

Serve beer? You only need a spanner now!



—That's the message of the Campaign for Real Ale

Real ale men launch branch

A branch of CAMRA, the Campaign for Real Ale, was formed in Shrewsbury last night. There is already a Shropshire branch but as the membership was over 450, it was decided the county could support another, and a third is planned for Telford.

Officers elected at Shrewsbury were Peter Brown, chairman; John Murray, treasurer; and Murray Edwards, secretary. The meeting was addressed by John Salter, West Midlands area organiser.

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I'll be frank and say that ever since I heard about the Campaign for Real Ale I thought it was a rather elaborate excuse for a booze-up. A posh way of getting round a pint and talking earnestly about beer while, at the same time, you also sipped a fair amount.

But apart from one or two wags the like of whom you find anywhere, I think the majority of those involved in this organisation take the whole business very seriously. Too seriously, you might say.

With their CAMRA ties and the way they hold a glass, they are easily recognisable, and what's more there are women who are just as earnest about the matter. Indeed there is a woman on the national executive committee, no less.

For all that, I wasn't over impressed before I went to the forming of a Shrewsbury branch of CAMRA the other night. Secretary of the Shropshire branch, Martin Silvester, of Broseley, had spent some time explaining to me that the 14,000 members up and down the country really do feel strongly about the passing of what they call real ale.

They are prepared to go into battle in a big way.

But I really felt that he was exaggerating the matter a bit. However, his fervour had nothing on that of West Midlands organiser John Salter, from Wolverhampton, whom I met at the meeting. I suggest to John that there is anything less than all that is deadly serious in the campaign and he will quite likely go off you right away.

It apparently is mostly to do with the chaps not wanting to drink keg beer, which they claim breweries

use foreign or inferior natural beer, you see, can be recognised by the layman if you watch for the frothy, yeasty head on it.

The head on a pint of keg gets lost in the gas and bubbles.

"To me," said Martin, surveying his glass, "it's like the difference between margarine and butter. I know if I've got margarine on the bread and I know if I've got keg in a glass."

This was where I put both my feet in it firmly.

"Come on," I said, under the influence of a Cinzano

and lime, "why don't you admit that it's all just fun and gives you a good night out?"

Instantly they swung on me merracing their pint pots. Never, they said, were their members seen worse the wear for drink. They went to conferences and meetings at their own expense. All members had to pay an annual subscription, and did I think they would hand out money if they didn't take it seriously?

No waste

No, I supposed I didn't. John Salter even pointed out that his own phone bill had gone up from about £10 to £30 during the time he had been involved with CAMRA.

There main complaint is that breweries seem to consider the likes and dislikes of the customer last when it comes to policy.

I was told that keg is mostly a bit more expensive to buy and there is no waste for the brewer, either. "It sorts out the good landlords from the bad ones. Anybody can serve keg beer if they've got a spanner," said Martin.

Some of them ally CAMRA along with a general feeling that mass produced bread is awful, that plastics will never take the place of china and glass and that people are getting fed up with melamine kitchens and want wood instead.

I'll go along with all that, as it happens. But never having been a beer drinker I had to keep on asking questions to make sure the lads were as serious about the matter as they seemed on the surface.

And I soon found out that not only are they genuinely poker-faced about their fight, they are also ultra-sensitive to a bit of gentle teasing.

Most branches meet once a month and I kept searching for an answer to what they actually do, apart from drink.

"Well," said John, "we arrange visits to breweries and we arrange coach trips to other areas to try their ales." They also arrange demonstrations up and down the country if breweries start pushing through new ideas they don't like. And they have a good beer guide which, they say, influences at least one Midland brewery to play it their way and keep extra gas out of the brew.

There are a number of MPs who belong to CAMRA, including one entirely fellow who is a socialist. And so much in demand is membership becoming that they will soon be opening branches in Telford and Bridgnorth to join the 50 others which have cropped up all over the country.

"It must keep you pretty busy," I said to John.

Lyrical

Just to give me a quick example he said: "On Friday night I went to the opening of Pelsall and on Saturday I had to arrange brewery visits. On Sunday morning I had a casual meeting of West Midlands branch members and on Monday lunchtime I met a crowd of Londoners in my local and got involved with explaining CAMRA to them. And tonight I'm here."

This was on Tuesday, so it was clear he had seen a pub or two in a few days.

Martin would like to think that CAMRA will become like the Friends of the Wine in France. And they all wax quite lyrical about beer as it used to be.

Then the meeting started. John told the assembled company firmly that branches must guard against becoming just drinking clubs and that they must be prepared to be militant and actively campaign wherever good beer is threatened.

With some mild skirmish and secret discussion the officers were elected and the Shrewsbury branch was launched amid cheese, black pudding and pickles. And beer.

John gave a beautiful, hand-blown and hand-engraved tankard, probably worth around £20, to be raffled for the new branch's funds. I let it be known that if I won the tankard they could get a better story.

They bore that in mind and the next day I received what somebody called second prize, but which I have a feeling was not just luck on my part. It was a book called The Death of the English Pub.

Cheers, chaps. May your beer always froth on top.

Chirley Tart

visits the beer drinkers for whom it's a really serious business