

JIM'S JAUNT

a towpath trundle

by Jim Reay

The ancient parish of Belgrave lay in East Goscote hundred and contained the chapelries of Birstall and South Thurmaston as well as the township of Belgrave itself. Birstall and South Thurmaston became separate civil parishes in the 19th century and ultimately Belgrave became part of Leicester. This walk, which visits six pubs between them having fifteen different beers available, starts in Leicester and as far as practical, follows the route of The Grand Union Canal through Belgrave and on to Birstall. My first port of call was The Bridle Lane Tavern which is situated adjacent to the Belgrave Circle Roundabout and with plenty of walking in front of me this was a good place to start as the bar



The Bridle Lane Tavern

opens at 11am with breakfast available from 10am. Should you require breakfast it's advisable to book in advance (Tel 0116 251 0585).

The Bridle Lane Tavern is a small wedge-shaped building with rendered white painted external walls and genuine leaded lights. The interior consists mainly of one room plus a small adjoining annex with a serving hatch type bar. The pub was originally situated on the corner of Bridle Lane and Junction Road. The field track known as Bridle Lane disappeared with the plethora of Leicester's urban spread during early Victorian times. Junction Road does still exist but no longer extends as far



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as the pub. The introduction of real ale since being acquired from Everards has helped to put this traditional little pub back on the map. Although they now do food, regular drinkers are the core clientele and two real ales were available: Belvoir Dark Horse, and a house beer Belvoir BLT.

On leaving The BLT I crossed over the road towards The Woodsman (No Real Ale Here) turned left off of the roundabout into Abbey Park Road and soon came to the canal bridge where I turning right onto the canal tow-path towards Belgrave. Eventually the towpath crossed a footbridge to the other side of the canal just before the point where the canal and River Soar merge to become the River Soar Navigation. Before long the path crossed back over the river where I turned left along the pathway veering right into Corporation Road past the Abbey Pumping Station Museum and National Space Centre to my left hand side. At the end of Corporation Road I turned right into Abbey Lane where The Broadway was less than a furlong ahead of me.

The Broadway is a former Hardy & Hanson Kimberley Brewery house. Kimberley Brewery's long heritage, dating back to 1832, was brought to an end in 2006 with its purchase, and subsequent closure, by Greene King. From the external appearance it's apparent that two buildings have been converted into one. The larger redbrick house was the original pub whilst the smaller adjoining house was formerly a butcher's shop. The interior consists of a restaurant to the rear of the premises and a large room to the front which extends the entire width of the frontage; divided in the middle by a pool table, one end of this room is reminiscent of a public bar whilst the other end is more like a

lounge bar. The two real ales available were: Greene King IPA and Greene King Broadway House Bitter (House Beer)

Turning right out of The Broadway and first right along Wade Street The Tom Hoskins was on the diagonally opposite corner of Robert Hall Street and Beaumanor Road.



The Tom Hoskins



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The Tom Hoskins is the site of a former brewery. Mr. Jabez Penn commenced brewing at Hope Cottage, which became known as Beaumanor Brewery, and a licence was granted to sell beer off the premises in September 1877. It remained an off licence for a century before eventually becoming a public house. Penn was joined in partnership by his son-in-law Thomas Hoskins in 1904. Tom attained sole control of the brewery in 1906 and eventually it became known as The Tom Hoskins Brewery. The brewery was acquired in 2000 by Archer's and closed down. The pub is now an archetypal two roomed local drinkers' pub popular with local football and rugby teams. If you need a haircut a barber is on site Thursday and Friday afternoons and Saturday and Sunday mornings. Out the back is a beer garden and childrens' play area. The five real ales available were: Carlsberg Tetley Mild, Greene King IPA, Molson Coors M&B Brew XI, Brains Bitter and Wadworth 6X.

Turning right out of The Tom Hoskins I walked to the end of Beaumanor Road, turned right and passed over the 15th century Belgrave Bridge. The ancient bridge which has perceptibly undergone various aesthetically atrocious renovations carries Thurcaston Road over the River Soar.

Just a short distance in front of me on the right hand side The Talbot is a former coaching inn named after an extinct breed of hunting dog. It's referred to in the parish records of 1784 as then being 'new built'. Renovation works following a raging fire in the 1950's saw the originally three storey building reduced to two floors. It has a sinister history with rumours abounding that

condemned criminals on route to meet their fate at the nearby Red Hill Gallows were taken to the pub to be supplied with their 'last meal'. It's hard to imagine now that this tranquil location of Thurcaston Road was once one of the country's most important roads featuring on John Ogilby's strip maps of 1675 as part of the great road from London to Manchester and Carlisle. The pub's interior consists of a lounge bar and a small public bar predominantly taken up by a pool table. An annexe off of the bar contains a small stage that occasionally features Bollywood dancers. The one real ale available was Adnams Southwold Bitter.

Leaving The Talbot I retraced my steps back to the river taking the pathway to the left and turning right to pass under the ancient bridge. Avoiding all other paths, I stayed on the one nearest to the river. It took me under Loughborough Road and Watermead Way Bridges, through Watermead Country Park and eventually to Birstall where The White Horse is unmissable situated adjacent to the Waterway.

Established as an ale house in the 1790's to meet the trade generated by the construction, through Birstall, of the Grand Union Canal, the then Landlord was listed in trade directories as a coal merchant and the now extensive gardens were then used as a coal wharf where, in the 18th and 19th centuries, barges brought their loads to trade. The pub was modernised and rebuilt in the 1920's to how you see it today. The interior comprises mainly of one large L-shaped room with what is known as the fireplace area at one end ranging through the bar area to the restaurant area at the other end. The four real ales available were: Greene King IPA, Thwaites Wainwright, Timothy Taylor Landlord and Thwaites Lancaster Bomber.

From The White Horse I turned left up-hill to the end of White Horse Lane and The Old Plough was visible to my right across the road.

The Old Plough consists mainly of one large, elongated U-shaped, room. Popular with Rugby supporters and frequented by Birstall Rugby team whose photographs adorn the walls. Although food is served, drinkers would seem to be the mainstay clientele. Excessive imbibers could well be confused by the clocks in the bar: one is upside down; one is back to front whilst a third is correct but has animals in place of numerals. The Three real ales available were: Black Sheep Best Bitter, Robinsons Trooper and Belvoir Peacock's Glory.



The Talbot

Turning left out of The Old Plough and bearing left whilst staying on Front Street, Birstall's third pub, The Earl of Stamford soon came into view on my right hand side, but with no Real Ale there I carried on walking to the bus stop. A word of warning! I don't know if any buses stop at the bus shelter near the shops opposite The Earl of Stamford but if they



The White Horse, Birstall

do, I've never seen one. For a bus back to Leicester, cross over the road at the roundabout and bear right into Sibson Road where on your right near Birstall Garden Centre there's an operational bus stop.

Now you've read the talk, get you walking boots on and do the walk.

Cheers,

Jim Reay



Old Plough, Birstall

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What more could you ask for? Well if there is anything and it doesn't fall into that awful alcopop type category then we'll endeavor to get it in for you, as we're completely free of tie. Any suggestions very welcome.

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