

JIM'S JAUNT

Gilmorton & Bitteswell

by Jim Reay

For reasons of expediency, all of my jaunts commence by catching a bus from the city centre. As I don't actually reside in the city centre, I usually travel there by bus, as I suspect do those following in my footsteps. I mention this because, during the recent Lions tour of New Zealand, some licensed premises opened their doors at 8 a.m. on Saturday match days so as rugby supporters could watch the game live on television. On one such day I was about to start this jaunt by catching a Leicester-bound bus from the bus stop next to South Wigston Working Mens Club when Neil, the Bar Manager, enticed me in! Regrettably, I couldn't stay 'till the final whistle, as I had a tight schedule. In Leicester I caught Hinckley Bus X84 from Stand SP, St Margaret's Bus Station, at 10.15, alighting on Lutterworth's George Street, adjacent to the car park at 11.30. With a lengthy wait at the bus stop for Murphy's Taxi Bus 661 at 12.10, I couldn't help but notice that across the road was a far more hospitable waiting place, The Union Inn, where a ham salad cob was washed down with a pint of beer. Refreshed, the 661 driver dropped me off right outside The Grey Goose, Gilmorton, at about 12.20.

Gilmorton is believed to imply "Golden Village on the Moor". Recorded as Mortone (town on the moor) in the Domesday Book, it subsequently acquired

the prefix gilden (Old English for golden) which may have been due to the colour of the native flora, such as yellow flowering gorse, heather or buttercups. Whatever the origin of the toponym, Gilmorton originated in Saxon times and is literally located on a watershed with watercourses arising to the north of the parish eventually flowing into the Humber Estuary, whilst those to the south ultimately reach the Bristol Channel. Evidence that the Roman occupiers were no strangers to this area was unearthed locally by two metal detector enthusiasts in 2004, when they discovered a treasure hoard of 1,254 Roman coins dating from around A.D. 296. Some coins were retained by the British Museum but many are on display in Lutterworth Museum. Close to All Saints Parish Church, an archaeological site indicates earthwork remains of a motte and bailey moated timber castle of the type introduced into Britain following the Norman Conquest. In medieval times, an early form of army reserve existed here, with villagers obliged to provide a trained squad of archers, to be called upon for military service at the monarch's behest. The Gilmorton Enclosure Act was debated in The House of Lords in 1777, following which the villagers lost their grazing rights to open fields and their rights to cultivate common land. Not to be outdone, the resourceful inhabitants began to utilise many road verges as allotment gardens, and some actually continued to do so until the inter-war years. Fortuitously, an ancient cattle drovers' route, between Leicester and Northamptonshire, had passed through Gilmorton, and drovers' roads were notorious for having very wide verges. Agriculture remained the villagers' main source of employment until the mid-19th century when Gilmorton underwent its very own mini industrial revolution. There was a framework knitters' factory, a lemonade factory, an agricultural machinery repair business, several hauliers, blacksmiths, farriers, wheelwrights, joiners and cobblers. More recent businesses have included printing, hairdressing, garages, toy model making and security fencing. At one time the village had about 20 shops, including butchers, bakers, dairy, grocers and gift shops, but with dwindling agricultural employment and the relative decline of industry, Gilmorton has increasingly become a dormitory village.

The Grey Goose was formerly The Talbot before an entrepreneur demolished much of it leaving only about a fifth of the original structure still standing. Following extensive rebuilding, the considerably extended pub was re-launched in 2009. Now it is essentially one large open plan room which meanders around the central serving area and has a distinctly contemporary ambiance throughout. A log burning stove is set in an original brick fireplace, with an ample supply of logs stacked in an alcove aside the chimney breast. The pub is suitably furnished for diners both



The Grey Goose, Gilmorton



The Crown Inn, Gilmorton



The Red Lion, Gilmorton

inside and outside on the large al fresco dining area to the rear of the pub. In conversation with a couple of venerable fellow imbibers, long time inhabitants of Gilmorton, they recalled memories of a time when beer in The Talbot was served through a serving hatch, straight from a barrel draped in wet towels. Drawn nowadays via hand pump the one real ale available was Sharp's Doom Bar.

From The Grey Goose I turned left along Lutterworth Road and fairly soon saw The Crown Inn at the end of the road, on the right hand corner. Access to this pub is from the car park entrance to the rear.

The Crown Inn trades as part of Marston's estate and is essentially a spacious open plan restaurant separated into more intimate dining areas by timber supports and braces to the large ceiling beams. An area adjacent to the bar and an aptly furnished patio area to the rear provide ample space for drinkers. Furthest away from the bar, to the left of the rear entrance, is the surviving part of the original village school, which was founded by Mr Edward Chandler in 1774. Along with the schoolhouse, Mr Chandler also provided a dwelling house for a headmaster, who was to be paid £10 a year for the education of poor children, but who could enhance his income by taking private pupils. As one enters this area, the ceiling

beam above has "The Headmaster's Study" written on it, and on the next beam it reads "The School House". The School House has a mezzanine floor furnished with traditional school chairs, and on the wall a blackboard lists pupils who had been awarded School Scholarships. Returning to the main bar, the back of the ceiling beam reads "To the Playground". The pub had a narrow escape during the Second World War, when a Wellington bomber, one of many aircraft that flew from nearby RAF Bruntingthorpe, crash landed close by. Three real ales were available; Marston's Pedigree, Greene King Abbot Ale and St. Austell Trelawny.

On leaving the Crown I turned left along Main Street and it wasn't very long before I arrived at The Red Lion.

The Red Lion now trades as another Marston's house but in the early 20th century it was a hotel. To the left of the front entrance door is a small public bar suitable for the drinking fraternity. More suitable for diners is the extended area to the right, which is bright and spacious with a modern feel, having a laminate wood design altro floor and wood cladding beneath the dado rail and a brick built fireplace. To the rear is a large slabbed patio area with wooden picnic benches which leads directly to a large spacious lawned garden

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The Olde Royal Oak, Bitteswell

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with further picnic benches in an enclosed area for drinking or dining. There is also a heated and lit smoking solution. There is a 30p/pint discount on real ales to card carrying CAMRA members and three were available; Banks's Mild & Park Life, plus Wychwood Drophead.

Leaving The Red Lion I turned left then almost immediately left again down Church Lane, on the corner of which the school is now situated. This short lane ends at the lychgate entrance to All Saints Parish Church. I took the public footpath over the stile to the right of the lychgate, into a field where a distinct earthwork mound is all that remains of Gilmorton's timber castle. The footpath was easy to follow and soon emerged on Ullesthorpe Road, where I turned left. Although Gilmorton is well-known for its enormous wind turbines, one is blissfully unaware of them when actually within the village. I was quite a way out of the village, when I first saw them in the distance, over the fields to my right. I walked along Ullesthorpe Road for around a mile then turned left along a narrow road named Boneham's Lane. From the moment I entered Boneham's Lane I was faintly aware of traffic noise which rose to a crescendo as the lane crossed over the M1 motorway. This stretch of the M1 runs alongside the route of the dismantled Great Central Railway, and the traditional railway bridge, blue brick parapet walls, are still in situ, adjacent to the M1's utilitarian metal railing parapets. After crossing the M1 I could see the end of the Lane where it forms a T-junction with the A426 Leicester Road. I crossed over and turned right along Leicester Road for a very short distance to a cast-iron milestone (the cast-iron ones really are also called milestones) next to a driveway, to the left of which was a stile and a yellow waymarker post (YWP). The footpath crossed diagonally to another YWP at the far corner of the field. From this point on, the footpath was only just trodden enough to follow, but it is worth noting

that the route was several yards to the right of that directed by the YWPs. The footpath ended next to Tollgate Cottage, on the corner of Bill Crane Way and Lutterworth Road. Tollgate Cottage is a former Road Toll House thought to have been built for the Hinckley and Lutterworth Turnpike Trust in the 19th century. I turned right along Lutterworth Road and was soon entering Bitteswell village. I soon passed St. Mary's Parish Church to my right, after which I turned left along Valley Lane, and arrived at The Olde Royal Oak.

Bitteswell was registered in the Domesday Book as Betmeswelle. The village was almost certainly first settled by the Anglo-Saxons and its name is likely an amalgamation of the Old English words Bytme ("head of a valley") and wiella ("spring"). In support of this theory, it is in fact well documented, in text and maps, that Bitteswell does indeed have a mineral spring. The moderately sized central village green is a clearing made by the first Saxon settlers. The common open space is unfortunately segmented into what are essentially extremely wide grass verges, as its main thoroughfares form a crossroads in the centre. The following rather bizarre happening was reported by a newspaper in 1791: "A man from Bitteswell sold his wife for the sum of half a crown (12½ pence in today's money) [and] she was publicly delivered in a halter at 12 o'clock the said day in the market at Lutterworth amidst a concourse of many hundreds of people". The building of Bitteswell Hall in 1841 brought employment and new families to the village causing a sizeable population increase. The Hall had its own farms, gas installation etc., but in the 1920s it was demolished, the land and buildings split up and the population went down to an all-time low. The Second World War brought a great upheaval, as land to the west of the village was taken over and an airfield built to train aircrews. The aerodrome was eventually taken over by British Aerospace and some of the most modern jet planes were regular visitors. RAF Bitteswell closed in December 1987 and has since been replaced by an enormous distribution complex known as Magna Park, which spreads over many hundreds of acres encroaching into neighbouring parishes.

The Olde Royal Oak is a traditional public house, which dates back to the 17th Century, and is now owned by Punch Taverns. To the front of house is the public bar with a fireplace each end, one of which sports an open log fire, whilst at the other end, set in what is clearly a former inglenook fireplace, is a pseudo log burning stove powered by electricity. Behind the inglenook is a cosy snug with timber panelled walls. To the rear of the public bar is a lounge bar and even further back is a large restaurant which doubles as a function room. Outside is a large enclosed beer garden with children's play area and bouncy castle. Greene King IPA & London Glory plus Morland Old Speckled Hen were the real ales on offer.



The Man at Arms, Bitteswell

Leaving The Olde Royal Oak, I crossed diagonally right across the road and followed the causeway around the corner to the left where The Man at Arms was just in front of me.

The Man at Arms unique name is steeped in village history. During the renaissance period and before, a man at arms was a soldier well versed in the use of arms and served as a fully armoured cavalryman. In 1543, the vicar of Bitteswell, Robert Dowse, bestowed an endowment to enable the village to make a man at arms available to fight for the King in time of war. This ancient legacy was still supporting King and Country in 1941, during the reign of King George VI, when £25 was given to The War Office. This doesn't sound very

much by today's values, but 1941's £25 would now have the equivalent purchasing power of over £1,000. The pub is now part of the King Henry's Taverns group, and was in fact this company's first pub. Some locals contend that the building was initially three cottages, which may well be so, and to this day there are three front doors although the middle one is no longer in use. The interior has uncovered timber floors throughout and is basically a large L-shaped expanse with the bar in the front section, which has four crittall bay windows with genuine leaded lights. The section extending towards the rear has the appearance of former outbuildings with unplastered walls, exposed ceiling beams, struts, purlins and rafters. At the far end is a suit of armour above an enormous fireplace containing a much smaller inset log burning stove. Two real ales were available; Greene King IPA and Sharp's Doom Bar.

Not counting the early unscheduled venues, five pubs were visited which between them had a total of ten different real ales. To begin my journey home, I turned right from The Man at Arms then left into Ashby Lane where, just around the corner, was the bus shelter for the X84 back to Leicester.

Cheers,

Jim Reay

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