

JIM'S JAUNT

Braunstone Town & Leicester Forest East

by Jim Reay

A combination of bus timetables and pub opening hours allow this jaunt to be enjoyed any day of the week. I set off on a Monday morning catching the 11.07 Arriva 104 from the Haymarket bus stop nearest to the clock tower (n.b. Haymarket, the street, not the bus station) and alighted in Braunstone Town at 11.30 on The Glade, opposite to The Winstanley, just right for opening time.

Braunstone Town lies outside the boundaries of Leicester City Council's jurisdiction, flanking its bisected namesake located within the City. Braunstone Lane is the dividing line between these two now distinct districts, which were formerly combined as the old civil parish of Braunstone. Earliest indication of human occupation hereabouts was found in 1893, in the form of an axe dating back to the Bronze Age. The Romans were no strangers to this area, with the Roman road, Fosse Way passing through Braunstone along the course now followed by Narborough Road (A5460). The Vikings also had settlements locally, as the name of the adjacent parish, Lubbethorpe is of Viking origin. In the Domesday Book of 1086, Braunstone was just a small settlement and remained a relatively small, almost entirely agricultural village, until the late 18th

century when some framework-knitting was done. The village was within the great chase of Leicester Forest and, during the Middle-Ages, forestry rights were of considerable economic importance to the lord of the manor and his tenants. They mutually had the right to pasture their livestock in, and collect wood from, the forest, until 1628 when it became fully enclosed. In 1650 the Winstanley family moved to Braunstone and in 1750 the enterprising James Winstanley sank a pit shaft here intending to turn Braunstone into a coal mining district. He was thwarted when intruders, thought to be from rival mining communities, filled the mine shaft with stones. In 1776, Clement Winstanley built Braunstone Hall which became home to successive generations of the family. Although this Grade II listed building isn't actually within Braunstone Town, the history of both Braunstones is linked with the Hall. As ever with the landed classes, country pursuits were a way of life and in the 19th century, Braunstone Hall became a popular meet venue with the hunting fraternity. Situated on Braunstone Park, the Hall was always destined to be at the heart of an estate; formerly a country estate, and latterly a large Council Estate. In 1925, the bulk of the Braunstone Hall Estate was compulsorily purchased by Leicester Corporation which wanted the land to build Council Housing, inevitably leading to this part of Braunstone becoming part of the Borough of Leicester in 1935. The southern part of Braunstone remained a separate civil parish within the rural district of Blaby and in recompense for its diminished holding, the parish was allowed to annex a small part of Lubbethorpe parish in 1936. Extensive private housing development took place to the south of Braunstone Lane, and with the disappearance of agricultural land, Braunstone Town has largely become a suburb of Leicester. The name Braunstone Town is a somewhat recent development, adopted in 1977, to distinguish the Blaby village from its city neighbour. Just within the civil parish of Braunstone Town is Braunstone & District Working Mens Club; originally founded in a council house in 1931 it moved shortly after to a wooden bungalow in Coalpit Lane. In those days the club sold real ale served directly from barrels covered in damp cloths to keep it cool. It relocated to its present position in 1934 but I didn't visit on this jaunt, as these days it doesn't have real ale.

The Winstanley takes its name from the long-time lords of the manor. Built in the 1960s and part of Everards Estate since 1963 it underwent a major refurbishment in 2010. To the right of house, as viewed from the front, is the large tap room (AKA Public Bar) which has an uncovered timber floor, except for a small carpeted area in one corner with comfortable seating. Facilities here include darts boards, pool table, table football and live sporting events projected onto big screen televisions. To the left of house is the lounge bar, with an adjoining annex resembling a cosy snug, and to the rear is a large



The Winstanley, Braunstone Town





Braunstone Hall

restaurant. Within the pubs curtilage are an extensive car park, paved and timber decked patios and an enclosed lawned garden with childrens play equipment.

Real ales available were the pub's three regular beers: Everards Beacon Hill, Tiger & Old Original, plus three guest ales, on this occasion Shefford Plum Mild, Slaughterhouse Space Trotter and Brain's Rev. James. Card carrying CAMRA members get 20p/pint off guest ales.

From The Winstanley I crossed straight over the road and along The Chase; a street name harking back to former fox hunting traditions. At the end of The Chase I turned left into the boulevard known as Kingsway, which features a really wide lawned central reservation. The width of this carriageway stems from the fact that it was initially intended to be a connecting arc of Leicester's outer ring road and would have formed part of a link between Glenhills Way and Braunstone Way, via a more direct route than the elongated loop eventually decided upon. For many years, through the 80s and maybe before, the Centre 21 shopping development was planned in this area, but the proposal faced much opposition. The piecemeal growth of Fosse Park has probably resulted in a development larger than Centre 21 would ever have been. As things turned out, it was evidently rational to reroute the outer ring road to encompass the emerging Fosse Park Shopping Centre and the motorway junction. Reaching the far end of Kingsway, Braunstone Civic Centre was situated to the right side of the road.

Braunstone Civic Centre is owned by, and is the administrative base for, Braunstone Town Council.

The extended Civic Centre was officially opened on 3rd November 1984 by Nigel Lawson, at that time Chancellor of the Exchequer and sitting Member of Parliament for the Blaby Constituency. The main entrance foyer leads into a reception area, with the Civic Centre Bar ahead, slightly to the left. The not ever so large bar has extra capacity courtesy of an adjacent outside courtyard. The bar is open to the general public and is also available for all functions booked at the Civic Centre. The centre also encompasses the Council Chamber along with several other rooms of various sizes available to the community for meetings or social occasions. Wells Bombardier was available as the centre's one regular real ale and Kendricks Grand Slam was the guest beer.

Leaving the civic centre I crossed back over Kingsway, turned left for a short distance then right at the entrance to Mossdale Meadows and immediately left along a Public Bridleway, which was well trodden and easily followed. On reaching some adult exercise equipment, the track turned right, then on reaching some more adult exercise equipment, I turned left then immediately right crossing the bridge over Lubbesthorpe Brook. The track turning left around the edge of the field, keeping the hedgerow on my close left, although if the grass isn't too muddy, one can cut diagonally to the far corner of this field, where the path turns left through a small spinney to a handgate leading onto Lubbesthorpe Way (aka A563 outer ring road). At this point the footpath crosses over this very busy dual carriageway, facilitated by the much-needed central pedestrian safe refuge between overlapping crash barriers. Safely across, I was now in Thorpe Astley. I turned right along the causeway alongside the slip road, at the top of which, The Observatory was just around the corner to my left with the Bees Knees immediately opposite.

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The Observatory



Bees Knees

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Thorpe Astley is named after the Astley family, who owned land in Braunstone from 1334 to 1404, and despite its own differentiating name, forms part of Braunstone Town. It was in 1994 that Blaby District Council granted planning consent for the large suburban settlement. Sandwiched between the M1 motorway and the A563 outer ring road, the new Thorpe Astley residential development was built on Braunstone Town's last area of agricultural land and currently comprises over one-thousand houses.

The Observatory is a Beefeater pub/restaurant, newly built in 1998, to meet the needs of the rapidly evolving neighbouring housing development. The foyer leads into a large open plan dining room featuring a spiral staircase, enabling access to a mezzanine floor, with a much smaller and more intimate dining environment. To the right of the entrance is a public bar, appropriate for non-dining imbibers. Doors from the bar lead out to ample picnic tables furnishing both a lawned garden and a block-paved patio. Real Ales available were St Austell Tribute and Wadworth 6X.

From The Observatory I went to the Bees Knees, crossing directly over Meridian Way, bearing slightly right to the hand gate leading onto the pub's large car park. I walked past the dining entrance to enter the pub through the bar entrance.

Bees Knees trades under the Greene King Hungry Horse franchise, and is another comparatively newly built establishment. It consists of a large L-shaped public bar, intended for adult drinkers, and has no less than four televisions screening sport. The rest of the large hostelry comprises of several conjoined family restaurant areas plus a Wacky Warehouse playroom for

children. Outside are various paved and lawned areas with garden furniture and children's play equipment. Although five hand pumps adorn the servery only two were in use, dispensing Greene King IPA and Greene King Ruddles County.

Leaving the Bees Knees via the car park drive, I turned right towards ALDI, and as the road veered right, I continued straight ahead along a footpath to the left of ALDI. After just a short distance, and just before reaching the brook, I turned left along a path keeping the brook to my right hand side. After crossing over three roads, the surfaced footpath swung off to the left, and I continued straight on over the grass, with the brook still to my right, on a footpath that would take me under a bridge supporting the M1 motorway. For readers of a geographical bent, I had now ambled into the Civil Parish of Lubbesthorpe. After passing under the M1 the footpath veered right, then left to the far right hand corner of a pastureland field. I passed through a pair of kissing gates and continued straight on keeping the hedgerow to my right hand side. On reaching a multi directional yellow waymarker post, I turned right over a footbridge, whereupon I had now entered into the civil parish of Leicester Forest East. I continued straight ahead with the hedgerow to my right hand side until the footpath merged with a metalled road, where I turned left. This road took me back over the M1, then I turned left onto a road which fairly soon emerged on Hinckley Road right next to the Forest Park.

Leicester Forest East is now essentially an appendage to Leicester's urban expansion and is a popular locality for commuters but, like its neighbouring hamlet of Leicester Forest West, takes its name from the ancient Royal Forest, described in the Domesday Book as Hereswode, variously translated as Army Wood (almost certainly the Danish army, once based at Leicester), or the wood of the community.

The forest occupied an area fourteen miles long and four miles wide between the River Soar and Rothley Brook and was an important game reserve for the Earls of Leicester. Townsfolk of Leicester had rights to gather wood in an area of the forest known as the Frith, a name which lives on in Glenfield Frith and Braunstone Frith. In 1628, King Charles I 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 name of Leicester Forest lives on in the appellations Leicester Forest East and West. However, a more tangible vestige of the Royal Forest endures on Western Park, in the form of a solitary surviving oak tree known as Old Major. The built environment of Leicester Forest East primarily developed during the twentieth century.

Forest Park is a modern looking Whitbread Table-Table pub, which some locals still refer to, by its previous name of The Moat House. Ceiling beams and joists of





Forest Park



The Red Cow

previously worked reclaimed timbers, inclusive of waney edges, nail and mortise holes, create an erstwhile ambience, which belie the pub's actual age. The foyer leads into what is essentially a large room subdivided into more intimate isolated zones, with names such as Oak Room and Chestnut Room. An annex called the Red Room doubles as a function room and some of the more mature clientele relate childhood memories of the Red Room being utilised as a mini cinema, with film-shows followed by snacks served in the main bar. The pub also has outdoor patio seating. Real ales available were Wychwood Hobgoblin, Sharp's Doom Bar and Purity Mad Goose.

I turned left out of Forest Park crossing back over the M1, and before long, shortly after passing the right turn to Kirby Muxloe, The Red Cow came into view across the road.

The Red Cow originated in the 1650s as a very small inn situated within a row of cottages but has since

expanded to occupy the entire remaining thatched terrace. It traded as an Everards pub from 1908 but is now under the Vintage Inns brand as part of the Mitchells & Butlers Estate. The front of house occupies the old cottages, now knocked through to create one large room. The premises retain enough partitioning to keep a cottage ambience, enhanced by exposed ceiling timbers, flagstone floors, genuine leaded lights and original fireplaces. Viewed from outside, the large restaurant area to the rear is obviously a comparatively much newer extension, but inside replicates the aesthetically pleasing traditional character of the cottages. Outside are a paved patio and lawned garden, both furnished with picnic tables. Card carrying CAMRA members may ask for 20p/pint off of real ales at this pub. The bar has no less than five hand pumps but only two real ales in the form of Everards Tiger & Sharp's Doom Bar.

So there we have it. A walk around the extended add-on to the outer periphery of Leicester's south-westerly urban sprawl, but nevertheless inclusive of a little rural rambling over fields. Six pubs were visited and between them they had a total of fifteen different real ales available. To begin my journey home, I caught the bus from the bus stop right outside the Red Cow.

Cheers,

Jim Reay



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