

JIM'S JAUNT

Desford, Botcheston & Leicester Forest West

by Jim Reay

This jaunt commenced by catching the 10.52 Arriva 153 from Stand SM in St Margaret's Bus Station, and alighting outside The Lancaster Arms, Station Road Desford at 11.25, just right for 11.30 opening time. Bus and pub times allow this day out to be enjoyed any day except Sundays and Mondays.

Desford was very densely forested in its early days and was inhabited, as much of the East Midlands, by a large Celtic tribe, the Coritani, who formed a settlement here. The toponym Desford first arose from a Saxon settler, by the name of Deor, who lived by or guarded the ford over Heather Brook (now Rothley Brook). Deor's Ford was near to where the level crossing and, now closed, railway station are. The earliest written record is in the Domesday Book where alternative spellings of Deresford or Diresford are listed. There are records

of a Manor at Desford dating back to the 15th century although, when The Manor House was demolished in 1959, signs of earlier occupation were discovered including remains of two Romano-British kilns. These days the oldest surviving village building is St. Martin Parish Church, largely 13th Century in origin, although the font is Norman. Medieval Desford belonged to the Earls of Leicester, who in the 14th century also became Dukes of Lancaster, both titles being united with the Crown in 1399, resulting in the present Queen being Patron of St. Martin's Church. A great former influence on the village was that inhabitants had important rights of common, associated with the proximity of Leicester Royal Hunting Forest, until its clearance in 1628. Villagers were largely engaged in agriculture until a private Act of Parliament in 1760 resulted in 1000 acres of the open fields being enclosed by hedgerows and farmed independently by the landowner. The cottage industry of stocking or framework knitting developed as an alternative source of work in the village, first referenced as early as 1704; the 1851 census recorded over a hundred framework knitters. During the 19th century, many residents hired knitting frames from Nathaniel Corah whose company (formed in 1815 in The Globe Inn) went on to be one of the largest hosiery firms in England, before eventually closing in 1999.

Subsequently, coalmining played a major role in the lives of many of Desford's residents. The first shaft was sunk in 1875, but the venture was bankrupt by 1877 and abandoned due mainly to constant flooding due to water seeping into the shaft. A second shaft, sunk in 1900 by the Desford Coal Company, extracted coal from 1902 and produced more than 30 million tons before closing in 1983. In 1832 Desford Railway Station opened on the newly constructed Leicester to Swannington Railway but fell victim to the Beeching Axe in 1964. The rail connection clearly played no small part in commuting becoming a way of life for many villagers, a trend that has led to a declining number of shops, pubs and farms.

The Lancaster Arms was known locally as The Flying Lancaster following WWII, and a large signboard outside the pub depicted a Lancaster Bomber in flight. The majority of planes used at the then nearby Desford Airbase were De Havilland Tiger Moth, although a Lancaster, diverted here after returning from an operation, overshot the flare path and hit two Tiger Moths. This proximity to the airbase is the assumed origin of the pub's name but this hostelry is of the late Victorian period and a more probable reason is the aforementioned connection to the Duchy of Lancaster, indeed the reigning monarch was entitled to up to 18 wagon loads of hay from nearby Kings Meadow. The pub consists of a public bar with quarry tiled floors and original exposed gnarled ceiling timbers. To one side of the bar is a conservatory dining area whilst on the other side is seating area with a cottage ambience. To the rear is a large restaurant area. To the rear are a paved



Desford Mill



The Lancaster Arms



The Greyhound, Botcheston

patio with external quality furniture and a lawned garden with picnic tables. Part of the Everards Estate since 1923, the beers on offer were Everards Beacon Hill, Tiger and Burton Bridge Draught Burton Ale.

Leaving The Lancaster Arms I turned right and over the level crossing by the former railway station and over the Rothley Brook, which forms the boundary between Desford and Newtown Unthank. To my left was a nameplate reading Millholme, on the wall at the start of a long driveway leading to a large house. Set even further back, and unseen from the road, is Desford Water Mill. There was first mention of a water mill here as early as 1140 and records show the existing mill and miller's accommodation to have been built in 1340. A windmill was later added and, when the water flow diminished in 1854 with the formation upstream of Thornton Reservoir, steam power was added. The mill ceased operating in 1922 and was eventually converted into living quarters for staff employed at Millholme alongside a gymnasium and outbuildings. The whole mill and associated buildings now constitute one large dwelling house. I went through a small metal gate immediately to the right of the drive. The footpath route kept the hedgerow close to my left until the hedgerow turned sharp left, the footpath continuing in a straight line to the yellow waymarker post (YWP)

across the field, then crossed over two footbridges to emerge on Botcheston Road, where I turned left along the causeway. I fairly soon turned first left into Botcheston Main Street, at the far end of which stands The Greyhound, the last building in the village, to the right side of the road.

Botcheston, along with Newtown Unthank, lies within Desford parish, although until around 1936 it was within Ratby parish. The hamlet was mentioned in the Domesday Book but nothing thereafter until 1563 when it numbered five dwellings. Framework knitters were here between 1751 and 1800 but there were few houses before 1950 and most of the land in Botcheston was farmland. Still Botcheston, but about half-a-mile to the north of the village is Kirby Grange Retirement Village. Within this complex is Polebrook House, built in 1881 by the Leicester School Board and formerly the home to Desford Industrial School. When it first opened, pupils' ablutions were said to involve a big bath filled with cold water straight from a well. Although it took difficult boys from all over the country, its name was later changed to Desford Boys School, but it was colloquially referred to as Desford naughty boys' school, housing about 200 boys until it closed in 1984.

The Greyhound first featured in an 1863 trade directory, with no evidence of the inn existing before then. It is believed the pub was originally 3 cottages, the oldest of which dates back to 1680, and thought to have been where the front door now is. The cottage is said to have been constructed around an old tree, built into the fireplace area, and still in situ to this day. Inside consists of three main areas known as the lounge bar, the gunroom (no guns in there these-days!), and a small snug the other side of what appears to have once been an inglenook fireplace. Quarry tiled floors and exposed original ceiling timbers add to the rural ambiance. There is a car park to the right of the pub and to the left a

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The Bluebell Inn



Pesto (aka The White Horse)

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large lawn garden with numerous picnic tables. Real ales available were Marston's Pedigree & Wychwood Hobgoblin.

From The Greyhound, I retraced my steps along Main Street for about 150-yards, where I turned right into a jitty, running between The Mews and Manor House, to join a public footpath to Desford. The footpath across grazing-land, was well-trodden and well-directed by YWP passing over several footbridges and a railway pedestrian level crossing and continuing more or less in a straight line. A couple of fields after crossing the railway the route carried on, though less well-defined, in the same direction to the far side of a large field taking Desford's church spire as a relative bearing of 11 o'clock. Where YWP offered a choice of different directions, I took the path leading straight on, eventually arriving in the appropriately named Little Lane, which led to Main Street where I turned left. Main Street is in the old part of the village and forms part of a Conservation Area designated by Hinckley & Bosworth Borough Council in 1981 that includes Chapel Lane, Church Lane, Cottage Lane, High Street and part of Newbold Road. I soon arrived at the parish church, one of only three Leicestershire churches to be dedicated to St Martin, the others being at Stapleton and Leicester Cathedral. At the end of Main Street I turned left into High Street and found myself outside The Blue Bell.

Everards bought **The Blue Bell Inn** and its outbuildings from the Duchy of Lancaster in 1901. The earliest recorded entry for the Olde Blue Bell was in 1846, although the building itself existed even earlier as three cottages, incorporating a bakery and a grocery. The pub was then a small establishment only half the size it is now, and consisted of a smoke room, small snug and tap room with an inglenook fireplace where regulars used to gather to chew the fat. The interior now comprises a central servery with public bar and adjacent snug to one side, whilst to the other side is a lounge and dining room with low ceiling beams. A few outside tables overlook the car park and at the back is a pleasant small garden with covered pergola and hanging vines. I am told that the pub is popular with rugby supporters and frequently the big topic of conversation at the bar. Real ales available were Everards Beacon Hill, Tiger, Old Original Tighthead, and Gales Seafarers Ale. Hogan's Picker's Passion Cider was also available.

Leaving The Blue Bell I turned left along High Street for about 100-yards then right into a jitty, opposite Manor Farm, called Forest Way. The footpath continued straight on crossing a road and small green before merging with Forest Rise, at the end of which was a public footpath to my right over a footbridge. The route was relatively easily discernible as it was well trodden and marked with YWPs until arriving at a YWP indicating three alternative directions. The one I wanted was the leftmost, almost straight on keeping the hedgerow close to my right hand side. From hereon the route was more or less a straight line, until emerging on Leicester Lane about 100-yards short of Pesto.

Pesto was formerly The White Horse and is still referred to as such by many; indeed the pub sign still depicts a white horse beneath the words Pesto White Horse. It was extensively refurbished and relaunched in September 2015 with a large extension, referred to as the conservatory, seamlessly integrating with original pub building to create one open plan expanse. Forming a central feature is a log burning stove, whilst outside there was a paved patio to the front furnished with timber garden furniture. Although professing to be essentially an Italian restaurant, with diners as its target clientele, drinkers are nonetheless welcome to pop in. This establishment, which is still part of Marston's estate, had three handpumps on the bar, all displaying a Pedigree pump clip, the one and only real ale available.

From Pesto I retraced my steps back to the public footpath but instead of bearing right back the way I'd come, I took the other public footpath straight across the field. Again I ignored another footpath veering right and took the alternative footpath veering only slightly to the left, past a small solar farm, and on to the far side of the field. The way was now diagonally to the far corner of the next field then straight ahead to emerge,



The Bulls Head

next to a bus stop, on the A47 Hinckley Road, directly opposite to The Bulls Head at Leicester Forest West.

Leicester Forest West is a comparatively small geographical region made up of mainly farmland, a pub, a few dwellings but no actual nucleated settlement. The hamlet and its much larger neighbour, Leicester Forest East, take their names from the ancient Royal Forest to the West of Leicester and described in the Domesday Book as Hereswode, which variously translates as, the wood of the army (almost certainly the Danish army once based at Leicester), or the wood of the community. It occupied an area fourteen miles long and four miles wide covering 5,000 acres between the River Soar and Rothley Brook. Townsfolk of Leicester had rights to gather wood in a part of the forest now occupied by Glenfield and western districts of Leicester, then known as the Frith, a name which lives on in Glenfield Frith and Braunstone Frith. In 1628, King Charles sanctioned the disafforestation of the area,

resulting in the forest being sold in parts during the 17th century. In the following centuries, much of the area was cleared to provide land for farming and housing.

The Bulls Head has traded as part of Everards' estate since 1897, although it was originally licensed during the 1770's when it was named The Halfway House, being approximately midway between Leicester and Hinckley. It was a roadhouse much frequented by cattle drovers and during the 1820s the name was changed to The Bulls Head. The pub's interior underwent a major refurbishment in November 2014 and consists of four distinct areas known as: tap room, snug, public bar and restaurant. Exposed ceiling timbers, uncovered quarry tile and timber flooring plus log burning stoves all add to the rural ambiance. Out the back is a small wood-decked veranda leading onto a large enclosed lawned garden with picnic tables and children's play equipment. Everards Beacon Hill, Tiger, Old Original and Hydes The Star were on offer as was Bottle Kicking Scrambler Cider.

So in total, five venues linked by a ramble, almost entirely off-road, with a bus stop immediately outside both the first and last pub. In all there were fifteen hand-pumps dispensing real ale, but with some duplication the total of different real ales was reduced to nine supplemented by two real ciders.

Cheers,

Jim Reay



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