

## The Trubadours

### Pubs & Beers in England & Wales

by Gary Corbin and Laura Guimond

*This is the second in a series about the breweries, pubs and beers that we encountered in our recent trip to Britain and Ireland. In this article we focus on pubs and beers in southern England and Wales.*

#### Is the beer better?

The average bitter in the UK comes across as bland to American microbrew aficionados, who expect full-bodied, highly hopped beers in a variety of styles wherever they lift a pint. The typical British pub – particularly in southern England and Wales – serves four to six beers from a single brewer. Each beer would be classified as some sort of “mild” or “bitter” ale. On one end of the continuum would be light-bodied, low-alcohol, medium-bittered ales with little or no hop finish. The other end would sport medium-bodied, somewhat more bittered ales with a light hop aroma or finish and slightly more alcohol.

However, holding Britain’s everyday ales up to Portland’s standard microbrew is unfair. The average American beer is a flavorless, colorless “premium lager.” The average British beer is one of these perfectly enjoyable, typically cask-conditioned bitters. In America, bitters and stouts are for the elite beer drinker; over there, *everybody* drinks them.

#### Two types of pubs

British pubs are usually of two types: the *tied house*, which is owned by a brewer and serves primarily or even exclusively that brewer’s beer; and the *free house*, which is independently owned and serves a variety of brewers’ beers.

There is also the occasional brew pub, but these are far less common than in Portland. (Not to worry – we found one. See below.) And of course there are bars, typically whiskey bars, which we did not tour.

#### England

It’s only right to start with our first pub – *The Sun Inn*, an Arkell tied house just outside Swindon, near London. Since it was not yet lunchtime, the pub was reasonably smoke-free – a rare treat in the UK. There was a fully stocked bar, and three bitters (3%, 4%, and 5%) to choose from. We sampled the one the bartender said the locals drink: **Arkell’s 3B**, a thin-bodied, copper-colored cask bitter, 4% alcohol, with a low but persistent head. 3B is a mild ale, not highly bitter nor sweet, with some caramel and a bitter finish.

In Bath, we visited *The Huntsman*, an Eldrige Pope tied house. In addition to a typical pub dinner of jacket potatoes with beans and a drab lasagna, we sampled the **Thomas Hardy Bitter**, **Thomas Hardy Oak Strong Ale**, and **Thomas Hardy Gold Label Barleywine**. The bitter (4%) was low in aroma, medium bodied, evenly balanced with a noticeable malt flavor. The strong ale (5%) had very low carbonation but was very malty, almost evenly balanced by high hop bitterness, with a sweet finish. The Barleywine came in a bottle, but had very low carbonation, high maltiness and sweetness, substantial hop flavor, and a sweet finish mixed with some bitterness. Thomas Hardy ales are for lovers of alcohol and grain flavors rather than hopheads.

Also in Bath, the *Pig & Fiddle* is a fun pub and a free house. We had a great chat with the manager, a 20-something chap who knew of Oregon’s brewing prowess and happily traded his pub’s T-shirt for one of ours. We had **Hop and Glory**, a bitter from Ashvine Brewing. Medium bodied and gold in color with a

delicate floral aroma just detectable above the smoke, it had a malty sweet taste, moderate bitterness, and some hoppiness in the finish.

The *Old Station Inn* advertised itself as “probably the best pub in Hallatrow” (population ca. 300). At this free house, we got a lot of free advice from the locals on what to see in Wales (everything; as it turns out, they were Welsh) as we tried what they had on tap. The delightful **Olde Merryford**, from Wickwood Brewing Co., is a 4.8% crystal-clear coppery cask ale with a floral hop aroma (probably Goldings), flavorful and balanced, some caramel, with a bitter (even astringent) aftertaste. The **Ringwood Brewery Forty-niner** is 4.9% alcohol, with moderate hoppiness, some sweetness in aroma, deep gold in color, lightly carbonated, with a decidedly bitter and alcoholic flavor and a clean aftertaste. Where the Merryford is a slow-sipping beer, the Forty-niner is a get-drunk beer. We preferred the former.

## Wales

We visited Laugharne and its famed (very smoky) locals’ pub, *Brown’s Hotel*, solely to catch some sights celebrating the town’s famous late poet, Dylan Thomas. But, what the heck, while we were there we tried **Buckley’s Best Bitter** (3.8%). No aroma is detectable above that much smoke. This very nice beer was medium-bodied, on the malty side, balanced by higher than average hop bitterness, and had a bitter finish.

We stayed the night in the coastal town of Tenby, and had **Worthington’s Bitter** at the *Bay Tree Restaurant*. Worthington’s is part of the Bass empire, and proof that big doesn’t necessarily mean bad. This deep gold ale had a thick, creamy head (probably CO<sub>2</sub> or nitro), accentuating its hoppy aroma and esters. It has a malty, sweet flavor but significant bitterness up front, a dry and medium hoppy finish. Later, at the dark, smoky *Tenby House*, an Ansell tied house, we had the deep gold **Ansell’s Bitter**, a medium-bodied cask ale, medium-bodied and highly bitter, with some hop flavor. Clean, not complex – a session beer.

We went to the town of Solva in the County of Dyfed trying to find Solva Brewing. Unfortunately, they were closed. However, the *Ship Inn*, a Whitbread house, was open, and we had a not-too-special CO<sub>2</sub>-driven **Welsh Bitter**. Clean, golden-colored, balanced and boring, it could pass for an American lager.

We had better luck in Pysgah, at the *Halfway Inn*, so called because it’s halfway between Aberyswyth and who knows where. Musical accompaniment to a decent dinner (by British standards) included Bread, Fleetwood Mac, Alanis Morissette, and Roxy Music. This free house had four ciders and a number of ales on draught, including two casks from which customers can draw their own pint. Unfortunately, they’d had a busy holiday weekend, and those casks were dry. We tried the **Felinfoel Double Dragon**, a “strong” cask bitter with a hoppy aroma and noticeable esters, and a considerable creamy and long-lasting head. Served at about 50F, it was medium-bodied, fruity, somewhat bitter, with low malt character and sweetness and a complex fruity, hoppy, bitter finish. The **Flowers Bitter** was red in color, also had an ample and long-lasting but rocky head. The aroma was hoppy and estery but not strong. It had a pleasant bitterness, some dryness verging on astringency, almost balanced by a residual sweetness from malt, and a dry finish.

In Aberyswyth, we had a late pint of **Hancock’s Bitter** (from Bass’s local Cardiff brewery) at *The White Horse* (AKA *Rea’s Lounge*), a free house. Hancock’s is deep gold, with a thick, creamy, long-lasting head. Its up-front bitterness gave way to a subtle, evenly balanced ale, thin in body and low in alcohol, a touch dry (even astringent) with a slightly hoppy finish. Laura’s exasperated comment was: “More beer that tastes like water and smells like smoke.” We also tried the **Carling Black Label**, a continental-style lager made in Britain. Carling’s is very aromatic, even a bit sulfury. It was bright gold in color, malty, semi-sweet up front, light in body, with a very clean finish. We traded a Brew Festival T-shirt for two brand-new bar towels to Rea’s hard-working daughter, whose cheerful friendliness helped us forget how bland the beer was.

## Hiatus

On the Stena Explorer ferry to Ireland, we tried a **Boddington's Bitter** from Strangeways Brewery, Manchester. This was our first smoke-free beer tasting experience in Britain. Unfortunately, this ale was CO<sub>2</sub>-driven and served very cold. It was gold in color, with a thick, long-lasting head. It has a light hop nose with some banana and citrus esters. Thin-bodied, bitterness predominated the flavor; the finish was dry, slightly hoppy, and a bit astringent.

After 2 ½ weeks in Ireland and Scotland, we returned to England from the north and worked our way back south. The beers in Northern England more closely resemble Scottish ales than those you'd find in the south and therefore will be discussed with the Scottish ones in another article.

## Back to England

### The Cotswolds

The Cotswolds area of England is famous for its tiny charming towns of golden stone. It also has some attractions for the beer lover. Just around the corner from the B&B we stayed in, we had dinner and coifed a few pints at the Black Bear Inn, a Donnington tied house in Morton-in-Marsh. The **Donnington Best Bitter**, brewed locally in Stow-on-the-Wold, was cask-conditioned, cloudy (unusual for a British commercial beer), copper in color, with a low, creamy, long-lasting head. Low in alcohol, this ale is medium-bodied, semi-sweet, highly bittered with low/medium hop flavor, with a semi-bitter finish. Much more interesting was the **SBA**: also cask-conditioned, it was brilliantly clear and deep red in color with a barely detectable hop aroma over heavy bar smoke. Medium-bodied but very malty and medium-to-high in sweetness, low in bitterness, its finish was sweet with low-medium hoppiness. Finally, the **XXX**, Donnington's stout, is black/opaque but ruby-red around the edges. It has a thick, very creamy and lingering head, with some malty and roasty aromas. Medium-full body, medium-high maltiness and sweetness, low bitterness, its roast/black malt flavor is stronger on the finish. XXX is a "session" stout, low in alcohol and easy to drink.

Driving around the Cotswolds, we stopped for a pre-lunch pint at the Baker's Arms in Broad Campden. In search of calories we tried the **Hook Norton Double Stout** first. Cask-conditioned, this stout's thick, creamy tan head equaled its nitrogen-driven counterparts. Black-opaque in color and full bodied, its malty and slightly roasty aroma also contained sniffs of banana and citrus esters. Its malty, sweet flavor contained a strong dose of roasted and black malt and was balanced by bitterness from both hops and roasted malt. The roasted, sweet flavor continues to the finish, and is complemented by a sourness common to many Irish stouts.

While enjoying our stout, we chatted a bit with the bar manager and one of its patrons who turned out to be Alexander Pennycook, the brewer at the tiny Stanway Brewery at the nearby Stanway House. Stanway is part of a revival of the old manor house breweries – tiny house breweries for wealthy owners of these grand estates, except now the breweries produce for the commercial market. Alexander quit his job as master brewer at Donnington's to explore the freedom and challenges of brewing in a 17<sup>th</sup>-century facility not much larger than a home brewery. We tried the **Stanney Bitter**, an 80-IBU (yes, 80) gold-colored cask ale with a thick, creamy white head and just as much bitterness as you could imagine. It was medium-bodied with some hop aroma, medium maltiness but low in sweetness, and a very bitter finish.

Later that day we visited the brewery (to be described in a later installment) at Alexander's invitation and tried his **Lords-a-Leaping Bitter**. "Lords" is very similar to Stanney except that the bitterness level was a "mere" 60 IBU, which, Alexander said with a straight face, was made blander for the mainstream market.

### London

Getting to a pub in London turned out to be quite an ordeal. It seemed we were always 5 minutes late; they close very early by our standards (11 PM except Sundays at 10 PM). It wasn't until the 28<sup>th</sup> day of our trip that we set foot in a pub in London and were served a beer. Our strategy for overcoming this long delay was a London pub crawl. Thanks to Martin Wilde, who had supplied us with a 20-pub itinerary, we were able to sample some of London's best in a short time.

We started with the best -- the White Horse on Parsons Green. (There are a lot of pubs called "The White Horse" in England, but this is the one to look for.) We met the manager, Mark Dorber, a fan of the OBC (even before I got there; or should I say, even after?). Mark was a gracious and generous host, who joined us for several beers and supplied some wonderful Belgian ales from his private stash in the basement. Before he got to us, though, we sampled some British beers. **Highgate Dark Mild** is a low-alcohol, dark brown ale with a rocky head, very slight aroma, low bitterness, medium body and maltiness, low sweetness, and a clean finish. **Harvey's Sussex Best Bitter** is light-copper in color with a low head and hoppy, floral aroma. High in bitterness, it is also very malty, full-bodied, and low in sweetness with a medium-bitter finish. **Hopback Wheat** is pale straw colored with a low head and a strong clove/banana aroma. Medium-bodied, its malty-grainy moderately sweet flavor is almost balanced by low-medium bitterness, and it has a moderately bitter finish.

We stayed so long at the White Horse that we almost didn't make it in time to the second stop on our pub crawl (never mind stops three and four). The Orange Brewery, a very fun brew pub near Victoria Station, now has an employee who sports an Oregon Brew Festival T-shirt. The first beer we tried was **Pimlico Porter**, a beer Terry Foster describes in his Porter style book as "the only remaining example of a London-brewed porter." Deep brown (ruby at the edges of the glass), opaque, with a low head, the aroma was not detectable above the pub's smokiness. Malty, sweet, and chocolatey in flavor, with medium bitterness, it is full-bodied with moderate hop flavor and a sweet finish. **Orange SW1**, a cask-conditioned bitter, is deep gold to copper in color, has a floral hoppy aroma with fruity esters, and medium/low head. Medium to full in body, its flavor is malty and sweet, balanced by equally high hop bitterness, and has a hoppy and bitter finish. **Orange SW2** is similar but has more of everything: deeper color, fuller body, very fruity/citrusy aroma, sweeter and more bitter, and a stronger hop finish -- one of the most flavorful beers we had on the whole trip. **Victoria Lager**, like all of Orange's beers, had a low head, but unlike the others this one fell away quickly. Deep gold in color, medium noble hop aroma, no off aromas, very malty, sweet, with medium bitterness and a sweet finish. Not very clean, but very tasty.

The next night, after a play by the Royal Shakespeare Company, we naturally picked *The Shakespeare*, a touristy bar near Victoria Station. **Theakston's XB**, a cask-conditioned bitter, had a medium-thick head atop the clear, deep gold liquid. Theakston's is slightly citrusy, with low-medium hop aroma and some pear esters. Medium-bodied, with medium sweetness and maltiness, somewhat more bitterness, it had a bitter finish with some residual sweetness. **Old Peculier**, also cask-conditioned, is dark brown/opaque, ruby at the edges, with a thick tan creamy head and almost no aroma. Full-bodied, high in sweetness, medium maltiness, with some chocolatey flavors, it is medium-bittered, slightly sour, with a roasty bitter and sweet finish.

Our final pub stop was the *Clarence Pub* near Whitehall, where we tried **Brackspear Bitter**, from Tenly-on-Thames. This cask ale is deep gold to copper in color with a very low head, moderately hoppy nose and slightly fruity/estery and malty hints in the aroma. It is low-medium in body with high bitterness, medium-high maltiness and sweetness, and very low carbonation with a bitter, dry finish.

## Conclusion

Despite -- or because of -- CAMRA's warnings about the impending disappearance of real ale, you can pretty much find it in any good British pub. Better yet, get CAMRA's "Good Beer Guide" and be sure of it.

We had a great time in England and Wales. While we loved the pubs and beers, it also made us appreciate Portland even more. This trip was evidence that Portland holds its own as a world-class brewing city. While our Brew Crew-induced expectations were not (and probably could not have been) met, we still must concur with most of the world's opinion that the beer and pubs in England and Wales are among the world's finest. You won't find ales like Deschutes' *Mirror Pond* in every English pub, but you'll find gems like Orange SW2, Donnington SBA, and Stanney Bitter that you can't find anywhere else. And you'll enjoy them in the old-world comforts of pubs with character, charm, and grace, as well as good beer.