

This Week Tickers

Phil Mellows infiltrates the murky world of the 'tickers' to track down one of the UK's most dedicated devotees of real ale. Welcome to a little-known subculture of cartels, bottlers and scoopers...

Meet Mick the Tick

FOR A Tuesday afternoon in an economic downturn the Wellington, Birmingham's famous cask ale emporium, is busy.

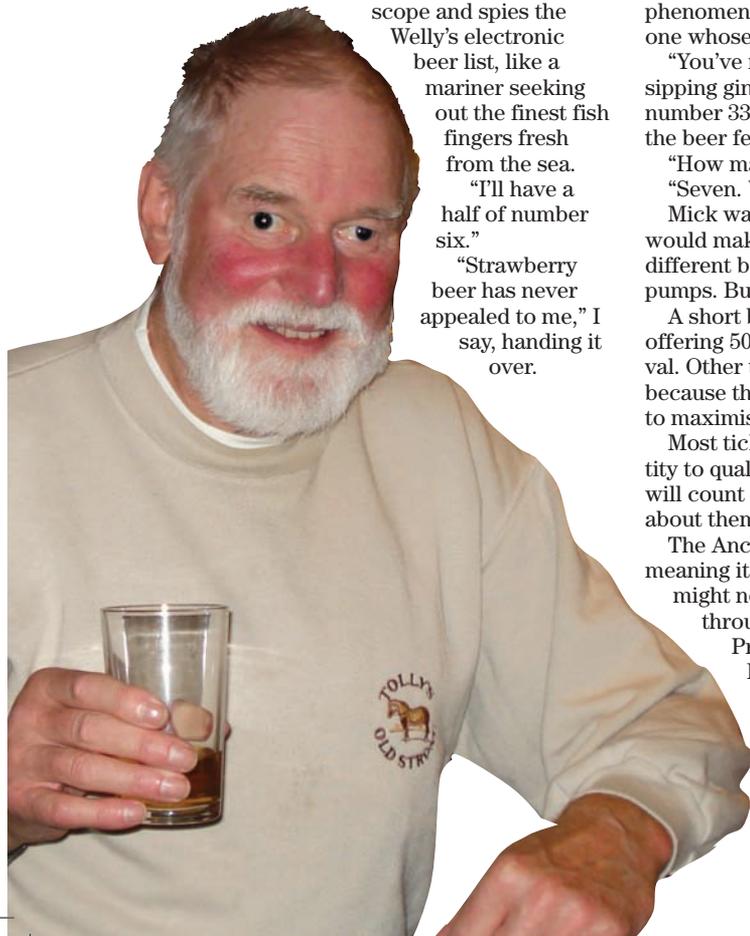
"Don't worry, you'll not miss him," says the woman behind the bar. "He looks like Captain Birdseye and he'll have a shopping trolley."

Sure enough, a minute later he walks in, waves to some friends and parks his trolley against the wall. Until that moment Mick the Tick had, for me, been only myth. Now, suddenly, he was made flesh.

"You must be Mick. What'll you have?"

Mick gropes around in his waterproof jacket, pulls out a miniature telescope and spies the Welly's electronic beer list, like a mariner seeking out the finest fish fingers fresh from the sea. "I'll have a half of number six."

"Strawberry beer has never appealed to me," I say, handing it over.



"Me neither."

"So do you like it?"

"No."

"You don't have to finish it, you know."

"Yes I do."

Now I knew this really was Mick the Tick, known to his mother as Mick Baker, a legend among beer tickers, the doyen of an art that involves tasting and recording as many different cask beers as possible. They call him, simply, The Leader.

Mick has tasted 33,000 different beers. He may no longer be the most prolific ticker – that title goes to his friend, Brian 'The Whippet' Moore, who boasts a phenomenal 40,000 ticks. But Mick has the aura of one whose reputation will never be surpassed.

"You've not caught me at my best," he says, sipping gingerly at his Riverdale Strawberry Ale, number 33,001 or thereabouts. "I've just come from the beer festival at the Anchor."

"How many ticks?"

"Seven. We ought to go there."

Mick was missing some ticks. I thought the Welly would make a good rendezvous, with around 2,000 different beers a year going through the hand-pumps. But the Anchor has some rare winners on.

A short bus ride away in Digbeth, the Anchor is offering 50 beers over the course of a six-day festival. Other tickers are in there. You can spot them because they drink halves, essential if you're going to maximise your ticks.

Most tickers regard a half as the minimum quantity to qualify as a tick, though there are some who will count a sip or two. Mick doesn't like to talk about them.

The Anchor runs a proper tickers' festival, meaning it concentrates on new beers a ticker might not have had. Mick scrutinises the board through his telescope and chooses Elland Privilege. I go for an ale called Bon Homme Richard from a new brewery, East Coast, which Mick had been excited to scoop earlier. Then we share a pint of Full Mash Monty's Extra.

Mick remembers his first tick, in 1975. It was Gale's HSB in the Commercial (now the Old Comical) in Sandown on the Isle of Wight. The

licensee was a member of the fledgling Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA). He recruited Mick – a CAMRA life member – and sold him a copy of the local pub guide for 10p.

That inspired him to visit every pub and try every ale. Then his long-suffering wife Betty made the mistake of buying him the *Good Beer Guide*.

"I saw the list of beers in the back and thought I'd try to drink as many as I could," says Mick, who had dabbled in trainspotting and planespotting as a teenager "before women came along".

The birth of bottling

It's impossible to say whether Mick was the first ticker but he was certainly an early adopter. 'Ticking' originally referred to ticking off beers in

Glossary

Bottler – a ticker who takes away beers for sampling later, typically in an old Panda Pops bottle

Cartel – group of bottlers who share beers

Cellar run – beers brought up from the cellar by a sympathetic licensee when the handpumps have run out

Gen – Information on ticking opportunities

Normal – non-ticker

Rebadging – scurrilous practice in which a brewer gives an old beer a new name

Scooper – another word for ticker

Ticker – collector of beers

Trolley – shopping bag on wheels used by bottlers to transport bottles

Winner – a beer you haven't had. A new tick

Tickers **This Week****The GOBBS Guide**

GOBBS stands for Guild of British Beer Samplers, a tickers' organisation formed in the late 1980s. It exists mainly to produce the GOBBS Guide, which aims to list every cask beer in the country.

This daunting task is performed by Alan Douglas (14,000 ticks). Since he took responsibility for it 15 years ago, subscriptions have soared from 32 to 250, evidence of how the ticker population has grown.

The guide has grown too. Next May's edition will be a record 606 pages, listing around 45,000 beers.

Scoopergen

Ticking website scoopergen.co.uk is run by Gazza Prescott (16,000 ticks). It currently lists more than 350 tickers, including a couple of cats.

As well as covering ticking pubs, festivals and general gossip, it aims to explain ticking to 'normals'. An associated email group enables members to exchange 'gen' – the information about beers and where to find them that is the ticker's lifeblood.

the *Good Beer Guide* as you drank them, and the guide hadn't been around for long in 1975.

In fact, it was the early 1980s before Mick came across other tickers, "and for years you could count them on the fingers of two hands," he says.

Ticking grew with the growth of microbrewing and the increasing numbers of beers – and so did Mick's ticks, all recorded in triplicate.

Numbers soared in the 1990s with 'bottling' and 'cartels'. Tickers bottle beers so they can scoop many more than they could drink on the spot, taking them away to consume later. That's what the trolley is for, although Mick says today he's picking up some fruit and veg at the market – if he can get out of the pub in time.

Bottling made cartels possible. Mick formed the first cartel with two other tickers in order to cover more festivals and bring winners back in bottles for each other.

Some frowned on the practice. But the first rule of ticking is that there are no rules.

Mick admits he has slowed down in recent years, and he's aware there is a new generation of tickers coming up fast behind. But he still notches up 2,000 ticks a year.

"I never got rid of the bug and I'm still number two among half-pint drinkers," he says. "It's never been a race, though. There's no rivalry as far as I'm concerned. We're all nice people and I just love doing it." ■

How to spot a ticker in your pub

- ✓ Appears during the day
- ✓ Arrives on a bus
- ✓ Arrives with a rucksack/trolley
- ✓ Brings Panda Pops bottles (or similar) plus funnel
- ✓ Studies full range of cask beers before ordering
- ✓ Drinks halves
- ✓ Makes notes



Mick has sampled more than 33,000 ales at pubs across the UK

Licensees on tickers

"We get loads of tickers in here and they're no problem at all. Mick the Tick is in here six days a week, and we also see Brian Moore – they're the top two in the country.

"Personally I can't think of anything worse than drinking beer from a Panda Pops bottle that's been in a fridge for five days, but if that's their thing it's nothing to do with me."

Nigel Barker, the Wellington, Birmingham

"You can spot a ticker a mile away. The pub could be burning down and all they can see is what beers you've got on. We had the Vicar of Rotherham (top ticker Peter Collins) in here during our beer festival and he scooped 26 in one day.

"They are a strange bunch but very nice chaps – and ladies too. Mind you, I'm a ticker in disguise myself."

Andy Grant, the Hare & Hounds, Ramsbottom, Lancashire

"People drinking cask ale has got to be a good thing – and it's better than counting Eddie Stobart wagons. They keep you on your toes, too, because they're always looking for different beers and trying to catch you out. We make sure we keep the beer list on our website up to date so they know what's on.

"Bottlers? They're a special breed. I think they come from down South, places like Birmingham."

Ian Rigg, the Taps, Lytham, Lancashire