

The Firkin



Magazine for CAMRA North Bedfordshire

• Vol 50 No 3 Autumn 2026

**48th Bedford Beer and Cider Festival
7th - 10th October**



WHAT'S IN THIS ISSUE

Regional Pub of the Year

State of the UK Brewing Industry



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Branch Diary (all dates and venues subject to confirmation)

When	What	Where
Thursday 17th September 7-9pm	Branch Social	Stone Jug, Clophill
Wed 7th - Sat 10th October	Bedford Beer & Cider Festival	Bedford Corn Exchange
Monday 17th November 7-9pm	Branch Social	The Three Cups, Bedford
Thursday 22nd April, 2027	Branch Annual General Meeting	Venue to be confirmed

For details of events check the Events page on the branch website www.northbeds.camra.org.uk

North Bedfordshire CAMRA Committee

Chairman	Roger Stokes
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Treasurer	Dave Hodgson
Membership Secretary/ Contact	Neil Ratnett
Website Coordinator	Peter Argyle
Pubs Data Coordinator	Paul Barnes
Festival Organiser	Katherine Lilley
Social Secretary	Gary Mudd



EDITOR'S CORNER

North Bedfordshire CAMRA Branch

It's full steam ahead for the Bedford Beer and Cider Festival. We are looking forward to seeing old friends and new ones during the festival. The festival is on Wednesday 7th October to Saturday 10th October. You can read more about the festival on page 5.

Since the last issue of Firkin, members of CAMRA have been judging the County Pubs of the Year to find our Regional Pub of the year – CAMRA East Central Region covers, Beds, Bucks, Northant and Herts – you can find out more and who the winner is on page 13.

Thanks to all our contributors and if you have ideas about articles we should include or would like to write for The Firkin, please get in touch.

We have a range of social events throughout the year, so keep an eye on our website <https://northbeds.camra.org.uk> for up to date details of our trips and events.

Cheers

Dave Hodgson

firkin@northbeds.camra.org.uk



North Bedfordshire CAMRA members at Beer Day Britain social at the Hidden Barrel on Monday 15 June.

At 7pm glasses were raised and toasted "**Cheers to Beer**", as members across the county did the same.



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We welcome contributions that will benefit our readers, to submit an article, please email firkin@northbeds.camra.org.uk

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Advertise your Pub/Venue/Special Event or local business. The Firkin is issued 3 times per year and distributed to pubs, clubs and other outlets in North Bedfordshire.

Please contact Dave Hodgson for information and to request a Media Guide. firkin@northbeds.camra.org.uk

48th Bedford Beer & Cider Festival: A Celebration of Heritage, Community and Great Beer

7–10 October 2026 | Bedford Corn Exchange

This year marks a very special milestone for North Bedfordshire CAMRA – the 48th running of our festival. For nearly half a century we have brought together drinkers, brewers, cider makers and food producers from across the region, building an event that is a beloved part of Bedford's calendar.

To mark this 48th edition, we honour the legacy of Harold Abrahams – 48 years since his passing – whose Olympic triumph remains one of our greatest sporting stories. It feels a fitting tribute as we celebrate our own long-running tradition, following past themes including the town's 850th charter anniversary and the Corn Exchange's 150th birthday.



What to expect

True to CAMRA's mission, we have an exceptional range of real ale – a special thank you to Geoff Foll for arranging such a spectacular selection for us all to enjoy! Look out for well over 100 brews, including a good selection of dark beers and milds, and we hope to welcome back last year's Champion Beer of Britain, Penzance Mild. Alongside the ales you'll find traditional ciders, perries, continental beers, mead and gin. Soft drinks will also be available.

Food is always a highlight: we have more Owen Taylor pork pies than ever

after last year's huge demand, and we're hoping to add Ploughman's options to go alongside them. On the menu you'll find our classic sausage, apple and cider casserole, plus vegan chilli, mac 'n' cheese, and evening specials including honey jerk chicken, curry goat, and our popular Friday night fish and chips.

We are running tutored tastings covering ale and mead – no cider tastings this year – ideal for new and seasoned drinkers alike. Saturday brings a dedicated family area with activities for all ages, plus live music from local folk and country singer-songwriter Lily James that evening, and our famous festival quiz across the weekend. Keep checking our social media for further updates coming soon!



Scan the QR code for advance tickets and more festival information or visit www.northbeds.camra.org.uk

Tickets & Practicalities

Advance tickets are £14, including entry, glass hire and beer tokens: Non-members will receive £5 of tokens CAMRA members will receive £10 of tokens (on production of valid membership card at the door). Limited-edition souvenir glasses will be on sale alongside standard hire glasses; these sold out last year so don't miss out. Paying on the door is still an option, but advance booking guarantees your place. You can pay at the venue for entry, tokens and glasses using cash or card.

Regrettably, under-eighteens are only admitted on Saturday, and will be admitted free of charge on that day.

Please note: beer lanyards are not allowed at any time.

A huge thank you to our main sponsors Gallagher Developments, plus Bedford Radio and Future Legend Media, and to all our volunteers, brewers and suppliers who make this event possible. If you need any information or help finding something, just grab one of the CAMRA stewards – they'll be happy to assist!

We can't wait to welcome you – for great beer, good food, family fun and wonderful company. Here's to the next 48 years!

I look forward to seeing you there!

Katherine Lilley
Festival Organiser

Bedford Beer & Cider Festival Bedford Corn Exchange

- Wednesday 7th October 4pm - 11pm
- Thursday 8th October 12 noon - 11pm
- Friday 9th October 12 noon - 11pm
- Saturday 10th October 12 noon - 10pm

Food Available Every Day

Entertainment

- Wednesday evening - Ukulele Bedford
- Saturday Evening - Lily James

**Real Ale - Cider - Perry -
International Beers - Rookery
Craft Mead - Wine - Willow
Tree Gin - Soft Drinks**



The State of UK Brewing Industry

By Roger Stokes



In July a group of 14 CAMRA members enjoyed a brewery visit with a difference – we didn't tour the brewery (although one was offered). Instead we had what was generally regarded as a very interesting talk about the history and state of brewing, and Wells & Co in particular, from Paul Wells. Paul is Chairman of Wells and Co., a former Master of the Worshipful Company of Brewers and a former Chair of the Independent Family Brewers of Britain. Wells is celebrating its 150th anniversary as one of the small group of breweries which is still owned and operated by the original family.

If they wish, family members can have either a short-term role within the company or build up knowledge and experience elsewhere which is then brought back to strengthen the business. We heard why they sold the Eagle Brewery and the IP of most of its beers, of the pressures trying to get their beers into pubs and their determination to continue developing the real ale portfolio even if for practical reasons they cannot export real ale into their strong French market.



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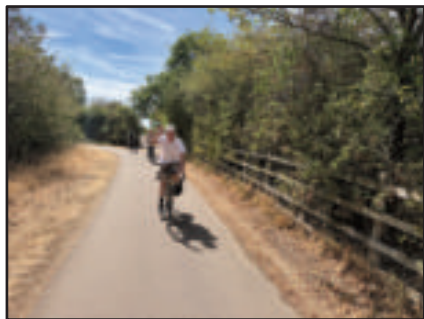


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CycAle Rides Again!

by Jon Abbott



Following the success of last year's inaugural North Beds CAMRA CycAle, six of us gathered at Priory Country Park for the 2026 edition – another afternoon combining some of Bedfordshire's quieter cycling routes, country pubs and, of course, good beer.

We started by following the old Bedford to Sandy railway line out towards Willington, giving us a pleasantly traffic-free beginning to the ride before making our first stop at **The Crown in Willington**, where **Harvey's Sussex Best Bitter** was the choice from the hand pump.



It was over our first drinks that the day's route underwent a little revision. Our originally published route would have taken us through Cople and Cardington before eventually finishing back in Bedford, but the draw of **The Polhill Arms – North Beds CAMRA's Rural Pub of the Year** – proved too strong to resist. So, in the best traditions of a good pub cycle ride, we changed our plans and decided to make the Polhill our final destination instead.

At The Crown, two of our riders also had to leave us temporarily, but they arranged to meet us again at the Polhill later, while the remaining four continued the ride.



We carried on along the route of the old railway towards Blunham and our second stop, **The Horseshoes**, where **Timothy Taylor's Landlord** provided our next refreshment.

From Blunham we headed north towards Great Barford and **The Anchor**, with its lovely riverside setting. Unfortunately, the pub's **Anchorman** wasn't available on the day, which resulted in at least one member of a CAMRA cycle ride committing the minor heresy of opting for **Foghorn – a Brewpoint keg beer!**

Leaving Great Barford meant leaving the relatively gentle former railway route behind and treating ourselves to some proper Bedfordshire hill climbing as we headed through Wilden towards our newly chosen destination. There was, however, time for an unscheduled roadside

stop to sample some blackberries before tackling the rest of the journey.

We eventually reached **The Polhill Arms**, where our original party of six was reunited for the final stop of the afternoon. A refreshing **Old Dandy Hen** was a particularly welcome reward after the hills and a fitting beer on which to finish the ride at North Beds CAMRA's Rural Pub of the Year.

As with last year's CycAle, the afternoon wasn't about racing from one pub to another – the pace was deliberately sociable, with plenty of time to enjoy the countryside, the pubs and the company along the way. Last year's ride showed what an enjoyable



combination cycling and supporting our local pubs can be, and this year's slightly more adventurous – and somewhat improvised – outing certainly continued the tradition.

Thanks to everyone who joined us. CycAle is rapidly becoming a North Beds CAMRA tradition, so look out for the next ride – and remember, you don't necessarily have to cycle the whole route to join in!



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Lost Pubs of North Bedfordshire Part 1 – The Road to Ampthill

by Mike MacKechnie



Heading out of Bedford on the B530 road to Ampthill, We will first take a quick detour to Woburn Road, on a layby of the old A421. The **Brickmakers Arms (1847 – 1993)** was previously known as the Red beerhouse or Half Way beerhouse and most of the trade came from the nearby brickworks, which in all likelihood is where the pub name originated. It lay derelict for years after closure and was subject to a fire in 2015.

Onward to *Kempston Hardwick*, we can still see the **Chimney Corner (1935 – 2016)**, another pub with a brickmaking connection, which was situated at the junction with Manor Road and Ampthill Road. After closure, it became a restaurant for 2 years, followed by a second-hand car business for a few years after that. It is now an events venue called the Marquee.



Continuing south, we take a slight detour to the village of *Millbrook*, where the **Chequers (1935 – 2017)** in Sandhill Close was the only pub in this newish settlement, built primarily for the brickmaking trade. Facing the village hall, the building is now in private use but still has "The Chequers" on a nameplate by the front door.

Back onto the main road and into the town of *Ampthill*, which was home to the Morris & Co. Ampthill Brewery in Bedford Street until its acquisition by J. W. Green of Luton in 1926. The brewery site is now occupied by a Waitrose supermarket. Also on Bedford Street, at number 11, was the **Crown & Sceptre (1754 – 1957)**, which is now home to Hot House Interiors.

Turning left at the Water Pump in the town centre, the **Kings Arms (1542 – 1957)** at 9 Church Street was formerly known as the Crown. A grand old building, it is now occupied by a series of shops, but the passageway to the right of the entrance looks very much like it would have led to



the stabling yard in days gone by. On the western side of the town, at 23 Woburn Street, the **Old George (1831 – 1959)** is now a private residence standing almost directly opposite the Queens Head.

Back onto the main street through town, the **Compasses (1528 – 1911)** at 92 Dunstable Street is now a barbers, but like the Kings Arms the passageway to the left of the front entrance must have been where weary travellers would have stabled their horses before settling in for the night.

Onto *Flitwick*, where the **Wheatsheaf (1860 – 2011)** at 15 High Street is now an Indian restaurant, and the **White Horse (1868 – 1996)** at 101 – 105 Station Road has been converted into private properties, with White Horse Mews constructed around the pub.

We would also have found the **Fir Tree (1857 – 1962)** on Dunstable Road, which was deemed surplus to requirements after the J. W. Green brewery was taken over by Whitbread. The site was demolished soon after closure and is now beneath modern houses in Pope Close. The name lives on in the nearby Fir Tree Garage.

Another pub that has now been converted into an Indian restaurant is the **Drovers Arms (1837 – 1994)** on Flitwick Road in nearby *Steppingley*, which thankfully still retains the look and feel of its previous life.

The last village in this chapter is *Westoning*, which is a short hop south of Flitwick heading towards the M1. The **Hop Vine (1851 – 1956)** at 36 Flitwick Road has now been converted to a private house but can be easily spotted, as it is surrounded by more modern housing and has "The Old Hop Vine" on a nameplate by the front door.



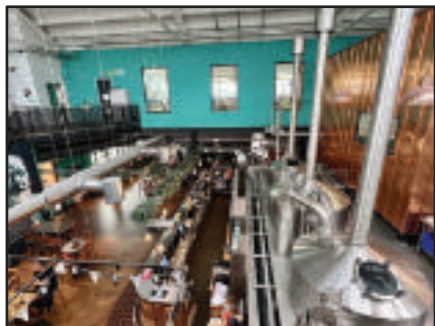
On the corner of High Street and Greenfield Road, the **Bell Inn (1861 – 2019)** is a Grade II listed building and is now a Thai restaurant and still looks very much like the photo here, although all pub signage has been removed.

A little bit further up Greenfield Road, the **Nags Head (1839 – 2009)** at number 14 has now been demolished and replaced by private housing.

This is an excerpt from Mike MacKechnie's book, "The Lost Pubs of Bedford & North Bedfordshire", available for £10 from the Eagle Bookshop on St. Peters Street or online at <https://www.lostpubsofbedford.store/>

North Beds CAMRA: Brewpoint Visit

25th June 2026 by Gary Mudd



At my update meeting as BLO (Brewery Liaison Officer) at Brewpoint Tim Hickford (Brewpoint's Beer Engagement Manager) kindly offered North Beds Branch a tour of the Brewery with a few beers.

Since we'd not visited since just after startup, his offer was enthusiastically accepted and, after a few false starts with unavoidable date changes, 15 of us met with Tim at Brewpoint Bar on Thursday 25th June.

To say the evening was somewhat warm is an understatement and we were all pleased (after a round was served) to be taken up to the air-conditioned meeting room!



Because of the excessive temperature (35°C) we did not spend time in the museum area to start the tour but stayed put whilst Tim gave us background to the brewing process and how things were going at Brewpoint. After a period of downturn in the fortunes of cask beer Brewpoint had seen a more encouraging upturn. This, coupled with this year being the 150th Anniversary of Charles Wells, prompted a re-evaluation of their Real Ale portfolio. A trial batch of Double Star (a new session bitter – not a million miles

away from 'Eagle') was brewed and sold out far quicker than expected. So, more was brewed and the decision was taken for this to become a second regular beer alongside Anchorman with a run of bi-monthly special beers to back them up.

As a partnership agreement with Adnams comes to an end, visitors to Wells pubs should see more Wells beers on the bar!

We braved a physical tour around the brewery floor and then we were treated to a taste of Wells '150' a special, bottle conditioned, 12.3% Barley Wine for this year's Anniversary.

A fine, full-flavoured ale which should mature nicely! It had a good mouthfeel and a big hit of dried fruits on the palate (I thought of prunes). A few bottles were bought to keep for special occasions.

A most enjoyable and informative tour and I hope it won't be too long before we visit again!

Do take the opportunity to go on one of Tim's Brewery tours if you can.



Malt Shovel Tavern wins Regional Pub of the Year by Peter Argyle



Back in February we announced **The Hidden Barrel, Bedford**, as North Beds CAMRA Pub of the Year 2026, together with three other branch awards to local pubs and a club.

CAMRA Pub of the Year is a national competition, with winners going on to compete at county, region and eventually national level. The three Bedfordshire branches judged the **Hidden Barrel**, the **Bricklayers Arms, Luton**, and the **Sir William Peel, Sandy**, for the county title and chose the **Sir William Peel** as Bedfordshire County Pub of the Year 2026.



The three other county winners in CAMRA's East Central Region were the **Orange Tree, Baldock** (Herts), the **Bell & Bear, Emberton near Olney** (Bucks) and the **Malt Shovel Tavern, Northampton** (Northants).

Although only one winner can go forward to the final rounds of the competition, all four county winners are excellent pubs and well worth a visit.

Judging by members from each county of the four county winners is now completed and the **East Central Regional Pub of the Year 2026** is the **Malt Shovel Tavern, Northampton**.

The **Malt Shovel Tavern** is now our candidate for the next round, which will reduce regional contenders to

the final fab four, from which the national winner will be chosen and declared early in 2027. Visit the branch website to keep updated on the National Pub of the Year, www.northbeds.camra.org.uk



Whitbread to close its whole pub estate by Peter Argyle



Historic pub owner and former brewer Whitbread is to close all its 450-odd pubs by September 2026 and pull out of the pub trade. The company has announced that all *Beefeater*, *Brewers Fayre*, *Table Table*, *Cookhouse + Pub* and other branded pub-restaurants will be closed.

Whitbread also owns dozens of Premier Inn hotels throughout the country, recent announcements have confirmed that pubs next to Premier Inns will be among the many closed.

According to information in the trade press, Table Table and Cookhouse + Pub pubs will close on 3rd September, followed by Brewers Fayre pubs on 7th September and Beefeater on 10 September. Whitbread may be tempted to maximise its returns from selling these assets by obtaining planning approval for change of use prior to sale, thereby preventing anyone buying them as going concerns.

At one time Whitbread owned a lot of pubs in Bedfordshire from its brewing history in Luton, but many old corner pubs have been closed or sold in recent decades. Many of the pubs now facing closure are relatively new. Although there are more cases elsewhere in the county, only two Whitbread pubs faced closure in CAMRA's North Bedfordshire branch area: the **Priory Marina in Bedford**, a popular Beefeater pub overlooking the marina, and the **Brewers Fayre in Fletcher Road, Kempston**, close to the big interchange on the A421. The Brewers Fayre is a relatively recent new build pub, part of the development in western Kempston following the opening of the A6 western bypass.

The Priory Marina will close on 10th September. We do not currently know its eventual fate, although as it is popular with boat users and families, there would certainly be support for another pub owner taking it over.

The Brewers Fayre in Kempston closed several weeks ago, but fortunately has a more assured future. It has already been sold to Wetherspoon and will be reborn as the Wetherspoon's **Fletton Brick** on 1st September. No real surprise here, given the opportunities for business in this area of the county from the huge development of the Universal theme park to the south. We look forward to sampling the beers and forming an opinion!

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