



CHESTER & SOUTH CLWYD

CAMRA DIARY

For the latest events, please visit the branch web site www.camracasc.org.uk

- Fri 8 Dec: Minibus trip to **Llangollen**
Includes presentation to **Sun Inn** for 20 consecutive years in Good Beer Guide.
Departs Mill Hotel, Chester 6.30 pm & Wrexham General station 7 pm
- Thu 14 Dec: Branch meeting, **Cross Keys** - to include Xmas Social
- Fri 12 Jan: Welsh area **Good Beer Guide survey** trip on minibus.
- Thu 18 Jan: Branch social evening, **Brewhouse & Kitchen**, Chester. 8 pm
- Fri 2 Feb: Cheshire pubs **Good Beer Guide survey** trip on minibus.
- Thu 15 Feb: Welsh area Good Beer Guide selection meeting
plus short branch meeting. **Bridge End Inn**, Ruabon. 8 pm
- Sun 18 Feb: Chester area Good Beer Guide selection meeting,
Cross Keys, 8pm
- Thu 15 Mar: Branch meeting: **Cornerhouse**, Chester. 8 pm



@CAMRACaSC

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As well as Chester and its environs, this Branch covers an area stretching from Childer Thornton on the Wirral to Tushingam in the South.

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Chester News

There are new hosts at the imposing **Bridge Inn** on Tarvin Road. After some recent turbulent times, Kelly and Mark have moved in and are determined to re-establish the pub's reputation amongst the community and welcome feedback from customers. Live music, sports TV and food has already recommenced while, on the all important beer front, a guest ale (e.g. Hawkshead Bitter, Salopian Oracle) is back on the bar alongside regulars Sharp's Doombar and Wells Bombardier Gold.



The Bridge is a short pleasant walk or cycle along the Shropshire Union towpath from the centre of town so please try and pop in.



Hats off to **Old Harkers Arms** who, on presentation of their medal, offered 26.2% off their bill for all competitors in October's Chester Marathon.

We're pleased to report that following a fire back in April that caused extensive damage to the **Rake & Pikel**, that the Huntington pub re-opened in November. Cask ales on the bar were Doom Bar, Hobgoblin and Taylor's Landlord.

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The **Race Horse** - Greene King's purpose-built pub on the Upton Grange estate near the Countess hospital has been bought by and re-named after the Goodwins restaurant and bar chain. They have seen fit to discontinue cask ale prompting one Twitter comment; *"Who'd have thought it could become less appealing than a Hungry Horse?!"*

My Favourite Pub in a Text Message:

A series that's a great wheeze at getting other people to write in OIC about pubs other than just the usual correspondents ...

No.112 Mike Lightfoot on **Ye Olde Cottage**, Brook Street.

"Located in the most diverse, eclectic street in the city, it's one of the last true boozers in Chester. The beers, usually 4 on cask, are immaculate. Trev, the larger than life landlord, knows his stuff. The open fire in the autumn and winter months adds to the magic of this gem. It is a tremendous community pub, raising lots of cash for local good causes, notably Dee Banks School. I just love it!"



More Peregrinations with the Ped-ale-urs

Mid-August. Resisting temptation to sample the delights of the **Grosvenor Arms** and **White Horse** at Aldford and Churton respectively it was a gentle ride round the meandering lanes of Coddington and Aldersey Green to arrive at the **Calveley Kitchen** at Handley. As the name suggests, very food orientated but great to see it re-opened under caring new ownership. Not disturbing the diners we joined two other like minded cyclists in the beer garden to enjoy genuinely excellent halves of Cheshire Brew Brothers Chester Gold.

After a nervous blast down the lorry-infested A41, mercifully more peaceful lanes led us on to Tattenhall where we popped in another gastropub - **Allium**. Previously known as *Mitchell's* and *1836*, the former village shop is now kitted out in a rather sombre grey-wash exterior and approached by an avenue of olive trees. It is owned by chef Mark Ellis and marketed as a restaurant and bar with rooms. All very tasteful, as was the lone cask offering Stonehouse Zephyr.

Pressing on we made a slight detour to check on progress at the **Inn at Huxley**, the promised replacement for the lamented *Farmer's Arms*. It looks more or less complete so surely to God it's opening soon - but then we have been saying this since Methuselah was a lad. Next issue we reckon! From here we headed homebound via the Shropshire Union towpath albeit with one more stop in mind. A convenient canal-side gate entry opens out into the rear courtyard of Vintage Inns' **Cheshire Cat** on Christleton Road. Inside the gastronomic theme continued with plenty of scoffing taking place in its warren of large rooms. Unlike previously though, we humble drinkers felt a less conspicuous presence and, relaxed in armchairs, toasted the conclusion to another pleasant pedal with Peerless Knee Buckler (alongside Doom Bar, Wainwright and Bombardier).

A late September Sunday, and a totally random pedal which turned into a voyage of discovery. Passing Spitting Feathers Brewery at Common Farm we came across **Waverton Institute** with its prominent Weetwood Ales banner outside. A crown green bowls game was taking place so we went in for a nosey. Courteously one of the members offered us a drink from the bar and thus we supped a marvellous Weetwood Southern Cross whilst listening to the soothing gentle clack of the woods and the plaintive mewing of a fledgling buzzard.

After saying our *'thank you's* it was onward - this time to Tattenhall Marina where we'd heard rumour of cask beer on site. Access was via the Ice Cream Farm off Newton Lane. *(Never mind Mocha Coffee Bean, Irish Cream and Chocolate Vermicelli flavours. How about doing a hop-infused Azaca & Motueka Ripple, a Tutti-Hoppi or a Biscuit Malt Sundae?)* Lying on an island surrounded by an armada of moored narrow boats, we were delighted to discover the **Boathouse Cafe** was hand pump fitted. A pleasing modern, neat and airy bar ticking over with diners, it was serving Courage Directors - a changing national guest beer. The bar is open to the public and not merely for paying customers at the marina. Worth a look. Will re-visit.

Back onto the saddle and off to the **Shady Oak** nestling in the rain shadow of Beeston Castle with opportunities for more goongozzling, seeing as the Shropshire Union nestles up against the beer garden. Two Stonehouse beers were on offer and the Station Bitter was excellent. The popular carvery was sorely tempting but it was time to head home albeit via one more stop and another "winner".

Located more or less opposite the Ring o'Bells we'd never been in the **Christleton Institute** before so we popped in for a cheeky half. We were welcomed into the charmingly homespun main room with SKY sports on but ignored by two slumbering dogs prostrate on the carpet.



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>>> Just the one beer on at the bar but it was a superbly kept award-winning (see elsewhere) Spitting Feathers Brainstorm.

Excellent finish to another enjoyable tour. What a great way to get round your rural pubs!

Finally a quick condensation of a Halloween ride where the weather was only just about mild enough for shorts. With a stiff pace to get the muscles warmed up, it was non-stop to the **Bull** at Shocklach. Looking lovely, illuminated by lighted pumpkins and with agreeable colourful patchwork floor-tiling, Ossett Spellbound was the obvious beer of choice. In good nick. Pat the cat is pictured in prime position by the fire.

A short ride weaving round fresh cow muck a sharp descent in Threapwood lead us to the snug-as-a-bug-in-a-rug **Queen's Head** at Sarn. For once, not sat out back in the stream-side garden but indoors with warm fire savouring Taylor's Golden Best. Sunday roasts looked and smelled fantastic. The epitome of "hidden gem".



Next fleetingly into Malpas for a quick jar of Black Sheep (+ Bombardier) at the **Vaults**. A fascinating collection of prints reflect the landlord's time working as an RAF photographer. Incidentally, food should soon be available here with dining set aside for the lounge area. Horrid to see the *Red Lion* tinned up.

Forced by necessity due to fading light, there then followed a long, long old haul (painfully resisting the allure of the **Carden Arms** in Tilston) before reaching the welcome glow of the **Plough** in Christleton. Held in fond affection, this remains a lovely pub with lots of cosy rooms around the central bar plus spacious dining at the rear. We settled in the snug (the old entrance from aeons ago) to enjoy Spitting Feathers Brainstorm which joined Robinson's Dizzy Blond and the local's favourite Thwaites Wainwright on the bar.

Home for a hot shower.

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Behind Bars: Craig Elliott

A chat about all things beer / pub related with Craig Elliott - the manager of the **Cross Keys** in Chester and Chester Beer Blog's Bartender of the Year 2017.

How did you first get into the industry?

I started off at the Grosvenor Hotel in the city centre, where I learnt a lot about the hospitality trade and about various drinks, especially wine, but I always took an interest in the different Weetwood bottled ales we would get in. Then I got a bar position at the 'Keys', where I really started taking more of an interest in real ale initially with Joules beers and then on to exploring the national microbrewery scene.

Besides the Joules, you have a good range of guest beers at the Keys. How do you go about choosing them?

I have to think about the clientele we get through the doors. Most Cestrians love hoppy beers, the hopper the better - two of our regulars are nicknamed 'Hophead'! Beers from Vocation, Bad Co, Oakham, North Riding, Arbor, Dark Star, Black Iris, Grey Trees and Howling Hops usually keep them happy. During the winter months we usually try and get a more malt based alternative in, as people like to see a dark beer on to warm their cockles. Beers from the likes of Hammerton, Gun Brewery and Purple Moose do the job here.

Being a beer enthusiast, what three cask beers would you love to see on in any pub?

I would have to say that I like to see a good array of styles so my hoppy session beer would be North Brewing Co's Pale Hallertau Blanc. I know they're not everyone's favourite but I'm also keen on cask sour beer so I'd also have Tiny Rebel's Mojito Sour! And then I'd have a good solid stout/porter e.g. Bristol Beer Factory's Milk Stout. >>>



Ellesmere Port News

Another edition of OIC and another Ellesmere Port pub under threat. This time it's the **Grace Arms** on Stanney Lane which is the subject of a planning application that, if approved, would see it bull-dozed to make way for 42 new apartments.

Residents in the area first heard of the development on receiving letters from Birkenhead-based housing association Magenta Living, who are in partnership with Warrington developers Lane End Developments on the project. Suffice to say, they were not happy.

Following a public consultation, a Facebook page "[Save the Grace Arms](#)" was created by Gemma Baxter, whose grandparents ran the Grace from 1945 to the late 1960s. Gemma succinctly sums up feelings.

"We are quickly losing the identity of this town to ugly, template developments which will not be fit for purpose in 40 years time and have not been designed with our town in mind."

"Buildings like the Grace Arms are milestones in our heritage and we must fight to protect them for future generations, as well as the social space which this pub provides for so many people in the town including those who are marginalised."

Local MP Justin Madders has also weighed in. He points out that there are many empty, more preferable sites in Ellesmere Port that could be redeveloped rather than provocatively choose one that puts a loved landmark at risk.

The Grace Arms dates back to before the Second World War and is named after the Grace family, who owned nearby Whitby Hall. Objections to CW&C council closed in November. Will common sense and local wishes prevail? >>>

>>> *You also like your can/bottled and keg beer don't you?*

Firstly I love cask beer, as there is so much flavour and freshness you can pack into a pint, but in terms of keg and bottled beers, there's definitely a place in my heart for them. They intrigue me as they can be so extreme and, well, mad for want of a better word. Take for instance Siren Kentucky Tickle Monster that was recently on at the Cellar. That was a 16.3% bourbon barrel aged triple IPA with mango and cedar. It just doesn't lend itself to cask-conditioning.

What about the future of the Chester beer scene? Solely keg or cask, or a mix of the two?

No offence to CAMRA hard-liners but I personally think that more and more pubs will get into the keg / bottled scene in Chester. They lend themselves to the younger market, although I have seen seasoned drinkers sink a few glasses of craft keg too.

We ourselves now stock a Joules keg beer as does the Deva Tap with their Deva Craft beers. The Artichoke also stocks a decent amount of keg and the Cellar stocks loads.

That said, for me the backbone of it all, both breweries and pubs wise, will always be cask! There are so many drinkers who like a good traditional pint.

Other than the Cross Keys, where are your favourite UK pubs near and far?

In Chester, as you may have guessed, it's the Cellar (wackiest range of cask and craft in town). Elsewhere the Port Street Beer House in Manchester. Local to where I live, the West Kirby Tap and, as a homage to my home town, the Brewery Shades in Crawley.

And finally where do you see yourself in the future within this trade?

The ultimate goal for myself is to one day own my own pub, maybe a micro, but for the foreseeable future I just want to learn more about the beer scene and put my heart and soul into the Cross Keys to make it as good as it can be! All I can say is that despite the long hours, the unpredictability of trade (where a usually quiet shift turns into the busiest) and the up and downs of pub life itself, I love it!!



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>>> On a more positive note, **Alfie's** in Little Sutton opened in early autumn. And what an excellent addition it is to the Port's drinking / dining scene! With the welcome sight of Black Sheep Bitter on the bar, it is a spacious single room bistro in cream and black art-deco style with striking chequerboard tiling. There is simple seating and plusher banquettes for the diners and the odd high table for the drinker. Close to Little Sutton station. Give it a visit!

More praise for the **Halfway House** at Childer Thornton where Chris and Jayne are doing an excellent job of creating a typical local - one that is sadly lacking in today's drinking environment.

There is now a permanent fourth hand pump with rotating beers and, since the tie to Marston has been relaxed, the variety has only improved - not that the quality has been anything other than good. Chris also welcomes suggestions of new beers to try.

But it is as a community local that it stands out. Two darts teams, two dominoes teams and two Golf societies are based at a pub where impromptu old-fashioned sing-songs can break out. It's the type of pub where, to quote a phrase, "everybody knows your name". Strangers are of course cordially welcomed though turn up with a beer thermometer and a superior attitude and you'll likely get the mickey taken out of you.

STOP PRESS: We also see a planning application is in to demolish the **Sutton** (formerly the **Marquis**) in Great Sutton. Please seek it out and object!

We should run a sweep on which will be the last pub standing serving the windswept streets of the Ellesmere Port conurbation.

Rural News

The Hyde's owned **Goshawk** at Mouldsworth now offers 50p of all cask ales all day every Monday. They've also started a quiz night on the 2nd and 4th Wednesday of the night. Train trip out for the Swedish Dormice, eh boys?!!!



News from the **Farndon Arms** in Farndon (*pictured*) which has re-opened with enthusiastic tenants Karen and Mike.

Faced with the tough task of rebuilding the customer base, our man on the ground has good reports of greatly improved ambience and quality/choice of food.

Only one hand pump so far (from SIBA list) but there's hope this will rise as throughput increases.

For far too long now - January 2013 to be precise - the handsome **Golden Lion** at Ashton Hayes, lying in the heart of the village, has been a depressing, all too familiar sight; a once vibrant pub closed for business. What's particularly different here though is that it's not as if the villagers don't care. From the outset the Parish Council has been desperately keen to operate the pub as a community hub and yet the private owner, for unfathomable reasons, has steadfastly refused to enter dialogue seemingly content for his asset to remain "tinned up". But is there some light at the end of this interminable tunnel of frustration? Rumours circulated in late summer that it might finally have been put up for sale to spark renewed hope the pub might get a fresh lease of life.

The building is registered as an **Asset of Community Value** (ACV) and this basically gives the community a six month window in which to raise the required finances to purchase the Golden Lion should the property be placed on the market. As a consequence, a draft business plan was carefully drawn up to demonstrate how the community could buy the pub.

This was duly presented for public comment at a meeting in late October where a healthy 130 folk were in attendance. After informative talks from the parish, a pub steering group and the **Plunkett Foundation** (a rural community support group), consent for purchase was overwhelming with 99% voting in favour of attempting to buy the pub via a **Community Benefit Society**.



Highly encouraging signs then but there's a long way to go before this handsome pub is once again welcoming customers. Readership is therefore urged to cross fingers and toes in the hope there will be more positive news to bring come the New Year.

Conflicting reports from the natives as to what the future has in store for the **Red Lion** in Malpas currently shrouded in unsightly metal shutters. In the Crown opposite bar talk reckoned it had been gutted and stripped of its cellar pipe-work. In the chippy the hearsay was of demolition and building of replacement housing. Elsewhere optimists still maintain JW Lees are intent on repairs before it reopens. Is all this misinformation part of the owner's tactics to ensure the locals are not all joined up and organised to launch a rescue campaign? Or is it simply a case, as we were also told, Malpas is rife with rumours? *"Had they been true, the pub would have been sold to the Brunning Price group years ago!"*

>>> Depressingly, the **Sandstone Inn** remains closed with no sign of any imminent rescue. Behind the scenes, a complex stand-off emerges.

The most recent tenant, whilst looking to sell the lease and the business, was late on one occasion with rent payment. He then discovered the owners (Bolesworth Estates) had invoked a clause in the small print and ejected him, changing locks, etc.

Unfortunately this now prevents the tenant from selling his lease, since the owner claims he is technically in forfeit of it, and the issue has become a matter of legal dispute.

The Asset of Community Value status, arranged by the local branch with the support of the Parish Council, prevents the owner from developing the property unless there is full planning permission, which would be unlikely given the stance of the parish council.

Local residents are keen to see the pub reopen while the owners have stated that they *“remain committed to the successful future of the building and are aware of the community’s wish to see this re-opened as soon as possible.”* Let’s hope the impasse is broken soon.

Snippet; We understand that the Community-run **Centurion** at Vicar’s Cross is starting Sunday lunches. This is in addition to regular quiz nights and charity events. Good show!

BEER PARASITES

No, not the annoying tiny fruit flies the sometimes circle your beer glass.

The commercial organisations who have attached themselves to the beer industry in order to make money, gain influence, or attain a level of power. Two that come to mind are the **Pubco** and **SIBA**. Most readers will know about the **PubCos** and their practice of extracting the maximum from brewers, tenants, and customers and how successive legislation changes have still not really addressed the issues. Greed prevails in consequence of the operation of a broken business model.

SIBA [the *Society of Independent Brewers*, the A used to stand for Association but is clearly a redundant word in the title] came into existence to represent the interests of all of Britain’s brewers from the tiny micro to the larger regional outfit, but not the international conglomerates. In this respect, they have proved to be a useful voice in the industry but lately, through their Direct Delivery Scheme [DDS], are starting to work against their members as greed takes hold.

The idea behind DDS was that smaller brewers could gain access to pubs previously closed from them by the **PubCos** who insist their tenants buy from an approved list, normally of beers from larger, well known brewers. Rather than make the small brewer deliver into the **PubCo** distribution systems, DDS allows for delivery direct to the pub, thus saving beer miles and associated distribution costs. Great idea one would think; allow pubs to sell local beers, increase choice, improve sales profile of small brewers. Trouble is that while **SIBA** will buy the small brewer’s beer for a price similar to the latter’s free trade price before selling on to the pub, the publican then ends up paying anything up to £40 per firkin more than the free trade price. This is despite the brewer doing delivery, managing empties, and so on, which means the **Pubco/SIBA** axis is making up to £40 for doing almost nothing - just a tiny bit of administration.

The latest **SIBA** wheeze to emerge is the requirement for brewers to pay an annual monitoring fee, believed to be £300, for conducting an audit which is basically a repeat of Trading Standards and HMRC inspection audits which have been regularly carried out for many years.

This move stands alongside **SIBA**’s practice of getting brewers to supply beers free of charge for their beer festivals, for the “marketing opportunity” to display their product. What other beer festivals does anyone know of where the organisers do not pay for the beer they sell?

Where’s that fly spray?

THE GRIPER