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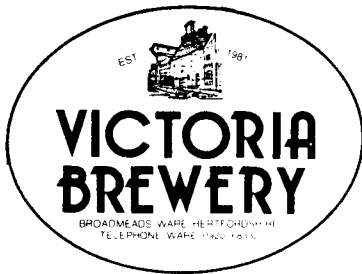
The Campaign for Real Ale

HERTFORDSHIRE NEWSLETTER

AUGUST 1981

CIRCULATION 4500

NUMBER 42



VICTORIA CROSS THE LINE

Despite the old adage, attributed to the old lady herself, some very amusing things are indeed taking place at the Victoria Maltings in Ware. The first brew of the new Victoria Brewery was produced in mid-July and the first batch delivered to the Cambridge Beer Festival and some local pubs shortly afterwards.

Victoria Bitter is a 1036 brew made solely from hops, malt, yeast and water, and first tastings suggest that Allan Swannell and Tony Burns, the two CAMRA members who launched the scheme, are on to a winner.

The brewery itself is housed in the splendid old Victoria Malting building in Ware – hence the name – and occupies around 3000 square feet at one end. The plant is a motley collection of bits from old breweries, food processing vessels and home made bits and pieces, and the two partners along with associate Chris Storey, are still in the process of getting everything exactly as they want it. Another, slightly stronger and as yet unnamed, beer is to follow when Victoria Bitter is established. Sadly, the name Albert Ale is already being used for a brew produced by Bourne Valley Brewery. Many local CAMRA members have shares in the new venture and so there is possibly more than the usual incentive for this small company to get the product right. We certainly wish them the best of luck with their efforts.

NEW BREWERY FEVER seems to have hit the county. For more news of two other new home brewers see the Cornell Column on page three. Whitbread, who are responsible for one of these also seem to have caught handpump fever. For more details see Pub News on the back page.

QUICK ONES

Clearing Banks

During the month of June a small party of Hertfordshire South members went to visit Banks's brewery in Wolverhampton. This splendid place is a perfect blend of old and new. Microprocessor-controlled traditional copper mash tuns and coppers turn out two splendidly drinkable beers – a mild and a bitter. Only the very best ingredients are used with no adjuncts, for the Company's policy is to make money by selling lots of beer – and to do that they reckon the best way to do it is to make the best beer.

Banks have their own maltings – two in fact – and both are of the traditional floor variety. To top up to their requirements they order some malt from other companies, but insist that they too product the malt by this method, using no chemicals on the way to promote growth or increase yield. They like to know exactly what goes into their beer.

The brewery itself is large – there are 98 fermenters alone, each of around 130 barrels. 70% of their trade is in hogsheads (54 gallon barrels), 20% in barrels (36 gallons, and normally the largest container used by brewers) and the rest in kils (18 gallons). Needless to say most of the Company's 800 or so pubs are also large and they get through an enormous amount of beer each week. Despite the recession Banks's have just recorded their best ever week in terms of volume of beer sold. However, despite the apparent size of the organisation, there's very much of the small company attitude about the place, and the quality of the product – in an area where people like their beer – is always uppermost in their minds.

All this and 41 pence for mild, 43 pence for bitter. Southern brewers please take note.

Our thanks go to brewer Philip Barnett for a most entertaining tour and to brewers Paul Robinson and Alan Griffiths for coming along after to help finish off the 9-gallon cask of mild laid on for the 11 of us.

Our environment correspondent writes . . .

Those who admire 1930's architecture might remember the Wilbury Hotel, a stylish example of the species situated outside Letchworth – a large Greene King pub with flat roofs, metal-framed windows and large, well-fitted bars. For the real ale drinker the Wilbury was a place to avoid, as beer was served with top pressure except in the Ballroom Bar (only open for special functions) where electric pumps were in use. When asked by CAMRA whether real ale could be available in the other bars, Greene King were adamant that it could not be done.

Now a funny thing has happened. Greene King have leased the Wilbury to Whitbread, who are opening it as a Beefeater Steak House. At least two sets of handpumps have been installed, serving . . . wait for it . . . Greene King Abbot Ale and IPA. Congratulations to Whitbread for achieving the impossible! But at the same time, the building has been wrecked. A dinky and highly inappropriate pitched roof has appeared; the window frames have been painted a chocolate colour, the inside has been knocked through to form an enormous waiting room for happy eaters, and, worst of all, the outside of the building has been plastered with signs painted in standard Whitbread – Victorian lettering.

The heavy hand of the brewery architect has struck again – but what were the local council doing approving such vandalism?

On the same subject, has anyone seen the New Found Out in Hitchin recently? An ancient historic building, this was rebuilt and put back into use as a pub a few years ago. At that time, there was many comments that the modern plush steak-bar style interior of the pub was hardly in keeping with its ancient and distinguished exterior. But now the exterior is being ruined as well, as once again cheap and tawdry signs are disfiguring it.

Yes, the New Found Out and the Wilbury both sell real ale, but should we be particularly pleased when real ale is being served up in a building which looks like a supermarket or second-hand car showroom. When will "designers" learn that a pub should look like . . . a PUB!

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At most of the pubs, I couldn't stop for more than one pint: the sessions were carefully planned with capacity in mind, whether driving, walking, or (best of all) being chauffeured by an abstainer (well, nearly). (Nevertheless it was no problem to take in 16 different beers, the duplicates being Benskin's bitter (12), Wethered's (7), Ind Coope bitter (3), and Directors, Country, KK, and Bombardier (2 each).

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I considered it prudent to visit the Horn of Plenty and the Crystal Palace at, or soon after, opening times: with a relatively sober haircut and appearance I might have felt out of place later when the regulars arrived. Talking about opening times – full marks to the Acorn, amongst a few others, for displaying theirs in a window, and no marks to the Fighting Cocks which had not opened at my first visit at five to six on a hot evening. I was not the only disappointed customer: with such a captive position and reputation the pub could really be expected to make the most of this, or any other, summer. I, of course, returned another day. I doubt that the others did.

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THE COOPERS, not Mini, Gladys, Henry or Tommy, but the traditional craftsmen that skilfully transform lengths of oak and hoops of iron into those magnificent wooden casks that we all admire, and which, we hope, will not be cut in half, filled with dirt and used as flower tubs. Have you ever thought about their art?

Coopering has always been a family tradition which dates back to the iron age. For hundreds of years the coopered cask was the packing case of most trades and the majority of things people needed were stored, shipped and transported in casks. These came in various sizes, each with its own name; a pin holding 4½ gallons, a firkin holding 9, a kilderkin or kil holding 18, a barrel holding 36, a hogshead with 54 and the daddy of them all holding 108 gallons – the butt.

Cider

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The ancient Egyptians, it seems, invented the craft, according to tomb paintings dating from 3000 BC which depict wooden buckets made of staves bound with wooden hoops.

The Romans and Greeks also knew the art and as people became more "civilised" the demand for vessels made of wood increased.

The real skill required was as a "dry" cooper – not a teetotaler – but a man with the ability to make a cask from staves of timber and iron hoops that would – without adhesive – stay watertight.

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This is a highly skilled task, the lengths of oak are trimmed and shaped into curved hollow staves, each with an angled edge, which are then "raised up" inside a single hoop to get the shape of the cask. The cooper carefully selects each individual stave to fit and judging by eye the capacity of the cask he is making. Now he has to bend the staves into shape. First he lights a fire in a "cresset" – a small iron brazier – and then hammers strong iron "truss hoops" over the cask whilst heating it over the cresset, making the oak staves pliable.

Gradually the cask takes shape as the ends are pinched in with smaller truss hoops. The cooper then levels the ends of the staves at the "head" or end board. The heads are made from pieces of oak, cut and joined with hand-made oak dowels.

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Unfortunately the art of coopering is disappearing but there are some areas where it still survives. One such is in an exclusive society – the Somerset Guild of Craftsmen – who are dedicated to continuing crafts such as that of the cooper.

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VARIETY IS
THE SPICE
OF LIFE



TRY OUR
14 REAL
ALES

TYTTENHANGER GREEN

In addition to our normal range there will always be a cask on the bar from our range of guest beers which could be one of the following: Eldridge Pope, Bourne Valley, Donnington, Arkell, Archers, St Austell or Brakspear's 6X.

It's barbecue season again!

Come and cook for yourself:

Steak 75p, Sausage 12p, Hamburger 20p,
Rolls 12p, Butter 4p, Sauces 6p, Mustard 2p.

Salt and pepper free!

8.30-10.30 (Mon-Fri eves); 12.-2.30 and 8-11 (Sat)

Our aim is to sell the best beer in the county – if ever you are dissatisfied with it we will change it without question.

CAMPAIGN NEWS

McMULLENS –

a slow response



There's no doubt that in the last ten years, since CAMRA's inception, drinkers have witnessed a remarkable about-face by most of Britain's brewers – back to traditional beer, and traditional methods of dispense. Hertfordshire today has over 500 real ale outlets compared to around 70 in 1971.

If Ind Coope have been the standard bearers, with the introduction of Burton Ale, and more recently, Benskins Bitter, what of McMullens, until this month, the county's only independent brewer?

Reluctance

It is true to say that Macs **have** responded to the swing towards real ale, mainly in the managed house trade, by fitting handpumps for Country Bitter, but CAMRA feels that the company has been slow and even reluctant to meet the increased demand for real ale. Today, still only 47% of the company's pubs offer real ale.

CAMRA and McMullens share one major difference of opinion, an opinion fundamental to our aims as a campaign, ie, we say that the company's real ales, Country Bitter and AK Mild, are best served naturally, for instance straight from the cask or on handpumps, and certainly without the use of carbon dioxide to pump the beer from the cellar to the customer. Macs do not agree, and freely admit that they think their beers are best kept and served under top pressure.

Six of one ...

This stance possibly explains why Macs have only partly come down the road in re-introducing real ale into their pubs. Where they have it is usually for Country Bitter, a beer they are vigorously promoting, and hardly ever for AK, their most popular draught beer, and a beer which outsells Country by six pints to four.

McMullens certain do not encourage the promotion of real ale – their handpumps often do not display a pump clip and where the handpump is in competition with top pressure, bar staff will often automatically reach for the 'gas' without asking customers which they would prefer. And, as far as we know, the company do not give any help to tenants wishing to install handpumps.

Excellent beers

But it's not all gloom, McMullens have many points in their favour. On prices they are generally below average and on price per strength are probably one of the best in south-east England. Their two excellent cask-conditioned beers, Country and AK, have a flavour and character all of their own, and the seasonal Christmas Ale has been well received. Some of the company's pub improvements have, of late, been much improved, such as the Jolly Farmers in Enfield (*what about the John Gilpin?* – Ed) and refreshingly, Macs have not tried to do a Ruddles or Everards and ship beer all over Britain. Macs prefer to operate within a fairly localised area, a policy which gains support from many CAMRA members. However this makes it very difficult for Macs to expand into the pub free trade due to the abundance of their own pubs, although in the club trade Macs do very well.

CAMRA will continue to press for more real ale from Hartham Lane, and look forward to the day when each of the company's 160 pubs offers its drinkers real ale. Come off the fence Macs – and step off the gas!

Les Middlewood

John and Tess

invite you to the

ROYAL OAK

Bushey

to try our real ales

free house

01-950 2865

CORNELL COLUMN

by Martyn Cornell

HOME BREW FEVER HITS HERTFORDSHIRE

Big Six brewers Whitbread have stunned the real ale world by announcing they are starting their own home-brew pub in the Hertfordshire village of Frithsden.

Around two dozen new pub breweries have opened in Britain in the last two or three years, encouraged by the real ale boom. But this is the first time any established commercial brewer – let alone one of the Big Six, who own between them half the country's pubs – has set up such a revolutionary venture.

One of the people most surprised by the move is the manager of the pub concerned – the Alford Arms – 28-year-old Martin Winship. He said: "I was flabbergasted when the idea was put to me. I'd thought about running my own home-brew pub one day, but I never thought it could happen while I was manager of a Whitbread pub. I'm amazed".

Underground ale

A prototype version of the brewing equipment to be installed in the pub is apparently already running at Whitbread's Wethered brewery in Marlow, Bucks. The Alford Arms brewery, is actually being installed in an old garage next to the pub, with an underground beer line to the bar from a cellar alongside the brewery.

Work is expected to finish by the middle of this month, with the first brew appearing late this month or early September. The beer will be produced from a malt-extract mash, and all raw materials will come from Whitbread. Initially some three barrels a week will be brewed, but the plant has been designed so that it can be doubled in size, if necessary.

Mr Winship said: "This is a pilot scheme for Whitbreads – if it's a success, there could be a whole chain of similar Whitbread home-brew pubs."

As yet the pub's own brew has no name, but a competition is being run among Alford Arms regulars to come up with a suitable moniker.

Arms house

However, the honour of being the first home brew pub in Hertfordshire since the 19th century looks like going to an establishment which, coincidentally, is only a few miles away – the Bridgewater Arms at Little Gaddesden.

Ironically, one of the stumbling blocks the owners of the former Trust House Forte inn had before work could start on the brewery was with the local planning department, who were worried about change of use – for the Bridgewater Arms was one of the county's last surviving home brew pubs, and only stopped brewing its own shortly after 1895.

However, work was due to be completed on converting a building at the back of the pub to a brewery in mid-July, and if all has gone well the first pints should be on sale now.

All the equipment for the brewery has come from the Mendip brewery in Somerset – which only began brewing itself about three years ago – and Mendip boss Roger Walkey has been supplying the Bridgewater Arms with his own beers and giving advice while they wait to start production on their own.

Bridgewater Arms manager Len Walker said: "We heard about Roger through a friend. His brewery has expanded so much, he had outgrown his original equipment, and so he sold it to us.

"He's lending us a brewer for a month, just to get started, and then we're on our own."

The pub will be producing a full mash brew, ten barrels a week. Two different beers are planned, best bitter with an OG of 1035 and Earl's bitter at 1042. There is also the chance that other free houses will be able to take Bridgewater Arms beers – revivers of a worthy tradition.

DON'T FORGET!

Don't forget that August is Great British Beer Festival month. From 12th to 16th at the Queen's Hall in Leeds more than 125,000 pints of real traditional ale are being collected together from more than 100 breweries. There's all the usual festival fun with championship brass bands and trad jazz to morris dancers and fire eaters. The event is open lunchtimes from Wednesday to Saturday (11am to 3pm), Sunday lunchtime from midday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings (5.30 to 10.30) and Friday and Saturday evenings (5.00 to 11.00). Admission is 50 pence after 7pm on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday and all day Saturday; at other times it's free. For more information contact Peter Lerner on Ware 830616 or Iain Dobson on St Albans 67201.

Leeds isn't far, especially by train and the beautiful Yorkshire country is all around for you to enjoy during closing hours. Why not have a short mid-August break and visit Leeds at Festival time?

PASSPORT TO ST ALBANS

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THE COOPERS

by Chris Storey

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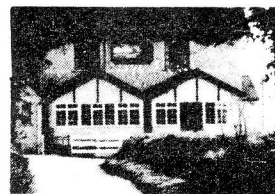
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