

**FREE**

# The Firkin



Campaign  
for  
Real Ale

Magazine of CAMRA North Bedfordshire • Vol 48 No 1 Spring 2024



## Stone Jug at Clophill, Pub of the Year

**EDITORIAL**

**PUB & CLUB AWARDS 2024**

**THE STONE JUG AT CLOPHILL**

**INN SIGN SOCIETY**

**A BEDFORD WALKABOUT**

**FEBRUARY PUB TRIP**

**POTTON BREWERIES**

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# Editorial

**B**edford Beer and Cider Festival 2024 is still on – perhaps!

The high spot of North Beds CAMRA branch's year is the Bedford Beer and Cider Festival at Bedford Corn Exchange in early October. This has taken place forty-five times, with a gap only in covid year, 2020. As Chair of the branch, as well as Editor of the Firkin, I was therefore very concerned to discover that there was some doubt whether our Treasurer, Mike Parks, could put together a viable budget for the 2024 festival. The festival committee met in February, and Mike produced a budget that seems to work. So far, so good. We have to overcome some scheduling problems, though, which may need a little compromise somewhere. But for now, the planning for the 2024 festival goes ahead.

Once the financial issues are sorted out, though, we have another little problem to solve. We get plenty of people willing to work as volunteers at the festival itself, but it's not so easy to get people to do all the tasks that have to be undertaken beforehand. So – it's all up to you, the real-ale fans of Bedford and district. Please come forward and volunteer to help over the next six months, to make sure the 2024 Bedford Beer and Cider Festival happens on 2nd-5th October. [firkin@northbeds.camra.org.uk](mailto:firkin@northbeds.camra.org.uk) will do the trick.

Sadly, another beer festival that's been part of my life for the last fifteen years will not take place this year – the Great British Beer Festival (GBBF) at Olympia in London in August. In this case, national CAMRA decided that it was no longer possible to use such a large and expensive venue for GBBF. It will happen in 2025, all being well, but there just wasn't time to find a venue and arrange a smaller festival by August 2024.

Like many voluntary organisations, CAMRA was hit by the lockdowns due to covid, which meant that GBBF didn't happen in 2020 or 2021, and everyone got out of the habit of going. And then the subsequent economic

difficulties meant that people couldn't afford to go to Olympia.

So it's up to smaller local festivals, like BBCF, to keep alive the experience of a CAMRA festival and how much fun it is. So come along in

October to BBCF46! But please give us a hand beforehand too, to make sure it happens.



*Fytton Rowland*

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# North Beds CAMRA Branch's Pub and Club Awards

**A**t our branch meeting on 15th February, we decided on our pub and club awards for 2024.

The branch Pub of the Year (PoTY) is the **Stone Jug at Clophill**. As our PoTY, we have given it a full article to itself; see pages 5-6. It will compete with the PoTYs from the South Beds and East Beds CAMRA branches for the title of Bedfordshire County PoTY for 2024.

When our PoTY is in the town, we nominate a Country Pub of the Year and vice versa. As the Stone Jug is in the country, we nominated a Town Pub of the Year. It is the **Devonshire Arms** in Dudley Street, Bedford, another pub which has been PoTY several times before.



*Devonshire Arms*

Always busy with residents of the populous Castle Road area of Bedford, of which it is in effect the social centre, the Devvy has six handpumps in use. Although it is a Wells house, Ronnie and Rebecca's cask ales come from a variety of breweries, but are always well kept. The Devvy is my own local, as I live just 100 yards away.

The **Fox at Carlton**, another recent PoTY, has a heavy involvement in village community activities, and as landlady Alison has assured us that she is staying for at least another year, we have named the Fox as our Community Pub of the Year. This thatched village pub, though much



*Fox at Carlton*

extended, has retained its historic interior, and is generally recognised as one of the most delightful country pubs in Bedfordshire.

Yet another of our former PoTYs is the **Polhill Arms in Renhold**, kept by Steve and



*Polhill Arms in Renhold*

Lucie, who previously ran the White Horse in Bedford. Always a fine cask ale pub, it has recently had a thorough refurbishment, and so we have named it Most Improved Pub of the Year for 2024. It's a Greene King house, but GK allows its licensees to stock real ales from independent breweries as well as its own ales. As befits a former PoTY, it keeps the cask ales well.

And as for clubs – Bedfordshire isn't rich in good real-ale clubs, but one that always stands out is the **Stewartby Club**.



*Stewartby Club*

As Stewartby is a publess village, owing to the London Brick Company forbidding pubs when Stewartby was built to accommodate its workers, the club fills the

gap, and does so admirably. It's bigger than the average pub, with several large rooms, and a range of cask ales available at moderate prices. Good value for a membership fee of £5/year! We decided to give it our Club of the Year title, which it has had before, as it keeps the beer well, is popular with Stewartby residents, and has a public feel despite its larger size.

And that's it for 2024. No cider pub, I hear you ask? Sadly, there is no pub in North Bedfordshire that serves more than one real cider. The one served is usually Saxby's, the only real cider brewed in North Beds, but nevertheless we decided not to name a Cider PoTY for 2024. For a range of real ciders, pop over the border to East Beds CAMRA branch and visit the March Hare at Dunton!

*Fytton Rowland*

# Stone Jug at Clophill, Pub of the Year

On the date that won't come again for four years, 29th February, I interviewed Mark Stevens, who runs the Stone Jug at Clophill, though his mother and sister are the actual licensees.



*Mark Stevens*

The Stone Jug is Noth Beds CAMRA's Pub of the Year for 2024 – though this isn't by any means the first time it's had our top award in the period of 43 years that the Stevens family has owned the pub, a freehold free house.



*Main Bar*

The main stone, slate-roofed building is thought to be about 500 years old, and was originally a row of three small cottages for workers at the local watermill. It became a pub about 1870, when the brewer



# Stone Jug at Clophill, Pub of the Year continued

Fordham's of Ashwell acquired the cottages and knocked them together. Recently, a historic Fordham's sign turned up in the garden of the pub's neighbours, who gave it to Mark. He put it up on the fence at the back of the pub. The Fordham and Flower dynasties were intermarried, and when Fordham's stopped brewing at Ashwell in Hertfordshire their beer was replaced at the Stone Jug by Flower's from Stratford-upon-Avon. Whitbread bought out Flower's along with many other breweries, and when the Stratford brewery closed in 1967 the Stone Jug became a Whitbread house.

In 1977 came the big change to a free house, when Bob Hartup bought the freehold of the pub. Now eighty, Bob still works part-time at the pub, though he sold it to Mark's parents in 1981. Shortly after that, the Stevens built two extensions – one at the side to accommodate toilets, a kitchen and more living space upstairs. Another extension at the rear provides more restaurant and kitchen space and more bedrooms above – Mark and his partner Helen live upstairs. Vicky and her husband and children now live at his farm in Maulden, and their mum lives with them there too. The extensions and improvements were financed by loans from Courage's, despite the fact that the Stone Jug was a free house; however, they carried Courage's beer until the loan was paid off.

Mark's father died in 2000, when his sister Vicky, who had been living in Australia, returned to help out their mother. Prior to that Mark had worked in the commercial-vehicle business, though he did do the pub's accounts. Now he reversed his original decision to leave the pub trade, and joined Vicky – who became joint licensee with Joyce Stevens, their mother – in running the pub.

Being a real-ale drinker himself, Mark decided to turn it into a cask-ale specialist



*Front Bar*

always on for twenty years. Otter beers from Devon became ever-present after that, until Otter ceased to deliver so far from home.

Now the regulars are Witcher from Vale Brewery of Aylesbury and one of Three Brewers of St Albans' beers. A beer from Nethergate of Sudbury, Suffolk, often fills another pump. He chooses changing beers from relatively nearby brewers such as Horne's of Bow Brickhill, Bucks, or New River of Hoddesdon, Herts.

However, local breweries can't always provide the quantity he needs – at the Coronation weekend last year the Stone Jug held its first-ever beer festival and sold over thirty kils! So Nuttycombe or Cotleigh (actually the same firm) from Somerset often appears, as does Abbeyfield from Sheffield.

It is pub of two halves. In the evening it is a traditional pub for beer drinkers, with darts, crib and dominoes teams. But at lunchtime it is very much a restaurant, with a large and lucrative eating trade. Helen is the chef, and two others work in the kitchen with her, and Bob Hartup and his wife also work some shifts. Mark's son has a non-pub job, but Mark encourages him to put in some shifts in the pub, and Mark harbours hopes that the pub might stay in the Stevens family for another generation! Helen puts in some time in the bar as well, and a barman, Andrew, is also employed.

*Fytton Rowland*

# Inn Sign Society

**F**ounded in 1990, the Inn Sign Society raises awareness of the nation's pub signs and compiles a record for the



*Inn Sign Society logo*



*John o' Gaunt, Sutton*

benefit of future generations. Many pub names have links with events from the past or personalities of national and local importance, and the Society provides a forum for members to research the history of inns and pub names. It has an active web site and a quarterly full-colour journal to which members are encouraged to submit articles, pictures of pub signs and news from their areas. As inns and pubs close at an alarming rate, much local heritage is in danger of being lost forever. Pubs are not just a place to enjoy a drink, they are often at the heart of the community and can reflect its history. Many members take a general interest in all signs, with some specialising in particular breweries, counties, aircraft or railways, to name but a few. The local Midlands Group meets three

or four times a year at the Mare & Colt, near Kidderminster, to enjoy a lunch followed by a slideshow of pub signs. The Inn Sign Society is seeking to recruit more members and bring in new blood to help continue the good work done over the last 32 years. For more information, including on how to join, see the website at [innsignsociety.com](http://innsignsociety.com). If the Inn Sign Society doesn't research, capture and save our pub sign heritage, perhaps no-one else will.



*Kings Reach, Biggleswade*



[innsignsociety.com](http://innsignsociety.com). If the Inn Sign Society doesn't research, capture and save our pub sign heritage, perhaps no-one else will.

**Iain Perks**  
Membership Secretary  
Inn Sign Society



# A Bedford Walkabout in January

As usual, North Beds CAMRA had planned a series of three pub assessment trips in January and February – two rural minibus trips and one town walkabout – to check on the current quality of the pubs and their beer, before we decided our local entries for the 2025 (yes!) *Good Beer Guide*, and our various awards, in particular our branch Pub of the Year for 2024. In the event, the 8th February trip didn't happen, and was replaced by two visits by different small groups of members to two different groups of pubs, using large taxis. I didn't go on either of these.

This year, owing to the dates when minibuses were available for hire, we did our walkabout first, on 24th January. As is customary, we started at the **Wellington Arms** in Wellington Street, Bedford, our favourite “Welly”, and walked from there.



But not before we'd each sampled one or more of the cask ales on offer that evening. First, Vale Brewery's Good King, a malty darker beer at 4.9% abv. As its name suggests this was Vale's Christmas beer, but surprisingly it was still drinkable after being open for a month after Christmas. Another Christmas offering still on was Roman Way Brewery's Pudding Stout (4.7% abv). These long-lasting stronger beers enabled the licensee, Liz, to have six cask beers available on a Thursday evening in January!

The others were Adnams Southwold (3.7% abv), their well-known session bitter, now

widely available; Purity's Pure Gold, a golden ale, at 3.8% abv another session beer; and two lower strength beers, Purity's Bunny Hop (3.5% abv) and Vale's Maybe Next Year? (3.4% abv).

I tried Bunny Hop, a hazy and hoppy pale ale, and found it very drinkable, and reasonably priced too. The strength puzzled me though, as 3.4% is the limit for the government's new lower tax band, introduced last August. Why brew a 3.5% beer and pay more tax?

A very short walk took us to the **Flower Pot**.



Allegedly this is the oldest pub in Bedford town centre, though we rarely visit it. The cask ales on offer were not surprising for a foodie pub that doesn't specialise in cask: London Pride and Doom Bar. Shame that, as it's a delightful old pub with several separate rooms.

Moving on to the High Street, we called at the **Bear**, another historic pub, which has





had several changes of licensee in recent years. Once a fairly serious real-ale pub, it still had two cask ales on, the unsurprising St Austell Tribute and the more enterprising Timothy Taylor's Boltmaker – CAMRA's national Champion Beer of Britain a few years back. I tried the Boltmaker and found it as good as ever, and acceptably kept.

Turning left into Mill Street, we passed through to Newnham Street, but not before we'd detoured a few yards up St Cuthbert's Street to the **Ship**, another nice multi-



roomed real ale pub that is usually there or thereabouts, but only sells Greene King products, without guest ales. So GK IPA and Abbot were accompanied by "Holy Ship", a GK brew – perhaps Ruddles – made to provide each GK pub with what appears to be its own beer. I had IPA and found it acceptable.



Next, the Castle, a very attractive Brewpoint house which used to specialise in Young's beers, but its cask ales on this occasion were

Adnams Ghost Ship and Southwold, plus Woodforde's Wherry and Timothy Taylor's Landlord. I had Southwold (3.7% abv) and found it very drinkable and well kept.

Just a few yards along the street is the **Three Cups**, a Greene King house that for



several years also sold Kelchner's beers from Ampthill. At that time Chris Kelly from Kelchner's was the licensee, but he left a few months ago and this was our first visit since the new licensee arrived. He had only two of the handpumps in use out of the six present, and sold Black Sheep Best Bitter and Adnams Lighthouse (3.4%). As I'm trying to go for low-gravity beers these days to reduce my alcohol intake on doctor's orders, I tried the Lighthouse, which I hadn't encountered before, and which turned out to be a golden ale with a pleasant, though not strong, flavour. The cellar work was up to standard.



# February Minibus Pub Trip

The first North Beds CAMRA minibus trip this year to assess local pubs took place on 1st February.

Our starting point this time was the **Burnaby Arms** in Stanley Street, in



Bedford's Prime Ministers district. A friendly Brewpoint pub, it has been a cask ale pub traditionally, but on this Thursday evening in January the choice was limited. London Pride and Adnams Southwold and Ghost Ship had been on, but when we arrived both the Adnams ales had run out, so we all ordered Pride – and being last to order, I got the last of that! It was cloudy but still drinkable. Even without cask ale, the pub was busy, though welcoming with a real fire in the grate.

We quickly boarded our waiting minibus for the longish trip to the **Swan with Two Nicks**



in Sharnbrook. The Swan was also busy –

for these pubs, it seems that Thursday is the new Friday. It's an attractive Brewpoint pub of traditional design with separate rooms. The beer choice was the same as at the Burnaby but this time all three cask ales were available. Southwold doesn't have much nose, but it was clear and flavoursome. The beerkeeping was of an acceptable standard.

A couple of miles from Sharnbrook is Odell, where the village pub, the **Bell**, is another



nice old-fashioned multiroom one. It's a Greene King house, though, which sadly limits the choice of cask ales mostly to GK beers. On this evening the expected GK IPA and Abbot were joined by Butcombe Bitter. Most of our group chose the Butcombe Bitter, but as I was still keeping my alcohol intake down, I stuck to the IPA, now reduced to 3.4% abv owing to the changes in tax boundaries. I used not to like GK IPA, but either GK have changed the recipe or I have changed my tastes, since I like its flavour now.

Our next stop was a pub we hadn't been to for some years, the **Muntjac at Harrod**. This turned out to be an unfortunate evening for us to go there, since the landlord also runs the Bell, where we had just been, and where he had been behind the bar. The regular managers of the Muntjac were on holiday, and the two staff on duty didn't seem to be particularly good



*Muntjac at Harrold*

at looking after cask ale. The ones on were Hook Norton brews: Hooky (3.8% abv) and Old Hooky (4.6% abv). Most of us chose the stronger Old version, but I and couple of others tried the 3.8. Neither seemed in particularly good nick, though neither was poor enough to warrant taking it back.

The next pub was another busy one, and justifiably so – the **Fox at Carlton**, a recent North Beds CAMRA Pub of the Year.



Landlady Alison has been threatening to leave, but she assured us that she will be there for at least another eighteen months. Thursday is Alison's quiz night, so the Fox is always busy when we call, but they managed to serve our busload quite quickly. The main bar area is the historic village pub with a thatched roof, but there is a large modern extension where most of the quizzers were sitting. There were four cask ales on for this busy night – Potbelly Best, a dark amber session bitter at 3.8%

abv, Timothy Taylor's Landlord, Nuttycombe Brewery's Brown (4.0% abv), and, from the XT Brewery, Animal Portuguese Man-o-War, a strong bitter at 4.6% abv. We spread our custom around these, with many of us choosing the Nuttycombe. Choosing the weakest one as usual, I had the Potbelly, and of course found it well kept.

Our final stop was Turvey, a village of two pubs. However, the Three Fyshes is nowadays mainly a food pub and no longer emphasises real ale, so we confined ourselves to the **Three Cranes**. A free house



now, where we were fortunate enough to find the landlord and landlady staffing the bar. They have four handpumps in use, offering Woodforde's Wherry, Adnams Southwold, and two beers formerly commonplace in the Bedford area: Eagle and Directors, both products of the former Wells brewery in Havelock Street now owned by Barcelona's Damm brewery. Sadly the Directors had run out, otherwise I'd have sampled it to check whether it had changed, but I did try the Eagle, which did seem more or less unchanged from the days when it had been Bedford's favourite tipple.

And so ended my evening – as usual the trip finished at the Pilgrim's Progress. And as usual I'd had my ration and left for home immediately.

*Fytton Rowland*



# The Complex Recent History of Brewing in Potton

The town of Potton has had a brewery since 1998, after a hiatus since 1922 when the previous local brewery in Potton had closed. The 1998 company was founded by two ex-Greene King staff from the closed GK brewery in Biggleswade – the chief engineer and the quality control manager. They used a ten-barrel plant that they built themselves. That brewery survived until 2016 when the founders retired.

The following year, another new owner, Richard Haigh, started up the next Potton Brewery in a small industrial unit in Market Street, just off the main square. He developed the business in these premises with a 2.5-barrel plant, producing bottled beers for sale through – mainly – local off-licences, markets, and beer festivals. The 1998 company had sold a fair amount of beer through the Shuttleworth estate, and a fair amount of the current brewery's beer goes to Jordans Mill. A smaller proportion goes into casks, often sold to private buyers locally for use at parties and weddings. The cask ales are also stocked in the Rising Sun in Potton, and more recently at the Hare and Hounds at Old Warden as well. The bottled beers are unfiltered and therefore hazy, but the cask ales are fined using isinglass (the draught beer is thus not vegan).

Last year, in June 2023, Richard Haigh sold the business to Emma and Guy Horsfall. They both have full-time jobs, so they brew only at weekends, generally once or twice per fortnight. They used savings to buy the business and are unencumbered by debt. A 2.5-barrel batch creates six casks and 240 bottles. Prior to buying the brewery they were home brewers on a substantial scale; just as when they were home-brewing, they use the local mains water, not modified in any way, which they find tastes fine for beer-making, along with British malt and a Nottingham yeast.

They have six regular beers, two of which



are recipes from the 1998 company: Shannon, a session ale (3.5% abv) named after the locomotive built by Sir William Peel to run the Sandy-Potton branch line, and Village Recycler (4.3% abv), originally Village Bike, a big malty beer with Cascade and Goldings hops. Another recipe originated with Richard Haigh – Pride of Potton, a strong ale (6.2% abv). The present owners created the recipes for the remainder:

Transmitter, a citrus golden ale (4.0% abv) named after the TV mast between Sandy and Potton; Crow, a traditional stout with a hop finish (4.5% abv); and Holly Pup, a dark mild named

after a relative's dog, Holly (3.8% abv)!



When North Beds CAMRA visited the Potton Brewery in November 2023, we were impressed that people

with other full-time jobs in such small premises could produce such a variety of interesting beers.

We tried Transmitter – which was not to my liking, but that was a matter of personal taste – and Holly Pup, which was. We would like to thank Guy and Emma very much for giving up some of their scarce free time to entertain us at the brewery.

*Fytton Rowland*



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

Items for publication in the next issue should reach the Editor by the date shown at the foot of this page. Edited by Fytton Rowland, 73 Dudley Street, Bedford MK40 3TA  
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# Branch Diary

CAMRA North Bedfordshire branch business meetings are normally held on the second Thursday of alternate months.

Social events are usually held on the third Thursday of each month.

Guests are welcome at social events, but members have priority on brewery visits.

For latest information visit the branch website at [northbeds.camra.org.uk/diary](http://northbeds.camra.org.uk/diary).

Unless otherwise stated, for all events further details can be obtained from, and bookings made with, Gary Mudd on 01234 741871 or e-mail

[socials@northbeds.camra.org.uk](mailto:socials@northbeds.camra.org.uk)

## MARCH 2024

Thursday 14th - Branch Meeting - 7pm - venue to be announced

## APRIL 2024

Thursday 25th - Branch Annual General Meeting - venue to be announced

See the branch website for updates to the branch diary

[northbeds.camra.org.uk/diary](http://northbeds.camra.org.uk/diary)

The advertisement features a dark background with the text "Help us power WhatPub" at the top. Below this is a laptop displaying the WhatPub website. A red arrow points from the text "Help keep WhatPub up to date by using the feedback form to let us know about any changes at the pub:" to a feedback form on the website. At the bottom, the website URL "www.whatpub.com" is displayed. A small CAMRA logo is in the bottom right corner.





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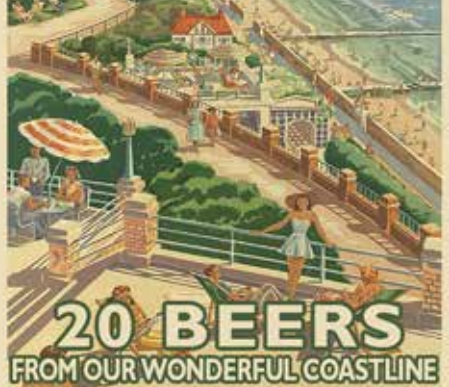
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## A TOAST TO THE COAST



Wednesday 1st May - Wednesday 8th May 2024

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## The Fox at Carlton



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