years, now a Wells house run by landlords Graham and Terry who keep their beer well. Eagle and Bombardier were joined by Young's Winter Warmer. The Winter Warmer didn't disappoint. It had a smoky tinge I hadn't met in the previous winter. A touch of Bedford's twin town Bamberg, perhaps?

Fytton Rowland

Meet the Landlord: Ben Just



Ben and Hannah Just took on the Sun in Felmersham in July 2013, after it had been closed, under threat of being sold for development, and in February 2014 the North Bedfordshire CAMRA named it the Most Improved Pub in its area. Then in 2015 the Sun became our Pub of the Year.



To have achieved such a transformation in the space of 18 months is remarkable, and we were sad when, after this interview with Ben, we heard of their decision to move on to pastures new. However, they have left a

successful, friendly and welcoming pub. Their family still owns the pub, and it is now run by Peter Anthony, who ran the Horse & Groom in Clapham a few years ago. Peter has made few changes so far, apart from introducing Pies on a Plate. Call 02134 781355 or find the Sun on Facebook. www.thesuninn-felmersham.com

CAMRA: So Ben, can you give us the story of how you came to be the landlord of this pub?

Well, we saw it close and be put on the market by Charles Wells, and it happened at a stage when Hannah and I were looking to do something different in our careers. I grew up here, so this village was quite close to my heart, and I discussed it with my parents, who still lived in the village. Coincidentally, they were considering investing in it, so the way it's worked out is that they've bought it and we rent it off

them. At the same time, there was concern in the village, and a group of residents worked together to get the pub the status of an Asset of Community Value (ACV).

CAMRA: Can you give a brief life history of yourself and Hannah?

We met at college, studying Youth Community Work with Applied Theology. Hannah had worked with schools and churches doing youth work, and the last thing that I had done was to set up an organisation to carry on doing the work that a local charity used to do.. I'm still involved with that now, although I'm pretty hands-off now. Hannah was doing some supply teaching before we took on the pub.

I'd been working in the same area for nearly ten years, and I was beginning to look for something different. Hannah hadn't really settled into a career. I'd done some pub work, so when this opportunity came up we were both excited by it. We pursued it, and here we are!

CAMRA: What sort of condition was the pub in, when you got the keys to the door?

It wasn't too bad, just run down a bit. It had been empty for about six months. We opened in August 2013. We were quite fortunate, because the last tenants, who had been here for five years, had done some major development work on the back bar, so it was in quite good shape, and the front bar was just a bit tired really. There was a bit of damp on one wall. We initially moved in and opened the back bar first, as all it needed was a lick of paint and a new bar top. Then in the front bar, we took the plaster off and exposed the old fireplace. We pulled up the carpet and replaced it with quarry tiled flooring, replaced the bar and redecorated.

When we first got in, a good number of people volunteered to help us, so we had a couple of days of volunteer parties where people would come in a spend a day painting – we had 20 or 30 people working in the pub on those days!

Meet the Landlord: Ben Just (cont.)

CAMRA: Had you had any experience of running a pub before the Sun?

We had no training as such. We were lent a CAMRA book on cellarmanship. A local had recently retired as a publican, so he very generously spent some time helping us sort out the cellar. Also, we had a very good account manager from Charles Wells who came out the day we were opening to sort out a few issues we had. Other than that, we learnt on the job!

CAMRA: Have you made any changes to the pub since you moved in?

When we first came in, we had lots of ideas about what to do with the pub and how to make it more of a space that could be used by different community groups; some of them worked and some of them didn't. We have lots of different groups using us regularly – there's the village table tennis club, the bell ringers, a book club and a ladies' Sunday evening group. The WI have used us for dinners as well. The one thing that we were going to do which we haven't done is food. We originally thought that we'd have to do food, but six months in we found that the wet trade was so good that we didn't need to on a regular basis. We do cater for events, like the Cricket Club end of season dinner, and we do a monthly food night.

CAMRA: Would you say that the villagers make up the bulk of your customers?

Yes I would, although we do get a fair number of people from the surrounding villages as well. I find that people like to use more than one pub these days, so we often see customers from Pavenham, Odell and the like. I remember someone saying to me that when there were three pubs in the village**, they all got better trade than when there was only one! We have a skittles team now, which has been a real boost mid-week, and we're hoping to get a darts team together as well. We also do a monthly quiz night which has been very successful.

CAMRA: Can you give me a typical day in the life of a village publican?

It's difficult because it's always different! We don't open at lunchtimes during the week, but we're always busy during the week anyway – pretty much every hour we're awake we're working, just not always behind the bar. Hannah does more of the accounts and the admin side of things, and I do more of the practical jobs like the stock run and the drays. We try and keep staffing costs to a minimum, with one member of staff who does Sundays and Mondays with us, giving us the Monday off. We have a few other people that we can call up on an ad-hoc basis, as there's often a few things that we need help with.

We're a free house but we still use Charles Wells as a supplier. They supply our keg products and they look after our cellar. We buy all our bottles and soft drinks from a cash and carry, and all our ales (apart from Eagle) are delivered direct from local breweries. There is an extensive list of breweries within a 25-mile radius, and I use between 15 and 20 brewers regularly. It's nice to be able to build a relationship with them, to get to know them and to support local businesses. I called four breweries yesterday, as we're going on holiday soon and I wanted to stock up, and all four of them delivered this morning!

Actually, we often get people asking over the bar if we can buy in casks for private functions, which we are happy to do, and we can lend them the taps and spiles and anything else they might need. They often come back and ask to borrow our mallet!

I think we have it fairly relaxed here, as we don't do food and we don't open at lunch times during the week. But it is still high pressure, and hard work, but we came into it knowing it would be. We are still young (30 and 29), but until you do it you don't realise the impact it has on you, working and living in the same place, and your lives really are on show. It's not easy, but we've

Meet the Landlord: Ben Just (cont.)

enjoyed it. I like to think we've got a friendly and welcoming venue here, which is a relaxed and traditional pub with two beer festivals a year, with space for events and with four or five guest beers a week.

CAMRA (later): Now we hear that you have decided to move on. Can you give us some idea why you made this decision?

From the outset we took the pub on as a short term project, with the aim of showing that the Sun could be both a thriving centre of the community and a profitable business. We successfully achieved these aims, are we're pleased to be leaving the pub in a good position. We wish Peter all the best with his future at The Sun.

Hannah has returned to working with young people and I am currently looking to return to work in the charitable sector.

We would like to thank everyone for all their custom and support over the past few years. It has been great fun!

Mike MacKechnie

***The other two pubs were the Plough, which closed in 1991 and the Six Ringers, which closed in 1995 – not forgetting the Swan at nearby Radwell, which closed in 2008.*



The Firkin

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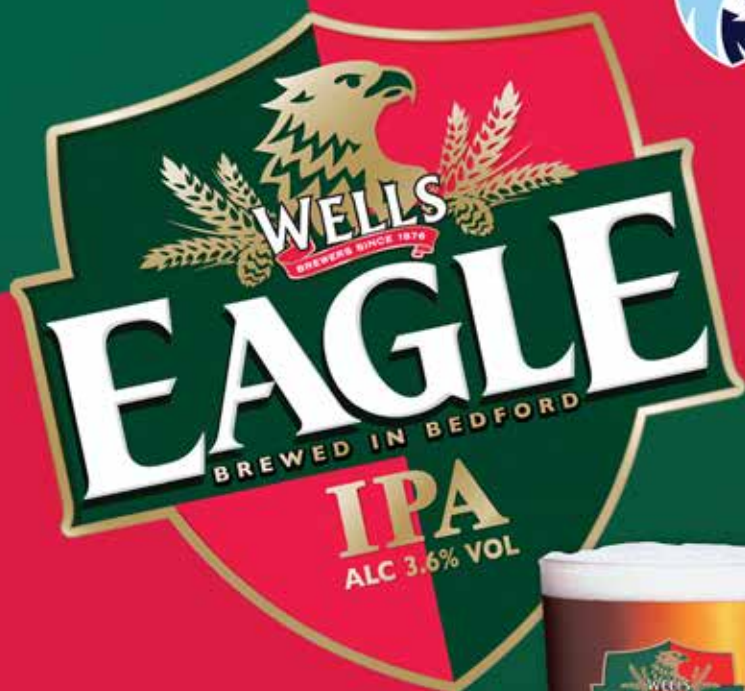
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