

# LAST Tipple Tattle

The electronic newsletter of the Lichfield, Atherstone, Sutton Coldfield and Tamworth branch of CAMRA

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## INTRODUCTION

For the time being, we've suspended our branch magazine, *LAST Orders*. Clearly this was a necessity at the beginning of the Covid-19 lockdown, and we'll need to exercise caution about when we can get the magazine up and running again. There are a number of issues, not least of which is funding – we depend upon our advertisers to cover production costs, and now is not a good time to ask them to restart! While *LAST Orders* has a wide readership in electronic form, we don't want to go down the route of solely electronic – it works after a fashion but just wouldn't be the same thing.

We're devoted to getting back into print, but until then, we thought it would be good to keep branch members up to date on what's happening in the branch and its near vicinity. So here we are – the first issue of Tipple Tattle. In the current circumstances, we aren't getting out and about as much as usual, so please do let us know at [LST.Camra@gmail.com](mailto:LST.Camra@gmail.com) if you have some tidbits. It's all about supporting your local in these tricky times, so keep us up to date!

## ACROSS THE AREA

It looks like the majority of branch pubs opened on Saturday 4th July. Prior to that date we had a good trawl around the internet, backed up by some phone calls, to find out what intentions were, and clearly many publicans were keen to get going. There were of course a number of exceptions, some of which we'll mention below. We've tried to reflect any special or temporary opening conditions in the online *WhatPub* system – if we've got it wrong for your local, please do let us know via the feedback system on *WhatPub*.

Many pubs have wisely reduced their ale choices post lockdown, and many limited their hours, until trade gets back to normal. Please bear with them and give them your support.

Readers will no doubt be aware that propping up the bar is not allowed in the current environment, with a majority of pubs providing service to your table. As Brits it's not something we are used to, but we should embrace the idea. It's certainly got a pleasantly continental feel to it – at least when the weather is fine!

To the best of our knowledge, only one branch pub has actually closed as a result of the lockdown (see below). Clearly though it's early days yet – some pubs may still find the trading conditions too tough, particularly as trade has been slow to pick up in a number of cases. If you're able, get out there and support our licensees!

Was a Saturday a good day to re-open? It seemed yet another piece of shambolic government thinking, but it seemed to pass off reasonably well in the branch area. Sadly one branch pub – which we'd best not mention – made the national news due to a major brawl, though it seemed due to unruly customers rather than a direct fault of the pub.

Don't forget that August sees the government's Eat Out To Help Out scheme, intended to drum up business for pubs and restaurants. It applies on all Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays in August, with 50% off food and non-alcoholic drinks, up to a maximum of £10 discount per diner. It's not valid on takeout, but you can employ a doggy-bag if you overdo it! You can use the scheme as many times as your waistline allows, though only at establishments that have registered – although it would seem totally daft for places not to register. Oh, and if you could also lose a bit of weight at the same time ...

Sadly but somewhat inevitably we've had to cancel September's Tamworth Beer Festival. This would have seen us moving back to the town's Assembly Rooms, after a break of four years due to a rather prolonged refurbishment of the building. The ongoing Covid situation is doing the venue itself no favours, with much of its programme cancelled or on hold.

## NORTH WARWICKSHIRE

Pub-wise, we are delighted to kick off with good news from Atherstone. There was some apprehension when the **Hat & Beaver** closed down in early January – another town pub teetering on the brink of permanent closure? – so we're pleased to note that the place re-opened in late February following a pleasant refurb. Louise and Alan Dyche are the new faces at the helm; Alan has worked at both the **Queens Head** in Wilnecote and the **Plough** at Fazeley. *Bass* is on the bar – there'd be a riot if it was removed – and a free-of-tie guest which to date has been *Titanic Plum Porter* which is clearly shifting well. They used the lockdown period to turn the neglected and rubbish-strewn yard at the back into a pleasant beer garden. There's a 50p/pint-off happy hour 6-8pm from Monday to Friday.

Meanwhile in Atherstone, the **Angel Ale House** has been allowed to use the market square for its drinking area, pictured right. It's perfect for nice days, and reminds you how picturesque the square and its surrounding buildings are. There are pop-up marquees for occasions when the weather doesn't play ball. Beers have been trimmed just a bit – four or five are typically on offer.



Also able to use the square is the former Chariots Bar, now imaginatively re-named as **The Wine Bar**. They're still doing cask, but we haven't bothered to find out how its sole offering of *Doom Bore* is going down.

The town's **White Horse** kicked off strongly post lockdown, with two Tiny Rebel beers, and has subsequently moved on to *Titanic* and *North Riding* offerings. It has to be said though, the pricing of around a pound per pint more than anywhere else in town won't be doing the throughput any favours. And to rub salt into the wound, the CAMRA discount has been removed!

Lockdown certainly wasn't wasted at the **Griffin Inn** at Shustoke. The terrace and outside bar to the rear have been completely refurbished to allow a focus on exploiting the massive beer garden. The inside bar is closed, though the conservatory area can be used. On fine days the car park is often totally rammed, but everyone fits in nicely because of the large number of beer garden tables, widely spaced. There's also a big marquee should the weather turn foul. Six ales on the bar when we visited.

## STAFFORDSHIRE

What we believe to be the only branch area casualty of Covid is the **Crafty Two** in Tamworth. Only open for six months after a £400,000 refurbishment, it did not reopen and now has the sad sight of ugly steel plating at the windows. Whether owners Star Heineken are looking for new tenants yet is unknown.

Rather more unsettling was the prospect of losing Lichfield's **Horse & Jockey**. The pub did not re-open after lockdown, with long-standing tenants Tracey and James reportedly walking away after being asked for full rent over lockdown, and receiving no government grants due to the pub's rateable value. Happily an accommodation has been reached, and Tracey and James plan to re-open the pub on 5th August.

While Lichfield's **Bitter-Suite** kept going during lockdown with a popular takeaway service, they also used the downtime to embark on a significant expansion. A third room will be brought into use inside (at present only one is open while the work is ongoing) while to the rear the outside area is significantly bigger, including a good fraction of covered parts. Is it now a micropub or full blown boozier? It's now open every day of the week with extended hours.

Just up the road, there's a worrying situation at the **Greyhound**. The building owner already has planning permission for eight dwellings on the surrounding land, but has greedily put in an application to up it to ten dwellings, which would see the loss of the pub. The application is still pending, but we must thank the many members who put in objections. In the interim, the branch have applied for and been granted Asset of Community Value status for the pub, but this will have no impact if the new application is granted. To complicate matters further, the building owner is terminating the current rental agreement, with the pub now closed a few weeks after re-opening. The motivation here is unclear, with talk of redoing the electricals – but why do this if the owner still has confidence in the planning application? The worst bit is that it has fairly callously put manager Vinnie out of a job; he's a gent who has done a splendid job in running the pub. Clearly we'll be keeping an eye on what happens to the pub.

Lichfield's best pub beer garden at the **George & Dragon** deserves better weather than we've been having, but they're still using inside. It was just Marston's portfolio beers to start with but happily they're now getting back into smaller brewers, with Backyard *Marynka* the first micro offering.

The city's **Beerbohm** kept takeaways going both during and past lockdown. Paul and Wendy have now suspended the dwindling takeaway service in order to prepare for formal re-opening in "early August".

Next door, the **Whippet Inn** has been a takeaway hub too. The takeaway options remain, but the place also has a short opening 5pm-7pm from Wednesday to Saturday. Service is at the door with drinking on the pavement. Two ales when we visited.

Fully opening such tiny places in the current regime may seem overwhelming, but the **King's Ditch** in Tamworth has proved it can be done. The key feature here is plastic screens separating the tables; sounds a bit clinical but in practice it works really well, and they're hardly noticed after a while. As a result, things are pretty much back to normal as far as the booze choices are concerned – four or five ales and the usual wide choice of ciders and other drinks.

The **Moat House** in Tamworth remains closed, but we understand that lockdown allowed them to start on a planned refurbishment which is continuing. It's rightly self-styled as

"Tamworth's stately home", and we look forward to seeing the results of the latest work.

The **Tamworth Tap** weathered lockdown very well, doing a thriving ale takeout trade, buoyed by the curious fact that nowhere else in town offered anything similar. It was even temporarily re-branded as the **Pour House**, right; in the longer term this will be the name of an offy to be opened in a separate part of the building. The Tap reopened for normal trade from Thursdays to Sundays, though at present this is in the courtyard area only, and you need to book to avoid disappointment.



It's also a good idea to book at the town's **Sir Robert Peel**, though walk-ins are welcome if they've room. Well, we say walk in, but you need to ring the bell! Ale choices are pretty much back to normal here. Service is both inside and to the pleasant garden at the rear, where most of the tables have full monty umbrellas which will keep you dry unless the weather is overly boisterous.

Like many pubs in the area, the **Crown** at Elford was unable to source *Bass*, but it's now back for the devotees. No action in the on-site brewhouse at present.

We understand that Martin Young will be taking over as gaffer at the **Three Tuns** in Fazeley. Martin ran the pub some years ago in its heyday, so let's hope he once again realises the potential of this nice little canalside boozier.

## WEST MIDLANDS

The **Brew House** at Streetly has extra space inside now the café part has gone, but customers can also now use outside, with six tables available. Numerous Albion scarves hanging behind the bar may be a turnoff for other supporters, but it's worth a visit for the interesting ales – from Sarah Hughes, Salopian and Weatheroak Hill during our visit.

We hear stories of Ember Inns staff advising against use of their "temperamental" beer-ordering app – which is not ideal given it is also supposed to drive their test-and-trace info! Not that the government are doing any better of course ...

## BEYOND THE BORDERS

We weren't expecting to see many if any CAMRA beer festivals this year, but it looks like the massive Nottingham festival may go ahead, albeit delayed from October to November and with a raft of Covid-secure measures in place. It's a bold move – we hope it goes well.

While CAMRA beer festivals will be thin on the ground, we can report that Ansley's **Lord Nelson** still plans to go ahead with its autumn festival, something to look forward to. This too will likely move back, from August to September.

Sadly, lockdown was too much for Burton's **Fuggle & Nugget**, which is no more. It was good while it lasted, and we wish Jane and Shaun the best in whatever they move on to. On the bright side though, the town's **Olde Royal Oak** (on the market place) has been taken over by Fownes Brewing Company of Brierley Hill. The pub is managed by Steve Jackman, who some readers may recognise from his stewardship of many real ale flagship pubs. A recent visit saw four ales from Fownes, with a plan to introduce up to four guest ales as trade and consumer confidence grows.

- Thanks to contributors Adrian S, Ray C, Adam R, Phil & Denise H, Kevin & Mandy G, Dave P