

The ideal country pub crawl would involve being driven around a selection of excellent real ale houses by an obliging non-drinking car owner. And this is just what a few of us did a couple of years ago, starting in Sheffield and taking in a circuit of the Peak District including the then home of the Leatherbitches brewery at Fenny Bentley, the incomparable and unique Yew Tree at Cauldon, the delightful and quirky Travellers Rest just outside Flash, the highest village in the country, and the excellent Red Lion at Litton.

This summer, in an attempt to recreate this pub crawl perfection, and bearing in mind that obliging non-drinking car owners are not to be imposed upon too frequently, we set out on a similar circuit but this time by minibus. Although minibus hire is more expensive than buying your friendly driver's petrol and a few soft drinks, it's well affordable if a full bus load can be arranged, in this instance 16 of us. (Post codes are included in the description to help those who want to recreate the route using satnav or Google maps.)

First stop on leaving Sheffield was Ashbourne, about an hour's drive, the home since 2008 of the Leatherbitches brewery. The **Green Man and Blacks Head** (DE6 1GH) is the oddly named venue, clearly an amalgamation of two neighbouring hostelries. Paul, our driver, had to drop us off in the market place just around the corner as the pub is on Ashbourne's tricky one way system. We invaded the Boswell Lounge, the smaller of the two bars, which went from empty to full in the blink of an eye. A stunning selection of ales included several Leatherbitches brews, of which Scoundrel at 4.1% proved popular, plus a number of other local ales including Blue Monkey Amarillo and Peakstones Rock Nemesis. We could happily have stayed here all day, but that would have been a waste of the minibus, and besides we had other treats in store.

Next stop was the aforementioned **Yew Tree** (ST10 3EJ), a few miles to the west along the A52 and A523, in the unpromising environs of a cement works. Check out the GBG entry or better still get yourself out to Cauldon before it disappears (not that there should be any danger of that in this case, but see below). Beers included well-kept Burtonbridge Bitter and Rudgate Ruby Mild, lager and cider being only available from supermarket bottles. It being lunchtime, some pub crawlers were in danger of over-indulging in pork pies and freshly made sandwiches. As well as its living museum character, this pub is also a friendly and welcoming local, and the landlord even came to wave goodbye as we drove from the car park.

We had to drag ourselves away from the Yew Tree before closing time to be sure of reaching the next pub before last orders. The **Blue Mugge** (ST13 6LJ) is on a Victorian housing-cum-industrial estate on the fringes of Leek. On my first visit here I circled the area several times on my bike before finding the pub, because it just doesn't look like a pub at all. It's just a street corner house, with a Tardis-like central bar and innumerable pictures of Queen Victoria. Bass was the beer of choice here before the afternoon hiatus at three o'clock. We then walked the quarter of a mile into Leek town centre while Paul the driver took his statutory break.

Leek is well provided with good real ale outlets. The proposed venues were **Den Engel** (Stanley Street) and The **Wilkes Head** (St Edward Street, ST13 5DS), but we also sampled The **Red Lion** (a Hydes pub) and The **Bird in Hand** (Marstons Bitter and Wychwood Hobgoblin) on the Market Square. At Den Engel there are real ales on hand pump, but the Belgian-style café bar also boasts many foreign beers on fonts and is a deservedly popular venue for local drinkers and shoppers. The Wilkes Head features Whim brewery product as well as guest ales, of which Peakstones Rock Black Hole at 4.8% went down well.

Next stop was The **Travellers Rest** (SK17 0SN) at Flash Bar on the A53, the main road from Leek to Buxton. This is a superb location, high up in the Staffordshire moors at about 1500 feet above sea level, and almost as sought-after as the Yew Tree for its idiosyncrasy and charm. Unfortunately the previous landlord had retired and the new owners had chosen to replace his assorted bric-a-brac with tasteless plastic tat, with grossly uncomfortable chairs and horrible mirrors in a sort of Lord-of-the-Rings-meets-Dungeons-and-Dragons theme. The beers, previously from Whim (ten miles away), had been replaced by Fullers (two hundred miles). A

disappointing experience.

Fortunately the next stop was the ever-reliable **Red Lion** (SK17 8QU) at Litton, which although always crowded to the point of overflowing, manages to provide an excellent pub experience, with real ales and food served speedily and efficiently in a friendly atmosphere. Local beers are always available here, including Barnsley Bitter and Copper Dragon Golden Pippin (not so local really, coming from Skipton, but next door compared to Fullers).

The sun was going down as we approached The **Barrel Inn** (S32 5QD) in the hamlet of Bretton, atop an escarpment overlooking the “plague village” of Eyam in the valley below. This is a food-oriented pub, especially in the evenings, but there are benches outside for the view, and a covered yard if the evening is chilly. Green King beers were available, including Abbot and Olde Trip.

Final stop of the day, in gathering darkness on the way back to Sheffield, was The **Grouse** (S11 7TZ), a roadside pub on the A625 at Longshaw. This was another busy food pub, but there is a back bar (not open for service but we made use of the seating) and a conservatory with grape vines. Beers were fairly standard offerings including Banks's and Tetleys.

We returned home to Sheffield determined to “do it again soon”.