

November 2011

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FOR
REAL ALE
TIMES

Opening

THE FREE CAMRA REGIONAL MAGAZINE

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**Out Now -
see page 19**

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and bars



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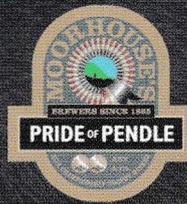
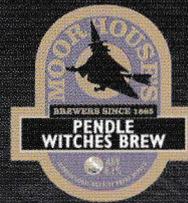


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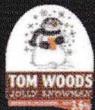


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Pub OF THE Month AWARD

The Stockport & South Manchester CAMRA Pub of the Month for November is the Grapes in Hazel Grove. Chris Wainwright is a regular visitor to this Good Beer Guide regular...



ROBINSONS may have closed a number of struggling pubs in Hazel Grove lately, but no such worries exist about the future of November's Pub of the Month. George and Elaine have been in the Grapes for 18 years now. As if this level of longevity in one pub is not achievement enough, this year they celebrate 25 years with Robinsons. Older readers may remember them at the controls of the (now closed) Royal Mortar on Hillgate.

Well known and respected in the area the Woods have contributed to local events and charities from the outset. The efforts of the customers each year in playing a major role in the Hazel Grove Carnival were rewarded earlier this year in them winning "Best Decorated Float". And it's those same regulars that will share a cheery welcome with you as you walk through the door, whether it is for the first time or the umpteenth time.

There has been some fairly dire beer sold in Hazel Grove, as is evident from a recent Stagger article in these pages, but there is however no doubt that the Grapes consistently delivers an excellent pint. The Unicorn bitter is always on top form and the Hatters mild is offered at two different temperatures for those that prefer a slightly cooler than usual tipple.

Testament to demand for George's cellar skills is the fact that this pub is driven on wet sales alone. You won't see any menus on tables; hear any deafening live music to shatter the peace. Even the jukebox is reasonably low key. What you will hear is good old bar room chat and banter. Customers actually having conversations with each other prove this is truly a pub for the community.

So come along for the presentation on Wednesday 23rd of November from 8.00pm and sample the atmosphere for yourself. The Grapes is in the middle of Hazel Grove (SK7 4DQ), on the bend in the A6 served by the 191, 192, 199 bus and just four minutes walk from Hazel Grove rail station.

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Open every day from Noon
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Comment, Notes & Contents

What's On

Opening Times – Comment

John Hesketh (obituary page 17) was a true campaigner for real ale in every sense of the word. Unlike those of us who just enjoy our beers, John was someone whose actions spoke more loudly than his words. Not only did he make the Station in Ashton a proper real ale destination (I have particularly fond memories of the stout and porter festivals staged in a marquee outside the pub) but his transformation of Stalybridge Station Buffet Bar is the stuff of legend, and it remains a lasting memorial to his commitment and dedication.

This month sees the launch of the eagerly awaited Manchester Pub Guide (see advert on page 10). This has taken about a year to produce but surveying continues to the last minute to ensure it is as up to date as possible. Worth every penny – don't miss out.

Opening Times - Information

Opening Times is produced by the Stockport & South Manchester Branch of CAMRA, the Campaign for Real Ale. Additional material is supplied by the High Peak & NE Cheshire, Trafford & Hulme, North Manchester and Macclesfield & E Cheshire Branches. The views expressed are not necessarily those of CAMRA either locally or nationally. 7,200 copies a month are printed by Phil Powell Printing of Failsworth. All articles copyright CAMRA unless otherwise stated.

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Trading Standards – for complaints about short measure pints etc contact Consumer Direct (North West). Consumer Direct works with all the Trading Standards services in the North West and is supported by the Office of Fair Trading. You can email Consumer Direct using a secure email system on their website (www.consumerdirect.gov.uk) which also provides advice, fact sheets and model letters on a range of consumer rights. Their telephone no. is 0845 404 05 06.

Copy Date for the December issue Saturday 12th November

Front cover – unspoilt interior of the Circus Tavern, Portland Street, Manchester. Photo courtesy Mick Slaughter

Contributors to this issue: John Clarke, John Tune, Dave Hanson, Peter Butler, Robin Wignall, Peter Edwardson, Frank Wood, Phil Booton, Mike Rose, Caroline O'Donnell, John O'Donnell, Fraser Brisbane, Chris Wainwright, Mark McConachie, Tony Icke, Ralph Warrington, Nick Earle, Heather Airlie, Stewart Reville, Geoff Williamson

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Local CAMRA branches organise regular events in pubs across the region – members of other branches & general public are welcome to attend except some Branch business meetings (contact branch contact if in doubt). Organising branch in brackets.

November

Wednesday 9th – Worsley Crawl: Cock, Walkden Rd 7.30pm; John Gilbert, Worsley Brow 8.30pm. (NM)

Thursday 10th – North Manchester Social: 8pm Marble Arch; 8.45 Angel, then Smithfield and Fringe. (TRH)

Monday 16th – 500th Member Social: Society Rooms, Macclesfield. From 8pm. (MEC)

Thursday 17th – Altrincham Social: 8pm Tatton Arms; 8.45 Unicorn; 9.15 Costello's (TRH)

Friday 18th – Central Didsbury Stagger: 7.30pm Station; 8.30 Dog & Partridge. Both Wilmslow Road. (SSM)

Saturday 19th – Bollington Crawl with Chesterfield Branch. Start point & time tbc.(MEC)

Monday 21st – Happy Valley 'Meet the Brewer' at the Brewhouse, Altrincham (TRH)

Wednesday 23rd – Swinton Crawl: Park Inn 7.30pm; Staff of Life 8.30pm; White Swan 9.30pm. (NM)

Thursday 24th – Pub of the Month presentation to the Grapes, Hazel Grove. (SSM)

Friday 25th – Regional Pub of the Year Presentation to the Magnet, Wellington Road North, Stockport. (All)

Saturday 26th – Chorlton Challenge. Covering **all** real ale outlets in Chorlton. Start Oddest at 12 noon. See branch website for details. (TRH)

Monday 28th - RedWillow "Meet the Brewer" at the Brewhouse, Altrincham. (TRH)

Wednesday 30th – Soup Kitchen, Spear Street, Manchester. Starts 8pm. (NM)

Your Local CAMRA Branches:

SSM: Stockport & South Manchester www.ssmcamra.org.uk
Contact: Mark McConachie 0161 429 9356, mark.mcconachie@o2.co.uk

NM – North Manchester www.northmanchestercamra.org.uk
Contact: Dave Hallows 07983 944992, davehallows2002@yahoo.co.uk

HPNC – High Peak & North Cheshire www.hpneccamra.org.uk
Contact: Mike Rose 07986 458517. mikewrose@gmail.com

MEC – Macclesfield & East Cheshire www.eastcheshirecamra.org.uk
Contact Tony Icke 01625 861833, contact@eastcheshirecamra.org.uk

TRH – Trafford & Hulme www.thcamra.org.uk
Branch Contact: John Ison 0161 962 7976, enquiries@thcamra.org.uk

CAMRA Branch Business Meetings

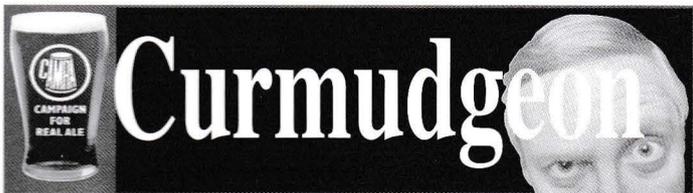
Thursday 10th – Railway, Wellington Road North. Includes New faces event and talk by David Bremner, Robinsons Director of Marketing. Starts 8pm. (SSM)

Monday 14th – Royal British Legion, Poynton. Starts 8pm. (HPNC)

Wednesday 16th – Angel, Angel St, Manchester. Starts 7.30pm (NM)

Thursday 1st December – Old Market Tavern, Market Place, Altrincham. Starts 8pm. (TRH)

Monday 5th December – AGM: Park Lane Tavern, Macclesfield. Starts 8pm. (MEC)



Not so Ordinary

BACK in the 1970s, most British brewers just produced Mild (at around 3.3% ABV) and Bitter (around 3.8%). Choice, and a contrast in flavours, was achieved by switching between brewers, not within an individual brewer's range. There were a handful of premium beers, such as Ruddles County, Marston's Pedigree and Wadworths 6X, and these got the recognition as the beers you would go out of your way to sample, and became the standard-bearers of the "real ale revival". The fact that they had memorable brand names rather than just being "Bloggs' Bitter" must have helped.

But times change, and recently we have seen a number of brewers reducing the strength of these "premium beers" because they were losing sales in the current climate of sobriety and health obsession. You can't really blame them for this, as they're just responding to changes in customer demand.

However, wouldn't it be better for them to do more to promote their classic "ordinary bitters" in the 3.5-4.0% ABV strength band? These beers, which manage to extract huge depths of flavour and character from a very modest, quaffable strength, are surely the most distinctive achievement of British brewing, and cover a vast spectrum of colour, flavour and character.

Locally, Robinson's Unicorn at 4.2% is a bit too strong to qualify, but both Holts and Lees bitters are excellent brews when in good condition. Across the country, just considering the family brewers, a selection of Timothy Taylors Bitter, Batemans XB, Adnams Southwold Bitter, Harveys Sussex Best and Hook Norton wouldn't disgrace any bar.

Incidentally, I was surprised to learn that the 3.8% Dizzy Blonde – perhaps more of a golden ale, but very much in the ordinary bitter strength range – is now outselling Robinson's traditional mainstay, the 4.2% Unicorn. Originally just produced as a seasonal beer, this was initially a touch bland, but more recently it has gained more hop character and is now, when well-kept, a very enjoyable beer.

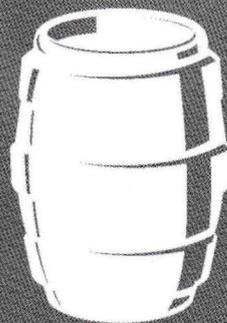
Drinking with the Enemy

MY jaw dropped recently when I heard that SIBA – the Society of Independent Brewers – had become associate members of government-funded anti-drink pressure group Alcohol Concern. While Alcohol Concern may have been making some noises about pubs promoting responsible drinking, those are just weasel words when you consider that they define consuming two pints at a sitting as a hazardous level of consumption.

Over the years, they have opposed every liberalisation of licensing law, supported every increase in duty rates, and championed any proposal that would damage the interests of pubs and the British brewing industry. It is hard to conceive of any issue on which the objectives of Alcohol Concern and SIBA would not be diametrically opposed. I've heard of turkeys voting for an early Christmas, but this is more like them joining the board of the slaughterhouse.

Curmudgeon Online: www.curmudgeoncolumns.blogspot.com

(Comments on these articles can be left on the website)



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OUR BREWER WAS UP
AT 2AM
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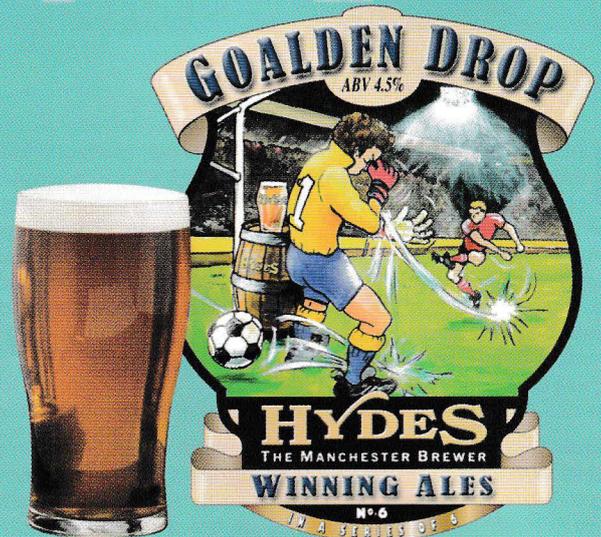
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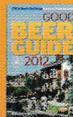
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Stagger.....

The Jewel in the Crown - Shaw Heath & King Street with Fraser Brisbane

ON a pleasantly mild night in August we set off to explore the pubs on the well trodden route down to Stockport from Shaw Heath. Our mission was to confirm the status and beer quality of the pubs en route, and to note any improvement or unfortunate lapses on our way. It was to be the first time this drinker had ever visited most of the pubs, so an open and honest, if sometimes cursory appraisal was on the cards.

Our first port of call was the **Florist** on Shaw Heath. The pub has recently undergone a change of landlord and we were keen to see (and



taste) the result. The building itself is an old Robinsons pub with a large ground floor laid out to several small rooms. It was quiet, with low background music as we entered, and only a dozen or so other patrons in for early doors. Despite this I found it had a slightly unhelpful and crowded bar layout, however the beers on offer were plentiful with a choice of Dark Hatters, Hatters Mild, Unicorn, and Dizzy Blonde. Unfortunately the Dark Hatters had already sold out, due to popular demand by all accounts, and there was no real cider on offer. The majority of the team chose to try the Mild and found the beer to still be of acceptable quality - the Mild and Unicorn were average, where as the Dizzy Blonde was of a slightly better quality. Still, the night was young so we pressed on to our next destination - The **Grapes** on Castle Street.

Stepping in to this small local pub we found only one cask ale on offer. This was another Robinsons pub and



apparently only offers Mild infrequently, another casualty of low sales. There was no real cider on offer either, so with the choice rather limited we settled for the Unicorn. The rather helpful barmaid was quick to top up our foaming pints without being asked so we passed the singing fish on the wall and proceeded to take our seats. The pub comprises a lounge and vault to either side of the bar. A rather overpowering smell of Lu Blus didn't assist our perch around the crowded small tables to the rear and neither did it help the rather average scores our beers

received. As such there was little delay in proceeding to the next venue, the Armoury.

A refreshing change, on entering this pub it is immediately obvious why it was the busiest so far. The **Armoury** has been recently decorated and was certainly the nicest pub of the evening with an excellent buzzing atmosphere. This was the first pub where no music was required and there were at least three cask ales on offer - Hatters Mild, Unicorn and Dizzy Blonde. With an outside smoking area and decent toilets too (or so I was informed) the whole experience enticed you to return. The beer choice was split across the group with all scoring well - the Hatters described as wonderfully consistent and the Dizzy performing well too. Is it coincidence that in a modern society the "nicest", cleanest pub also appears to also be the busiest, best run (with the most efficient staff) and offer the best beer quality (so far). With some regret we pressed on to our next destination...



The **Greyhound** on Bowden Street was the next pub on the list but with the assurance from a member that a recent visit had confirmed that there was still no real ale available, and that the pub was still firmly keg based, we moved straight on to the Olde Vic on the corner of Chatham Street.

I have personally never set foot inside the premises before and as I did so, was in two minds whether to continue.

Possibly the "most unfinished pub in Stockport", the bar at the **Olde Vic** actually proved to be the most welcoming of the trip. Presented almost like a newly purchased house - untidy, cluttered, in a constant state of renovation - the unfinished interior does slightly distract from the purpose of the visit, the beer. A good range of beers was on offer though with five cask ales available on our visit. All beers were sampled, the list including: Hawkshead (Bitter & 5 Hop), Oakham JHB & Dark Star (Dark Star & Pale Ale). All scored well, with the Hawkshead just slightly topping the list. This was the first pub of the evening to finally offer real cider, Thatchers Gold. There was, as ever, some conversation regarding the state of the pub itself and it has to be said that despite apparently aiming for the homely 'lived in look' it did somewhat fail to hit the mark with me,



perhaps rather reminiscent of a grotto due to the quirky nature of the interior - in any event, the beer was all well kept and the pub worth a repeat visit.

Our next stop was to be the **Comfortable Gull** on King Street West. Disappointingly, within seconds of sticking our heads in the door it was apparent that cask ale was no longer available. Perhaps the Cask Marque should now be withdrawn from its place by the front door..? Anyway, much to the delight of several of the party we therefore proceeded directly to the Pineapple on Heaton Lane.

Another Robinsons pub, the **Pineapple** is a small "local" multi room pub with an outside area and a popular juke box. The walls are still littered



with an array of plates brought back by punters from their holidays abroad. A loose pineapple / artex theme pervades... This was the only Robbies pub of the night to sell either Crusoe or Hartleys. The other cask ales on offer being Hatters and Unicorn. Everyone seemed determined to try the Crusoe, which scored quite well and the Hartleys was also sampled faring even better. As the night was rolling on, the decision was taken to move swiftly to our final location of the night, the **Crown Inn** under the viaduct.

What can be said about the Crown that hasn't already been said? A medium sized multi room pub which retains many of its original



features, provides a local and cosy atmosphere for a mix of customers, whilst providing said punters with a range of around 16 cask beers and ciders to choose from. The pub is welcoming, lively and a real beer haven. Whilst braving competition from the Magnet these days, the Crown retains its own local charm also offering outdoor live music and the occasional BBQ - as if simply being there for the beer and good company wasn't enough. Being the final pub of the evening it would be fair to say that each member of the team stayed to sample several of the brews on offer with Dark Star Victorian Mild and Copper Dragon Golden Pippin being especially lauded.

A fine end to an interesting exploration of a very convenient run of pubs. Try them, perhaps your opinion will differ - but the choice of beers will always surprise.

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