

RAILWAY IS LOCAL PUB OF THE YEAR

Following the success of the Nursery as CAMRA's national Pub of the Year for 2001, Stockport & South Manchester CAMRA have chosen the Railway, Portwood, to carry the torch in the 2002 competition.

It's a case of second time lucky for the Railway, as the pub very narrowly missed out on the award four years ago. This time however, the pub was a clear winner, a tribute to the hard work and commitment of licensee Alex Lord. Back in 1996, the Railway was re-opened by the Porter Brewing Co as their third tied house. Under the stewardship of Paul and Bev Stanyer, the Railway became an instant success and something of a flagship for the Porters brewery. At around the same time Alex Lord started working for the company as a barman, and then also as an odd-job man.

Paul and Bev left the Railway after notching up two Pub of the Month awards there, and subsequent events have been well documented in these pages. Suffice it to say that the pub appeared to enter a period of decline culminating in a sudden management change in September 2000. This resulted in Alex taking charge and facing the task of restoring the Railway's fortunes.

Luckily, in Alex Lord the Railway has found itself in the hands of one of the most hard-working and committed licensees you are likely to encounter. And the hard work has paid off with the Railway now restored to its place as one of the top cask beer pubs in Stockport. The full range of Porter's hand-pulled beers, including the house beer, Railway Sleeper, traditional cider and foreign beers are all back to the top quality demanded by the pub's customers. A comprehensive menu of home-made food has also been restored. A new innovation, introduced by Alex, is a wide range of Belgian and German bottled beers. The range, which would look well at home in Manchester's *Northern Quarter*, has really taken off with the pub's customers.

On hearing of the award Alex told Opening Times "Everyone is very, very happy and all of the customers are over the moon. It would have been a shame to see the pub go without getting the top award".

This richly deserved award will be presented to Alex on Saturday 2 March from 8.00pm onwards. Every night at the Railway is a good 'un, but this one promises to be a classic. Alex is promising something special - a 'Night of 101 Beers'! It will certainly be a case of get there early if you want a seat.

AND THE DAVENPORT ARMS IS RUNNER-UP

While there can be only one winner, the Davenport Arms at Woodford made a strong showing to become runner-up. Known to many as the "Thief's Neck", this classic country pub was a previous winner of the award in 1995.

Uniquely in the area, the licence has been held in the Hallworth family for over seventy years, with John, the third generation, having handed over to his daughter Yvonne in 1991 after twenty-five years' service. Despite bouts of ill health he continued to be a familiar face in the pub and gave the benefit of his long years of experience of cellarmanship, until his sad death in May of last year. A mark of the respect in which John Hallworth was held was the fact that over four hundred people attended his funeral.

However, Yvonne, her sister Alison and their hard-working staff continue to maintain the same high standards in this atmospheric, traditional, multi-roomed pub with its real fires, magnificent garden and warm welcome to a wide cross-section of the community. Most importantly, the beer - Robinson's Hatters Mild, Best Bitter, Old Tom and seasonal beers - remains in consistently good nick, resulting in the "Thief's" having been in the Good Beer Guide for fifteen straight years since 1988 - a record second only in the area to the Nursery, which has just become the National Pub of the Year.



INTERBREW PLOT LINK WITH CARLSBERG

After a bruising rebuff from the competition authorities that saw Interbrew forced to sell off Bass Breweries to US-based Coors (with the lucrative Carling brand), Interbrew now appear to be plotting a sales-led link with Carlsberg-Tetley.

Interbrew were allowed to keep some of the smaller parts of Bass, (including the right to sell Bass Ale - though it will be brewed in the part sold off) but in order to keep the beer (i.e. lager) market competitive, was forced to sell the Carling brand which accounts for, we kid you not, a massive 19% of UK beer consumption.

In an attempt to put together a 'sector-killer' package, Interbrew are in talks with C-T to combine their sales and distribution (which would then be sold off and managed by BOC) to combine low-strength British-brewed Carlsberg (NOT the best lager in the world, even when brewed in Denmark), with high-strength British-brewed Stella. A combination of ersatz-beers designed to knock a hole in equally ersatz British-brewed Carling's market share.

Given that the taste of Carling was described by one beer writer as "a combination of gnat's pee and soap-suds with an unpleasant rusty-metallic after-taste", and that Carling's domination owes much to saturation and lack of choice in the midlands, it may be a winning formula. Together with the news that C-T chief exec Colin Povey has been carrying out a "core-brand review" to be announced within the next couple of weeks, it looks like more predatory discount-led selling into the pubco estates, and you can bet that quality, tasty, real ales - and the discerning customer, will lose out yet again. **PBH**

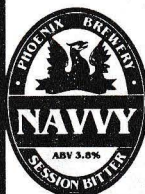
IN FEBRUARY'S OPENING TIMES

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1998 International Brewing Awards
Wobbly Bob awarded Silver Medal

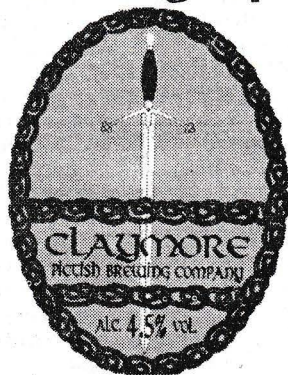
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IN THE EDITOR'S VIEW..

The argument about the size of the cask ale market seems set to rumble on and on. Certainly, the entertaining row between the various market research firms shows no sign of abating. On balance I think the British Beer & Pub Association has the better methodology in assessing the cask ale output of its members. It seems equally clear that they have seriously underestimated the size of the micro-brewers share of the market. If they are to defend their own figures on the basis that they come from surveys of their members, then they must surely accept SIBA's figures which are based on similar surveys. Of more importance than arguing over the odd percentage point, though, is how the figures are presented. The headline figures cover the whole beer market including off-sales. Cask ale is essentially an on-trade product and so the headline figure don't compare like with like as keg beers and lagers have their volume boosted by canned and bottled products. Even senior figures from local family brewers have spoken in gloomy terms of cask ales 9 per cent market share when what they should be talking up is the much more healthy 16-17 per cent of the pub and club market commanded by cask ale. Perhaps this is something the Independent Family Brewers of Britain should take on board when planning this year's Cask Ale Week.

Most of the family brewers are also members of the British Beer & Pub Association. Given that this organisation seems dedicated to talking down cask ale, the very product on which the family brewers depend, it remains a mystery to me why they remain members of it. Answers on a postcard, please.

John Clarke

News of a distribution tie-up being planned by Interbrew & Scottish & Newcastle is yet more bad news. The combined force of Stella and Carlsberg will be too much for most pubco's to refuse, and this will lead to bland national ale brands being discounted as part of the deal, with tasty micro brews squeezed out of yet more outlets by predatory discounts. Fat chance of this Government intervening, however.

Paul Hutchings

OPENING TIMES ISSUE 214

OPENING TIMES is published by Stockport & South Manchester CAMRA - The Campaign for Real Ale. Views expressed are not necessarily those of the campaign either locally or nationally. Editors: John Clarke, 45 Bulkeley Street, Edgeley, Stockport SK3 9HD. ☎ (0161) 477 1973; Paul Hutchings, 8 The Green, Heaton Norris, Stockport Cheshire, SK4 2NP. ☎ & Fax (0161) 432 8384. News, articles and letters welcome. All editorial items may be submitted in most popular WP formats or preferably ASCII on IBM-PC format 3.5" disks (which will eventually be returned) or CD-R, or via e-mail to johnclarke@stocam.u-net.com. Adverts or photos should be "hard copy" or in CorelDraw 3.5 or 7 (*.cdr) format or TIFF or EPS files (submit printed proofs for checking and ensure that any "include all fonts" options are on). All editorial items © CAMRA: may be reproduced if source acknowledged. All Advertising images are copyright the respective design sources (Largely CPPR, but all other copyrights and trademarks acknowledged).

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Fight for Consumer Choice in Pubs - Join CAMRA now - see page 19!

PUB OF THE MONTH FEBRUARY 2002

Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
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3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28		



The Stockport & South Manchester CAMRA Pub of the Month for February is Kro Bar, Oxford Road, Chorlton-on-Medlock.

Uncompromisingly modern in its interior design and catering mainly (but not exclusively) for the student market, Kro Bar is perhaps not the typical 'CAMRA pub', at least not in the eyes of those who believe the clichés. In point of fact, Kro Bar proves the point that good pubs come in all shapes and sizes, and make no mistake, Kro Bar is a very good pub.



Converted from the former premises of the Manchester Temperance Society, the stylish interior and rear conservatory extension were designed by Manchester architects Stephenson Bell who have successfully incorporated a very modern bar into a listed Georgian building. Upstairs other public rooms have a more traditional feel and are decorated with old Temperance memorabilia found during the restoration of the building.

The owner of Kro Bar, Mark Ruby, is Danish and a Kro is a Danish country pub. As it says on the Kro website (www.kro.co.uk) the aim is for the bar to have the qualities of a Kro - good food, good beer and a warm welcome. Mark, ably assisted by bar manager Martin Judge, has certainly achieved these aims. The bar is lively and friendly, as you would expect from its location, and the quality of the food is legendary with a wide variety of freshly prepared dishes, often with a Scandinavian accent, available.

However, it is on the beer front that Kro really makes an impact. Given the type of bar this is, you could be forgiven for having very low expectations on the beer front. You would however be very wrong. A wide range of foreign bottled beers (both Belgian and German) are complemented by both interesting foreign beers on draught and, pride of place in the centre of the bar, five cask beers on handpump. Taylors Landlord is a regular as is Boddingtons Bitter. The other three beers are constantly changing guests, usually from micro-brewers. There's a real commitment to quality too, a policy which has resulted in very healthy cask ale sales in an environment where the bigger operators would have you believe it would be a non-starter.

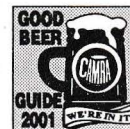
Great beer, great food and a great welcome. What more do you need? Still not convinced, then come and join those of us already in the know when we present this well-deserved award on Thursday 28 February.

Public transport to Kro Bar couldn't be easier as it's on one of the busiest bus routes in the country. It's at 325 Oxford Road, opposite the University Students Union.

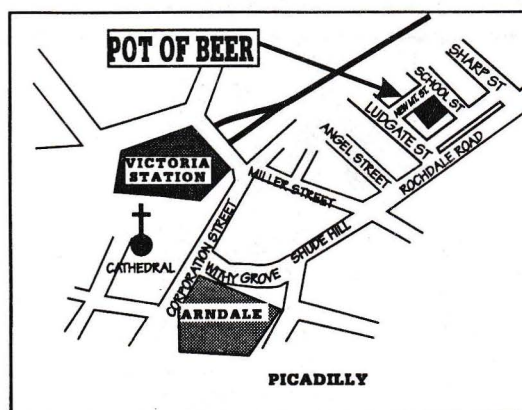
The local branch of CAMRA decide on a Pub of the Month by a democratic vote at the monthly branch meeting.

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OPENING TIMES

From Dave Nunn, Hazel Grove:

It is noted that January's OT resulted in the Horse & Jockey painting out "Cask Conditioned". They missed out the "Ale" bit. This isn't a victory for the Campaign - a victory would have been the restoration of cask beer to the pub.

As you might expect the contents of my fish tank have more imagination than the Pubco that leases/runs the "Jockey".

Ideal for the Campaign would be the restoration of 100% availability of real ale in Hazel Grove. It's not hard to sell here, in the days of the "tarmac carpet" the Jockey was well used by a broad clientele consuming Holts and other unmentionables (in a CAMRA audience).

Notwithstanding the poor effort of the Bulls Head with solitary John Smith's cask and the "Jockey" the 100% record could be restored if only Brown's could get on board.

As Brown's insist on serving factory produced beers, it can only be assumed that the wines follow suit. How about some class beers to restore status?

From Jeremy Hinks, Newtown, Disley:

I've had mixed experiences of Wetherspoon's pubs, but in the past have enjoyed the Thursday 'Curry Club' at some of their better local outlets. For the uninitiated, this offers a choice of curries and a pint for under £4.00. Guest beers aren't included, but cask Theakstons is - or at least was. Late last year the offer was changed and while lager, cider and a smooth are all allowed real ale is not.

I've written to Wetherspoon's but had no explanation as to why the chain, which usually and admirably promotes real ale, have taken this backwards step.

Obviously you can still buy a decent ale and dispose of the free one as you see fit, but this change certainly makes the offer a lot less tempting to me and I'm sure to many others who want a proper pint to wash down their chicken balti.

(Just to add that I've recently written making the same point. I found that in December one of the Wetherspoons in London did agree to 'swop' the beer for me, but this was a one off. Slapped wrists to Tim Martin (the big 'W'), I think. Ed(2))

Letters to Opening Times are welcome: The Editor, Opening Times, 45 Bulkeley St, Edgeley, Stockport. SK3 9HD or

johnclark@stocam.u-net.com

**COPY DATE FOR THE MARCH 2002 ISSUE
OF OPENING TIMES IS FEBRUARY 23**

STOCKPORT & MANCHESTER

Mild CHALLENGE —2002—

CALLING ALL LICENSEES!

The 2002 Stockport & Manchester Mild Challenge is coming. This increasingly popular annual event will run from early April to mid-May next year but the organising starts now!

Last time over 100 people completed the Challenge with two dozen visiting every pub. Each year more and more people take part and once again we are pleased to have sponsorship from the Stockport Express which will be ensuring the Challenge gets maximum coverage.

The entry fee is just £10 per pub so if you sell traditional cask conditioned mild and would like to make a provisional booking to get your pub on the 2002 Mild Challenge then call Mild Challenge Organiser - Mark McConachie on 0161 429 9356

HELP HOLD BACK THE NITROKEG TIDE!

**JOIN CAMRA (SEE PAGE 19)
AND DRINK REAL ALE**



16TH STOCKPORT BEER & CIDER FESTIVAL 2002



Make a date in your diary now! Stockport's 16th annual Beer & Cider Festival will be held in the Town Hall from 30 May to June 1. While we won't be hosting the National Cider & Perry Championship this year, we will still have a terrific range of ciders and perries. Beer lovers won't be forgotten either as the usual huge range of milds, bitters, strong ales, stouts and porters will be available.

Work on the beer order was starting as we went to press and promises to be the popular mix of old favourites and new beers. We have already commissioned the festival special which this year will be brewed by the Pictish Brewery in Rochdale, so expect something very hoppy and bitter!

Many thanks to the Stockport Express for once again sponsoring the event and to Steve Brannan of the Olde Vic for agreeing to be this year's licensee.



At the Royal Mortar, Hillgate, Vinnie and Irene have now been in residence some 20 months. Both experienced hands in the club and pub trade they have turned around the fortunes of this popular Robinson's house from a one-barrel-a-week loser (yes, one barrel!!) to an eight per week, thriving local. Steadily applying improvements during their tenure, they have redecorated the place entirely, and remodelled the rear bar and other arrangements in the pool room, all from their own pockets. Liquid entertainment is in the form of well-kept Hatters and Best, live entertainment supplements this on Friday, Saturday and Sunday evenings when single or duo artistes play to an appreciative crowd. For those seeking a partner, Singles nights have been introduced Mondays and Thursdays. The pub is always a feature in OT as it is the current leader in the Stockport Super League Darts. The players are such a draw, apparently, that the pub is packed for the Tuesday matches. Vinnie and Irene's efforts have not gone unnoticed at Robinson's, as plans won approved to extend the pub into an adjoining property the brewery owns. This will house a new toilet block and games room, whilst the existing outside toilets will be razed to provide a beer garden and some car parking.

Staying on Hillgate, the Lamp Hotel has been closed and up for sale. However it was open again as we went to press but we have no news at to the owners.

Stephen Butler, the new tenant of the Unity, Wellington Road South, Stockport, has fulfilled a long-standing ambition by taking over the running of the Robinson's pub. Having grown up in a number of pubs run by his parents, Stephen is delighted to be continuing the family tradition. "I've always wanted to run a pub of my own but thought it better to wait until I was older and had more experience of life," he said. "My parents ran houses around Greater Manchester so I've seen at first hand what being in the licensed trade is all about."

Customers at the Star & Garter, Higher Hillgate, Stockport, are in safe hands following the arrival of Dave Burtles as the new tenant. Dave is well versed in pub life having run another Robinson's pub, the Prince of Orange in Ashton-under-Lyne, for 10 years. Dave, who is originally from Didsbury, left the Prince of Orange in 1992 but has now returned to the licensed trade after working for two cake firms. Helping him at the pub will be his wife, Lynda. "I took a break from being a landlord because I fancied being able to spend more time on the other side of the bar!" joked Dave. "But



Dave Burtles (right) receiving his licensee course certificate from David Robinson

it is very nice to be back - it's good to be your own boss and to have the chance to meet so many people. We are extremely pleased to have taken over the Star & Garter. It's a traditional local with a very nice interior and a lovely beer garden that will be popular in the summer. Most importantly, the pub has a very friendly atmosphere, and that was just the sort of place we were looking for."

The new tenant of the Armoury in Shaw Heath will be a familiar face to many of his regulars. For Peter Kaut has connections with the pub that date back more than 30 years. "I've been working here on and off since 1969 when my in-laws were in charge," Peter said. "I've had lots of experience both in the bar and the cellar over the years." Although he has done a variety of other jobs, including working as a motor mechanic and a horticultural engineer, the licensed trade has always been Peter's first love. "I really enjoy the atmosphere of pubs and the chance to meet so many people and feel part of the community," he said. "I've worked at a number of houses but have always had a soft spot for the Armoury as the customers who come in here are so nice. As soon as I knew the tenancy was available I decided that I wanted to be the landlord." Peter has moved into the pub with his Boxer Cross dog Charlie and describes the Armoury as a friendly local that is particularly popular with older drinkers. He's already taken the jukebox out because most of the customers don't like a lot of noise.

Boddington's Bitter has finally been withdrawn from the Crown, Heaton Lane, Stockport. An incongruous national brand amongst the ever-changing guest beers, sales had dwindled to a trickle. So eager were the pub's customers to see the back of the stuff, two of them bought the last few pints...and had them poured down the sink! The replacement permanent house beer is Jennings Bitter.

Last month we reported that the Royal Oak in Cheadle had a new licensee. This turns out to be a case of seriously crossed wires. There have been no changes at the pub which continues to be one of the best in Cheadle. Apologies to all concerned.

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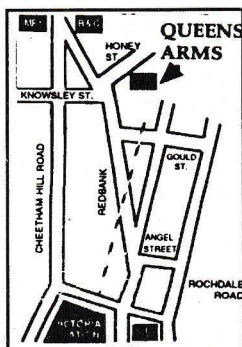
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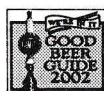
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ESSEN XMAS BEER FEST

Phil Booton goes festive in Belgium

In the middle of December a small group travelled to Belgium to visit the Kerstbier Festival at Essen, organised by OBER (Objectieve Bierproevers Essense Regio). Essen is 25 kilometres north of Antwerp. The festival is held in the Parochiecentrum (Church Hall) opposite the parish church in Kerkstraat. This is less than 10 minutes walk from the station. Trains run approximately every hour, but a change at Berchem is required at weekends. Our train was delayed by 20 minutes on the Saturday, which made us feel quite homesick! Incidentally, don't look for the Krupp armaments factory as this is in the (slightly larger!) German city of the same name.

The festival opens at 1400 hours on Saturday and 1200 hours on Sunday. It closes when the last customer leaves! We arrived soon after opening time on the first day to find a good-sized hall with plenty of seating, and very few customers. This was the calm before the storm however as it did get very busy for a period in late afternoon/early evening. More than 80 Christmas beers were available, including 8 on draught. The beers are numbered in the programme, which made ordering easier for those lacking confidence in their Flemish pronunciation.

Before tasting the beers one needs to hire a glass for 100 Belgian Francs and buy some tokens (40BF each). The informative programme cost 20BF. Beers are theoretically served in measures of about 0.2 litres but this seemed to vary depending on who actually served you. All the beers cost 1 token, with the exception of a few very strong ones, which cost 2. Service was very friendly. Many customers were from Holland and the UK. The border with Holland is only a few kilometres north of the town.

Food was also available in the form of cheese or ham rolls (1 token), Soup (2 tokens), Croque Monsieur (2 tokens) and Stoovleejs (3 tokens). This last is a Belgian meat stew and was enjoyed by those who tried it. Those of us who returned on the Sunday found almost all the beers still available. In fact Sunday was busier than Saturday, but service was always quite fast. This was in large part due to the amount of seating, which meant that few people congregated at the bar, unlike many UK beer festivals!

But what of the beers I hear you ask. Well they ranged in strength from weak quaffable session beers at 5.5/6.0 up to the more full-bodied 13.0 of Bush Millennium. More than 30 were new to me (and I am an experienced drinker of Belgian beers). Brewers represented spanned the spectrum from large international companies to the smallest microbrewers (e.g. Gaverhopke, De Cock, Brootcorens). Also a very good selection of rarer Wallonian beers (from the French-speaking half of Belgium). Quality was generally good. Occasionally one was unlucky enough to get the last of a bottle, including a bit of sediment. Among the beers I particularly enjoyed were Liefmans Gluhkriek (served hot), Caulier Blonde de Noel, Enghein de Noel, Verhaege Christmas and the aforementioned Bush Millennium. My beer of the festival though was Fantome Noel, which was wonderfully spicy and warming - just the beer for the cold winter weather.

I would certainly recommend this festival. Although it is smaller than some, it is less crowded. It is easily accessible from Brussels, Antwerp or the Netherlands and has an excellent range of beers. See you there next year (14-15 December 2002). For more information see the festival website at: www.ober.be

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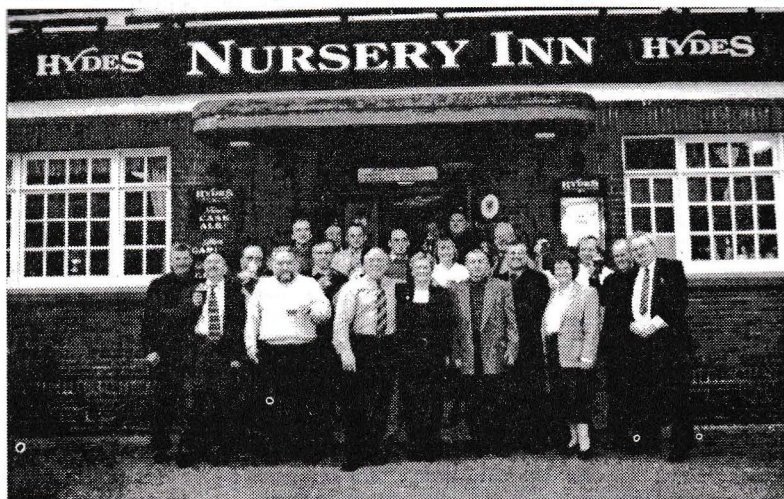
NATIONAL PUB OF THE YEAR

The Nursery, Heaton Norris, found itself at the centre of a veritable media circus last month.

Once the news broke of the pub's victory as CAMRA's National Pub of the Year, licensees George and Sue Lindsay found themselves almost under siege with requests for press, radio and television interviews. "The phone hasn't stopped ringing for two days" Sue told us on the day of the formal presentation. The story appeared in the national press and local papers the length and breadth of the country. Both the BBC and Granada TV broadcast from the pub as did numerous radio stations. At one stage Sue went international with an interview for British Forces Overseas radio.



The award was presented by CAMRA's national chairman Dave Goodwin who is pictured here presenting George and Sue with a brass plaque to mark their achievement. Our other picture shows local CAMRA members celebrating with George and Sue. As the presentation was made on a Tuesday lunchtime when many members and pub regulars couldn't be present, Stockport & South Manchester CAMRA also arranged a second presentation for Saturday 2 February.



CASK ALE ON THE UP?

New report questions 'official' real ale market share figures

There are lies, damn lies and statistics, or so the saying goes. And never more so than when it comes to surveys of the beer market. For years the licensed trade has been bombarded with surveys and reports firmly predicting all manner of things that never actually happen. More recently there has been an entertaining row about something that will interest readers of *Opening Times* - the size of the cask ale market.

The figure usually trotted out is that cask ale has a 9 per cent market share, the source of this being an annual survey conducted by the British Beer & Pub Association (BBPA). Wrong, claims a survey by Martin Information, it is in fact 16 per cent.

Why the big difference? Well, Martin Communications, who based their findings on a survey of some 66,000 licensed outlets, reckon that amongst other things the 'official' figures greatly underestimate the micro-brewing segment which is more like 800,000 barrels a year rather than the 346,500 estimated by the BBPA. Cue the redoubtable Peter Haydon, General Secretary of SIBA, the body which represents many, but by no means all, of the micro-brewers, who agrees that the 800,00 figure is in line with his own organisation's surveys.

This was too much for BBPA statistician Graham Page who mounted a lengthy defence of his figures in the letters column of the *Morning Advertiser*. This included some interesting revelations. His results are based on questionnaires completed by BBPA members but added to that are guestimates of the output of Sam Smiths along with another sizeable brewery in Cornwall plus another estimate of the micro-brewers output.

Even without the micro sector, the BBPA figures show that cask ale has some 13.5% of the draught market. Page then suggests that the micros perhaps count for another 1.5% (based on 'historical judgements' and ignoring the obvious micro brewing boom in recent years). SIBA say it is at least double that (and they should know how much they produce). This gives cask ale something like 16-17% of the draught beer market. A figure not unlike that produced by Martin Communications - which is where we came in.

So, where does this headline 9% figure come from? Well, it depends on how you present the figures. The BBPA presents its figures as shares of the entire beer market and that includes bottled and canned. Cask ale, by definition, can only be a draught product and so only has one market, the on-trade (that's pubs and clubs). And as the BBPA's own figures show, cask ale's share of *that* market is indeed a healthy 16-plus per cent.

We are therefore left with a situation whereby the BBPA's headline figures for the cask ale market (and the ones that will be picked up by journalists) are put forward in a way which disguises what is in fact quite a healthy state of affairs. The BBPA is of course dominated by the national brewers whose antipathy to cask beer is plain for all to see. Only those prone to conspiracy theories would consider this to be more than just an unfortunate coincidence.



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Robinson's

KEEPING UP APPEARANCES

A crucial reason for Robinson's success has been the great importance it attaches to customer service. This commitment is manifested in, for example, its determination to ensure its cask conditioned ales are of the highest standard and that its tenants and managers are fully trained in all aspects of the licensed trade.

Another very important factor in ensuring that customers enjoy their beer, however, is the physical environment in which they drink it. This is something of which Robinson's has long been aware. Back in the 1930s, under the chairmanship of Sir John, it was one of the first breweries to recognise the need to make pubs more comfortable in order to compete with new leisure attractions such as the cinema and radio. At this time the estate was expanding through the acquisition and building of new houses and there was a move away from traditional 'boozers' to create a more female friendly environment.

The task of keeping all of Robinson's houses in good order has grown over the years as the estate has expanded to its current size of around 400, including Hartleys in Cumbria. It is a challenge that the Company is determined to meet and it is the Architects' Department, based at the brewery, which plays a key role in achieving this aim.

Under the direction of Chief Architect Tom O'Shea Brown and Maintenance Supervisor Peter Wilson, the department spends much time ensuring that all Robinson's houses, which include a variety of architectural styles and characters, are looking their best. The department is a strong believer that alterations and developments should be sympathetic to their surroundings and that when a job is done, it is done to last, using original materials where practical.

The first impression that drinkers get of pub is its external appearance - and this is something to which the department devotes considerable resources. One key member in this area is William, a member of the sixth generation of the Robinson's family to be involved in running the Company. Mr William, a Chartered Architect, has introduced a rolling programme to ensure that the outside of all the houses remain in good order.

REFURBISHMENT

Last year alone, more than 50 pubs were repainted and Mr William is aiming to ensure that the pubs and exteriors are repainted every six years. Work around the Stockport area is usually handled by the brewery's in-house painters while, further afield, jobs are sub-contracted.

The heart of any pub, of course, is the bar area and the Architects' Department works closely with all its managers to maintain a conducive environment for customers. While Robinson's tenants are responsible for the maintenance of their pub interiors, the department provides expert advice and supervision, and also deals with all structural alterations.

Among the houses currently benefiting from the department's work is the Airport Hotel in Wythenshawe, where the bar and lounge areas are being refurbished with new timber flooring, carpets and soft furnishing. Closer to the brewery, improvements are also taking place at the Friendship Inn at Romiley, and both the Horsfield Arms and Arden Arms in Bredbury.

Recent decades have seen the licensed trade become fiercely competitive with many independent brewers disappearing from the landscape. But with Robinson's belief in quality in all aspects of its activities, there is every reason to think it will enjoy a prosperous 21st century.

Cheers!

This space is sponsored by Frederic Robinson Ltd.



Two local breweries are celebrating success in last month's CAMRA National Winter Ales Festival.

Robinson's scored twice with Old Tom being runner-up in the barley wine category and winning bronze in the supreme championship. These are the latest in a long line of awards for this classic strong ale.



Also celebrating is Congleton's Beartown Brewery which won a bronze for Black Bear in the Strong Mild/Old Ale class. Beartown's John Gregory told Opening Times "we are delighted to have had national recognition for one of our beers" The previous national award picked up by Beartown was at the 2000 Great British Beer Festival for Kodiak Gold.

Meanwhile at Joseph Holts, the brewers are working themselves up to fever pitch to produce a really wonderful first brew for the promised series of specials. Twelve different types of malted barley have been ordered so they can select a suitable combination for the trials.

The strength and name of the new brew is not yet known. It may appear next month, or then again it could be later. Details of how the beer will be marketed or advertised are also not known. As usual, it will probably be word of mouth and perhaps a poster in the pub.



MANCHESTER MATTERS by Citylink

The short time between January and February Opening Times plus the demands of the National Winter Ales Festival have clipped my wings a little this month, I'm afraid. So it's just a few snippets...

In the City Centre the hoardings are up around the new Wetherspoons on Princess Street. The Waterhouse, as it will be known, is due to open in April. The hoardings are also up next to Churchills on Chorlton Street. I'm not sure whether it's Churchills that is being expanded or whether Scottish & Newcastle are creating a new pub in the buildings next door. No doubt all will become clear in the fullness of time.

Not a million miles away from Churchills, there has been a change of licensee at the famous Circus Tavern on Portland Street. George Archondogeorge took over on Monday January 28 from Steve Campbell. George will be opening the pub at weekends. I hope to have a chat with him in time for next month's column.

During one of my lengthy stays at the Winter Ales thrash, I spoke to Graham Patient of the excellent Unicorn Wholefoods in Chorlton. Graham tells me that Unicorn is now a member of SIBA, the independent brewers organisation, which has now opened its membership to pubs and other purveyors of fine ales. Unicorn also hope to be selling some bottle-conditioned beers from the excellent Black Isle brewery in Scotland and they already sell all of the winners from the recent SIBA/Safeway organic beer competition held at the Marble Arch a couple of months back.

There are also rumours circulating that Lees are buying a pub in Chorlton, although brewery representatives were staying tight-lipped when I raised the matter with them. A case of watch this space perhaps?

In Ardwick, the Park has been done up in fine style. The two room, lounge and vault layout, is no more. It is now one large L-shaped space with new bar and seating to complement. Food seems to feature highly now - the pub always lost out to the nearby Church because of the lack of this in the past - those days seem to have gone. Just one thing remains to be done in my opinion, install cask Burtonwood beers instead of the smooth version they have now. As the trade has noticeably picked-up, I'm sure they could warrant selling cask ale; after all, the Church has been selling cask Boddies for years now.



This month's Desert Island beers are from Richard 'Sooty' Sutton of Pictish Brewery. Richard's brewing experience included stints at both Manchester's Footage & Firkin and Heywood's Phoenix Brewery before he set up the highly regarded Pictish Brewery in 2000. Already armed with both the current Champion and Winter Champion Beer of Britain, currently Oakham JHB and Dorothy Goodbody's Wholesome Stout, these are Sooty's other choices... "Whether I'm brewing beer or drinking it I have one basic rule, it's got to have lots of flavour. Life's just too short for crappy, mass produced bland beers! I'm not particularly fussy about style; I enjoy everything from lagers through to stouts as long as it's good (that rules out 99% of British brewed lagers). If I was genuinely taking that trip to a desert island I would probably have to take at least one of my own beers along but I can't decide which is my favourite from one minute to the next. It would be pretty pointless and self-indulgent selecting one of my own beers for this list, I wouldn't brew it if I didn't like it. For this list I have selected the beers that through the years have really made an impression on me and perhaps helped to nudge me into becoming a brewer.

"The beer that started my love affair with real ale was **Cropton Two Pints**. It was the first pint that I had in Rochdale's Tap & Spile (sadly no longer in existence.) It's full malty flavours and delicate hop aromas brought about the sudden realisation that Tetley Bitter wasn't really much good. True to the legend one pint was not enough so I went back for another but they'd sold out so I had to have something else. That was pretty good as well and so my fate was sealed.

"Probably my all-time favourite beer is **Springhead Leveller**. Alan Gill has a real nose for a good recipe and I could equally have chosen Roaring Meg, Cromwell's Hat or Hersbrucker Weizenbier. The large proportion of amber malt in Leveller gives it a rich coffee flavour which you'll either love or hate and really sets this beer aside as one of a kind. I haven't tried it since Alan left as brewer and can only hope that things have not changed too much.

"I first encountered **Butcombe Bitter** on a potholing trip in the Mendips in a cracking country pub (sorry I can't remember which one) served on gravity dispense. For some reason beer is always more satisfying after you've spent several hours down a dark wet hole which is probably the only good reason for going down a cave in the first place. The fact that Butcombe brewery survived for 18 years only brewing the one beer is a testament to just what an outstanding beer this is.

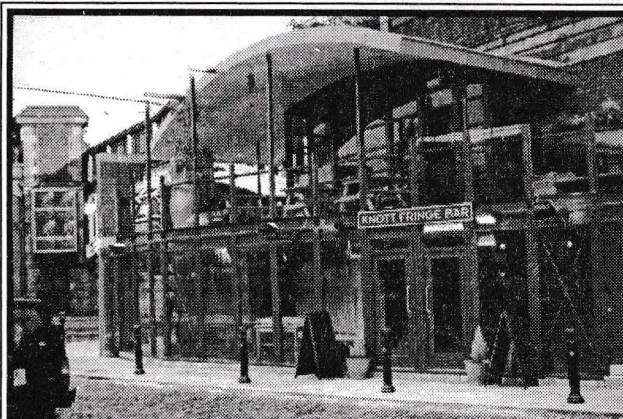
"**Orkney Dark Island** is one of the fullest flavoured beers around and is perfectly balanced. What more can you say about perfection? "My final selection is **Mort Subite Gueze** (the traditional unfiltered version if you can find it). This was my introduction to the world of lambic beers, which I would consider to be the champagnes of the beer world. The idea of a deliberately soured beer is a strange concept for British brewers to grasp. The first mouthful is disgusting, about half way down the glass you're not quite so sure and by the time you reach the bottom you need another bottle.

"In true Good Beer Guide style I would like to include a few try also's and in keeping with the guide most people will probably agree that they're better than the main selections. Beers that didn't quite make it into my top five are, Batemans victory, Hop Back Summer Lightning, Sarah Hughes Dark Ruby Mild and Dent Bitter. If you ever find yourself in Mexico and haven't had a decent pint for days try a bottle of Bohemia, It's not real ale but it's full flavoured and very hoppy."

CONTRIBUTORS TO OPENING TIMES 214:

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There has been much written, some of it by me, about the Northern (or Beer) Quarter of Manchester, for many years one of the nation's premier real-ale drinking areas, and whether it is suffering some sort of decline. In order to answer the question, I thought it appropriate to undertake the equivalent of an Opening Times Stagger around the area - looking at the beers on offer when I walked through the doors, and judging the merits of the establishments as havens for drinkers. Despite the core pubs' boast of all being within a half mile radius, problems of locomotion with my hip has meant that two visits were necessary, and pressure of space means that the stagger will have to be spread across two issues, part two to follow with my thoughts on the start of the festival season next time. Each pub was visited (for these purposes) but once, and what I found then is what you get...

It all starts at the **Castle**, in Oldham Street. An ultra-traditional (nay, time-warped) Robinson's three roomed pub. A drinkers area with some table seating and three bar-stools at the front, a lounge just behind the bar and a larger games room at the back. The gents is down a long corridor, and while covered is very much tacked-on in the old Robinsons outside-loo-tradition. It is well known that I like this quaint boozer with a real locals feel a lot. Kath and Ian add their own kind of atmosphere. Widely known as the only Robby's pub to serve all nine real ales: Hatters & Dark Mild, Old Tom and 6 bitters: Old Stockport, Best, Frederics, Hartley's XB and Cumbria Way and the seasonal guest (Robin). Cumbria (outstanding) and Old Stockport (good) were sampled. The drinkers atmosphere is untroubled by food. It is so absurdly English (down to the giant Czech football flag and leaflets advertising their airline and tours of Moravia) that I am somehow reminded of a bar in sixties Montmartre! Across Oldham St and onto Tib St and left to the **Centro** cafe-bar. Modern clean, pale, light. An upstairs bar with tables and a few high stools. Foreign beers and cask ales, and later drinking at weekends. There is a large downstairs area, and the inside loos are at least 15°C hotter than the rest of the pub. Real ale was successfully introduced here a couple of years back, and the range is usually interesting. Hydes Dutch Courage (their then seasonal), Pictish Winter Solstice, Slaters Grand'Un, and Salamander Hellbender were on offer. The Slaters was tried first, a light brown beer with a peppery hop nose, almost lentil-like dryness in the body and a slightly fruity finish leading to a light hop bitterness. It was very good, and I preferred it to the maltier taste of the Salamander I had next, though the condition was excellent. Up Tib St, away from the centre until it reaches Swan St, then across the road to Bar Fringe. Established five years ago (plus a month or two) this eclectic long, single-roomed pub based on a Belgian brown bar soon fought its way into drinkers hearts, and eventually the Good Beer Guide. Its walls are festooned with cartoons and oddments, and to say licensee Carmen is a character would be doing Charlie an injustice, for she is a whole host of them, packed into a tiny, tattooed body. All four handpumps were in use with Bank Top Santos Claws, Boggart Dark Side, Spinning Dog Santos Paws and Osset Silver King, complementing the extensive range of Belgian draught and bottled products. Sticking to 'stagger' rules and eschewing any foreign temptations, I tried the Bank Top offering (Bank Top has a residency here, with at least one of their beers rotating on a handpump). It was mid brown, sweet and fruity with a bittersweet finish. Everything indeed that you would expect of a Christmas seasonal beer. It was also in spot-on condition. After

NORTHERN QUARTER STAGGER (1)

sampling two of the others I crossed Swan St to the **Burton Arms**, which was packed. Like its neighbour the Smithfield (see below), The Burton really is still a hotel, and very popular. The bar runs the depth of the building with a lounge at the front (and more TVs than you can shake a stick at) and a games room at the back. It is also a locals pub and has theme nights etc. Up to six beers are available here, from larger breweries, and the choice today was Old Speckled Hen, Adnams Bitter, Bass and Pedigree, the other two having run out. The lighter Adnams was something of a relief after all the 5% plus beers I had been on. It was as usual, fresh and in good nick, though without the complex flavours of the last three or four.

Next door but a couple is the **Smithfield**. Also a hotel, but in this case specialising in some of the obscurist micro-beers there are. The Smithfield holds a beer festival every few weeks, and the range of handpumped beers are then complemented by more offerings from the cellar. As it chanced, there was one on on this visit - Black Isle Autumn Ale, Woodhampton Old Rooster, Golcar Bitter, Moulin Brew, Bankfield Dark Times, Ale of Athol, Goldthorn Premium. Too many to list. But always a hatful in this excellent pub. All the ones I tried were in good form...and we haven't even reached the Beer House yet, where part two of this venture begins. So far the Northern Quarter seems to be holding up quite well, which is more than could be said for me as the cold December night air hit my face as I emerged from the Smithfield....

...to be continued

NATIONAL WINTER ALES Festival & Championship Round-up

Organisers of last month's CAMRA National Winter Ales Festival at the Upper Campfield Market, Castlefield, have hailed the event as an outstanding success.

The foreign beer stall was impressive to say the least and featured probably the best selection of draught (that's as in straight from the cask) German beers ever to feature at a CAMRA festival. Indeed it was the foreign beer bar that provided two of Opening Times's favourite beers (well Ed (1)'s anyway, Ed (2) as foreign bar manager is far too modest to blow his own trumpet) in the form of Carlow O'Hara's stout, a marvellously dry and complex 5% brew from the Irish Republic, and from Germany the wonderful Tegersee Spezial again hit the spot. This 5.5% masterpiece, and now a firm festival favourite really did show what a proper pale German lager should be like, and was in stark contrast to most of the crummy germanic-sounding, but British-brewed muck foisted onto the drinking public.

It was however British cask ales that took pride of place, with a superb selection, not only of stouts, porters, old ales and barley wines, but milds and bitter of all strengths. Many local brewers were represented including the first major festival appearance by the LAB beers, which sold at a phenomenal rate, much to the delight of brewer Anthony Firmin. Other stand-out beers included 1872 Porter from the West Yorkshire Brewery (6.5%, dark, dry and complex) and Goachers Old Ale, tried late on Saturday afternoon and still brimming with condition. This complex, bitter-sweet 6.7% ale was a classic of its style.

Champion Beers Include Local Favourites

The highlight of the festival was the announcement of the Champion Winter Beer of Britain and, unlike last year two local brews featured in the medals. The results in each category are:

Old Ales & Strong Milds

Gold - Bath Ales, Festivity; Silver - Rudgate, Ruby Mild; Bronze - Beartown, Black Bear

Stouts & Porters

Gold - Wye Valley, Dorothy Goodbody's Wholesome Stout; Silver - Ringwood, XXXX Porter; Bronze - B&T, Edwin Taylor's Extra Stout

Barley Wines

Gold - Big Lamp, Blackout; Silver - Robinson's, Old Tom; Bronze - Adnams Tally Ho

Supreme Champion Winter Beer

Gold - Wye Valley, Dorothy Goodbody's Wholesome Stout; Silver - Bath Ales, Festivity; Bronze - Robinson's, Old Tom.

THE CASTLE

OLDHAM STREET, MANCHESTER
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RANGE OF ROBINSONS CASK BEERS!

Old Stockport Bitter, Best Bitter,
Hatters Mild, Dark Mild, Frederics,
Old Tom and Hartleys XB and



Cumbrian Way
re-introducing....
Samuel Oldknow
(3.5% abv)



A WARM WELCOME IN A TRADITIONAL PUB