

OPENING TIMES

ST. NEOTS & DISTRICT



BRANCH NEWSLETTER

ISSUE NO 68

BI-MONTHLY CIRCULATION 1,000 COPIES

FREE FREE FREE FREE FREE FREE FREE

CHARLES WELLS ON THE RAMPAGE

Charles Wells have closed The Half Moon in Kimbolton, this being the latest in pub closures by them. The Half Moon was a former Good Beer Guide pub which had qualified for an original 10 year certificate for consecutive Good Beer Guide entries. Closure was muted several months ago, when the landlord was told that the brewery was giving them 12 months notice before the pub would close.

Reason given for closure was not low turnover, but uneconomical to modernise. The locals and ourselves began a campaign to save the Half Moon and Charles Wells were shaken by the response. They assured that they would not close the pub until an alternative site in Kimbolton had been found to open a new pub. However, since that announcement the landlord has been found an alternative pub and surprise, surprise Charles Wells closed the pub and declared it would be sold as a private house. The Brewery as is typical in these cases will not sell off the pub as licensed premises, enabling other interested parties to see if it could be run as a successful venture.

Charles Wells record of pub closures leaves a lot to be desired. In nearby Tilbrook they have just recently closed another former Good Beer Guide The Three Shuttles, also with a ten year certificate. Note: only three pubs in the branch qualified for these. Tactics for this pub were slightly different. The brewery acquired a former Manns house, The White Horse a few hundred yards away. This was gutted, with the intention of closing The Three Shuttles on completion of the renovated White Horse. However, tasteful the conversion, it does mean another 'local' with its vastly contrasting atmosphere to the new pub, has been lost.

The Branch has also lost The Nags Head in Eynesbury, St. Neots which closed in 1986 and is now a private house despite objections to Charles Wells and the planning departments. They have also purchased the Old Falcon Hotel on St. Neots market square, which has appeared in the Good Beer Guide as a Free House. This will no doubt lose its current choice of ales to be replaced by Charles Wells usual beers, although at the moment Mansfield Riding Bitter is on sale as part of the deal making it available in some Wells pubs. This acquisition does raise a question about the future of Charles Wells other pub on the Market Square, The Golden Ball. Although the two pubs enjoy a different atmosphere and clientele it is not unknown for Wells to close pubs when in close proximity to another of their houses. We do notice that Wells have spent money on painting the exterior of the pub, so who knows.

This newsletter is published by the St. Neots branch of the Campaign for Real Ale Ltd. (CAMRA). The views expressed are not necessarily those of the Editor, CAMRA Ltd or its branches. Articles or letters for consideration for publication are always welcome.

Advertising rates £3.00.psci(column width 4"). Artwork can be made up.

Series discount 6 insertions less 15%. 3 insertions less 10%. Typeset on Apple Macintosh Pagemaker and printed by Doric Print Sales Hatfield 73738.

Editor: Mike Birch 37 The Broadwalk, Eynesbury, St. Neots, Cambs. Tel: 0480 74497

LOCAL NEWS

News of yet another Charles Wells pub is that the New Tavern at Gt.Staughton has been tastefully redecorated (we don't only criticise breweries, you know) giving it a cosy and welcoming atmosphere. Real ales available are unchanged with Eagle and Bombardier on handpump.

The Montagu Arms at Grafham has replaced its Charringtons IPA with Adnams Bitter to complement its existing Bass.

The Manchester Arms, Tilbrook Free House is now under the ownership of John and Maureen Maguire and their parents Ray and Jean Page.They have moved to the area from Hertfordshire and are looking to test new beers in addition to their existing range.

The Crown at Hail Weston a Charles Wells house has new tenants, with Graham and Patricia Wooding moving in and is another Wells house to stock Mansfield Riding Bitter.

Yet another Charles Wells house, The Wheatsheaf, Eaton Socon has a Northampton couple Frederick and Ann Maffey taking over.

The Olde Plough at Bolnhurst, a historic pub was partly destroyed by fire, which ripped through the thatched roof and the first floor of the building. The pub was already being extensively extended at the rear, so it may be a totally different building that arises from the ashes, but hopefully its previous character will be recaptured.

The Coneygeare, Free House at Eynesbury (a previous St.Neots Beer Festival location) now has new owners in Ron and Ann Harris from London.The couple have been in the trade for fourteen years having worked for Benskins, and also having run The Wheatsheaf, colmworth for a couple of years. Current real ales available are Ruddles County, Adnams plus one guest. However, the future of this pub is in doubt as plans have been submitted for the redevelopment of the site for houses.

Derek and Lynne Hancock are the managers at The Barley Mow, Hartford a Good Beer Guide listed pub.The couple are originally from St.Ives and have returned to the area after spending 18 months running a Flitwick, Beds pub. The Brewers, Charles Wells have plans for extensions to include a family games room.

We also have new landlords at The Chestnuts, free house, in Needingworth High Street, in Vic and Carol Burrows - real ales being available are Bass, Geene King Abbot and IPA.

Latest beer news from one of our popular free houses is that the White Hart, Bythorn is now stocking Marstons Pedigree, Hook Norton Bitter and Morrels Varsity and Oxford Bitters.

Whilst over at The Montagu Arms, Grafham we hear that Adnams has replaced Charringtons IPA to complement the Bass.

Gt.Yarmouth couple Raymond and Lorraine Coleman take over The Exhibition, Godmanchester having previously worked in the hotel and bar trade in the Norfolk and Suffolk areas.They say that nothing will immediately change in this popular pub where they have a big act to follow of previous landlords Richard and Macha Pumphrey who were responsible for the design of the interior of the pub.

Plans for a new pub at the Duloe Road/ Gt.North road junction site at Eaton Socon have again been rejected by Huntingdonshire District Council.

Kisby's Hut a former Tolly house has now re-opened as a Free House after being closed for a year.New owners Simon and Nicki Fry have given the pub a complete face lift, gutting the building and refurbishing throughout whilst retaining its style as a traditional pub.Public and lounge bars plus a dining area have been created. Being the only pub in the village it makes a welcome return with beers from Greene King plus Websters Yorkshire Bitter.

The Three Horseshoes at Gravely has re-opened after a period of over 2 years under the new onership of Len and Bridget Mountifield formerly of the White Hart, Godmanchester.The newly refurbished pub is selling Ruddles County and Best, plus Martons Pedigree on handpump.

CASK BREATHERS

A growing 'problem' on the local and National 'Real Ale' scene is the introduction, by a number of breweries of the 'cask breather' system of serving and storing traditional cask beer.

The first and, perhaps most difficult point here is, exactly what is a cask breather? Most people understand that CAMRA campaigns for traditional cask ale served without the use of added CO2 pressure, a fairly easily defined product. Cask breathers use CO2, via a 'demand valve' to replace the air in the cask as beer is drawn off - so keeping the beer fresh, its supporters say, for a longer time. The problem as far as CAMRA is concerned arises on a number of fronts.

Firstly by using CO2 pressure the system is open to abuse, or to be used as the thin edge of the wedge for the introduction of a full top pressure or even keg system.

Secondly, the system could, and only could, be a lazy landlords charter - less care is needed in making sure full use is made of hard and soft spilling.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly many people feel the system does affect the taste of the beer, leading to the softer palate usually associated with top pressure beer.

CAMRA Nationally are against the system and no pubs using it should be listed in the Good Beer Guide. Locally, branches, including St. Neots are more flexible, as brewers such as Greene King have said the system has 'saved' low sale real ales like mild

The local problem is that Charles Wells, Greene King and possibly Tolly (who refused to comment when asked to supply information to the survey in CAMRA publication - Whats Brewing? some time ago) are now fitting the system almost as a matter of course, rather than using it for low sale real ales. Thus a handpump in a pub locally is no longer a promise of beer served and stored without the use of added CO2.

The local branch would welcome a debate on this subject, but as a starting point we need to find out which pubs use the system. Tolly, as has been said, refuse to comment on the issue, Greene King and Wells don't seem to hide their policy, but then neither is it set out to the customer.

In Dorset, Eldridge Pope have had most of their pubs withdrawn from Good Beer Guide inclusion because they use the system. How many of our locals deserve to be excluded for the same reason?

PAUL HACKETT

TOLLY TAKEN OVER

Local pubs which were previously owned by James Paine found that their new masters Tolly Cobbold were themselves taken over when the Brent Walker property and leisure group acquired Tolly (Ipswich) and Camerons (Hartlepool) breweries for £239 million. Having already bought 386 pubs from Grand Met last year it gives Brent Walker a further 855 pubs making them a major presence in the brewing industry, especially in the east of England. However 52 of these newly acquired pubs are being swapped for 119 betting shops, 26 East Anglian Watney pubs and a cash sum of £20 million. Another 200 pubs are rumoured to be for sale to Greenall Whitley as Brent Walker seeks to service its debt mountain. The major concern is obviously the future of the two breweries and many of their pubs. Local Tolly pubs are continuing to sell the Tolly range of beers as before, but elsewhere licences caught up in this latest spate of pub swap deals must be confused as to whose beers they should be selling. Some pubs have changed hands twice in four months. Drinkers too are finding difficulty in understanding why Cameron and Tolly signs are hanging outside pubs selling Watney beer.

ELDERS BID FOR SCOTTISH & NEWCASTLE BLOCKED

The Monopolies and Mergers Commission have refused to allow a £1.6 billion bid by Elders IXL the Australian brewer for Edinburgh based Scottish and Newcastle on the grounds that it was against the public interest. At the same time Elders have been told to reduce their 23.6% holding down to under 10% in the next 12 months. 'Competition' has been given as the reason for stopping the bid, as the takeover would have brought together Courage (already owned by Elders) and Scottish and Newcastle. The decision is being taken to mean that the Government intend to free up the brewing industry, which of course becomes more apparent with the MMC report on the tied system (see separate sheet containing breakdown of main points of report). Scottish and Newcastle themselves are of course jubilant with the news as are the workforce and local drinkers.

PEDIGREE ON NATIONAL DISTRIBUTION

Marstons Pedigree is now available countrywide in Whitbread pubs. Over the next three years sales of Pedigree are expected to increase by 50% as a result of a national distribution deal with Whitbread.

Pedigree will have a vital role to fill in Whitbreads portfolio of beer brands because they do not have a nationally available traditional ale.

Marstons have been looking for some time to find the best partner to develop the Pedigree brand name. With one of the company's strategic objectives being to establish Pedigree into the countrys premium brand name. There are no plans to withdraw any Whitbread brands as a result of the new agreement.

In return Marstons are putting greater emphasis on Whitbreads lager brands, with extensive promotion throughout their tied estate.

Pedigree will continue to be brewed at Burton with no extra jobs, but the increased production will ensure long term employment for the Marstons workforce.

Locally, Pedigree is now available at The White Horse, Eaton Socon and is likely to appear in other Whitbread pubs in the area.

LOW ALCOHOL BEERS

A CAMRA report on low alcohol beers, caused a storm recently as it highlighted the poor deal for the customer, that these 'beers' offer. The conclusion of the report, was that those interested in health, their bank balance or driving to the pub, should avoid these poor imitations altogether. On health, the report shows that most low alcohol beers, contain a worrying number of additives, and not one UK brewed brand was uncontaminated in this respect. Fortunately, unlike full strength beers, low alcohol brews must detail their ingredients on the bottle labels.

As far as cost goes, the report exposes the 'rip off' price that is charged in a pub, compared with a supermarket, up to 70% more! A pint of low alcohol lager in a pub costs about £1.25, compared with an average of £1.00 for ordinary lager. Considering the brewer saves 18p duty on a pint of beer under 1.2% alcohol, it's obvious that the benefit is not passed on to the customer, even allowing for higher processing costs.

As far as drinking and driving goes, the report recommends avoiding alcohol altogether. 'People just cannot be certain of where they stand' according to Danny Blyth, co-author of the report. The strengths of the brews tested ranged from 0.05% to 1.6% volume (ABV), and few of the manufacturers were willing to make a statement on how much you could drink of their product, and still be under the limit.

Where low alcohol beers really let themselves down, was on taste. The tasting panel found them either weak or insipid, or else downright revolting. The best tasting low alcohol beer, according to the panel, was Clausthaler Sainsbury's own brand, which are the same, closely followed by Dansk LA. The worst was St. Christopher, which averaged only 2/10!

So the message is clear from the CAMRA report; if you're driving, avoid alcohol altogether, and if you're concerned about health, thrift or taste, try a couple of pints of a tasty Mild instead.