

WirrAle Drinker



Magazine of the Wirral branch of the Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA)

April - June 2026

Pub and Brewery news and more from across the Wirral for the discerning beer and cider drinker



In this issue...

- Pub of the Year 2026 Awards
 - Has the Government Declared War on Pubs?
 - Interview with Julie from the Harp
 - Why Opening a Craft & Cask Bar in Wirral Is Harder Than You Think
- ...and lots more

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Editor's Column

A warm welcome to this issue of *WirrAle Drinker*, a magazine produced by the Wirral Branch of CAMRA. It's all about real ale, real cider and the pubs that serve it on Wirral. From Brimstage Trappers Hat to Peerless Triple Blonde, from Glen Affric Rutting Stag to Sun Bear Porter and everything in between and occasionally beyond.

I recently read a piece by a publican who said that bar staff are the unpaid social workers of Britain and that pubs are "Non-government funded community centres" (Check out "The Grumpy Landlord" on Facebook). I felt that he had really hit the nail on the head with many of his points: For some their conversation with bar staff will be the one of social contact they get; that pubs are meeting places and social hubs and welcome people from all walks of life; that it is cheaper for those who are struggling with their heating bills to sit in the pub than at home. It really hammered home how much a centre of community a pub can be, far more than a place just to have a drink. Sadly they are under threat like never before and need urgent help.

In this issue, we report on the winners of Wirral CAMRA Pub of the Year 2026 and I ask if the Government has Declared War on Pubs? Dave

Levene has been in conversation with Julie Woodley about her first year of running the Harp in Little Neston. He also takes us through his first, last and best pints of real ale. Graham Hardcastle tells the story of opening Hop, Bromborough and the challenges of opening a micropub on Wirral. Hop is also our Pub of the Season for Spring 2026. Plus a tasting board of other cask beer and related delights including Pub and Brewery News and What's in a Pub name. Hope you enjoy, Cheers

Rob Carter

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NEW CASK BREWED MONTHLY

- THE NIGHTINGALE
- THE MAN IN THE PLANET
- SIXTEEN REASONS
- GOING DOWN TO LINCOLN
- UP IN FLAMES
- FINAL MILES

Wirral CAMRA Branch Diary

Details are correct at the time of going to press. Please visit our website, wirral.camra.org.uk for up to date information. All welcome at any meeting.



Tuesday 14th April Branch Meeting and Social at the Rose & Crown, Bebington Village, at 8.30pm

Saturday 9th May Heswall Pub Crawl - please check wirral.camra.org.uk for information

Tuesday 12th May Branch Meeting and Social at Gallaghers, Birkenhead, at 8.30pm

Tuesday 9th June Branch Meeting and Social at the Magazine Hotel, New Brighton, at 8.30pm

Saturday 13th June Coach Trip to Skipton. Leaving the Brass Balance, Birkenhead at 10.20am and Ship and Mitre, Liverpool at 10.30am. To book please contact Dave Hutchinson davehutchinson@wirral.camra.org.uk

Saturday 11th July Public transport trip to Wigan - please check wirral.camra.org.uk for information

Tuesday 14th July Branch Meeting and Social at the Black Toad, Hoylake, at 8.30pm

Saturday 8th August Coach Trip to Stourbridge. Leaving the Brass Balance, Birkenhead at 9.30am and Ship and Mitre, Liverpool at 9.40am. To book please contact Dave Hutchinson davehutchinson@wirral.camra.org.uk

Tuesday 11th August Branch Meeting and Social at the Rose & Crown, Bebington Village, meet at 8.30pm

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Website: wirrale.camra.org.uk For full contact details for Wirral CAMRA Branch wirral.camra.org.uk/Contacts.php

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Pub and Brewery News

Full details of all our pubs can be found at camra.org.uk/pubs We strive to keep the entries for Wirral pubs up to date. If you notice that something has changed at a pub on Wirral and the entry is not current, please contact us using the link for the pub on the site, and we'll update it.

Apologies to the **Hawkwinds and Jokerman** micropub, Liscard the last issue of *WirrAle Drinker* had the incorrect opening date for the pub. They did in fact open on 19th November 2025 serving a line up of four cask beers and real cider as well as an array of keg beers and spirits. A section of the ceiling is decorated with replicas of album covers of popular bands and the bar also features colourful tiles.



popular Wednesday Quiz Night and is in the process of setting up a darts team.

The **Red Fox**, Thornton Hough will be holding their annual beer festival 18th – 21st of June. It is also farewell to landlord David Green who has been in charge since the pub opened over 11 years ago. A passionate supporter of cask ale and a good friend to Wirral CAMRA,

he will be missed as he moves on to manage the **Architect** in Chester.

At time of writing the **Phoenix Club**, New Brighton is hoping to open again for Easter.

The **Boat House**, Parkgate closed at the beginning of March for a 1.5 million pound refurbishment including a function room and upstairs terrace. They are aiming to reopen in June.

The **Clairville**, Liscard, has had a £300K refurbishment including a new beer garden at the rear of the pub.

The new manager of the **Farmers Arms** in Wallasey Village, who took over in early January, is Sean Hornby who has forty years experience in the drinks trade. As well as ales from the Greene King stable, Sean is looking at the possibility of serving a locally brewed ale. The pub is continuing with its current entertainment for locals including sport on TV, a



Brimstage Brewery sponsored the recent Liverpool CAMRA beer festival.

Wallasey Golf Club is now serving real ale (Brimstage Trappers Hat).

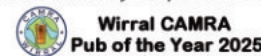
The **Irby Mill** is accepting CAMRA 50p off a pint vouchers.

Brimstage Brewery will be 20 years old this year and will be doing some things to celebrate through the year. They were sponsors of the CAMRA Liverpool Beer festival. They will be doing a collaboration brew with Pollys Brewery from North Wales and have a few other things planned for later in the year. They have also taken steps into stocking some merchandise and recently stocked some branded mugs in case you fancy a different sort of brew.



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Pub of the Year 2026

It's time to announce the results of Wirral CAMRA Pub of the Year 2026. To qualify, a pub had to be nominated by a Wirral CAMRA member (this was open to all, not just the committee) and serve cask beer in good condition. Any pub that was nominated that was found to be serving "Fresh Ale" (not cask conditioned) through a hand pull was automatically disqualified. Pubs were judged on the following criteria:

- Condition of the real ale they were serving.
- The range of styles and strengths the pub was serving. This was not purely a hand pull count, for instance a pub serving an IPA, a bitter and a stout would get far more points than a pub serving 8 pale hoppy beers. Whether the pub served real cider and beers brewed locally was also considered.
- Service and Welcome.
- Comfort and Atmosphere.

The overall standard was very high. An initial round of judging by teams of volunteer judges (again not just the committee) whittled the list down to a final four pubs. A further final round of judging, conducted this time as individuals, decided the results.

I won't bother with an extensive preamble as I am sure there are pictures! Congratulations to the **West Kirby Tap** for winning Wirral CAMRA's highest award. Owned and run by local Spitting Feathers brewery, which is based in Waverton, near Chester, the Tap has been a consistent entry in the *Good Beer Guide* for over ten years. Serving a good range of seven cask beers, some from Spitting Feathers, such as Brainstorm, Thirst Quencher and Old Wavertonian, and also from other microbreweries from near and far. The house beers are particularly keenly priced at £4 a pint. There are also a range of bottle and canned beers and ciders available. The décor is a balance



of the modern and the traditional pub, there is a real fire and dogs are welcome. There is often a bustling friendly atmosphere with an eclectic range of customers, Saturday evenings when there is live music showcasing local talent is usually particularly busy. A quiz is held on Tuesday evenings. Pizzas and snacks are available from the kitchen alongside more traditional dishes such as scouse and steak and ale pie. The pub is easily accessible from West Kirby train station and from a multitude of bus routes. Well done to manager Amy and her crew of friendly staff, thoroughly deserved. More information, including the current beer line up is available at spittingfeathers.co.uk/west-kirby-tap

Our runner up is no stranger to CAMRA awards having won the Pub of the Year award for the last two years running, the **Black Toad**, Hoylake. This jewel of a micropub opened in 2019 hit the ground running and had never looked back. There is a lineup of four ever changing cask beers often from local microbreweries, there is also an extensive range of bottle and canned beers available as well as real cider. There's no corporate gloss, just a friendly welcome in a quirky, characterful design and the staff are friendly and attentive. It is often



busy with a broad demographic of customers. Despite having no kitchen, they offer the biggest range of snacks known to man and pizzas are sometimes available in the lovely beer garden to the rear. It is a brilliant example of what a micropub can be. Congratulations to Robin, Shel and their lovely team. More information, including the current beer line up is available at theblacktoad.co.uk

There are also two pubs of excellence. Firstly, the **Plasterers Arms**, Hoylake. Dating from the late 1800's this is a gorgeous example of a traditional pub hidden in the backstreets of Hoylake well worth seeking out. They serve a changing range of four well-kept cask beers mainly from regional and national breweries. A section of the ceiling is mirrored and there is an inviting snug to your right as you enter. As well as being very characterful, it has a cosy welcoming atmosphere with a real fire and friendly customers, dogs are also welcome. It is a really good example of a community local with a regular quiz and live music. Last year it was listed in the top 500 pubs in the country compiled by the Telegraph and if they keep going as they are it's likely more awards will follow. Congratulations to Tony and his staff. For more information visit facebook.com/ArmsPlasterers

Finally, the **Red Fox**, Thornton Hough, another pub that is no stranger to awards from CAMRA and for good reason!

There are nine hand pulls dispensing an array of cask beers with a strong focus on local breweries but also featuring ones for further afield as well as a good array of real cider. It has featured in the *Good Beer Guide* every year since it opened. Run by Brunning and Price, it strikes a balance between a dining destination serving good food and a well-kept country pub. It has what has got to be one of the largest beer gardens, not just on Wirral but in the whole country! Congratulations to the veritable army of staff that keep the pub running, especially the cellar keeping team headed up by James and Dann. For more information visit brunningandprice.co.uk/redfox



So, to round off, congratulations to all four quite different pubs on winning their respective awards. Especially to the West Kirby Tap, Wirral CAMRA Pub of the Year 2026!

Pub of the Season Spring 2026

Hop, Bromborough

Hop is a micropub in Bromborough, a two-minute walk from Bromborough station and easily accessible from the 38, 41 and 42 bus routes.



It opened three and a half years ago in a former bakery premises. There is a lineup of up to four cask beers along with a vast array of keg beers, wines and spirits. The cask selection is often from breweries not typically found on Wirral – Kirkstall, Deya, Vocation and Five Points for instance. There are regular tap takeover events showcasing beer from a particular brewery, the most recent being Brew York including a meet the brewer event. Cask beer is £3 a pint on Monday and Tuesday on production of a valid CAMRA membership card. The décor is quite modern and minimalist but an impressive library and collection of Star Wars toys



and other assorted nick-nacks all add character. It also boasts an eclectic playlist of music. The atmosphere is welcoming and friendly for both drinkers and dogs. Owner Graham is a beer enthusiast, and the pub is run by manager Lewis along with a team of other friendly staff who are happy to make recommendations or offer tastes if you're not sure what to have. They have had extensive work done since the pub opened to improve the beer quality and get the cask beer served at the optimum temperature. The effort has paid off, and the beer quality is excellent.

I am very pleased to say that Hop has been voted Wirral CAMRA Pub of the Season for Spring 2026. Congratulations to Graham, Lewis and the team. Keep up the hard work and we wish you every success in the future.

More information including the current beer lineup is available at hopchain.co.uk

LocAle

Locale is CAMRA's scheme to encourage pubs to serve locally brewed beer. For more information on Locale, go to camra.org.uk/what-we-do/locale



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Breaking Into the Barrels of Wirral

Why Opening a Craft & Cask Bar in Wirral Is Harder Than You Think (from a CASK perspective)

Graham Hardcastle is the owner of Hop, Bromborough.

Rob asked me to write an article, and I gave him the same look I give someone who orders a lager shandy! However, to his credit he also remembers those early days of ours... the ones that felt less like a business plan and more like a pub tale you only tell once so here we go... The last decade has seen an explosion of craft and cask beer culture across the UK, and this has encouraged many enthusiasts like myself to dream of opening their own bar. My first experience and inspiration of a micro bar was 'The Itchy Pig' in Sheffield, opened in 2016 by Ted, a joiner who swapped chisels for casks. Ted explained a local scheme called a 'lite licence', which is practical and easy, for change of use and licensing of a venue governed by capacity and strict opening hours. And so, the great cask-capade began.

The Barriers

Before we opened, some blockers needed circumnavigating, the first obviously being my wife aka Chief Financial Officer. Only after the loss of her dear friend Beth, who passed 2 days before her 41st birthday, did Helen have a real change of mindset in life regarding risk and opportunity that helped pursue dreams.

Secondly, finding the right location was hard even with only two criteria ... to be near a train station and to be surrounded by a good density of residential area, which in turn brought an additional challenge of planning permission to change the use of the venue. Our first planning submission was rejected.

Finally, Wirral is a region already steeped in real ale heritage; turning that dream into a reality is far from simple. Between intense competition, technical challenges, and the ever-watchful eye of

CAMRA, opening a craft beer and cask venue requires equal measures of passion, precision, and perseverance.

A Land of Real Ale and Real Opinions

Wirral isn't just another dot on the UK map, it's home to a thriving real ale scene supported by an active local branch of CAMRA. The Wirral branch hosts regular meetings, beer scoring, pub awards, and community events, all designed to celebrate and protect real ale and traditional pubs. This infrastructure ensures an engaged and knowledgeable drinking community, but it also sets a high bar for any new operator entering the scene. In short, Wirral isn't just any place to open a craft and cask bar, it's a place where the standard is already exceptionally high, thanks to the likes of Robin and Shell (**Black Toad**) and Andy and John (**Bow-Legged Beagle**).

A Competitive Landscape of Highly-Rated Pubs

Adding to the challenge is the strength of Wirral's existing traditional pub network. The local scene regularly earns national recognition, with the region boasting numerous entries in CAMRA's *Good Beer Guide* which, if memory serves me right, has 17 pubs featured in the 2026 edition.

Our Start or How to Annoy CAMRA Without Really Trying

Let's just say HOP and CAMRA didn't enjoy a storybook beginning. Their first visit included a cellar inspection, followed by a second visit with a recommendation to reduce seating capacity by 25% to create an isolated cask area ... a polite but firm, "No, or let's not sell cask" was my reply.

Then came 'Chillgate'; the cask beer was too cold, caused by chill transfer from the keg lines through the python. We fixed it with a dedicated cask python delivering a consistent 11-13°C, and everyone lived happily ever after... well, eventually. Next came the great unknown in

customer taste. It was really hard to judge in the first year, with new faces arriving all the time with differing expectations. We solved that by launching Cask Club, where customers got a discount to drink and score all four casks. It was like speed dating, but with ale and much more honest feedback.

The CAMRA Relationship: Supportive, Visible, and Unavoidable

Dealing with CAMRA as a new bar owner isn't adversarial, unless they talk about reducing seating capacity of course, but there were times it felt like tapping a cask that wasn't quite ready. CAMRA's mission to preserve and promote real ale means they care deeply about quality and tradition. They engage with pubs, monitor beer standards, and highlight the best venues across Wirral in this publication. Given that CAMRA members routinely score pubs and contribute to national guides, a few poorly kept pints can quickly damage a new or an old venue's reputation.

Consistency Isn't Optional, It's Essential.

Is the CASK worth the TASK(s)? Despite the challenges, opening a craft and cask bar in Wirral

has been deeply rewarding. The region's beer enthusiasts are loyal and passionate, and great to know. CAMRA branch actively celebrates venues that get it right. The Wirral drinking community appreciates authenticity, craftsmanship, and local identity. For those willing to invest in the art of cask, build strong community ties, and embrace the expectations that come with operating in a CAMRA-rich landscape, Wirral offers the opportunity not just to open a bar, but to become part of that tradition.

Final Thoughts

If you are reading this in a far corner of Wirral, or somewhere further afield, please come and visit as everyone is always welcome. We are near Bromborough train station. Yes, we'll be opening another venue when we find the right one. Yes, we'll always champion craft and cask. And yes, CAMRA will always be watching, sometimes critically, sometimes encouragingly, always with a pint in hand. But honestly? We wouldn't want it any other way. Thanks to Lewis who manages the bar and the beer!! .. and of course, the team who support.

Fresh Ale isn't Real Ale

Don't Get Duped!

Fresh Ale isn't real ale. It doesn't have the same secondary fermentation in the cask or the same mouthfeel and taste.

Carlsberg are producing "Fresh Ale" currently in three brands although cask versions of these are also available:

- **Wainwright Amber**
- **Wainwright Gold**
- **Hobgoblin IPA**

They are served on hand pumps which may fool customers. Look out for labels that say "Brewery conditioned" as that will tell you it's "Fresh Ale" not real ale. If in doubt ask at the bar.

If you think you have found fresh ale in a pub please report it to CAMRA. Scan the QR code to do so.



Hello from the New Chairman

Hello, my name is Lee Reynolds and I have just taken over as Chairman of Wirral CAMRA Branch.

My first taste of real ale was in 1987 at a beer festival at Rayleigh Windmill (Essex) and I found my love for stout and porters. I learnt how to pull pints and condition beer properly at the local pub, the only problem was it was Tolly Cobbold which I thought was horrible.

I lived in London for some time and the beers were often unexciting with a flat head, so my main stay was Guinness. However, I did enjoy Fullers beers. After London I moved to Somerset for a time where I found a taste for real cider (pips included) as well as beers from Badger brewery.

After Somerset I moved to Newark. I've been to every beer festival held by Newark CAMRA and even have the glasses and t-shirts to prove it. Well, I attended the first one but didn't manage to have any beer as it had run out! I joined CAMRA during this time and made the silly mistake of saying I could help out at the festival and ended up going straight onto the committee and holding various roles.

In 2015, I moved to Rock Ferry and my now wife Gill and I joined the Wirral CAMRA Branch committee. I'm still here and now I'm the Chairman! Hope to see you at one of our meetings soon.

Setting the Records Straight

Occasionally, there is some misunderstanding, even among CAMRA members, about how CAMRA is organised and our limitations.

Firstly, all Committee members and other members performing various roles are unpaid volunteers. No one gets any form of payment and this applies all the way from the local branch committee members through to CAMRA's national Board of Directors, the National Executive. It is no one's 'job' to carry out any of the tasks performed by the local committee.

It is also important to note that CAMRA is a Campaign - for Cask Conditioned Beer (Real Ale) and the pubs where you can drink it. It is not a drinkers' club - although some members would like to think it is. Cask conditioned beer (Real Ale) is almost unique to the UK, a part of our

national heritage and is in danger of being killed off. So, while CAMRA will not criticise keg beers, many of which are very good, it will not actively promote them.



Yes, many members use their membership to get discounts on their beer but the discounts are offered by pubs themselves based on their own business decisions. Many customers will also ask for tasters of beers they are unfamiliar with. Of course, some of these will be CAMRA members but many are not.

As for allegations that the local committee have their favourite pubs...while it may be true that individuals will have favourite pubs, there is never any committee consensus on a favourite. At least not in my time on various branch committees over the last 45 years or more! Pub entries for Wirral in the *Good*

Beer Guide are not selected by a vote of the committee or even the other members of the Wirral Branch.

Wirral Branch has a published policy on its website on how we use beer scores submitted by CAMRA members from within and outside the branch area. The Branch takes

care to exclude beer scores put in by pub licensees and managers and anyone else who may have a conflict of interest. Also disregarded are scores from members who always give very high scores for their favourite pub. They are clearly not using any judgement as we all know that any pub can serve beer which is average or poor on occasions. Some pubs will also be excluded from consideration because they deliberately use misleading dispense to serve some products, for instance those pubs serving Carlsberg Fresh Ale. These are brewery conditioned beers misleadingly served through a handpump masquerading as cask conditioned beers. Some Wainwright and Hobgoblin beers are sold in this way and CAMRA as a consumer organisation will not recommend pubs which mislead customers by doing this.

The local Branch is responsible for putting pubs on the CAMRA Pubs website and keeping the data up to date. For new pubs serving cask beer we aim get them listed within a day or so of them opening. If a pub's details, facilities or description are in any way incorrect or incomplete, anyone can click on the link on the site to suggest corrections. These are always acknowledged and corrections made within a few hours wherever possible. But we need input from the pubs themselves and from pub customers so please help us to get it right.

As for this magazine, *WirrAle Drinker*, articles are written by many contributors, not just CAMRA members, and the whole magazine is put together by one volunteer. It is not like a newspaper and we rely on people to send us news. It takes several

“Wirral Branch has a published policy on its website on how we use beer scores submitted by CAMRA members from within and outside the branch area.”

weeks between the editor signing off the copy and the magazine being available in pubs. Sometimes things change and information may be out of date. If we make mistakes, we do our best to correct these as soon as possible.

In conclusion, if there are problems or complaints about CAMRA, don't rush to social media. Contact the Branch. There may be an explanation or ways of correcting errors quickly.

Dave Goodwin



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Hop It! - Nelson Sauvin



Hops are the flowers (also called seed cones) of the hop plant, *Humulus lupulus*. Hops are a vital ingredient in the brewing process, used for bittering, to impart floral, fruity, or citrus flavours and aromas and as a stability agent. There are many different varieties of hop and this is part of a series of short articles, each about a hop variety and its characteristics.

Nelson Sauvin is a hop variety developed at Riwaka Research Centre near Motueka in New Zealand from crossbreeding Smoothcone and NZ male cross hops. It was first released for commercial use in 2000. Its name is derived from the Sauvignon Blanc wine grape to which many agree has similar flavour and aroma characteristics. Often described as having a pungent white wine, gooseberry, and tropical fruit character, this hop variety can easily dominate a beer and is notoriously tricky to balance, unlike more traditional, consistent, and affordable hops and because of this it is avoided by many larger

brewers. Despite this, Nelson Sauvin has been used considerably by smaller breweries and home brewers. They variety has gained popularity in American-style Pale Ales. Nelson Sauvin is an aroma hop that is typically used in only late boil additions, including dry hopping. The oil profile is complex and also works well as a flavour hop and for bittering.

Beers brewed with Nelson Sauvin Hops:

- Brimstage – New Zealand Pale Ale
- Thornbridge – Quiet Storm
- Siren – Sold My Soul for Nelson
- Fierce Beer – Undefeated Champion

Coach Trips for 2026

It's that time of year again when we look forward to our planned trips for next year. All trips are on a luxury coach with a toilet. Booking in advance is essential. For all trips, we aim to be back on Merseyside between 8:30 and 9pm and the return price is £20 per person with payment on the day. For more details please contact Dave Hutchinson davehutchinson@wirral.camra.org.uk

Skipton - Saturday 13th June

The pretty town of Skipton in North Yorkshire, has frequently been listed as one of the best and happiest places to live in the UK. It is an ancient market town crossed by the Leeds & Liverpool canal. Skipton Castle is a major landmark, dating from 1090. It also has many micro and traditional pubs. Our first pickup will be from the Brass Balance, Argyle Street Birkenhead at 10.20am, and then from the bus stop facing the Ship & Mitre, Dale Street Liverpool at 10.30am.

9.30am, and then from the bus stop facing the Ship & Mitre, Dale Street Liverpool at 9.40am.

Huddersfield - Saturday 24th October

And on, to round off the year, we are returning to one of our favourite towns, Huddersfield in West Yorkshire. A famous mill town, it has much neoclassical Victorian architecture, including the railway station. Birthplace of Harold Wilson, the town's excellent pubs offer a selection of ales to rival any beer festival. Our first pickup will be from the Brass Balance, Argyle Street Birkenhead at 10.30am, and then from the bus stop facing the Ship & Mitre, Dale Street Liverpool at 10.40am.

Stourbridge - Saturday 8th August

Stourbridge in the West Midlands is a market town of medieval origins, lying 10 miles west of Birmingham, in the Black Country, famous for glass making. We will have lots of excellent pubs for you to visit. Our first pickup will be from the Brass Balance, Argyle Street Birkenhead at



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What's in a Pub Name?

The Anchor Inn

Many pubs on the coast have nautical related names such as the “**The Ship Inn**” and “**The Master Mariner**”. So why on earth is a pub in Irby, approximately a mile and a half from the coast, named “**The Anchor Inn**”?



The Anchor Inn, Irby



The old Anchor brewery site, as it turns out, nothing to do with the pub name!

Could it be an association with the former Wirral-based, Anchor Brewery? The brewery was founded by Henry Kelsall Aspinall in 1845 and was situated on Livingstone Street in Birkenhead. On August 29, 1865, it amalgamated with the Argyle Brewery (located on Oxtou Road) to create the Birkenhead Amalgamated Brewery Co. Ltd. This later became Birkenhead Brewery Co. Ltd. The company continued to operate on both sites, and the Anchor Brewery premises were rebuilt in 1900. The Birkenhead Brewery Co. Ltd. merged with Threlfall Chesters Brewery in 1962 and was subsequently taken over by Whitbread in 1967. Brewing at the former Anchor site ceased in 1968, and the main brewery buildings were later demolished to make way for a business park.

However, when you look at the history of the pub this theory doesn't quite fit. The building that is now the Anchor was originally constructed as a cottage in the 17th century. It has been serving as a drinking establishment since at least the 1770s. The pub was run by the same family from 1789

until 1940. It was leased by Birkenhead Brewery from 1901 and then they officially acquired it in 1940. The pub became known as the “Anchor Inn” sometime between 1789 and 1827. The Anchor Brewery wasn't started until 1845. Also, the

association of the pub with Birkenhead Brewery didn't start until 1901 so it's almost certain that there is no connection between the pub name and the brewery. Back to the drawing board....

There are many examples elsewhere in the country of inland pubs called the Anchor, though this is likely to derive from the biblical reference in Hebrews 6:19, which describes faith as a "sure and steadfast anchor of the soul". It was common for early inns to signal they were a safe, moral haven for travellers, and naming them the shortened version of “The Anchor” was one way of doing so. This is the most plausible and likely reason I've managed to find for the pub's name.

The pub has had extensive refurbishment and alteration work over the years. It was acquired by Mitchell & Butler in 2010 and is operated by them under

their Premium Country Pubs brand. It serves two regular real ales as well as food.

Rob Carter

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First, Last and Best

Dave Levene takes us through his first, last and best pint of real ale...

First

The first pint I remember drinking was when I was around 16. I had gone to a party and was feeling peckish, so I nipped out to get some chips. On the way back I passed a pub. It was a lovely warm, sunny summer evening, and a bunch of lads supping in the front garden tried to scrounge some of my chips. 'No way' I said (or words to that effect!). 'We'll buy you a pint' came the counter offer.

Shortly after I shared the chips with a pint of draught Courage Best in hand. I can't really remember what it tasted like, but I remember sitting outside the pub, beer in hand, in the evening sun talking about motorbikes. 45 years later I still think it's a grand way to spend an evening!



Last

As I write this, I've just come back from a weekend away in York. There really are some great pubs in York, but the city centre is very busy. It was also a Saturday when England were playing Ireland in the Six Nations. We had a good walk around in the morning, stopped for coffee and cake and later had lunch at the **Brew York Brewery Tap**. We then headed out to the Slip Inn, which is outside of the city centre and just near where we were staying. I've been to the **Slip Inn** and the nearby **Golden Globe** a couple of times. They are both really good, traditional community locals, each serving six to eight real ales, all fairly local. Because they are outside of the city, they aren't so packed and you can usually get a seat. The Slip also has a TV screen so was perfect for watching the game. The less said about the game the better, but the beer was very

good. I had a couple of dark porters from Craven Brew Co., and then finished with a pint of Craven Brew NEIPA, a very tasty 4.2% hazy pale ale, which was the last beer I drank in a pub.

And Best...

In the 1980's I had moved to Liverpool from London to study geology at Liverpool University. For those of you old enough to remember, the 1980's was a dire time for real ale, especially in Liverpool. Brewery closures and takeovers had continued from the 1970's and it was getting difficult to find a pint of real ale, with pub after pub selling nothing but tasteless keg bitters and lagers. As part of the geology course, we had regular field trips and one of these was to Devon and Cornwall to study the rocks and fossils down there. In preparation I had been doing my own studying with a battered old copy of the *Good Beer Guide*, and knew that we wouldn't be too far from



Blue Anchor, Helston

the legendary **Blue Anchor** pub in Helston, one of the handful of pubs in the whole country to still brew their own beer. Fortunately, one of the lecturers was also a real ale fan, so one day we organised the minibuses so that one would take the real ale drinkers a circuitous route back to where we were staying, and we would have perhaps 15 minutes to quaff a pint and still get back in time for tea. When we got to the pub we all piled in, probably 15 of us, and by the time we were all served it was almost time to go, but I got my pint of Spingo. I think it was the Middle 5% brew, and it was glorious, about as far away from a pint of keg bitter as you could possibly get. Perhaps I have since had a better pint, but I don't think I've ever had one I've enjoyed more.

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The Death of whatpub.com (and changes to guidance)

For several years, the go-to place for information about pubs, their beer range and facilities has been WhatPub.com, a website run by CAMRA with information supplied and updated by local CAMRA members and branches throughout the UK. That site had become so popular that it was visited more often than CAMRA's main website. CAMRA has decided to kill off WhatPub and transfer all data to a new much-improved site at camra.org.uk/pubs. I don't see the marketing logic in this but someone high up in the CAMRA hierarchy must know best.

The new site has most, but not all, the features of the old WhatPub site plus a whole lot more, so it is possible to refine your search to show only pubs with the precise facilities you need at any time. One particularly useful feature is the ability to score beer quality (CAMRA members only) and to report changes in a pub's facilities, opening hours, beer range etc. (anyone can do this) on your phone from the pub at the time of your visit. All you need to do is click the link to 'Pubs Nearby' and you should find the pub you are in automatically.

One major change being introduced is the Guidance for Disabled Access. Previously the wheelchair symbol was used to indicate step-free access to the pub and a fully accessible toilet for wheelchair users. There are, of course, many types of mobility impairment, and many

wheelchair users can walk short distances and negotiate a few steps with some assistance. The intention is that in future the website will give information to indicate for every pub the ease or obstacles for mobility-impaired customers. The hope is to give more information to customers with mobility issues, to encourage them to visit more pubs, and to help those pubs to increase trade.

So, in future, the wheelchair symbol will not necessarily indicate full wheelchair access and accessible toilet facilities but will also include additional information for the mobility impaired. While this will appear on the CAMRA pubs site (camra.org.uk/pubs), it will not be possible, because of lack of space, to include the detailed information in printed guides, such as the 2027 *Good Beer Guide*, where you will be directed to the CAMRA website for more information.

Dave Goodwin

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A Return to the Harp

The **Harp Inn** is a Neston institution – sitting on the banks of the Dee Marshes with views across to the Welsh hills, and a warm friendly interior with a welcoming open fire. It's well known for the quality of its ale and is popular with locals, walkers, cyclists, dog walkers and vet students from the nearby Leahurst campus.

I visited Julie Woolley at the Harp on a cold February morning. Inside the pub was a bustle of activity with floors being cleaned, beer being delivered and Julie and Fran, Julie's partner, sorting out the beer orders. Julie, the landlady, has been running the Harp for a year now, but her connections with the pub go back to her childhood.

I first started coming to the Harp in the 1980's. Rose Cannon was the landlady then and was really good friends with my Mum. My Mum and Dad had the Coach and Horses, and Rose and Mum used to meet up every Monday. I was brought up in Hospitality. We moved into the Coach and Horses when I was about 8. Mum and Dad were local, with generations going back in Neston, so when the opportunity for the Harp came up in 1990 they took it. Mum and Dad were here from 1990 to 2001. I lived here with them for a while until I moved into my own home, and later I came back to live between houses with two small children! I worked at the High School in Neston for 21 years, as well as working with my sister Net at Net's Café just near here. I heard a rumour that Sue (the last landlady) was planning to retire, so we came down on an Easter Monday. It was absolutely pouring down – but I knew everybody and was chatting away. Fran was a bit shell-shocked but was blown away by the views and could see the potential.

So, 24 years after moving out, Julie moved back into the Harp. I asked what that was like.

That was most surreal. It's very old worldy upstairs, with things like the original doors. All my family were here on the first day. My sons, niece



and nephews couldn't wait to explore and have a look around, remembering their childhoods. We found Mum and Dad's pictures from the walls and even older ones; we found old CAMRA awards and magazines too. It's a treasure trove up there, it's like nothing relating to the pub has ever been thrown away.

I still see Jean Wheeler who lived here in the 1970's. She's absolutely fascinating to talk to. She told me how downstairs used to be set up with a parlour, a smoking room and two rooms in the bar, but she says upstairs hasn't changed since she was here. Jean has also told me the ghost stories of the Harp. We've had ghost hunters down who said it was haunted, but I say they aren't going to be sad ghosts here are they!

It was really nice seeing everyone again. It's like coming home.

And what's been the best thing about your first year back at the Harp?

It's been getting immersed back into the community, getting involved in peoples' lives again and just realising how fantastic the



community is. It's a great community here, they come up with great ideas. Over the last year they've raised over £2000 for Maggie's (at Claire House), with folk evenings, a folk festival in the back garden, pie and peas nights and a Burns Night. They have been great fun, everybody up singing. The community here has been absolutely amazing.

It's been challenging too. The size of the bar is the biggest challenge. The tiny bar. You can only fit three people in (to serve). In my head it was all going to be lovely, sunny days, wandering around chatting to people, but in reality the sunny days are the busiest, with people relaxing and soaking up the views! This challenge has been met with some incredible people, the fantastic staff, who are an amazing team, and my family. On those extremely busy days family just turn up to help.

I asked Julie about their plans. Julie is clear on where she needs to focus:

We're looking at car parking, more toilets and a way to serve people outside. This summer we will have an outside bar in the back garden to relieve some pressure on the inside bar. We can't serve real ale outside this summer as the lines would be too long. Next year we are looking to build a bigger purpose-built cellar outside so that we can sell a

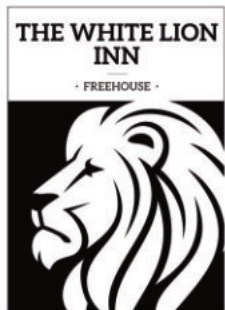
wider variety of beers. However, we do want to keep the lines short because they contribute to the quality of the real ale.

And finally, what about the beer? Fran looks after the cellar and he and Julie are really enthusiastic about the real ale offering. They want to keep the old favourites at the Harp like Holts and Timothy Taylor's Landlord but also try different beers and styles.

We've been looking at a mild and perhaps another traditional golden beer. We've looked at a few beers we fancied but then found they won't deliver to here, but others like Titanic will deliver all the way from Stoke. Their Plum Porter is really popular; the ladies love the Plum Porter! We also know we are always on a winner with Peerless. Everyone loves Triple Blond, and Steve is great; he has even put a barrel in his car and brought it down if we are running out! We have Little Eye on at the moment, but we might replace that with Ossett White Rat and then get the Peerless Oatmeal Stout. It makes the early mornings, getting up at 7 am and cleaning the lines, all worthwhile when you hear someone saying, 'that was absolutely fantastic!'

Dave Levene





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Has the Government Declared War on Pubs?

Pubs in the UK closed at a rate of approximately one a day in 2025. I've seen predictions from the industry of this rate increasing in 2026, with figures suggesting 540 pubs could permanently close in the country this year. I've also seen a report that 212 pubs have closed in the first two months of the year. Hospitality has been described as an industry on life support, and it feels like the government is not only trying to turn the life support off but also burn down the hospital!

I should point out that this piece isn't politically motivated. British pubs have been damaged by the policies of successive governments over the last thirty years, but the rate of pub closures has risen dramatically in the last 12 months. If any government was introducing the policies we are seeing from the current government, I would be calling it out, regardless of what political party they represented.



This is on top of pub operating costs increasing hugely:

- The government increased the minimum wage in April 2025, with the 16-17-year-old rate rising to £7.55 per hour (18.0% increase), the 18-20-year-old rate to £10.00 per hour (16.3% increase) and the 21-and-over rate to £12.21 per hour (6.7% increase). This hits pubs particularly hard as they tend to employ more young people.
- National Insurance Contributions for employers rose by 1.2% in April 2025, and there was a double whammy, with the threshold at which employers start paying the tax on each employee's salary reduced from £9,100 per year to £5,000.
- Energy costs have gone through the roof, with some pubs paying up to five times what they were pre-Covid.
- The cost of beer itself has gone up, not because breweries are being greedy, but many of them are struggling. They are suffering from the same rises in staffing costs and high energy prices.
- Insurance costs have also risen.

Then there is the competition from supermarkets. It's not easy to get exact figures but it's estimated that in recent years, approximately 65-70% of all alcohol sales in the UK occurred in supermarkets, off-licences, and other retail outlets. Supermarkets now sell alcohol cheaper than most pubs can even buy it. Supermarkets pay little to no VAT on food sales, allowing them to subsidise alcohol prices. Pubs pay higher VAT (20%) on ALL sales, making it harder to compete.

If that wasn't enough, the latest is a proposed change to planning regulations. This includes a plan to change policy HC6 so that a pub would only be given protection if it is the last one in the area. This would make it easier for developers to convert the vast majority of pubs into houses, shops or takeaways (or demolish them altogether), without local communities having their say or being able to keep it as a pub. It feels like the government has managed to ensure that many pubs will close and is now trying to ensure that they can be turned into flats or supermarkets!

If you are thinking, "Well, you were banging on about a lot of this stuff in the last issue" yes, I was but these problems haven't gone away. If anything, the situation has got worse and it needs sorting. A few quotes from publicans I've spoken to in the delivery area for WirrAle Drinker:

"Just as an example, my P32 for Tax & NI for August was £7800, in the same month last year it was £4700!!! For the same staffing levels!!!!"

"50p in every £1 spent in the pub is going on staff wages."

Rose and Crown, Bebington
2023 Rateable Value
£19,000
2026 Rateable Value
£43,000
Increase of
£24,000(+126.3%)

"Unless something is done about VAT the independent pubs in this country are doomed."

"I was looking at one of our food menus from 2018 the other day and it struck me how much we have had to put prices up since then. Also, the portion sizes have gone down, but we have had to do it just to keep the business viable."

"Everything is through the roof. In over 25 years in the business, I have never seen anything like it. Beer, Food, Staffing, Energy, Wine, literally everything is through the roof. Unless you are turning over 5 million a year in a pub like this you aren't making any money."

Red Lion, Parkgate
2023 Rateable Value
£26,250
2026 Rateable Value
£62,000
Change
+£35,750(+136.2%)

*"We're f**ked."*

I don't know if the Government has actually decided to declare war on pubs and force them to close. Or whether they have blindly introduced a series of misguided policies, the consequences of which haven't been thought through, and then refused to listen to those most affected. Either way it's not looking good for pubs, and something needs to change urgently. I perfectly understand why some pubs have banned Labour MPs from their pubs to make a point. The government say they are very keen on growth in the economy, so it baffles me as to why they seem to be determined to kill off an entire industry, especially one that already contributes an awful lot of tax to the UK economy.

Fox and Hounds, Barnston
2023 Rateable Value
£41,000
2026 Rateable Value
£105,000
Change
+£64,000(+156.1%)

The government has proudly vaunted its policies of the 15% cap on business rate increases, a 5p cut in the multiplier used to calculate the business rates for the next



three years, and extensions to the hours which pubs can open. However, they do little to help, and pubs are closing at an alarming rate. To any MPs reading this, if you don't think I am right on this then I urge you to contact pub licensees in your constituency. LISTEN and take action.

What needs to happen:

- Cut VAT for pubs and hospitality – to 10% or lower.
- Scrap the increases to National Insurance, which disproportionately affect the hospitality industry, and replace them with an increase on income tax.
- Reform business rates for the hospitality sector. The system of using rateable value simply doesn't work. Many licensees don't even own the pubs they operate; they lease them. The current system also sees supermarkets generally pay less business rates than pubs.
- Introduce a pub energy cap or rebate scheme.
- Tackle the unfair wholesale pricing structure that lets supermarkets sell cheaper than pubs can even buy.

Cartoons from the Goats Head in Abbots Bromley illustrating the pressures pubs are under and publicans frustrations with the Government.

- Scrap the proposed changes to planning laws removing protections for pubs.
- Reduce alcohol duty for pubs and increase it for supermarkets.

How can you help:

- Use pubs and don't buy your beer from supermarkets.
- Contact your MP – Ask them to act and tell them they don't want to be remembered as being part of the government that killed the UK's pubs.

Birkenhead – Alison McGovern

alison.mcgovern.mp@parliament.uk

Chester North and Neston – Samantha Dixon

Samantha.dixon.mp@parliament.uk

Ellesmere Port and Bromborough – Justin Madders

justin.madders.mp@parliament.uk

Wallasey – Angela Eagle

eagle@parliament.uk

Wirral West - Mathew Patrick

matthew.patrick.mp@parliament.uk

Pubs are part of the social fabric of this country and are important in so many different ways. Social hubs bringing people together and helping to combat loneliness. Providing short-term and long-term employment. For many working at a pub is their first job. It's not just people who work behind the bar; there are whole support industries that will also go if pubs continue to fail at the current rate. Centres of community providing venues for live music, family gatherings, meeting places, pub quizzes and raising money for charity. Not to mention the best place to drink real ale! If things are allowed to continue as they are, many of our pubs are going to be lost and consigned to the history books. We need to fight for them because, if you ask me, pubs are worth fighting for.

Rob Carter



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We use beer scores to determine which pubs go in the *Good Beer Guide* and also in judging various awards such as Pub of the Year and Cellarmanship.

Entering your scores is quick and simple:

- Using your phone on the pub's Wi-Fi or your phone's network, open camra.org.uk/pubs
- Find the entry for the pub – there is a button labelled 'Nearby' or 'Nearby pubs' to save you doing a full search
- Click on 'Submit Beer Scores'
- Press the Member Login bar (if you have forgotten your password, you can request a link to reset it from an email)
- You may be able to set your phone to save your password for later pub visits
- You can then follow the screen, first setting the beer score (as above) followed by details of the beer
- Please always give the brewery and beer name (ignore the note that says optional)
- Press the button which says Submit Beer Score
- If you make a mistake, you can correct it later (it's easiest to do this on a laptop/desktop)
- If you do not have a smart phone to enter scores while in the pub, you can use a laptop/desktop computer at home.
- You can review and amend your own scores at a later date



A brief guide to scoring

- 0.** No cask ale available
- 1.** Poor - Beer is anything from barely drinkable to drinkable with considerable resentment
- 2.** Average - Competently kept, drinkable pint but doesn't inspire in any way, not worth moving to another pub but you drink the beer without really noticing.
- 3.** Good - Good beer in good form. You may cancel plans to move to the next pub. You want to stay for another pint and may seek out the beer again.
- 4.** Very Good - Excellent beer in excellent condition. You stay put!
- 5.** Perfect - Probably the best you are ever likely to find. A seasoned drinker will award this score very rarely.

A few rules things to note:

- Only CAMRA members can submit beer scores.
- Submit scores only for real ales. We do not accept scores for cider or keg beers.
- We do not accept scores where there may be a potential conflict of interest such as pub licensees, managers, bar staff or anyone else closely associated with any Wirral pub.
- Any unrealistic scores will be disregarded – for instance where an individual always scores a very high mark for every beer on every visit to their favourite local.



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