

## **CAMRA South Herts Branch - Chairman's Report – January 2018**

2017 was a challenging but productive year for the Branch and a first interesting one for me as Branch Chairman. I thank everyone for their support. In February the new Branch Committee set out to organise a wide, varied and interesting set of events and this has been rewarded with increased attendance. The structure of Branch meetings has been altered to include a period of business, then time for a speaker – a change that has been well received. Our speakers have included Historians, Politicians, National Executive members, Brewers, Maltsters, Club Managers and Publicans. This change of emphasis has inevitably led to more business-focussed committee meetings and I would like to thank the committee for their efforts and support as a result of the change. Our new Branch website, after much excellent design and preparatory work by Tom Blakemore, was launched early in the year and the use of targeted Emails has informed members of up and coming events in their locality and important campaigning issues.

Branch Membership continues to rise and now stands at some 2200. Membership Secretary, John Kemp, and staff from HQ signed up over 250 new CAMRA members at the St.Albans Beer and Cider Festival in September - by far outstripping previous recruitment performances at the Festival. A friendly New Members night was held in October. There is no doubt that we need to work harder to attract younger people into our midst. Tom has been making good progress in this direction and I am sure the Committee will continue with this quest in 2018. Activation Officer, Sandie Taylor, compiled and issued a questionnaire which was sent to all Branch members, with a view to finding out a little more about how and if South Herts members would like to become more involved in Branch activity - and what events they would like to see. The answers have been evaluated and a wider range of events are now being planned for 2018, starting in the spring.

The Branch has supported a number of national campaigning initiatives and is keen to see the National Executive become more aggressive in dealing with the taxation burden on pubs and brewers – and drinkers! The impressive tally of 500 signed postcards achieved at the St.Albans Beer and Cider Festival even outshone the number signed at the Great British Beer Festival. There was some success in the November Budget with a freezing of Beer Duty and there has been minor easing of the burden of Business Rates. However, the latter was minimal. We intend to support local publicans (particularly those in St.Albans, many of whom are facing crippling increases) as they regather themselves for a bigger push to solve the problem both with District Councils and Parliament. The fight will continue. Beer prices are again on the march. The £4 pint is now often seen and whilst we cannot directly affect prices excessive profiteering needs to be exposed.

Fewer local pubs have closed this year but the general decline in pub numbers is by no means at an end and we must be ready and willing to tackle poor planning submissions and to expose bad practices such as pub sales direct to developers when we find out about them. We support national attempts to spur the Pub Codes Adjudicator into greater success - his performance to date is poor.

Much of what we do features on our Website and, of course, in Pints of View which continues to be organised and steered by South Herts Branch on behalf of other Hertfordshire Branches. The effort in producing a bi-monthly magazine must not be underestimated. I would very much like to thank Steve Bury and John Kemp, the Editorial and Production Team, for their excellent work in what makes Pints of View a great mouthpiece for the Hertfordshire branches – and just a great read. Formal liaison meetings with the other Hertfordshire branches have taken place on a quarterly basis.

In South Herts our Pub of the Year voting teams found new winners for 2017. The Gold award was presented to the Mermaid in St.Albans. The Olde Fighting Cocks, St.Albans picked up a worthy silver and the Old Cross Tavern, Hertford a well-earned Bronze. The superb refurbishment at the Prae Wood Arms in St.Albans (and its commitment to real ale) was recognised with the Branch's Most Improved Pub Award. Our Cider Pub of the Year was again the Mermaid in St.Albans and our Club of the Year award was scooped by the Hertford Club in Hertford – a hat trick of wins for the club. Whilst the quality of real ale in our best pubs remains consistently high, in some pubs keeping good real ale seems to be an after-thought. It takes time and attention to keep a great pint - we need to encourage some of our lesser outlets and that means frequenting them.

We have continued to support our local South Herts brewers. McMullen's now brew most of their seasonal beers under the Rivertown banner. A collaboration beer – Golden Years - with South Herts Branch was brewed for the St.Albans Beer and Cider Festival – highlighting Mac's 190 year celebrations and South Herts' 45 year anniversary. 3 Brewers have launched new beers and are confidently making forward strides – winning the Best Strong Bitter category with their Special Pale Ale in the East Anglian round of CAMRA's Champion Beer of Britain competition. Farr Brew have also brought in new beers and hold regular open days. Foragers appeared in a 2017 TV programme and our other pub brewers at the Old Cross Tavern in Hertford and at the White Hart Tap in St.Albans continued to brew well-received beers for their customers.

Our St.Albans Beer and Cider Festival was once again well attended and made a significant profit for the Campaign – at least £16,000 will be donated to National funds. As always, the Festival donates to local charities – the sum this year is likely to be in excess of £2,000. Whilst, in recent times, some other major Beer Festivals have seen a significant drop-off in visitor numbers our Festival keeps performing well with fresh innovations and ever surprising ways in how to get a quart out of a pint pot at the Alban Arena – we really do use every inch of the place. The Hertfordshire Beer of the Year Competition was again hosted by the Festival with Tring's Pale Four narrowly pipping New River's Twin Spring to the title. The Festival Beer of the Year went to Mad Squirrel's Hopfest. Many Congratulations to John Bishop, in his first year as Festival Organiser, to his senior Organising Committee of John Tubridy, Dave Wright, Tom Blakemore and John Lightfoot, and of course, to all of you Branch Members and friends who made it all happen – giving up many hours of your time. The Festival is one of England's major provincial CAMRA events and one which the people of St.Albans and the surrounding area look forward to every year and are rightly proud of. A thank you event for all volunteers was held in the garden at the Olde Fighting Cocks – the regular downpours not at all dampening our spirits – the beer was dutifully consumed! The Festival also gave Cider and Perry new emphasis. Brian Page's motivated team enjoyed their new prominent bar position at the Arena. Richard's Wonky Donkey won the Cider of the Festival competition. Waulkmill Cider's Mooseheid Perry was top perry.

Social Secretary, Ian Boyd, has organised a range of well-attended socials in 2017 – from festival and brewery trips to pub survey and celebration trips, enabling us to show a presence in our own area and to engage with new members, landlords and customers. The Hertford Autumn Ale Trail attracted over sixty members and the Ware Summer Saunter almost thirty. The Hertford Mild Night draws over 30 members each year. The Branch reached its 45 year milestone in November 2017 and held a special celebratory event back where it all started – at the Farriers Arms in St.Albans. It was great to see members from both the old days and the present.

Financially the Branch is in good order. I would like to thank John Lightfoot, our Treasurer, for his expert handling of our monetary affairs and to our Auditors, Jamie Day and Andrew Stovell.

We start 2018 knowing that there are difficult decisions to be made at April's National Members Weekend and AGM in Coventry. The National Executive are currently agreeing their recommendations on the Revitalisation Report and how they are to be put before the Membership. I urge all Branch Members to closely consider the report's contents, the National Executive's recommendations and to closely watch developments in the next three months but most importantly to vote taking into account CAMRA's strong traditional and current values and how you want CAMRA to progress into the future.

2018 will also, no doubt, bring other challenges – the pub and brewery scene is always developing. The important win in permitted development for pubs has given some extra protection. Whilst the need to obtain Asset of Community Value status for vulnerable pubs may have subsided a little we still need to be vigilant on local planning submissions. As a Branch we have never shirked from standing up for what we believe in. I hope this will continue.

Finally, I would like to thank all of you who have volunteered during 2017 and freely given your time, effort and support to the Branch and the campaign. A special thank you to Rob Strachan who has served the Committee for many years as our Pubs Protection Officer but has now decided to stand down. If any of you feel tempted to play a bigger part in Branch activity please consider coming on to the Committee – you will be made very welcome.

Les Middlewood – South Hertfordshire Branch Chairman.