

Abingdon History

Abingdon claims to be the oldest continually occupied town in Britain, flourishing throughout the Bronze and Iron ages, the Roman period, and, in turn, becoming a Saxon settlement. When Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries in 1538, Abingdon Abbey was the 6th richest in Britain. A Monday market has existed since 1556 and the Michaelmas Fair (now known as the Ock Fair) was originally a 'hiring mart' for those seeking employment.

In 1810 the Wilts and Berks canal arrived, with Abingdon becoming a key link between such places as Bristol, London, Birmingham and the Black Country. However, it missed out hugely not long after, by rejecting proposals to bring the GWR through, with its first rail link not coming till 1856, and then as a branch connection to the Didcot - Oxford line. The passenger station closed in 1963.

Abingdon used to be the county town of Berkshire, losing out to Reading before becoming part of Oxfordshire after local government re-organisation in 1974. Initial wealth was built mainly on wool but MG, producing fast, sporty two seater cars, became synonymous with Abingdon for 50 years, until production ceased here in 1980. Since then the local economy has been driven mainly by the high-tech industries and research projects that came to the area initially linked to the Harwell nuclear facility.

Getting there

Whatever route you choose you will end up with a BUS, either from Didcot or Oxford. (There is a rural ride possible via Radley, but anyone who wants to do that will be an enthusiast who can look for details themselves!).

Buses from Didcot (outside the station entrance) are Thames Travel hourly service 32 at 1032 to alight at Stratton Way in Abingdon. (Alternative is Thames Travel X2 at 1020 which goes into Abingdon by a different route to debus in the Town Centre). From Oxford (Stand R7 in St Frideswide - out of the station and right down to the main road where you will see all the bus stops) Oxford Bus X3 service (every 20 minutes) at 1021 which arrives Abingdon Stratton Way at 1056

We were waiting to see if the promised opening of a 'spoons would take place in Abingdon before our planned jaunt but it is now said to be opening early October so anyone for breakfast will have to aim for the Monks Retreat in Reading or the Four Candles in Oxford (or a more distant café of choice?).

Start in **The Brewery Tap** (unfortunately no longer the actual "Tap" as the Morlands Brewery closed in 2000). You might not know that, though, as the Morlands Original was excellent when we did the recce. Also on were new local brewery, Loose Cannon. Gunner's Gold, and some from further away -

Thornbridge (Bakewell) Jaipur, Vale (Brill, Bucks.) Red Kite, and Coach House (Warrington) Honeypot. Food available. CAMRA discount.

Out the front, turn right and continue along the road and behind the County Hall (described by Pevsner as “the grandest Town Hall in England”, built in the late 17th Century) you’ll find the **Punchbowl**. We thought initially that we might “bin” this one as the choice of libation is severely limited but it’s a no-nonsense little boozer and what we did have was fine so we’ll try it on the day! Morlands Original and Oakham (Peterborough) Citra when we called. No food.

It now depends which door you go out of but, assuming we leave by the one we came in through, we need to turn right and then cross the road (if you exit by the other door it’s just “cross the road”) to the **Kings Head & Bell**. Loose Cannon’s Abingdon Bridge, Cottage Brewing (Somerset) Norman’s Conquest MM, Red Squirrel (Herts) London Porter. Hook Norton’s Cotswold Lion was queried by the barman and deemed unfit, to be replaced on the line by Adnam’s Broadside. Food available. CAMRA discount.

Out the front and turn right, bearing round to the right and walking down towards the river. Cross the road at the light-controlled pedestrian crossing opposite the **Broad Face**, which did have Morlands Original & Golden Hen on, together with Greene King London Glory but it is operated by a Michelin-starred chef and has aspirations as an expensive bistro food operation. Hence we recommend passing it by to proceed directly to the **Nag’s Head** where we found Loose Cannon’s Abingdon Bridge (appropriately) & Gunner’s Gold, Hookey Mild and White Horse Weyland Smithy as the “regulars” plus Palmers (Bridport, Dorset) Copper Ale, Box Steam Brewery (Holt, Wilts) Chuffin Ale, and Dark Star (West Sussex) Espresso as the guests. Food available. CAMRA discount. Smokers can watch the stunts of the folk in the punts, or other river craft!

We also looked in at the **Crown & Thistle** which had plenty of fizz fonts and a pervading atmosphere of smoke and undesirability, though it is supposed to be getting a make-over so we’ll keep an eye open for any positive changes prior to the Jollyboys’ trip. We were also forced, by a pressing need for a comfort break before getting on the bus, to go into the **Black Swan**. They only had Morlands Original on which was, however, fine. We did also notice that the All-Day Breakfast, inclusive of Black Pudding and Chips, plus two of everything else, looked good value at £4.95, so anyone who hasn’t eaten elsewhere might be tempted?