

ISSUE TWENTY-FOUR | SUMMER 2014

# BEER



## PUB SIGNS

INSIDE

SOPHIE ATHERTON + MARK DREDGE  
TIM HAMPSON + GRAHAM HOLTER

A DYING  
ART?



# we're going on a beer hunt

**Claire-Michelle Pearson** takes a jaunt around the West Midlands and north Wales for a taste of culture and a beer or two



**Despite our amazing history, rich culture and vast array of beer styles, UK beer tours aren't very common.** Search the web for 'beer trip/tour' and a smattering of British brewery tours turn up in among numerous guided tours of Bruges, Munich, Prague and a host of continental destinations, but what about Birmingham, Monmouth and Perth?

There are a handful of companies offering British beer tours, but they are surprisingly few and far between. One tour offers a trip through the UK, ending in Belgium, while another finishes at the Great British Beer Festival.

In Chester, I join a group of American students from Baker University, Kansas, with two of their tutors, and a chap from Australia – all of whom echoed this sentiment and had been surprised that more UK companies weren't making the most of beery tourism.

Looking forward to seeing what this part of the UK has to offer, but more how the ale's drinking, the group is in the capable hands of tour organiser Steve Hobman of Beer Tours (UK) ([www.beertoursuk.com](http://www.beertoursuk.com)). The beauty of Steve's tours is that they cater to small groups, so they can be tailored to suit the group's specific needs.

**'The beauty of Steve's tours is that they cater to small groups, so they can be tailored to suit the group's specific needs'**

This particular four-day trip will take us on an action-packed journey to Chester, north Wales, Shropshire and Liverpool.

True to form, it's throwing it down in Chester (well, they didn't come for the weather), but Steve doesn't waste much time in putting some

cheer in our hearts and beer in our bellies as we're whisked off in Jim's Taxi to the first stop – the **Brewery Tap Ale House** (Spitting Feathers' brewery tap), in Lower Bridge Street. We try a handful of beers before we're on our way to the **Tyn-y-Wern** hotel in picturesque Llangollen (although it's fair to say most of

this part of the world is really rather pretty). Our base for the four days, the hotel is run by Mark and Julie, who allocate us rooms before we're whisked off again in the hacking rain to **Stonehouse brewery**, Oswestry, Shropshire.

**Set next to a country cottage, with gently promenading hens outside among a stack of casks, this rural brewery is anything but sleepy.** Having recently undergone substantial investment to expand capacity and renovate, Aussie brewer Shane Parr is keen to show off

**TOP:** Taking in a view of the Welsh countryside  
**ABOVE:** A taste of home – enjoying a pint of Peerless' All America IPA at the brewery





the work. We finish in the bar room where we are given delicious locally made snacks (thick, crispy pork scratching, tasty scotch eggs and moreish mini pork pies) to go with the beers. Shane and his wife, Alison, take up their position at the new bar to quench our thirst and chew the proverbial.

"I've always been a big fan [of beer tours]," says Shane. "When we've had tours in and they've gone to a local pub and there's six handpumps on the bar, they've told us they've always gone for ours. Landlords who previously had one barrel from us have then said 'you'd better give us two!' And then that becomes three."

Stonehouse's Sunlander, 3.7 per cent ABV, is clean, light and hoppy, and its Station Bitter (3.9 per cent) is wonderful – lightly hoppy with a malty backbone, complemented by a sweet, stewed banana note and rounded off with a smooth finish. After we've had our fill, we're on our way again to take in a World Heritage site.

The Pontcysyllte Aqueduct, which carries the Llangollen Canal over the River Dee valley, is magnificent. On the ascent, the iron giant towers above, and once up there it stretches into the distance; the people on the other side mere

specks. Despite the rain, this place is stunning and dramatic, and, if anything, the rain brings out the power of the river racing below and the lush hue of the flora in abundance for miles around.

Next stop – former CAMRA National Pub of the Year, the **Bridge End Inn**, Ruabon. The fire is blazing and the handpumps are primed. There are six beers on the bar – including those brewed at the back of the pub by owners Peter and Gillian McGivern's son, Matthew. Settled by the fire we sup on black-as-night, malty, coffee-noted Anubis Porter (5.2 per cent) from Raw, and one of the house beers – McGivern's Ales Gambit (4.7 per cent), which has a smooth, raisin and toffee character.

**"Landlords who previously had one barrel from us have then said 'you'd better give us two!' And then that becomes three"**

**Back at the hotel, Steve has matched the evening meal with beer.** This includes Bury black pudding with bacon and whole grain mustard sauce with Moorhouse's Black Cat at 3.4 per cent (from a bottle and filtered, although we try it cask-conditioned another day), steak and ale pie with Stonehouse's Station Bitter, and beer-battered cod and chips with Purple Moose's Snowdonia Ale (3.6 per cent).

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Tour of McGivern Ales brewery at the Bridge End Inn; beer at the Brewery Tap Ale House; hop smelling; brewer Shane Parr with his wife, Alison (of Stonehouse brewery); view from Pontcysyllte Aqueduct



After a hearty breakfast, most of the group charge up the hill to see Castell Dinas Brân's ruins (built around 1260), but there's also plenty to do in the town for those that (accidentally) leave their walking shoes at home. There's lots on offer in Llangollen, including horse-drawn and canal boat tours and a vintage steam train ride.

Lunchtime rolls around and we meet up at the beautiful **Corn Mill** pub, which is set right next to the river with its own waterwheel and two seated viewing decks. We try out the offerings on the bar – including beers from Facer's brewery, Brains and Brimstage – before Jim's shuttling us through the Welsh countryside once more.

On our way we pick up the affable Josephine Wynne-Eyton from new brewery, Henllan-based **Heavy Industry**, fresh from winning Champion Beer of Wales for Collaborator (5 per cent).

As we wind our way through Snowdonia, the views are humbling. This green and pleasant land inspires frequent periods of quiet awe from inside the minibus. We take a few moments' respite to stretch our legs (and try some of the beer Jo's

brought with her – not bottle-conditioned, but the brewery has plans to do so in the future). A ewe and her lamb trot down the road, but not a single car nor soul passes us. Soon we're on our way again, cantering through the hills and down dale, until the stunning landscape opens up and the blue yonder behind Portmadog beckons.

We stop in at **Purple Moose** for a tour – led by the newest of the three brewers, Barry Marples, before finishing with a tasting in the impressive brewery shop.

**Before we leave Portmadog, we** stop off at the quay (to polish off

Jo's beer and fruit cake Steve has supplied) and sample some of the beers on offer at the **Ship**, including Young's Bitter (3.7 per cent), Copper Dragon Golden Pippin (3.9 per cent), Cardigan Bay Best Bitter (4 per cent) and Moorhouse's Black Cat.

Before dinner at Bathams' **Y Giler Arms** in Rhydlydan, near Betws-y-Coed, we make a brief stop at famed **Pen-Y-Gwryd Hotel**, Nant Gwynant, Caernarfon, where Edmund Hillary and Norgay Tenzing called in for a drink when training for their successful 1953 ascent of Mount Everest.

**'We take a few moments' respite to stretch our legs. A ewe and her lamb trot down the road, but not a single car nor soul passes us'**

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Purple Moose tour; Pen-Y-Gwryd Hotel; Portmadog quay; inside the room where Edmund Hillary and Norgay Tenzing once sat; the Corn Mill pub and Llangollen Railway Station



**Further information**

The tour Claire-Michelle took was arranged by Beer Tours (UK). Because tours are only for small groups, they are flexible, so, on request, the company will put together tailored itineraries for organised groups, or you can go with the flow and sign up to a pre-set plan. Typically, programmes are three, five or seven days long, and run throughout the year. The tours take place in north-west England, north Wales, Shropshire and Yorkshire, and all start at Chester. Check out [www.beertoursuk.com](http://www.beertoursuk.com) for more information.

the name Wapping Beers. We try the refreshing Summer Ale (4.2 per cent) and the Stout (5 per cent). The overseas visitors get a taste of a genial British landlord as Simon Holt joins us to tell us the history of the pub and the odd ghost story.

With a taste of the city in our bellies and hearts we stroll on along the docks towards the chained-down Liver Birds (atop the Royal Liver Building) and Pier Head ferry terminal, where we board, bound for Woodside. Thankful as we cross the Mersey on a 'furry', we were outside of tourist time so didn't have to listen to Gerry and the Pacemakers crooning. Instead, we were swept along with the breeze and headed for the **Peerless Brewing Company**. Here, the floor above the brewery was packed with people as it was Thirsty Thursday – a chance to try the beers, and for the brewery to trial new brews.

We end the day in fine company, as brewer Steve Briscoe joins us to talk about the beers, including the hybrid Paxtons Peculiar (4.1 per cent), a 9:1 mix of Triple Blonde (4 per cent) and Oatmeal Stout (5 per cent).

"A pub wanted a brown ale and we didn't have one," explains Steve.



Our final day dawns and we find ourselves back in Chester, trekking along the city's Roman wall. We head to the **Pied Bull**, Northgate

Street, where we catch brewer Tom Sinclair, who shows us the cellar brewery.

Our last stop on the tour is the canal-side **Old Harkers Arms**, which has a mighty offering on the bar (around 10 handpulls) that we sample with our delicious lunch.

**Reflecting on the positive** things the tourists said, it's good to see what a boon the great

British pub and brewery experience can be for tourism and vice versa. "Very interesting – nice to visit UK breweries and see how they are doing things. We don't really see that in the States," says student Zak. "Interesting to see Australian hops being used over here. I'm fascinated by how British brewers can achieve a full flavour in a low-ABV beer," adds Mark, from Australia.

It seems high time Birmingham, Monmouth and Perth became beer tourists' destinations – as well as Chester, Liverpool, York, Plymouth, Brighton, Edinburgh...

**"Very interesting – nice to visit UK breweries and see how they are doing things. We don't really see that in the States"**

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Chester town centre; walking along the Roman wall; the Old Harkers Arms; brewer Tom Sinclair at the Pied Bull