

OPENING TIMES

ST. NEOTS & DISTRICT



BRANCH NEWSLETTER

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You will find that this issue of Opening Times is devoted more than usual to news items of national interest more than local news. This is because so much is happening so fast, with the repercussions of the Governments MMC report that we feel we should inform you, the drinking public of the facts as we know them, albeit today's information being out of date almost before it is printed. However, the details contained within our pages should enable you to grasp a semblance of the current situation. Watch this space!

Brent Walker Sell Off

The Brent Walker Group, who recently became a sizeable member of the 'Beerage', following their takeover of Tolly Cobbold and Camerons - including through Tolly the remnants of the old James Paine estate - have closed Tolly's Cliff Brewery in Ipswich. Brewing since 1723, with a tied estate of 340 pubs, including several local outlets in St. Neots, Huntingdon and surrounding area - Tolly have become a victim of an asset stripping exercise by the new owners.

Strong local feeling in Ipswich has seen a Tolly Cobbold Action Group collect 3,000 signatures in protest at the closure which meant the loss of 100 jobs. This would seem to indicate that there should be a future for brewing in a large population area, with support for Tolly but against Brent Walker. Indeed the local council has issued a preservation order on the buildings plus the brewing and bottling equipment. The main brewery building having a strong architectural character and forming a prominent and distinctive landmark on the River Orwell. Brent Walker say that no firm decision has been made on the fate of the brewery and that there is no intention to sell the equipment. Also that they are reviewing all possible uses for the site that would enable them to preserve the Tolly tradition.

The options are selling to an established independent brewer together with all or part of the tied estate. Alternatively the site could become yet another brewing museum. A trend which if it were to carry on could see us with more of these than actual breweries!

The portfolio of 7 Tolly and Paines beers is now being rationalised with Paines XXX, E.G. and Tolly XXXX

being withdrawn and being replaced in local outlets by Camerons equivalents.

The take-over raises questions similar to recent City fears over Brent Walkers "dabbling" in businesses they have acquired and their reluctance to fully develop those businesses.

The sell-off of pubs, many of which are in the St. Neots Branch area, including the Hare and Hounds, Eynesbury (now Free), The White Swan at Bluntisham and The King William IV at Fenstanton (now Greene King) could of course from CAMRA's point of view lead to more free houses and therefore, an increase in the range of ales locally available. However, the speed of the sell off, and the reluctance of Brent Walker to give preference to sitting tenants landlords, point to the sale having more to do with Brent Walkers balance sheet than any planned development of the care pub business and leads to fears of pub closures and 'block' sell offs to other regional and national pub owning groups.

Such 'wheeling and dealing' can benefit no-one interested in seeing good quality local pubs offering the range of beers their customers demand.

Brent Walker have had some good ideas credited to them since they entered the brewing and pub owning scene but, at the moment their commitment to the industry must remain in doubt where speculative financial deals seem more their stock in trade than a commitment to the development and improvement of their pubs and breweries.

Manns Sell to Brent Walker

Manns have sold four pubs in our area to Brent Walker, they are:

The Jolly Sailor, Ramsey (A Good Beer Guide listed pub),
The Green Man at Colne,
The White Hart at Great Staughton and
The Saddle at Kimbolton

This will mean a change in the range of the beers available at these pubs, see under local news for these changes as we know of them.

These are part of a package of 92 pubs whose leases have now been sold to Brent Walker.

OG and ABV

You will have noticed a change in the way of indicating alcoholic strength. The new method is called ABV (Alcohol by volume) which gives the strength of the brew once fermentation is complete. The old method, O.G. (Original Gravity) is a measure of the brew's potential strength, taken just before the yeast is pitched.

**PUBLICANS
ANYTHING NEWSWORTHY
HAPPENING AT YOUR PUB?
IF YOU WANT A MENTION THEN
CONTACT THE EDITOR**

Scottish and Newcastle to sell 250 pubs

In yet another move following the MMC report, Scottish and Newcastle have announced that they are to sell off 250 pubs which are over the laid down 2000 pubs limit. This is another reaction as the UK's major brewers seek ways to maintain their monopoly. The sell-off means that their surviving tenants will be unable to benefit from the guest beer policy due to come into force in May next year.

The 250 or so tenants of those pubs S & N have put on the market will not be able to bid for their pubs either, as "selling pubs to individuals was not practical in the time allowed" said a brewery spokesman.

This meant that the likely buyers would come either from non brewing leisure companies trying to build up their empire to the 2,000 limit or from smaller regional brewers. The pubs for sale are from all parts of the Brewery's empire and with some pubs selling less than 5 barrels a week many will end up delicensed and sold for housing development.

The sell off will mean that the split of S & N pubs will be 50/50 managed and tenanted, with the swing to managed houses becoming more pronounced.

In production terms S & N sells 74% to the free trade compared to the more normal 50/60% of the other large brewers, a lot of this being through its national keg brands of beer and lager. The expected income from the sales is an estimated £25 million which together with the £645 million received for Thistle Hotels means that they can tie their tenants absolutely and at the same time stitch up the free trade with low interest loans. Of course there is also nothing to stop them using the funds to buy a brewery, thus enabling them to snap up a national brand like Greene King Abbot! This in itself would mean them having to sell off the Greene King tied estate under the new regulations. So all this national movement among the beerage would certainly again affect local drinkers - amongst whom, the uninformed must be wondering what an earth is going on in their locals.

Ruddles could also be another S & N target with Grand Metropolitan possibly deciding to exit from brewing and concentrate solely on retailing. With Ruddles Best and County being installed in Manns pubs in our area, this could obviously lead to even more upheaval and change in what's available in your local.

Boddingtons Get out of Brewing

Boddingtons of Manchester with 130 years of independent brewing tradition has sold off its entire brewing business and portfolio of ales to Whitbread in a deal worth £50.7 million.

In the first big regional brewing sale since the controversial Monopolies Commission report into the industry, Boddingtons retain the pubs but Whitbread will supply beer from the Boddingtons, Higsons and Oldham breweries for five years. This is a non-exclusive deal and Boddingtons are free to buy their beer elsewhere if they choose. This would of course hasten the closure of probably Higsons Brewery in Liverpool as that would be the one most at risk. Drinkers in Merseyside and Manchester, the traditional Boddingtons areas are fearing the worst as Whitbread's track record for 'rationalisation' (Brewery Closures) is appalling, they having closed 10 breweries in 10 years.

They have made it clear that the Boddington Bitter brand is the only one they care about and certainly do not need the extra brewing capacity.

Although Whitbread say they will supply the beer at an agreed price, rising only by inflation it would seem that it spells the end for 'cheap beer' in the region. Whitbread tenants will be bribed into taking Boddingtons as a 'Guest' beer, but sold at a higher price as current Guest beers in the Whitbread range are sold at about 12 pence a pint higher than their standard range. Oldham and Higsons may survive in name only but there is no

commitment to brewing them at their existing breweries. Whitbread certainly will not retain all the brands, with the most likely outcome being the chop for other Whitbread brands or Breweries. The advantages for Whitbread are that they obtain a good name guest beer to send to their tenants, negating the need for them to look elsewhere.

This of course is a way around the MMC report on pub ownership and selling a 'foreign' beer. Also Whitbread will have the 500 pubs in the Boddington estate to supply with beer and lager. Also by eliminating one of the larger regionals in the North West, Whitbread may be able to dictate the market and force prices up.

The advantages to Boddingtons are not so clear. If by selling the Brewery to Whitbread and buying the beer off them to supply their pubs they think they have a good deal, then they should remember that there are a lot of Leisure/Pub owning companies viz Brent Walker who would see them ripe for a take-over. Boddingtons change in outlook from the most traditional of brewers to a highly diversified retailing, leisure and health care operation has resulted in the company's most precious asset being sold at a knockdown price. Boddingtons feel that their company research has shown them that sales of traditional ale are in terminal decline against the increasing market share for lager. We shall see!

Local News

Bill and Linda Danbury have taken over as managers of **The Old Falcon Hotel**, Market Square, **St. Neots** the 15th century riverside pub which was a freehouse until recently purchased by Charles Wells. The couple have lived in the town for the past 12 years and have run the local RAFA club for the last five years.

The Horseshoes, Offord Darcy is a recent convert to real ale, with Ruddles Best and County appearing on newly installed hand pumps.

The White Horse, Eaton Socon along with other Whitbread houses now has Marstons Pedigree available on a regular basis to complement its Flowers Original and Whitbread strong ale.

Developments, or lack of them at the old James Paine brewery site, show that the site is fully boarded up adding to the aesthetic glamour of St. Neots Market Square.

The Millers Arms, Eaton Socon with newly installed landlord has now added Greene King mild on handpump to its range and we are told it is selling very well.

The George at Spaldwick is now selling Adnams Broadside instead of Bombardier and the Spread Eagle at Buckden also has Broadside available alongside Eagle Bitter, whilst the Wheatsheaf at Eaton Socon has added Bombardier to its range alongside its existing Eagle bitter.

The King William IV at Fenstanton formerly a Tolly house has now been purchased by Greene King as part of the 'sell off' following the closure of the Ipswich brewery.

The Green Man at Leighton Bromswold under new owners David and Tony Hanagan now has a more varied range of beers available with Theakstons, Fullers and Hook Norton on sale.

The Windmill at Somersham, a Greene King house now has its IPA available on handpump instead of by gravity. The Abbot still being available by gravity dispense.

The Royal Oak, Hail Weston has extended its range to Charles Wells Eagle and Bombardier, Mansfield Riding and Adnams Broadside.

The White Hart at Great Staughton, and **The Jolly Sailor, Ramsey** (Good Beer Guide listed) both now under the Brent Walker banner, are selling Camerons Strongarm and Courage Directors bitter instead of their previous range of Watney beers.

The Olde Mill, Brampton has now re-opened as a Beefeater Steakhouse under the Whitbread umbrella.

The Anchor, Little Paxton now under Brent Walker has installed real ale with Camerons Strongarm now available on handpump.

Allied Breweries unveil new beer dispense system

Allied Breweries have announced a revolutionary new beer dispense system which uses concentrated beer mixed with water at the point of sale. The project which has taken seven years to develop was on show at the brewing industry trade fair, Interbrau '89 in Munich with prototype equipment dispensing lager.

Allied claim that the system is suitable for any style of beer although it would obviously involve brewery conditioned keg brands. The system works by freezing the beer to a concentrate, four times its normal strength. The 'beer' is then mixed with water in the pump in a similar way to provide a pint of normal strength beer. Allied have also released a technical paper which claims that it can "deliver totally acceptable beers to the consumer which are indistinguishable from their conventional counterparts."

It appears that Allied have developed the system to cut transportation and storage costs and increase the shelf life of the beer considerably. This of course will mean that actual taste will be a secondary consideration in the search to find a way to cut brewing costs.

One of the problem areas centres around the actual dispense equipment which apart from being expensive to introduce into the pubs, will need to be utterly reliable to ensure that the beer concentrate is diluted to exact levels. Moreover, local water authorities will need to vouch for the purity of their water supplies if the beer is to be diluted with the ordinary tap variety. Also, local water would lead to a

variance of 'flavour' across the country making the beers different nationally

It is unlikely that trials would be carried out in pubs until the system is perfected, however it is also unlikely the post-mix idea will go away because the brewery claim that considerable interest has been shown in the system by international companies.

Allied have not commented on any actual taste tests of the final diluted product, perhaps this will not be a factor in the commercial viability of the system. As usual the drinker will be lumped with it.

Whatever the outcome, post-mix diluted beer will be seen as a total anathema to real ale campaigners and hopefully all beer drinkers. The thought of a concentrated beer syrup lurking in the cellar waiting to be diluted with tap water and then presumably injected with CO2 is a sinister and chilling prospect.

Britains Brewers having recently spent a fortune on the Brewers Society campaign to get the Government to back down on the Monopolies Commission report on pubs have now upset drinkers by adding up to 10pence on a pint to pay for it all. This of course means that drinkers lose out both ways - once by the benefits of the report and then by having to pay extra for a round. The poor old landlord will of course be caught in the middle, with complaints flying in from his customers at him when it is not his fault.