

# Peak Performance: a view from over the pond by Dave and Joan Southworth

The authors of this piece had the pleasure of visiting Derbyshire for nine nights in late November 2008. Normally they reside in Minneapolis, Minnesota in the US.

"Why Derbyshire?", the man from Manchester asks. Joan, my wife, and I are waiting to be rebooked onto a later flight to Manchester from Schiphol after our earlier flight was cancelled.

The conversation is our first with what we will decide is a gregarious group of people. For now, it seems a little out of character when contrasted with the English we have met on previous trips. We have taken seven trips to England and all but one of them were to more southern locales. "I would go to the Cotswolds", he adds. Tired after our eight hour flight from Minneapolis, Minnesota I reply slowly, "We've been to the Cotswolds, they're beautiful but we wanted something different".



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Later while waiting at our departure gate, we have the same conversation with another Manchester man. I began to have second thoughts about our plan to pick a spot and stay there for the full nine nights of our trip. Months of reading, especially CAMRA publications, led us to select "The Old Poets' Corner" (OPC) in Ashover as a base. It appeared to offer everything: a brewery with great beer selection, a beautiful area, and a pretty village. Now two locals had us full of self-doubt.

However, our doubts faded upon arrival at the OPC. "Would you like a nightcap?" asked Anne the pub manager. An easy yes, but a difficult choice when you are staring at seven different hand pumps. (Kim Beresford, co-owner, later explained apologetically "that they normally have more, but this is the slow season.") I chose a Bateman's XXXB and was surprised by the complexity of the flavours. It had been a long time since I had a beer like this one. In addition to the great beer, we received our introduction to Derbyshire from Anne's husband who regaled us with things to do during our stay. This conversation was the first of many we would be rewarded with at the OPC.

Over the course of the next nine days we visited 13 pubs and sampled beers from 31 breweries. We knew from reading InnSpire and The Good Beer Guide (GBG) that the area is rich in cask ales. We did not know we would be able to sample so many quality cask ales so easily.

One of our first tours took us on the scenic single lane roads near Brackenfield to Shirland and the Shoulder of Mutton pub. The pub is beautifully decorated with dainty china hung from the ceiling. The regulars are dispersed throughout the bar, and many of them are accompanied by their dogs. We sit in the back section of the pub nursing two pints of Falstaff ales, Mickey the Idiot and 3 Faze. Both are well conditioned and served.

The music playing forms a strange contrast to the rough persona given off by the regulars. Diana Ross' "I'm Coming Out" seemed out of place. As we depart, we once again easily enter into conversation with the pub's regulars. Having not travelled in Derbyshire before, we find this friendliness disconcerting. Is this England? "We hope you come back," says one of the regulars. I hope so too. Continued overleaf...

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In total contrast to the Shoulder of Mutton pub is our next stop: the Britannia Inn, New Tupton. This pub is built for one thing: a variety of cask ales from Spire Brewery. What a pleasure it was to order a variety of half pints in some of my favourite styles: Scottish ale, mild and stout. The 80 Shilling Ale is the beer I spent a week looking for in Scotland but never found. It is a great malty flavoured beer with a very subtle hop finish. Joan's favourite is the Sgt. Pepper Stout. A confirmed pepper lover, she exclaims "there's pepper in that beer!" I check the GBG tasting notes only to find her correct.

A personal cavil of mine is in some weak moments I ask "should the GBG criteria be only about the beer?" One day we were taken on a tour of the countryside by local author and OPC regular Charlie Neal. Derbyshire countryside compares with any other region when you see the Curbar Gap on a bright, sunny day. No one who has seen this view can ask, "why Derbyshire?" Looking at this view from the Barrel Inn at Bretton while drinking an Olde Trip, I had to ask how can this pub not be included in the GBG? The moment of weakness passed though when I thought back through the great pints I had previously consumed at less well-located pubs.

What a selection of pubs, ciders, perrys and beers Derbyshire has to offer! Never have we seen such a range of beer styles on offer: light ales, bitters, milds, porters, and stouts. The nine days felt like a mini beer festival designed just for us. We sampled some old favourites like Greene

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King's Abbot Ale. The sweet, caramel richness from the cask is so much better than the bottled versions we can buy in America. Thornbridge's Jaipur is so different from other English beers because it's highly hopped. It was the only beer we sampled that reminded us of the triple hopped IPA's served at home. Joan fell in love with Broadoak's perry which we had never sampled before.

Staying at the OPC greatly added to our experience. Each night there was a turnover in the selection of ales offered. To me, there were three absolute standouts: Oakham's Bishops Farewell, and Ashover Breweries Poet's Tipple, and Coffin Lane. The Bishops Farewell seemed to have the citrus flavour I associate with cascade hops. Unlike a lot of lighter ales, this one had enough colour and body to convince me to sample more than one. It was an absolute standout beer.

Ashover Breweries Poet's Tipple remained my favourite bitter throughout the course of our visit. To me, it is everything a bitter should be with an initial malt flavour followed by a strong refreshing bitterness. I still miss the flavour. Coffin Lane is the stout that stood out for me as dark and delicious. I had the pleasure of sampling Coffin Lane directly from the cask while standing in the OPC's beer cellar with Kim Beresford. Coffin Lane is a truly refreshing stout and sampling it in great company only added to the flavour.

At the OPC, a pair of falconers came into the pub with their falcons one night. The regulars and the falconers sensed that we were enchanted by this event, and one of the regulars asked the falconer to offer Joan the gauntlet with the falcon attached! In addition to letting her hold the falcon, he also was more than willing to be photographed with her. We love this photo since it epitomizes what we found to be the generous nature of the people in the region. Not only did we enjoy our visit in Derbyshire, but we definitely hope to return someday, which cannot come soon enough for us.



***Derbyshire is a unique County where the countryside, villages, churches, ales, and people combine to create an experience not found anywhere else in England. The local people have a natural gregariousness that makes any visit a truly rewarding experience. You are never alone for long in Derbyshire.***