

## Haggis, Scoops and Fatties – Edinburgh 2006



No sooner had I returned from my frenzy of scooping in Argentina than we were off to Edinburgh for a long weekend with the intention of revisiting all our favourite pubs and the added incentive of Cow Parade to goad us into wandering around more of the city than we ordinarily would. This, our third UK trip of the year, had been booked a month earlier courtesy of a BMIBaby offer which allowed us to fly from Birmingham for £40 return; if we hadn't been able to depart from Brum then I'd have driven up as it's quite a scenic drive (once you pass Blackpool!) and, with travel and with check-in times included, it's almost as quick to drive than to fly.

The final decision to fly had been taken when we found out we could fly from Birmingham and when we located an ideal hotel slap in the centre with only one parking space for every 15 rooms! Fortuitously, I'd been collecting points with the Holiday Inn chain during my frequent stays around the country with my work and I had enough points, after paying £50 to top-up my account, to book two nights in the Holiday Inn express on Picardy place which put us in a very central location for the extensive pub scooping itinerary I'd planned for us and saved us a whopping £152!

**Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> June 2006.**

### ***The wheels on the bus...***

Our flight was predictably early from Birmingham; so early, in fact, that we couldn't even have a few trips on the skyrail before we went through security as we were there prior to it commencing operations for the day! We departed only slightly late and the 45-minute flight seemed over almost before we'd reached cruising altitude and we took the usual route in following the Firth of Forth, turning inland almost over the Starbank at Newhaven, before touching down at Edinburgh's surprisingly small airport just to the west of the city at Ingliston.

Prior to 2006 the only bus operating into the city centre was the 100 Airbus, operated by the local bus company Lothian, but being outside the scope of their amazingly good-value £2.30 day ticket and instead charging £3 single or £5 return to the city. Now, however, there was an alternative in the form of the new No.35 bus on which the day ticket was valid although, as if a disincentive was a part of introducing the service, it went to the city via a tortuous route taking almost an hour as opposed to the 35 minutes of the fast buses along Corstorphine road.

Once through security (there wasn't any to speak of, it was like walking out of a lift) we left the terminal building and saw a 35 bus sat waiting for custom, so we swiftly climbed aboard just before it set off and purchased our day tickets; these are truly amazing value as Edinburgh has a very well developed and extensive bus service enabling the scooper to get to within striking distance of any pub in the city and it's environs (even as far as the Gothenburg at Prestonpans) for only £2.30 a day – maybe it's something to do with Lothian buses being locally-owned that keeps the fares low and service relevant - other cities take note and keep your buses local rather than let the rapacious big companies come in and make a total arse of them!

We decided to take the 35 all the way in as far as Lothian road where the day's cow scooping would begin so, sitting on the top deck at the front, we watched the city's brewing heritage pass us by in the form of the Caledonian brewery – now S&N and therefore complete with correspondingly-adorned drays – then the huge Fountainbridge brewery complex, S&N's old home and in the process of being demolished, all the time inhaling the “hot porridge“ vapours from the enormous grain whisky distillery at Gorgie which could be smelt but not seen. Shortly after, we alighted close to the Filmhouse bar on Lothian road to begin the day's perambulations.

### ***Free whisky scooping!***

The weather wasn't looking too good as we began our exploration with leaden clouds scurrying seaward threatening to deposit their liquid cargo onto us at any minute but, thus far, we'd escaped any precipitation and hoped the day would carry on in the same vein. We joined Princes Street and followed it westwards which, obviously, was the secret password the clouds required to release their payload and they duly obliged with a heavy drizzle. We sought shelter in a variety of shops, netting Sue some new walking sandals, before the shower relented enough to enable us to continue the cow-scooping outside (although we did scoop one inside Jenners department store first!)

By 13:00 it was decided that we'd been walking enough so a bee-line was made for Leith Walk to check into the hotel – but not before we'd investigated the wine merchants Valvona & Crolla just along the way which the internet had suggested we might like just a little bit! The frontage gave little away as to the size of the Aladdin's cave inside but, as we passed the deli counter stuffed with all manner of drool-inducing titbits, I realised that this place was a lot larger than I'd credited it with being... we were soon standing in the wine section and a quick look around confirmed our suspicion that we could spend a whole wad of money very easily here – or we would if BMIBaby's cabin baggage allowance had been more equal to other airlines!

I was approached by a sociable-looking bloke holding a bottle of whisky, which is rarely a bad thing unless he's mumbling something about you being his “best mate” and/or the whisky is a quality product such as Auld McNessie or likewise but, fortunately, Harry Ramps are pretty rare in wine merchants and it was only a representative of a whisky bottling company trying to interest me in his wares. It seemed churlish to refuse a couple of samples so, as Sue checked wines against our gen book, I talked with the bloke about whisky whilst enjoying the free drams – which, of course, went straight into the big orange book! (Well, as soon as he wasn't looking).

Some large scoops were unearthed for buying on the Sunday and, to avoid further temptation, we then made for our hotel where we were momentarily stunned by the random Bert who walked out just as we arrived; he looked like he'd bought some retired lord mayor's costume and wore it even though it didn't fit that well! Momentarily stunned, we soon regained our composure and checked in, enabling us to dump our packs and sort out the gen for the start of our day's beer-drinking!

***Drive us to drink, please.***

We decided, as we'd done so much walking already that day, to take a bus down to our traditional starting point on any Edinburgh crawl, the Starbank in Newhaven – I don't know why, it just always seems to be a good start - and, armed with a rusty (and very large) map freshly procured from the Lothian bus office, we now knew, after all those years of sitting in the bar watching unknown buses pass by outside, which one we could take almost to the door. Fortuitously, this bus from heaven happened to stop just 100 metres down Leith Walk from our hotel, so off we went to the stop to await developments. Being a Saturday the service wasn't as good as it could have been, but we still only waited around ten minutes before the No.16 to Silverknowes homed into view.

We flashed our impeccably-valid day passes at the driver before scuttling up the stairs to bag the front seats to give us a low-flying bird's eye view of the unfolding cityscape of Leith Walk. As the bus progresses at a regal pace down the long incline towards the docks the character of Leith Walk changes subtly but noticeably; the ostentatious modern developments and wine bars give way to Polish delicatessens, Asian sweet shops (mmmmmm, koya barfi!) and slightly seedy-looking pubs before shifting to closed boozers and a feel of genteel unkemptness towards the area known as "foot of Leith Walk".

The No.16 carries straight on at this junction down Constitution street, which maintains the vaguely seedy air, before turning left onto Commercial street and past the Malt & Hops on Shore where Leith seems to have become the new capital of regeneration with new pubs, rejuvenated warehouses and a generally upbeat character which, I suppose, has come with the new Ocean terminal shopping centre and associated Royal yacht just a short distance away; if my memory serves me right this used to be a derelict area not so many years ago so I suppose it's a good thing. Apart from the eyesore of the Ocean Terminal, however, it seems as if Leith is embarking on it's resurrection with the same commendable air as Manchester in that old buildings aren't seen as obstacles which ought to be demolished and replaced by concrete carbuncles but historical assets which must be recycled as part of the regeneration of the area.

We passed the Craighall roundabout where we always used to alight from the No.7 (which still terminates there) and sailed on towards Newhaven, although I underestimated how close the Starbank was to the roundabout and, predictably, we overshot the pub and ended up disembarking outside the Old Chain Pier which, as you'll probably have guessed, was to be our next call anyway so this wasn't a great big spanner in our well-oiled plans!

I must admit to being a bit confused by the Old Chain Pier. I don't always remember it being there, but I suppose I never used to walk past the Starbank and therefore wouldn't have seen the place anyway. I also forget where we first heard about it but suspect it was in the pretty good CAMRA magazine "Pints of View" a good few years back, anyone know? I've never had many scoops in there – in fact, I'm not sure I've ever had any scoops in there – but I always look in with much the same manner of a loyal spaniel who gazes at his master in the hope of a juicy titbit and, this time, there was a scoop on the bar although I was secretly miffed that our intention to only drink Scottish beers was going to fall at the first hurdle; Black Sheep Emmerdale it was then!

### ***A Leith Walk.***

We sat overlooking the Firth of Forth and watched the planes approaching the airport pass in a steady stream along their route in addition to studying some particularly large ducks sitting on the rocks seemingly underneath our seats as I drank the beer and cursed my weakness in not going for the Scottish option which - had it not been Deuchars but something more interesting - I probably would have done. There was nothing else on the bar to detain us so off we went (I nearly went to pay as we left, but remembered we were in the UK just in time before I made a complete arse of myself) towards the Starbank. Looking back at where we'd just been sitting

from the sea wall we saw the building projected over the rocks in a slightly alarming manner which I suppose accounted for the ducks rummaging around underneath!

The Starbank was closer than I remembered it to be and we were soon walking into the uniquely cool, quiet and relaxing interior the pub possesses. I'd feared that now Greede King own Belhaven – the owners of the pub – the beer range might have decreased, but I needn't have feared as there was a full complement of handpumps on the bar and, even better, there were two Scottish micro beers on sale; Inveralmond Inkie Pinkie (3.7%) and Fyne Vital Spark (4.4%), so that was our choice made for us and allowed the adherence to our Scottish-only policy!

Happily the pub hadn't changed since our last visit, which must be at least three years prior, so we relaxed and enjoyed the beers which were both pretty decent and planned our next moves; the Malt & Hops was obvious, but we also wanted to have a look in the "new" bar we'd heard about nearby (the Old Dock) as well as the Carrier's Quarters and Noble's bar, both old favourites of mine. The time was still mid-afternoon but I'd already begun glancing at my watch; time was already getting on a bit, maybe we should have allowed another day, I thought, we always do this and end up running out of time, missing places out and rushing! Ah well, it was too late to do anything now but at least we had the relief that we'd both "done" Edinburgh more times than we can remember and we weren't in some far-flung city we'd probably never return to!

Our drinks consumed we set off for the 200-metre walk to the bus stop at the bottom of Craighall road with the intention of catching a No.16 as far as Shore at Leith where our next pub, the Malt & Hops, was located. True to form, we spied a bus lumber around the corner past the Old Chain Pier as soon as we left the Starbank's door which necessitated a scurry along the road and we just made the bus as it discharged a fairly large cargo of normals at our stop, whereupon we collapsed, panting through this very modest exertion, into our seats.

"Scooping isn't meant to be this much of a workout" I complained, "it's supposed to be a carefree wander around some pubs with all the winners laid on for you – at least that's what it's about nowadays!" I sneered in the way of the bitter "old school" scooper who worked hard for his 10,000 and now sees every man and his budgie getting the same tally within half the time it took him to do it! Aaaaah, the bitterness of middle-age...

We were soon at the Malt & Hops and were glad to see, just like the Starbank, that the place hadn't changed a jot since our last visit – even down to the (so Sue tells me) tiny size of the Ladies' toilet! There were no scoops on tap and, thinking about it, I've never had much luck here with winners although a perfectly acceptable glass of Stewart's No.3 (4.3%) for me and Brewster's Hophead (3.6%) for Sue were quickly ordered. The Brewsters was a touch hazy although it tasted fine and I was interested to see that the No.3 (this was my second tasting of the beer) didn't really remind me of the famous Younger's beer it's presumably brewed in honour of as it was far too tasty and complex without that dry caramel twang Youngers used to have – at least, that's the way I remember it, it's a few years ago now since I drank any...

A new pub is always a welcome prospect, especially in a city you know well, so we elected to have a quick look at the Old Dock which, so I'm reliably informed, serves some decent Scottish beers although - of course - not when we visited it didn't, with only two beers on sale and nothing very exciting amongst those. The walk wasn't entirely wasted though as Sue took the opportunity to view some cows which were located nearby and we probably wouldn't have gone to see otherwise, illustrating that you can portray even abject failure in a good light if you try hard enough... saying that, I'd definitely re-visit the pub as it looked to be a quality recreation of a traditional bar which will surely be a good addition to a Leith visit if caught on a good day.

Retracing our steps over the cute little swing-bridge, we passed the Malt & Hops yet again before arriving at the door of our next stop, the Carrier's Quarters, which is the latest name carried by the famous old Maclays pub formerly known as Todd's Tap. This cracking little

boozer now serves only two cask ales but we were in for a treat as one pump was dispensing the delectable Broughton Clipper IPA which, in my opinion, is Broughton's best beer by quite a long chalk although not really an IPA. We were also in luck in that, despite the rancid World cup being on TV, the cutesy little snug to the left of the bar was empty so we squeezed ourselves in and tucked into our pints of Clipper which I thought was excellent with a dry, resinous hop taste and a fruity, malty body balancing it well.

### ***Coming up Roses.***

The Clipper went down a treat and we were soon staring at empty glasses. As tempting as it was to have another we still had many pubs to cover so, reluctantly, we slunk away to our next pub, the grand old Noble's Bar on Constitution Street, where in the past I've scooped quite a few rare beers including some from the short-lived "self-brew" brewery Beer Necessities. As I walked in and surveyed the bar, however, I realised things were different now; gone were the rows of handpumps (or were they air founts – I can't remember!) and in their place was a wasteland of keg beers. A quick scan around the interior told me all I needed to know; the inside was still gaudy although the old seats had been replaced by "café-style" ones and the whole place had been brightened up somehow and, presumably, this had involved removing the proper beers at the same time! I must say at this point that I didn't hang around to fully investigate my initial views so I may have missed the handpumps; please tell me I did...

A bit withered that one of my favourite bars was no longer worth a swift half whilst waiting for the bus back up Leith Walk, we made our way to the nearest bus stop and waited for our customary No.16 to arrive which would take us along Princes St to within striking distance of the bars on Rose Street. We alighted at Frederick street and made double-quick time in installing ourselves in the Kenilworth, just along Rose Street, where Orkney Dark Island and Harviestoun Ptarmigan were the beers of choice along with a sustaining dish of haggis neeps and tatties; we'd decided to eat as much haggis as was possible during our stay so our first portion was duly consumed with pleasure, washed down by Scottish beers, just as I'd hoped it would be! We'd already confirmed that Milne's Bar was closed for refurbishment until the following week so that was out of the equation – just as well, as time was marching onwards and it was time to move on.

We'd decided to miss out the Abbotsford, reasoning that we were short of time and it was too far to walk as well as being quite close to our hotel so we'd be able to scoop it in later (guttingly, we totally forgot it wasn't open Sundays and therefore missed one of our favourite pubs), so next stop was the Standing Order Wetherspoons on George Street. OK, OK, I can almost hear some people screaming "Hypocrite!" at me as I type owing to my well-known views on McSpoons' establishments but, in my defence, let me say that I support those which serve local beers instead of the usual regional dross which infests the McSpoons list these days, and in my experience this particular retail unit (I still don't call them pubs!) usually has at least two Scottish micro-brewery beers on handpump.

As we left the Kenilworth I saw something lying on the cobbles which, on further investigation, turned out to be a golf club... not the sort of thing you usually see lying around, especially in busy thoroughfares such as Rose Street with no links in sight, so if anyone's lost a club (type unknown) then it was outside the Kenilworth in April, OK? Rather than nipping along the dingy back-alley to the rear door we allowed ourselves the luxury of using the front entrance and weaved through the throngs of stag parties and annoying lary tossers until we reached the far end of the bar where the local beers were usually located. To my great relief the policy seemed to still be in place as there were four Scottish micros available (plus Caley beers) so we chose Harviestoun Dragonfly (3.6%) and Sulwath Knockendoch (5%). The Eastern-European barman was doing a grand job pulling the beers when trouble arrived in the form of the Assistant Manager who cast a disapproving glance at proceedings;

“That looks shite” she said to the barman, in a voice loud enough that I could hear – don’t these people go on customer service courses anymore?

“It’s flat because there’s no sparkler on it. Throw that away and do it again” she continued, probably giving the barman a sense of inadequacy when he’d done nothing wrong, so I decided to intervene on his behalf.

“I’m not bothered about a head on the beer, honestly” I entreated, “it’s fine the way it is!”

This wasn’t good enough for the manager who, obviously believing that a beer without a head is undrinkable crap, ignored my wishes and made the barman go through the whole procedure again with the errant sparkler now firmly attached to the nozzle of the handpump; what’s wrong with McSpoons staff if they can’t comprehend that I (the customer!) didn’t actually mind a beer without a head and that pouring perfectly good ale away on presentation grounds is a monumental folly? Mind you, they are interchangeable with McScum staff so I’m surprised I’ve never been asked if I want “fries” with my beer, to “max it up” or some other repugnant Americanism... The beers, by the way, were very different with the Sulwath resembling homebrew yet the Harviestoun was full of rich peachy fruit and resinous hops and quite delicious.

### ***The Old New town.***

The boisterous atmosphere was proving to be un-conducive to our appreciation of the beer so we hurriedly supped up and headed off down the hill towards the depths of the old town and thence to Kays bar. For those not in the know, Kay’s isn’t owned by a buxom wench named Kay but has a much more prosaic reason for being so named; the building was, until the company closed in the 1970’s, the offices of Kay and company wine merchants and thus carries the name of the old owners. It’s a superb little building, looking more like a cute cottage than a pub, which has somehow been airlifted from the countryside and dumped in the middle of modern low-rise housing as if by some blunder of urban planning. Inside are several separate areas with barrel-ends pushing the drink merchant theme arrayed along one wall although I suspect the décor isn’t the main reason for the visit of those reading this; the eight handpumps dispense a variety of generally Scottish ales usually including Arran and, as a house beer, the now very rare McEwans’ 80/-, and I should also say that the pub also has a very respectable selection of malts perched on alarmingly sloping shelves.

We plumped for the Arran Blonde and Greene King... sorry, Belhaven 80/-, as it’s not the commonest of brews in cask form these days, and settled onto the long couch facing the bar and supped the beers thoughtfully; the Arran had an unpleasant hint of cardboardy Nottingham yeastiness whilst the Belhaven tasted, to me at least, like blood! I don’t want anyone to get the impression I’m a vampire and go around sucking the life from unsuspecting virgins (if only), but the beer had that twang that I can only describe as “iron” to it, presumably down to the mineral makeup of the water, and the more I drank the more the liquid in my glass conspired to take on a reddish hue and the more queasy I felt! Eventually the glasses were empty and our next objective was the Cumberland bar, a good ten-minute march away, so I partook of the facilities before departing. Whilst drying my hands I glanced at the condom machine (as you do – don’t disagree, I know everyone does it!) and had to look again to make sure I’d seen them correctly; whisky-flavoured condoms! It certainly gives a new slant to the phrase “on the rocks”...

To reach the Cumberland the quickest way is to head through the little walkway opposite Kay’s Bar and follow Jamaica Mews to Howe Street. Jamaica Mews is a strange little place; I’m not sure if it’s flats or housing but it seems totally out of place in the soaring architecture of the New Town although, for passers-through, there is the benefit of seeing the occasional cat lounging around in this car-free enclave. No cats were in attendance for us, unfortunately, so we pressed on past some pubs which, many years ago, used to be on the circuit (so long ago I’ve forgotten their names) and subsequently along Cumberland Street – which seems to go on for ever – until, at last, we reached the bar which due to the very temperate evening was thronged with customers enjoying the last of the sun’s energy and the pub’s range of ales.

I must admit to a bit of a soft-spot for the Cumberland; it's one of the newer pubs to appear on the Edinburgh trail (when I say new I mean within the last 15 years) yet was created so sympathetically and lovingly you'd never guess it wasn't a hangover from the old gin palaces of the last century with its tiled floor and wood-panelled walls. One unfortunate change since our last visit has been the eradication of the air founts and their replacement with the ubiquitous handpumps but the range of micro-brewed Scottish beers remains, albeit with some English interlopers, so I suppose you have to be thankful that this excellent pub is still basically as it was.

We chose, keeping to policy, two Scottish beers; Caledonian Nectar (4.3%) and Isle of Skye Hebridean Gold then, whilst looking for a seat, found a hidden little room that neither of us has ever noticed on any of our visits! I'm sure we would have seen it as it's located directly opposite the bar although, thinking about it, we usually visit the Cumberland quite late on in the day's festivities so maybe, in our inebriated state, we'd just never noticed it before...? Whatever, it was there now so we shot inside and found it to be well-insulated from the rest of the pub and enabled conversation at normal levels; not that the Cumberland is overly noisy but it was Saturday night and therefore people's volume control seems to go up a few notches accordingly!

The Isle of Skye was one of the best beers we'd had all night, this was evident as we could still taste it after all the beers we'd had thus far that evening! It was smooth, grainy and mellow, very rich and malty, with a porridgey quality and a sweet yet bitter complex finish. The Caley, on the other hand, wasn't as good being a rather simple sweet toffee-malt brew with little else to recommend it for future supping, leading us to speculate that S&N were now creating the recipes for Caley beers! As we drank our ales heads randomly popped around the corner, looking into our little hidey-hole, before withdrawing again with a look that said "Oy! Who's that in our seat?" although we weren't actually invaded by other people until we were preparing to leave – overall, another great little "compo" located in Edinburgh!

### ***The final leg.***

We were by this time becoming very tired – we must have walked a good five miles, at least – so we resolved that as much as we'd like to have finished in the Abbotsford it was just too much of a walk uphill so the Cask & Barrel would have to be our last call of the evening, or maybe the Barony if it had any decent beer on sale. We trudged around the Georgian glory which is Drummond place and before long we had the pub in our sights – and ears, and it sounded a bit busy! Neither of us has really spent a lot of time around Edinburgh during the evenings for quite a while so, after most of the previous pubs being oasis of calm, we weren't really looking forwards to a final drink in a bar where the customers were holding a shouting competition!

As we'd guessed, the cause of all the boisterousness turned out to be football being shown on the multitude of screens around the pub and it only served to intensify my dislike of the game; it takes everything over and turns people into aggressive arseholes who feel the need to shout and grunt "yessssss" or "cuuuuum oooooon!" alternately to assert their heightened manhood and mob credentials; what a great feeling it must be to be a clone of everyone else in the same room! We'd hoped that - as Scotland weren't actually in the World Cup - there would be no football on TV but it seemed that, although many pubs weren't showing any, some bars had realised that the Neanderthal gang mentality of their customers demanded it to be shown – even if they had no interest in the game at all! I just don't understand this football thing...

I cast a glance at the beer list and noticed that I required at least three, but we'd decided that one round was enough - even before hearing the football morons – so I chose Fyne Somerled and Carden's Wild ale, quoted as being from Hilden, although after seeing reports on Scoopgen during the week I knew that Hilden had simply been delivering to various bars around the city and was pretty sure the beer was still brewed at Messrs Maguires in Dublin, and the claim it was from Hilden was simply lack of gen on the pub's part! As we started on the beers we also

experienced the best case of “can’t be arsed” so far that day as we spotted a disaffected youth slouching around collecting glasses; he had a cloth in his hand – presumably to wipe the tables he’d cleared of glasses – although his interpretation of “wiping tables” seemed to comprise of making a couple of very half-hearted dabs at said table with the cloth before slouching back to the bar to continue his text message conversation with his mates... pure quality.

Sadly the beers weren’t the best we’d had thus far and, to be honest, were a bit of a let-down for final scoops of the day – the Fyne had their house thumbprint of homebrew and malt extract whilst the Cardens was overly malty with a “horlicks” character and a touch of TCP in the aftertaste. Whilst we struggled through the beers we found something we’d been after all day but as yet failed to find; the Edinburgh CAMRA magazine which used to be an invaluable source of gen on new pubs and which beers were around and, happily, it basically still is although there didn’t seem to be any new bars in the centre worthy of a look-in. I was secretly relieved as we already had a mammoth list of bars still to visit, many of which we’d not been to before, so it was a blessing in disguise that there was nowhere new with oodles of juicy winners that we’d just *have* to go and check out!

By this stage of the evening we were, as usual, craving food but one thing we’d noticed that has changed for the worse in Edinburgh pubs compared to in past times is that hardly any of them seem to sell toasties any more! I remember when it seemed as if every bar had a toastie machine behind the bar, a menu on the wall, and smouldering sandwiches with lava-hot contents continuously being doled out to satiate the hunger of the customers. Unfortunately for us, and presumably the populace at large, it seemed as if all pubs had abandoned the faithful old toastie and gone upmarket with posher – read more expensive – snacks; all we wanted was a cheese and onion toastie but there were none to be found, not even in the relatively traditional Cask & Barrel; we decided there and then that we *would* find a toastie that weekend, somewhere, as a matter of principle!

The beers finished we headed up Broughton Street into the by now heavy drizzle and, as previously decided, I nipped into the Barony to see what their beer selection would be. As I entered the door, however, I saw two old blokes in bad jumpers strumming along to “folk” music whilst the whole pub listened intently – my kind of folk music is played on electric guitars and this certainly wasn’t it; to describe it, I suppose the best illustration would be the “Dee English muuurthered me brudder” type of contrived, twee Irish music that’s usually heard around Dublin’s touristy Temple Bar area and is a million miles from what I’d expect traditional Celtic folk to be like. Oh yes, the beer? Fuck all, unless I’d somehow had a lobotomy and fancied Greene King IPA or other random dross, although the collection of pumpclips behind the bar suggested I was very unlucky that night – typical, although I don’t know if I’d have been able to stomach any beer whilst the “folk singers” whinnied away.

Food! That’s what we wanted and, as we were almost at the hotel, we needed some quickly! Luckily, having been in this very situation many times before, I knew exactly where nourishment of a kind could be found – at the top of the road 20 metres from the hotel in the form of the Café Piccante chip shop! After peering through the windows and confirming they sold haggis (they also do deep-fried mars bars but that’s another story) we burst in and ordered two trays of haggis and chips – or haggis suppers in Scottish! I was a bit put out to see that the haggis came in the shape of a battered jumbo sausage not as a huge battered shapeless mass as I remembered it, but we were absolutely starving and any port in a storm I suppose... Back in the room we gorged ourselves on the haggis suppers, finding said haggis very nice indeed despite it’s shape, and soon dossed out as is our normal procedure on the first day of trips away; we were tired and we had a big day of pub scooping ahead of us on Sunday!

**Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> June 2006.**

## ***Ocean terminal? It's just a fucking shopping centre!***

Don't you just hate irrelevant names given to hideous carbuncles which are patently not (and usually the exact opposite of) anything remotely connected with the name? Let's namecheck a few just to explain what I mean, shall we?

- Blue Water – OK, it's not that far from the Thames, but blue? The Thames? I don't think so; if it were called grey sludge then fair enough, but maybe the consultancy who came up with the name decided – rightly – that to tell the truth might not be the best policy, so thus was Blue Water born, conjuring up images of shopping amongst the palm trees and coral lagoons of a south sea island rather than the tedious reality of being near a fucking massive bridge over the filthy Thames and close to Essex. Doesn't sound as good now when you think about it, does it? Or maybe;
- Trafford Park; again, the originators of the name have succeeded in spinning a web of deceit about what you're going to find there. Wow, will we really be wandering around Old Trafford, smiling at Wayne Rooney, and once we've maxed out our cards we can go and relax in the park? Bollocks you will. Sorry, but Trafford Park is the name of a bleedin' huge industrial estate in the grim western outskirts of Manchester which smells of breakfast cereals, the aromas of which billow from the equally huge cereal factory, and is not really in Trafford at all – but why let that spoil the illusion? Or, how about;
- Meadowhall in Sheffield? I've not seen a meadow within miles of the place, never mind a hall, and it too is near a massive bridge although the cooling towers looming over it are quite attractive in their industrial concreteness and it has the benefit of being in Sheffield, so at least you can get some decent beer after buying all their shoddy tat. I'd carry on, but I think you get the message by now...?

Anyway, back to "Ocean Terminal". We weren't quite sure what it was, having received conflicting signals – the Royal yacht was parked there, so maybe it was a big ship station, but we'd also seen a leaflet describing the myriad of shops to be found there... ah well, it was our first call of the day (for some cow spotting, just in case you thought I'd been seduced by the god of Consumerism) so, after a hefty lie-in, we caught a No.11 bus straight there to see what we'd find. Straight away we realised that this wasn't a boarding point for ships but simply a massive eyesore with a name evoking the Victorian use of the site whilst totally ignoring it's present function of a huge box stuffed with all manner of tat, where you didn't queue up to board a boat, you queued up to board the good ship lifestyle. And it was raining. Marvellous.

After covering every square yard of the building searching for cows to spot it was time to start the day's beer events with a long trip out to somewhere neither of us had been before, the Gothenburg brewpub, out along the coast at Prestonpans between Edinburgh and North Berwick. We took a No.11 to the top of Leith walk, mainly as it went via Shore past the Malt & Hops, before changing for a No.26 which took a good 40 minutes to make the long trip out to Prestonpans via Portobello and Eastfield. On the way we passed a pub which obviously conformed to the Scottish stereotype of hating everything English, as stuck to the window was a sign proclaiming "Ada's Costa Rica, Sweden and whoever else they play supporter's club" – all the teams England were currently playing in the world cup! This made me smile and I was glad that the Scots' humour hasn't been totally crushed by the current politically correct climate in Scotland!

## ***Great Eastern.***

We weren't totally sure where the pub was and as the No.26 splits into two routes near it's eastern terminus – and we were on the route which might turn off before we reached it – we frantically scanned the passing buildings for any sign of the pub. Happily, the pub is a bloody great big place and appeared as soon as we lumbered into Prestonpans, so we alighted at the next stop and wandered back to the pub. I wasn't quite sure what the Gothenburg would be like

although I'd read quite a lot about it in CAMRA rags recently; apparently it'd won some awards for its refurbishment and was actually a historic building being one of a small number of "temperance bars" from the last century. Much to my relief we could see lights inside – coming all this way to be met with a locked door wouldn't have gone down very well with either of us I suspect - so in we went to sample some Fowler's beers.

I don't know what I'd imagined the interior would be like but I certainly didn't imagine most of the place to be painted a rather dirty-looking beige! OK, so the tiling looked good and the bar was a classic island one, but rather than making the pub look bright and airy the light wood just made it look bland and grubby. We weren't really there to do a Lawrence Llewelyn-Bowen on the décor and fixtures though so, after spotting the brewery lurking behind glass to the rear of the bar, I surveyed the beer choice and found three Fowler's beers available; 80/- (4.2%), Porter (4.4%) and Wee Heavy (7.3%), all on air pressure founts, so we settled down with the weaker two into a rather beige corner of the bar.

I'd been cradling the rather inaccurate notion that Fowlers were somehow related to the rancid Restalrig or marginally worse Fisherow organisations which, thankfully, no longer exist to pollute bartops and bowl out ethically-minded scoopers with their noxious emissions. I don't know where I got that impression from but, thankfully, I am totally wrong and – even better – the brewer knows Brendan Dobbin which might explain the pretty damn good beers he produces there. The 80/- was a cracking deep brown brew, very fruity and full-bodied, with a rich, tasty malt, fruit (maybe kiwi or plums?) then a balancing bitter finish whilst the porter had a red/brown colour and was full and intense in flavour with roast malt, caramel, burnt grain and fruitiness and a full, surprisingly dry finish with toasty malt, roast barley and a frazzled aftertaste; all in all, two very good beers indeed and definitely nothing to do with Fisherow – that much was obvious!

For once we'd played a blinder (see, all that subconscious indoctrination of football being on TV continuously has even got to me now!) and, from our beige-out position, we could see when the buses passed the pub and therefore would be able to time our departure accordingly to prevent us festering outside for 20 minutes. One had just passed so we quickly obtained the final beer, the Wee Heavy, which was disappointing compared to the previous two being a bit chewy, sweet and simple for its strength although it was perfectly drinkable and got better towards the bottom of the glass as more subtle flavours, such as butterscotch, came through.

Our scooping finished I examined the brewery and saw it was a pretty standard 5BBL or so installation but obviously used by someone who knew what he was doing! As I was returning to our corner, however, my progress was impeded by a never-ending column of fossils out on a Sunday walk all trooping into the pub (well, they were headed for the other side which functions as a sort of tea-room at times) and I must have stood there a couple of minutes whilst around 50 heritage Berts and Adas shuffled past, all dressed in brightly-coloured walking attire!

"Bloody hell, if there's many more we'll miss the bus!" I fretted as yet more elderly Karrimor-clad walkers filed in past our table, but I needn't have worried as the tide first thinned out to the stragglers then stopped altogether, enabling me to grab my scooping kit and follow Sue out of the door to the nearby bus stop! We could see a long way up the road and, with no bus in eyesight, we made a quick inspection of the sea, half-heartedly throwing itself against the wall over the road, and the base of a cow parade bovine which, according to the internet, had been stolen by two dodgy-looking geezers in a white van... it all happens in Prestonpans!

### ***"There's not many left like that"***

Before we'd commenced the trip various people on scoopgen had suggested pubs to visit – which was the main reason we'd trekked out to Prestonpans – and another prime candidate was, very handily, on the bus route back into Edinburgh; the Volunteer Arms at Musselborough and, as it sounded like a proper old locals' bar, that was us sold on the idea. Well, that and, by the time we got there we were busting for a piss!

The pub, confusingly with two names (Staggs and the Volunteer Arms), is located on a quiet road behind a hideous 1960's concrete theatre-type edifice which was probably hailed as a "triumph of design" in those days when people thought square things made out of concrete were a good thing but now, with the benefit of hindsight, it simply looks like a total heap of shite. Staggs certainly resembled a proper, old-fashioned boozier from the outside so we pushed open the door, half expecting the darts to hang in mid-air or suchlike, but simply found a sociable bar, looking like something from many years gone by, full of locals and the only noise being banter and the swooshing of the handpumps; quality.

There were three beers available so we had the Caledonian XPA (5.3%) and an RCH beer that I forget and settled down in a back room to soak up the atmosphere of the place. The interior was what I'd call "traditional" in décor and the back room we were in reminded me of the non-smoking snug in the Lass 'o Gowrie, Manchester, in all it's cosy dark wood way and we both agreed that this was one of the finest traditional locals we'd been in for a good few years and there couldn't be many left as real as this! The beer was pretty decent too, the RCH being very hoppy and bitter whilst the Caley was – well – very "old school" Caley, with a typical pear-like fruitiness then a buttery, malty taste with some balancing bitterness and more orchard fruit in the finish; just what Caley used to taste like, and I apologised to no-one in particular for suggesting S&N had humped their beers!

Very happy at finding this superb little boozier (thanks to John Hein for the gen) we now had a choice of buses back into the centre and were pleased when an X44 arrived first; this was our route of choice as it runs fast-ish (well, about as fast as buses run) into the city and then along Princes Street. The journey back was certainly quicker and entertainment was laid on too – we stopped alongside another bus going in the opposite direction somewhere near Brunstane whilst the other driver asked directions... doesn't exactly fill you with confidence, does it?

### ***The best Chilli Nachos for miles.***

We spent some time searching out some more elusive bovines for Sue's cow scooping list before it was time for some food – and more beer, of course. We made our way down to Cloisters on Brougham Street as I reasoned that if we didn't go then we wouldn't bother later on being a fair trek down Lothian Road, but as Sue had never been and I really like the place that was our move decided and, as a bonus, we could scoop some of the other bars around Lothian Road which neither of us had bothered to scratch in before! We had a quick look in the nearby Bennett's bar on Leven Street but there seemed to be no guest ales available and, despite it being a classic old Edinburgh pub we'd never been in before, the lure of Caley wasn't great enough to entice us to stay and we snuck out and marched the short distance to the Cloisters.

I was a tad put out when, on approaching the bar, the first "beer" (and I use the description very loosely) I saw was Greene King IPA, although on seeing Cairngorm Tradewinds I was mollified sufficiently to order some of that and, having eyeballed the food menu, some chilli nachos with onion rings to revive our flagging constitutions. We bagged a table tucked into the corner by the spiral stairs which snake away into the bowels of the building and swigged the superb beer; I've always liked Tradewinds but the last few times I've had it somehow it's got even better with a glorious resinous, citrusy and hoppy character before a tongue-frazzling bitterness in the finish; I'm sure CAMRA would class it as some random beer style they've recently concocted but to me it's a great example of an American Pale Ale with all the aggressive hoppiness that infers and a great antidote to the staidness of so many UK beers saddled by the weight of tradition which usually dictates blandness and conformity. OK, so it uses German Perle hops and elderflower to give it that citrusy zing, but it's the attitude it's brewed with that makes it so American to me!

The nachos soon arrived and were covered in an obviously home-made chilli; that much was obvious by the explosion of flavour from the beef and the fairly generous complement of chillies!

We munched away frantically until the dish was empty and we both felt a whole lot better – that had been the best plate of nachos I'd had for years and for a moment we both thought about ordering another, but in the end we quelled the chilli heat with the remains of the citrusy hop-monster in our glasses and headed back up Lothian Road to scoop a few new pubs which were either new or we'd never been arsed to scoop before, but not before we'd chanced upon a very strangely named curry house, the Bombay bicycle club! Name me one with a funnier name than that, if you can... OK, Balti Towers in Burton may give it a run for it's money I suppose...

The Filmhouse was a new one on both of us; an unlikely-sounding bar in the Filmhouse cinema opposite Usher's Hall on Lothian Street. The outside looked a bit dour and foreboding in it's Aberdeen-like austerity but we were soon inside and I wasn't convinced – it looked very much like a Wetherspoons to me, and that's not a compliment, in a way I couldn't quite pin down but was certainly there; maybe it was the carpets or the bar? I don't think there's one single object that made the Filmhouse look "McSpoony" on first impressions, more a combination of things, but I'd be happy if someone could either confirm what I'm saying or tell me I'm talking complete bollocks.

There were four ales available and I quickly chose the Atlas Three Sisters as we'd not yet tried anything from Atlas during our visit, whilst Sue scooped in the real Italian-style espresso on offer which was extremely tasty and smooth. I must declare a liking for Atlas beers and this example was definitely full of character; deep red, perfumey, toffeeish and tasty with lots of sweetish treacle-toffee maltiness and more strange perfumed hops in the bitterish finish – not your usual beer, but definitely characterful!

### ***Into the Old town.***

We were now on a roll, happy at having found a decent bar in such a strange location, so buoyed by the fact we were now turning towards the old town proper we set off to try out the Blue Blazer on Spittal Street which, somehow, I'd never been into before despite having walked from Cloisters to the Bow Bar vaguely this way a number of times. It turned out to be a handsome building on the corner of the street in the typical Edinburgh style of beige stone and the inviting glow from within soon drew us inside, where we found a decent range of beers, all Scottish, but no toastie machine to be seen... despite my better judgement I went for Heather Ales Fraoch, which I'd not tasted in a number of years, whilst Sue had Dark Island.

Let me say now that I've never been a massive fan of Fraoch, but I suppose it's the masochist in me which makes me drink some every now and again just to prove to myself that it actually does taste like mouldy old socks! And yes, it still does... although I also picked out a rosemary-like herbiness, maybe even lavender, which continued into the unusually soft, malty, heather-moor finish; I think it's growing on me! (and in me, maybe). The Dark Island was a welcome change from the Fraoch, being comforting and chocolatey, so we drained the glass whilst admiring the décor in this excellent little bar which, I'm sure, will be a regular on our crawls from now on!

Reluctantly we left the cosy pub behind and ambled down West Port into the old town proper; for anyone who's not had the pleasure of perambulating along this road, apparently called the "Pubic triangle" by locals, let's just say it's where you find the establishments which cater for gentlemen's desires – and there's a good choice too! The gentle slope aided our ground speed and we were soon in Grassmarket, the hub of stag night territory, but I decided to have quick look into the Black Bull anyway; I'd heard it did guest beers and I'm sure I've been in there a few times before on the way to the Bow Bar. It was noisy inside with crowds of normals watching football on TV (never a good sign!) and I was openly relieved when I saw nothing worth braving the cacophony for coming from the handpumps.

We pressed on and decided, as we were in such pioneering mood, to try another bar which I'd seen mentioned on the internet as having guest ales: Doctors on Forest Road, not that far from

our next scheduled stop, so after hurrying past a decidedly unworthy charity case begging at the end of Grassmarket we plodded up the steep Candlemaker Row towards the pub. When we got there, however, a quick look through the windows told us there was nothing remotely rare on the pumps and, as a double-whammy, the two cows that Sue had been hoping to scoop nearby were also missing, presumed abducted! Not the best part of our day so far...

Disappointed with this minor setback but pleased to be heading for one of our favourite bars in the whole city, the Bow Bar, we retraced our steps back to Grassmarket and then up the stiff climb up West Bow to our target which looked, thankfully, exactly the same as we remembered it from the many years we've been visiting. Inside was an oasis of quiet with a choice of tables, so Sue settled into the little "compo" one in the window whilst I checked out the bar which still had its air founts in place and decent array of whisky on the impressive wooden gantry behind. The best range of beers we'd found thus far presented itself to me and, although there were no actual scoops on, the rarity of most of the ales was commendable; I chose High House Auld Hemp and Hilden Silver (see what I mean?) and returned to our table.

We were both glad to see the pub hadn't altered one bit and we sat gazing around the interior, checking for changes, but finding none. The High House beer was dry and malty with a suggestion of spicy hoppiness in the aftertaste, whilst the Hilden was unfortunately average with a flowery, dry character and short bitter finish but, despite the beers being a little on the bland side, the thing that cheered us was the Bow Bar itself, still as it was and – hopefully – as it will always be, an oasis of calm and rare beers in the centre. As we drained our glasses it was time to choose our next pub and, after deciding that the precipitous steps of Fleshmarket Close were worth braving for the reward at the end, we unwillingly left the Bow Bar and clattered down the steps to the Halfway House, one of Edinburgh's hidden gems.

### ***Small, yet perfectly formed.***

It's a funny place, the Halfway House; it's always been worth a look-in as guest beers have always been on the bar but I think it's only in the last few years that it has begun to really blossom into a fully-fledged scooping pub. The blackboard outside proclaimed that there were two winners available, namely Stewart's Cascade and Hebridean Seaforth (both 4.2%), although I always suspect the accuracy of blackboards as I know that I'd be reluctant to update it every time a beer changed... We entered the pub and I soon remembered how small it was inside; tiny doesn't really describe the diminutive size of the place, the walls hung with random railway memorabilia, the little bar having sprouted more handpumps since I was last in – amazingly, dispensing the beers listed outside!

The two scoops were duly ordered and we bagged the table at the far end of the room - which isn't really that far at all, to be honest! On the table was a food menu which reminded us that we were hungry, as usual, so we studied the list of delicious Scottish snacks and whilst Sue chose to top-up her haggis consumption I decided on some Cullen skink for a change from chopped innards. The beers were once again a bit disappointing, with the Hebridean having a mellow, toffee-ish malty flavour with little else to recommend it whilst the Stewarts was deep red, an unusual colour for a cascade beer in my opinion as the malt flavours obscure the hop character, with some glimpses of the citrusy hop delights being crushed underneath the monolith of all that caramelly, toffee maltiness; a chance wasted.

The food arrived and, despite having been microwaved (well, it was Sunday evening!), was home-made and very good it was too; the haggis, neeps and tatties transpired to be huge dishful with all constituent parts being tasty and working together perfectly whilst my Cullen skink was thinner than I've had before but with a lovely smokey flavour reminiscent of Islay whisky and even, somehow, a hint of brewing in the flavour... maybe we'd had too much by this point, and I was secretly relieved that we only had one more pub to do, the classic Guildford Arms, another of the city's classic hidden pubs albeit not as well hidden as the Halfway House is!

### ***Toastie-less and half-plastic.***

With the food and beers consumed it was time to leave so we said our goodbyes and headed off into the twilight which had fallen outside. After puffing back up the steps to Cockburn Street and deciding we really should take more exercise, it was back over North Bridge with its archetypal views of the old town and Calton hill until we reached Burger King – which, before you ask, we weren't going into but is a handy navigational point by which to locate the Guildford, lurking behind on West Register Street, and shining like the beacon for quality it is.

Happy to see the famous rotating door was still in-situ, and well acquainted with its attributes, we successfully entered the pub without mishap but were suddenly struck by some major changes, and not for the better! The door-end of the bar was basically the same as it's always been, complete with the table in the middle of the floor, but the rear has been drastically modernised in a hideous "café style" way comprising of bright spotlights and white walls which has also meant the superb sunken barrel seat is no more... I suppose it's progress, and at least the front half of the pub is as it was, but we were both gutted to see the desecration of one of our favourite bars in the whole country!

Thankfully the bar seemed to be exactly the same, and I surveyed the rows of handpumps with pleasure and they contained some excellent Scottish beers – and some strange English choices to go with them, although both Sue and I remember Landlord has been popular in the Edinburgh free houses for years now. I had Houston Texas, one of the beers I remember used to be good but I'd not tried for quite a while, whilst Sue tried one of her favourites from our winter trip to Glasgow, Kelburn Misty Law, but there was one more thing I needed to check behind the bar and, surprise surprise, it had gone!

"Do you do toasties?" I asked the barmaid, hopefully, as we were hungry again.

She looked a touch confused as if I'd asked her the question in Croatian, but then a spark of recognition could be seen in her face, and she smiled,

"Toasties? No, we haven't done those for a few years now" was the inevitable answer, "There's a snack menu on the tables" she added helpfully, but to me it was yet another old favourite which was now toastie-less and lost to the mouth-scorching cause!

We slumped at one of the real tables near the front, tired from the day's exertions, but also a bit withered that this classic pub has sold out to the café bar culture and removed our favourite seat in the whole city! Ah well, we reasoned, at least the front bit is still unspoilt, and started on the final beers of the evening; the Houston was amber and very malty and had a fruity, very bitter finish although I'm sure it used to be more citrusy and cascadey a few years back, whilst the Kelburn was excellent and easily one of the beers of the weekend with its pronounced rose-petal hoppiness over a solid malty flavour, proving again the very high quality of Kelburn's beers in both our opinions.

We considered having another round of the superb Kelburn beer but decided against in on the counts that we were knackered and hungry (again!) so it was time to head back to the hotel and, gluttonously, indulge in another haggis supper - we always like to fit in with the locals – so, leaving the Guildford behind us, we plodded down the curve of Leith Street and into Picardy Place. I'd assumed we would visit the same chippy as the previous night, but Sue suggested the one which was even closer on the Leith Walk side of the hotel and, this meaning less effort walking back and a winning chippy, soon swayed the decision in its favour!

We joined the queue which comprised of some very drunken blokes who were struggling to string sentences together they were so pished! On examining the keep-hot shelf (I don't know what its real name is, so keep-hot shelf will do me) I was ecstatic to see that the haggis on offer were the traditional huge blob-shaped ones and not the smaller sausages we'd had the previous night, and the question when serving was for "salt'n'sauce?"; this seems to be a typically

Scottish condiment and comprises of what seems to be a mix of brown sauce and vinegar giving a slightly runny brown sauce! So, it was two haggis suppers, one with sauce please pal!

Back in the room we munched our way through the enormous haggi and I was very happy with the size and flavour of mine, especially as it was smothered by copious amounts of “sauce” and accompanied by some reasonably competent chips. It must have taken a good ten minutes to finish the huge suppers by which time we were totally exhausted from the frenetic pace of scooping during the day and, tempted by the extremely comfortable bed, we opted for an early night once again... old age is a terrible thing, ten years ago we'd have been rushing around the New town again in case any beers had changed – bollocks to that!

**Monday 18<sup>th</sup> June 2006.**

### ***A last glass.***

After checking out we headed down Leith Walk to Valvona and Crolla's amazing wine shop to stock up on some of the rare Italian scoops on offer there, although I was slightly disappointed to find no free whisky tasting on offer and therefore no free winners! Owing to the miserly 6kg hand luggage allowance of BMIbaby we couldn't take as much home as we'd have liked although we still managed to purchase some top wines (handily, some came in 375ml bottles) and left happy with our haul although our bags suddenly seemed a lot heavier than I imagined 6kg would feel like... ah well, we'd sort it out at the airport, we always do, we've never been caught yet for having over-weight hand luggage!

After some residual cow scooping and photography of the city which included going down to the absolutely hideous new Scottish parliament – look, it's just a fucking eyesore! I don't know who designed the thing, but he can't have wandered around the city and thought if it would fit in with the prevailing architecture because it doesn't; it's just a typical modern heap of crap with absolutely zero architectural merit! - we headed off to McCowans for, hopefully, our last scoops of the trip as Beige Phil had reported that it had been brewing a few months back after what must be over a year of closure. The bonus of this move would be that we could scoop the Golden Rule, a traditional pub just along the road, and one neither of us had done – although Sue had never scooped McCowans either, so that's hardly surprising really.

We alighted from the bus opposite the “leisure complex” containing the brewpub and, happily, noticed that the brewkit was still *in-situ* which was a good sign, although when we entered the bar only Caley beers were on the pumps, that wasn't such a good sign! I decided to ask what the situation was just in case the beers were on the un-labelled pumps; “Good morning, any of your own beers on?” I probed, unenthusiastically. “Nah, the brewer left last month” came the predictable reply and, with that, we turned about-heel and left before we were force-fed Caley Deuchars!

Within five minutes we were inside the Golden Rule where a decent range of beers was available, from which I selected Harviestoun Bitter & Twisted, but Sue fancied a coffee; I wasn't sure if such a thing would be available here, but the very sociable barman wasn't fazed by the request and went to boil the kettle. It was then I saw the sign, in the very last pub of the trip, the one I'd wanted to see all weekend – Toasties available! We couldn't really pass up on this offer, being the first toasties we'd seen for sale in three days, so two cheese and onion toasties were quickly appended to the order; result! I did see another sign which read “guest keg” but chose to ignore that one... honestly, that's what it says! If you don't believe me just go and have a look!

The Harviestoun was, as to be expected, bitter, fruity and hoppy and ended a good weekend of beer drinking on a high note. Sue's coffee came from a cafitiere – when we left, the barman said that it was OK, he'd finish the rest off for us – and the toasties were just as I remember them

from all those visits; burnt lines on the bread and lava-hot filling! Glancing around the pub there was the predictable world cup tat everywhere but at least they'd made an effort; a list of beers from most of the countries involved was on the wall, and it looked like they were all available too – although the selection seemed to have been influenced by “brand” and not quality!

During our stay a normal arrived, sat at the bar, and began discussing things with the barman; “Did ye get my postcard?” he queried.

“Where from?” asked the barman, which seemed a fair question.

“Ach, I can't remember...” muttered the local, returning to his pint!

Must have been an exciting time he had if he can't remember where he was, I thought, as the barman laughed and went back to his cleaning of the glassware.

Our drinks gone it was time to leave the last pub of the weekend, fittingly a winner, so off we trotted to the bus stop via a pie shop over the road. All I wanted was a Scotch pie, but the lass behind the counter was determined to inform us of the wasp she was petrified of which, by all accounts, was rampaging through the shop causing mayhem. Showing fake concern for her plight seemed to work as we got the pie without any further updates on the wasp's plan for global domination, and headed for the bus stop to catch the bus to the Gyle Centre where some more cows were waiting to be scooped!

One thing we'd been intrigued about on the bus map was the “Fast Link” guided busway so, being mugs for anything public transport related, we decided this had to be scooped in. We took a No.1 to Gorgie Road (close to Hearts' huge Tynecastle ground) where we changed for the following No.2 which traversed the busway; we'd noticed the little guide wheels on buses during the weekend (how sad is that?) and now it was obvious what they were for as we trundled onto the concrete track – they worked the automatic steering mechanism! To be honest I couldn't really see the point of the busway as the maximum speed on it was 30mph; surely if they'd just laid some everyday road instead then the buses would have been able to go faster than this? Just a gimmick to my eyes, but then I am an old cynic!

We had a quick storm around the Gyle centre, scooping all the cows, before taking the very useful 35 bus back to the airport. We'd slightly misjudged the time and arrived 2½ hours before our flight departed, but a quick look at the screens made it even worse; the plane was reportedly delayed by an hour! We glumly checked in before wasting as much time as possible in the shops, where I found a decent bottle of single-cask Tamnavulin whisky to take home, but we still had, with delays factored in, two hours to fester!

Luckily the hold-up wasn't as bad as had been posted, and we actually left 40 minutes late although the flight time to Birmingham is so short (40 minutes) we only made up ten minutes by the time we'd taxied all around the airport and onto stand. The delay's capacity to annoy us was more or less dissipated by the fact we only had a 50-minute drive home rather than the more usual couple of hours (and more) from the various other airports we usually use, which is always a massive relief after being on the beer all weekend! As we ground along the M42 in the heavy rush-hour traffic it suddenly dawned on me that this would be our last flight until September – and that suddenly seemed a hell of a long way in the future! I consoled myself with the thought that we'd be scooping a new country – Poland – and concentrated on negotiating the depressingly familiar scenario of peak-flow time on a motorway.

## **Conclusions.**

As both of us know Edinburgh well and have been visiting since the mid-80's any review of the place is bound to be a bit biased, but there you go! I love Edinburgh as a city; it has amazing architecture to gawp at as well as a whole stack of great pubs to wander around, although it is

(currently) lacking a brewpub. One thing that can be annoying is that the city attracts so many visitors it's hard to get to know the locals or see where they drink, although some of the quieter bars, such as Kays, are still tourist-free zones – apart from beer scoopers of course!

If you're just there for the scooping then your success is largely based on luck; you can trawl around all the pubs and score buggler-all one week and pick up a whole bagful the next, I know, I've done it, and it's very hit and miss I'm afraid although you'll always be guaranteed lots of Scottish beers to drink in lieu of winners with a preponderance of Orkney and Harviestoun which can't really be construed as a bad thing. Many of the pubs are gloriously constructed from beige stone and traditionally furnished so it's a lot of fun comparing the differences between them as you move around, but one thing lacking is tacky "theme" pubs, or at least there aren't as many of them as have infested most cities.

If you like whisky then there are many distractions from the beer in Edinburgh; the famous Scotch Malt Whisky Society has its headquarters in Leith, Cadenheads have a shop at 172 Canongate, on the Royal Mile is, appropriately, Royal Mile whiskies and up by the castle end at 354 Castlehill is the national Whisky heritage centre. Most pubs will have a range of drams but some have much better ranges than others, the Bow Bar is one which stands out in my memory.

To sum up, Edinburgh is a great city to spend a weekend drinking beer in, but its viability as a scooping city is variable. With no brewpubs (now McCowans has closed again) you'll have to rely on the pubs, although there are so many worth a look you'd have a job to get around them all in a full day's drinking unless you walk out if there are no winners on – and, as we all know, that isn't really the done thing although we've all done it at one point or another! A classic scooping metropolis it may not be, but it's still very high on my list of favourite European cities to have a wander around and try some local – for they usually are local – beers. With a good, cheap bus service and a tram system having been given the go-ahead, things can only get better for Edinburgh and, consequently, the visitor.

### ***Accommodation.***

Accommodation is expensive during the summer although we were lucky as we paid with points collected through work hotel stays! If you can stomach B&B's there are a whole load down Minto Street, south of North Bridge, and some more around Pilrig Street in Leith. The usual big chain hotels are mostly in the centre but one I'd recommend is the Holiday Inn out by the zoo on Corstorphine Road as it's easy to get into the centre on the No.26 bus and good deals can be had if you book in advance. There are also new Travel Inns and the like down by the Ocean Terminal shopping centre with large carparks; we're going to try one of these on our next visit as it's easy to get back to with a multitude of bus routes running until late at night.

### ***How to get there and get around there.***

With Edinburgh being in the UK I'm sure I don't have to explain that you don't have to go anywhere remotely near a plane to get there. You can reach the city by regular train from London (King's Cross) and the East Coast main line via Peterborough, Leeds and York although you could do both Edinburgh and Glasgow in one hit as they're only an hour apart by train – although the fares for the Glasgow-Edinburgh section can be very expensive. National Express runs a wide variety of coaches to the city for reasonable prices and it's not too long to be sat on a bus either. You could always drive up, with the easiest route being straight up the M6, continue onto the M74 and then cut across to the southern ring road via the A702 through Biggar; it's a lovely drive once you've passed Preston on the M6, although beware speed cameras and coppers on both the M74 and A702; some days it's crawling with them taxing tourists who can't read speed signs! I'd not recommend driving up via the A1 as it's like a cart

track in places and not nearly as scenic and, as a bonus, you get a lovely view of the nuclear power station at Torness on the way into the city; nice entrance!

You can fly to Edinburgh's cute airport at Ingliston if you want, although I'd say it's not worth the hassle from Manchester and above as the time taken getting to the airport and waiting for flights can exceed the time to drive there! Of the many airlines who fly there, here are the smaller and – usually – cheaper ones;

- easyJet go to Belfast International, Bristol, Gatwick, Luton and Stansted.
- BMIBaby fly to Birmingham, Cardiff and East Midlands.
- FlyBE serve Belfast City, Birmingham, Exeter, Guernsey, Jersey, Newquay, Norwich and Southampton
- Jet2 go to Manchester.

Once in Edinburgh you'll soon discover it's a large, spread-out city where using public transport to reach some of the pubs is necessary unless you have a week to hike between them. Luckily the city has a very good bus service operated, mainly, by the locally-owned Lothian buses which covers most of the city. A day ticket is £2.30, cash and correct change only, from the driver or as a scratch-card from the Lothian bus-shops around the city; this is excellent value although note it's not valid on the airport express buses, these are £3 single and £5 return, although you can always use the No.35 to reach the airport instead on which it's valid.

Princes Street is the city's main artery and splits the old town and new town; most buses pass along here at some point although their stops can be infuriatingly difficult to find as there are so many of them strung along the length of the road. From here you can reach any of the scooping pubs either by foot (Guildford, Halfway House for example) or by bus (Starbank, Gothenburg) as long as you have a map – get a bus map from the Lothian shops (there's one by the station where the tour buses stop) and a good street map is also useful to find your way around the confusing maze of the old town if you're not an Edinburgh veteran! Saying that, a lot of the new town looks very similar so a map is pretty useful there too...

## ***Pubs.***

I've split the pubs list into three parts; Old town, New town and Oot o' town. For each pub will be it's address, how to get there and some other random gibber about the place including the beers I scooped this time around but don't expect the same when you go as, generally, we only drank the guest ales and not the permanent beers. For opening times etc consult the internet or GBG although most are open all day. Be aware that this list is comprised of scooping pubs only; there are many other excellent bars in the city, for example the Oxford bar or the Café Royal, where you probably won't get any scoops but will most likely find decent beer and atmosphere!

## **Old Town**

Included in this list are all pubs located south of Princes Street in the city centre or thereabouts; there are some cracking little boozers in the list!

### **Cloisters, Brougham Street, Tollcross.**

Sister pub to the Bow Bar and housed in a most attractive church-type building, this excellent place is a bit out of the way and so attracts very few tourists but is easy to reach using the frequent buses which pass close by; try the 24 for a direct service or anything from 11, 15,16,17,23 or 45 which go along Home Street just a few minutes away.

- Cairngorn Tradewinds – Superbly hoppy and bitter brew, like chewing green hops, with citrussy, lemon-jelly hops and a balanced yet very bitter finish; classic. (5)

**Bennet's Bar**, 7 Leven St, Tollcross.

Excellent old pub, all wood panelling and mirrors inside, but I'm not sure if they still do guest beers as well as their Caley; we didn't see any when we looked inside. Very close to Cloisters.

**Filmhouse Bar**, 88 Lothian Road.

Relatively new bar in a cinema's lobby, this is a strange place which – at first glance – resembles a Wetherspoons! Fortunately this isn't the case as this freehouse serves five guest beers from, mainly, Scottish brewers as well as some very decent proper coffee.

- Atlas Three Sisters – Dark red beer, perfumey and toffeeish, fairly characterful and tasty with a sweetish, treacly malt finish with bitterness and more perfumey hops. (3)

**Blue Blazer**, 2 Spittal Street.

Classic old Edinburgh boozier with a very traditional feel and walls covered in adverts and mirrors for long defunct breweries. Serves six guest beers with a distinct Scottish bias! Buses 2 and 35 pass close by, or alternately it's a short walk from the Filmhouse.

- Orkney Dark Island – Good roasty, caramelly, smooth and mellow brew with bags of roasty, chocolatey and malty character; when it's this good, it's bloody good. (4)
- Fraoch – Lavender and rosemary aroma and taste with distinct "old socks" hints and a strange, soft malty and herbal aftertaste. (3)

**Black Bull**, 12 Grassmarket.

Fairly "yoof" oriented bar festooned with TV screens and the like which just happens to sell some real ales, although I don't know who buys them, if anyone even does. Can have some decent stuff on the bar, or it can be dross – all down to your luck on the day. We weren't lucky.

**Bow Bar**, 80 West Bow.

One of the most famous of Edinburgh's bars, with some justification, this little house is achingly traditional with no music, air founts atop the bar, long-closed brewery mirrors on the walls and loads of whisky on the gantry. It's other claim to fame is that Deuchar's IPA was originally brewed for it as a house beer in the 90's. One of the essential visits when in Edinburgh as much for the experience as well as the beers which are on the rarer side of what you'll find.

- High House Auld Hemp (3.8%) – Dry malty ale with some dry, spicy hoppiness. (2)
- Hilden Silver (4.2%) – Average, dry and malty beer with a slightly flowery hop finish with more dry maltiness and some bitterness. (2)

**Halfway House**, Fleshmarket Close.

Probably with the best claim to be the city's hidden gem, this tiny bar is located halfway (as the name suggests) up the precipitously steep steps between Market Street and Cockburn Street and, although it could just about admit a rugby team, serves up to four beers with some being on the very rare side. Good, solid, honest bar snacks are served all hours.

- Hebridean Seaforth (4.2%) – Golden, mellow, toffee-tasting malty brew. (2)
- Stewart's Cascade Red (4.2%) – Deep red, hints of the lemony hop, but it's crushed under the weight of the sweet, toffeeish malt; what a waste! (2)

**New Town**

Wide roads and soaring Georgian houses make up most of the New town where these pubs are located and this includes the famous Rose Street, beloved of stag parties and the like, although there are some decent bars along it if you know where to look.

**Kenilworth**, 152 Rose Street.

Highly ornate bar with an island bar and lovely ceilings, this place is on Rose Street but just happens to serve four real ales where most places nearby serve nothing. The food is decent enough if you fancy a snack – as we always do!

- Harviestoun Ptarmigan – Golden, fruity, peardroppy beer, bitter and characterful. (3)
- Orkney Dark Island – Tastes too sweet and caramelly, maybe a bit fresh? (2)

**Standing Order**, 62-66 George Street.

With a dodgy-looking back entrance from Rose Street, this is a decent Wetherspoons as it serves some local beers, usually three, from the pumps at the Rose Street end of the bar. Situated close to Frederick Street, look out for the closed Rose St Brewpub just behind.

- Sulwath Knockendoch (5%) – Brown, caramelly and homebrewy. (1)
- Harviestoun Dragonfly (3.6%) – Intensely fruity (peaches) with resinous hops and a sweetish, malty and full-bodied flavour for the modest strength. (3)

**Milne's Bar**, 21 Rose Street.

Worth a look if you're near the Kenilworth, this recently refurbished pub (June 06) serves a range of beers but they used to be of the safer end of the spectrum.

**Abbotsford**, 3 Rose Street.

Gorgeous pub with stunning ceilings and a dark wood island bar which came here 100 years ago from a derelict pub. Serves four guests on air fount although any house beers are likely to be rebadged. At the very eastern end of Rose Street by St Andrew's Square and I think it it's closed all day Sundays.

**Kay's Bar**, 39 Jamaica Street.

This cottage was once the offices of Kay's wine merchants which closed in the 1970's and, luckily, the building has been reused as a pub; a very nice job they've made of it too. Buses 24, 29 and 42 go close to the pub along Circus Place or it's not that far to walk from Rose Street.

- Arran Blonde (5%) – Deep amber, some coffee hints and a gentle yeastiness. (3)
- Belhaven 80/- - Copper beer, dry malt and blood taste (iron) with a slight dryness in the finish with more mineral dryness and faint malt. (2)

**Cumberland Bar**, 1-3 Cumberland Street.

A fairly new pub but you'd never guess! Great atmosphere, surroundings and beer are almost guaranteed in this pub although the air founts have now been removed in favour of more prosaic handpumps. Five minutes from the Cask and Barrel amongst some of the nicest Newtown Georgian tenement houses.

- Isle of Skye Hebridean Gold – Classic brew with a smooth, grainy sweetness, a distinct porridgy character, then a rich, smooth, complex grainy yet bitter finish. Excellent. (4)
- Caledonian Nectar (4.3%) – Amber with a simple sweetness and toffee-malt finish. (2)

**Cask & Barrel**, 115 Broughton Street.

Bustling, lively pub with bare board floors, lots of brewery memorabilia stuck all around the walls a good range of cask ales on handpump, maybe as many as ten at a time, although some are permanent residents. Buses 8, 13 and 17 pass the front door.

- Messrs Maguires Carden's Wild Ale(5.1%) – Very malty with a strange "horlicks" flavour, a hint of TCP, then a reasonably bland malty finish; an unusual beer! (2)
- Fyne Somerled – Amber ale, dry, homebrewy and malty in taste. (1)

**Barony**, Broughton Street.

Deceptively large wood-panelled pub on the hill down to the Cask & Barrel with a variable beer range which is sometimes good, sometimes awful, but you may as well have a look if you're passing by! Just watch out for the "folk" singers...

**Guildford Arms**, 1 West Register Street (behind Burger King).

One of the classic bars of Edinburgh lurks behind this bastion of all things fast and false at the Leith end of Princes Street, although in recent years the rear section has been developed into a café-bar type operation. The front bar, however, has been left untouched and still serves around

a dozen real ales with 4-6 being guest beers which can be anything from the mundane to the fascinating – it all depends on your luck!

- Kelburn Misty Law – gorgeous rose-petal hoppiness to this malty, bitter brew giving it a massive interesting character as well as a strange “Turkish delight” taste! Very different, but very well brewed and interesting. (4)
- Houston Texas – Amber, sociable, malty ale with a fruity, bitter finish. (3)

## Oot o’Town

Sorry about the title, couldn’t resist it! This section includes all the other pubs not listed in the two city centre lists so everywhere in Leith is here, for example.

### **Malt & Hops**, 45 Shore, Leith.

Long-standing pub right next to the Water of Leith which serves around six beers, although don’t expect many scoops here just some decent beer. Buses 22 or 36 pass the door.

- Stewart’s No.3 – Deep red, too good for a copy of Youngers! (3)

### **Old Dock Bar**, 3-5 Dock Place, Leith.

Originally a pub, then various wine-bars and cafés over the years, but now back as a proper, traditional pub close to the water with a range of real ales in comfortable surroundings.

### **Carrier’s Quarters**, 42 Bernard Street, Leith.

A famous little bar which used to be called Todd’s Tap before Maclays took over. Serves two beers, has a relaxing and exceedingly sociable manner as well as having a very cute snug. Buses 16 or 35 pass outside or it’s only a few minutes from the Malt & Hops.

- Broughton Clipper IPA – Amber, hoppy, fruity and bitter brew, very resinous and tasty. (4)

### **Noble’s Bar**, 44 Constitution Street, Leith.

Please tell me I was mistaken and this great little place still does real ale... please! Very close to the Carrier’s Quarters.

### **Home’s Bar**, 102 Constitution St, Leith.

We didn’t have time to pop in but this pub used to be a regular call for me on the way back into town from Leith. Dunno if it’s still any good, but I’m sure someone will tell me if it’s not.

### **Gothenburg**, Prestonpans.

Recently refurbished and reopened pub, formerly a temperance bar, containing it’s very own brewery, Fowlers. Much larger than it appears from the outside – which is quite big! Bus 26 to just where it enters Prestonpans village; either the Seton Sands or Tranent service will do.

- Wee heavy (7.3%) – Thick sweet and toffeeish – too simple for the strength. (2)
- Porter (4.4%) – Dark red/black, rich, full, sweetish with a roast caramel and liquorice taste then a full-on toasty and dry finish yet with some malty sweetness. Interesting. (3)
- 80/- (4.2%) – Deep brown, malty, very fruity ale with a good full-bodied malt, fruit and bitter flavour and finish. (4)

### **Volunteer Arms (Stagg’s)**, 81 North High Street, Musselborough.

Superb little local’s pub with a decent range of real ales available, it seems as if life has stood still for years in the main bar area. Buses 15, 15A, 26, 44 or 44A from the centre.

- Caledonian XPA (5.3%) – Very Caley! Orchard fruit, buttery toffee-ish malt and some balancing bitterness with more pears. Good. (3)

### **McCowans brewhouse**, Fountainbridge Leisure Park.

Large “leisure” and “retail” park where this is the only relief – if it’s brewing! During the last three years it has been silent more often than brewing but at least the plant is still there! Buses 1, 34 and 35 pass by outside.

**Golden Rule**, 30 Yeaman Place, Fountainbridge.

Just five minutes walk from McCowans, this very sociable bar has a decent range of Scottish real ales available and also, for the traditionalist, toasties! Relaxed atmosphere, good beer, good toasties – just like the old days!

- Harviestoun Bitter & Twisted – Very resinous, hoppy, dry and bitter beer. (3)

**Caledonian Ale House**, outside Haymarket station.

We didn’t go this time, but this is a handy pub if you find yourself at Haymarket station or if you walk to McCowans (when it’s brewing!). Serves Caley beers plus guests, nothing that exciting, but it’s worth knowing about.

**Thomson’s**, 182 Morrison Street, Haymarket.

Again, we didn’t have time to visit but this is a good example of the opulent Edinburgh pub serving around five guest beers, on my last visit via the increasingly rare air founts.

**Old Chain Pier**, Trinity Crescent, Newhaven.

An unusual pub, this one, with part of the lounge sticking out over the estuary but can have some good beers available if you’re lucky. Only five minutes from the Starbank by foot, although buses 16 and 32 pass by the door. Apparently the old ticket office for the chain pier.

- Black Sheep Emmerdale (4,3%) – Golden malty beer, dry and straightforward. (2)

**Starbank Inn**, 64 Laverockbank Road, Newhaven.

A favourite of many visitors to Edinburgh, this marvellous old waterside pub is now owned by Greene King following their takeover of Belhaven but, so far at least, seems to be showing no signs of decline in beer range. Serves several Belhaven brews alongside four guest beers, the No.16 and 32 buses pass by outside or Nos 7 and 10 go from the roundabout five minutes walk to the east making it easy to get either into the city centre or over to Leith.

- Fyne Vital Spark (4.4%) – Dark chocolate, dry malt and some bitterness in this reasonably well brewed ale, good by Fyne’s standards anyway! (3)
- Inveralmond Inkie Pinkie (3.7%) – pale, buttery and fairly hoppy/fruity pale ale. (3)

### ***Gazza’s beers and pubs of the trip.***

A lot of beers consumed but not that many great ones, unfortunately; I think we were just unlucky with some, although some breweries seem to be intent on churning out bland and/or poor quality dross for some reason – probably because people will pay for it. We did have some good beer, despite the above comments, so here are my favourite five from the weekend.

1. Cairngorm Tradewinds, Cloisters.
2. Isle of Skye Hebridean Gold, Cumberland bar.
3. Kelburn Misty Law, Guildford Arms.
4. Orkney Dark Island, Blue Blazer.
5. Broughton Clipper IPA, Carrier’s Quarters.

As for the best pubs, how can anyone choose the best pubs in a city blessed with so many excellent boozers? Edinburgh’s bars have everything from decent ranges of beer to classic architecture, some have both, but I have stuck my neck out and chosen five – see what you think.

1. Bow Bar, Old Town.

2. Cumberland bar, New Town.
3. Abbotsford, New Town.
4. Halfway House, Old Town.
5. Cloisters, Tollcross.

Outside the city proper, the following two are superb!

Starbank Inn, Newhaven.

Stagg's, Musselborough.

Thanks to the following people, in no particular order, who supplied gen for the trip; John Hein, Fudge, Tony Burke, Craig and Louise Whitwell and anyone else who emailed me – ta!

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