

JIM'S JAUNT

Burton Overy,
Ilston on the Hill
& Billesdon *by Jim Reay*

This jaunt started on a Saturday morning by boarding an Arriva X3 bus from St. Margaret's Bus Station. I alighted just past Engelbert Humperdinck's residence on London Road at the top of the hill leaving Great Glen, adjacent to Paws Boarding Kennels, at the bus-stop defined as adjacent to Mayns Road. This bus stop is actually



The Bell, Burton Overy

within the civil parish Burton Overy though a good mile out from the village centre. After walking a short distance in the same direction as the bus was travelling I turned left into Mayns Road towards the village. Entering Burton Overy proper, I kept straight on and The Bell was soon in view ahead to the left side of the road.

The history of Burton Overy certainly goes back to Norman times, and probably beyond. Throughout time it has had several names. In the Domesday

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Book (1086) it is called Burtone and listed amongst the lands given to Hugh de Grandmesnil by the King. In the 12th century Leicestershire Survey it is called Bicton, and in the 13th century appeared as Burton Noveray. After the enclosure act much land in the parish seems to have been used as pasture and a description of 1790 mentions the opulent graziers living there. In the early 19th century industry was for a time important at Burton Overy. Those engaged in trade and industry were probably employed chiefly in framework knitting, for in 1844 there were 20 stocking frames in the village. Hosiery manufacture at Burton does not seem ever to have developed into a factory industry, and the village was without industry of any kind during the 20th century: It was designated as a Conservation Village in 1974.

The Bell was built in 1933 as a reincarnation of the original Bell Public House, which was situated in Bell Lane, and subsequently sub-divided into two private dwellings known as White Cottage and Bell Cottage. The principal L-shaped room consists of two contrasting areas. The larger part, to the front, has oak panel clad walls, genuine leaded light windows and tables laid for dining and is reminiscent of a lounge bar, whilst the smaller rearward area is more like a public bar with bare floorboards, a darts board and a thick rope suspended from an exposed hefty pseudo (but realistic) ceiling joist. As Albert



Former Sun Inn & Post Office

Pierrepoint wasn't known to drink here the thick rope is probably in homage to the local tug-of-war team depicted in a couple of wall pictures. A former skittles long alley to the rear is now a bookable restaurant/function room with windows overlooking the lawned garden and a patio furnished with picnic tables. Available Real Ales were Timothy Taylor Landlord and Langton Inclined Plane.

From The Bell I took the road directly opposite sign-posted Carlton Curlieu and Illston, ignoring the distance indicated, as the way I was going was off road and far nearer. After passing the cattle grid I followed the Public Footpath signposted diagonally across the field to my left. When the footpath re-joined the road I turned left by another cattle grid and immediately right through a handgate following the Public Footpath sign to Illston on the Hill. Following the yellow way marker posts the path eventually came to and crossed a metalled section of the Roman Road known as Gartree Road near to the driveway of Illston Grange. I took the footpath signposted to the right of the driveway and followed it uphill with Illston Grange to my left. This large Victorian house of red brick with stone dressings and Swithland slate roof was built c.1860 principally as a hunting box for Col. J. W. Baillie, who, until 1895, was Colonel Commanding the Leicestershire Yeomanry. To one side it had a large stable block with a central clock tower. Following the death of the Colonel's heir in 1927, the house was demolished, being deemed surplus to family requirements. The fine

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Illston Grange - the stable block



Illston Manor House

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example of a hunting box Stable-block has been left standing and is now a Grade II listed building and an acknowledgment of the area's great importance for the Leicestershire foxhunting tradition, now used as riding stables. On reaching the top of the hill Illston church tower came into view.

The village is a very old one. Originally a Saxon settlement, it was mentioned in the Domesday Book but is now a conservation village inhabited in the main by commuters. Eventually the footpath emerged at the bottom cul-de sac of Main Street. It wasn't always a dead-end, being once part of an ancient trackway, twice as old as the Roman Gartree Road. The first building I encountered to my right was the Grade II listed 17th century Illston Manor House which is much bigger than first appears as only a small part of it can be viewed from the road. Former inhabitation by the once locally influential Needham family is evident over the front door by a carved stone tablet carrying the family's coat of arms. Flanking this, a string course either side is inscribed, M.H. 1794 recalling when a Mary Heard bought and partly rebuilt the house. There were once two inns along this road, the long gone Sun Inn which became a dwelling house following an interim period as a Post Office, and my next destination, The Fox & Goose, slightly more than a furlong ahead of me to the left side of the road.

This unique gem of a pub is unscathed by the passing of time. Its many artifacts include animal traps, farming implements, various taxidermy exhibits, pictures of hunting scenes, as well as a number of cartoons by local resident Ed McLachlan (Private Eye, Punch, etc.). In 1997 when major structural work was undertaken, photographs were taken before work began to ensure that each item could be put back in its exact same place. When Main Street was still part of an ancient trackway drovers sought their pleasures at The Fox & Goose. In those bygone times, according to the present Landlord, the pub was renowned as a drovers retreat and whore house but he asserts that he rarely sees the drovers these days. The pub also hosts the annual onion growing competition, Onion Sunday, by which local charities benefit by thousands of pounds from the proceeds. Comprising of a public bar and a lounge bar, outside there is a block paved patio with garden furniture and various planters. Available Real Ales were Burton Bridge Burton Ale, Everards Beacon and Tiger.

Leaving The Fox & Goose I turned left up Main Street soon passing St. Michael & All Angels Church, almost



The Queens Head, Billesden



The New Greyhound, Billesden

opposite which is the former Sun Inn. I took the left fork at top of road and straight on out of the village indicated Three Gates by the 1st signpost and Gated Road to Billesdon by the nearby 2nd signpost. Near to this road's 2nd cattle grid I passed two houses to my left followed shortly by a really large house known as The Ashlands. This stone mansion was built in the mid-19th century Tudor style completed in 1867 as another hunting box with extensive stabling. Billesdon was soon visible in the distance, across the fields diagonally to my left. I followed the bridle path in that direction by initially walking with the hedgerow close to my left for a short way until reaching a handgate to my left at which point the bridleway was clear to follow diagonally across fields to my right. Approaching Billesdon the bridle path (identified by a blue directional arrow on the yellow way-marker post), veers to the left whilst a public footpath (as indicated by a yellow directional arrow) carries straight on. I followed the latter and where the footpath split when entering the village I took

the one to the left that emerged into Vicarage Close, from a jitty between houses. I turned right into the close, followed it round to the left then turned right into Gaulby Road then left into Church Street. I followed Church Street round to the left past the Old School Building and St. John the Baptist Church where the road veered right and I fairly soon arrived at The Queens Head on the left side of the road.

Billesdon has existed for over a thousand years mainly as an agricultural based community. The name means 'Bill's Hill' and was first applied by the early Anglian settlers to the prominent hill nearby. The burial site there yielded three Saxon brooches now in the Leicester Jewry Wall Museum collection. The village appears in the Domesday Book as Billesdone. There were around a dozen pubs and beer houses in the village in the mid-19th century. The most recent closure in 1999 was The White Hart on Leicester Road, built as a coaching inn to service road traffic before 1800. The daily stagecoach between Leicester and Stamford stopped here night and morning for a change of horses. This pub's claim to fame was that in the 1960's it was reputed to be the first hostelry to serve chicken & chips in a basket before this repast became so popular elsewhere. Nowadays almost the entire Village is designated as a Conservation Area.

The Queens Head is a grade II listed building which was originally a dwelling house, but has been selling drinks now for over 200 years. It was part of The Ruddles estate until 1978 when Everards acquired their 24 pubs for the grand sum of £730,000. Subsequently we've seen the well- documented appalling demise of Ruddles' Langham based Brewery which lost its independence, through takeover, in 1986, several subsequent takeovers and eventual closure in 1999. The pub's ground floor consists of a public bar and a lounge bar with a conservatory and a staircase leading to a restaurant/function room on the first floor. Batemans XXXB and the Everards trio Beacon, Tiger and Original were available.

I turned left from The Queens Head, along Church Street and very soon came to The New Greyhound on the corner at the end of the road. Before the Billesdon bypass was opened in 1986 the busy A47 road passed in front of this pub but now the setting is far more tranquil. Records show that this pub has been called The New Greyhound since the 1840's although a gable-end date-stone indicates this building was erected in 1801. Preceding this establishment, a three storey building on the

opposite side of the Market Place was known as the Old Greyhound which ceased to be licensed in 1916. Now a private dwelling house, a plaque on the front wall betrays its former identity. National census records and entries in Kellys Directories indicate that both the Old & New Greyhounds were trading at the same time for at least half a century. The New Greyhound consists of an L-shaped public bar with an opening to the dining room on one side. To the rear is a games room with a pool table and darts board. A back garden has paved and lawned areas furnished with picnic tables. Available Real Ales were Marston's Pedigree and Burton Bitter plus a house beer called Greyhound Best (re-badged Ringwood Best Bitter).

This was a really pleasant rural ramble linking three delightful villages and four fine pubs with ten different real ales available. The route afforded some splendid views across open countryside as well as several interesting buildings to see. There's a timber bus shelter just outside The New Greyhound where I caught a Centrebus 747 bus to begin my journey home.

Cheers,

Jim Reay

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