

The Moorfield Pub Rating Scheme v4.0b2

Preamble

From almost the start of my pub ticking expeditions I have endeavoured to maintain a rating for each and every pub that I've been to. There have, so far, been three previous Moorfield pub rating schemes, which, although different in methodology, essentially attempted to assess the merits of a pub across a number of diverse criteria and combine them to place the pub on a linear, sliding scale that ranged from **excellent** at the top (rarely awarded) down to gradings such as **disappointing** and **best avoided** (always a lot of those, unfortunately). The first version was very simple but also incredibly subjective; version two brought a degree of rigour and objectivity to the assessing process but its complexity rendered it hopelessly impractical. The third was essentially a compromise between the two earlier systems and attempted to balance objectivity with ease of use.

These systems, however, ultimately failed for some quite fundamental reasons:

- ◆ *Muddled objectives*: The number and diversity of criteria being used to arrive at a single rating meant that the final result told you almost nothing about the pub. Although it was always the stated intention that a pub's beer range and beer quality were the main factors to be considered, too many other aspects of the pub (ambiance, service, price, locality, food, etc.) were also being taken into account which rendered useful comparison between pubs impossible.
- ◆ *Market diversification*: All three previous versions of the scheme were based substantially upon the romantic paradigm of the quintessential British pub and that all the establishments being assessed shared a common set of characteristics and attributes. As such, these schemes made little allowance for the increasing diversity of the market brought about by such things as the traditional brewery-tied estates giving way to monstrous money-grubbing pubCos and the rise of a certain pub chain that will remain nameless here. These, and no doubt many other influences, have meant that the 'traditional' British pub, as a generally applicable concept, has become increasingly meaningless when trying to establish ratings for the growing numbers of non-traditional venues in which one might drink real ale.
- ◆ *Excessive subjectivity*: Although a degree of rigour was *intended* to apply to the assessing process, the lack of objective definitions against which to measure a pub's attributes made this impossible. Ultimately, therefore, it was always subjective opinion which gave a pub its rating rather than anything that was definitively measurable.
- ◆ *Changed perceptions*: The problem of subjective assessments had been further exacerbated by the fact that, over time, my perceptions and priorities have changed, not least by the fact that I was not, in the beginning, a beer ticker. This has meant that, over the years, things that make a pub seem good or bad to me have altered. I am now far more picky about things to which before I might have been totally oblivious

and there are others to which I am now totally indifferent that would once have had me wetting my knickers; none of which, necessarily, had or have any direct relevance to the range or quality of beer on offer.

- ◆ *Excessive sentimentality*: I was also noticing a marked reluctance on my part to amend the ratings of favourite pubs where, nevertheless, there had been a noticeable drop in standards. Where opinions dominate over facts, it is all too easy to justify to one-self the over-rating of a much-loved pub and rather less easy to justify to a potentially disgruntled publican the downgrading of her establishment. Too many ratings were reflecting past glories rather than current realities.

My aims for the new system, therefore, are that it should be

- ◆ simple to use and understand;
- ◆ more objective than anything that has gone before in that a pub should be assessed into a certain category because, empirically, that is the type of pub it is observed to be rather than because I, or anyone else, just happen to like drinking there;
- ◆ more restricted in the range of categories into which a pub can fall, those categories being as distinctive from one another as possible so there is less room for doubt, uncertainty and dispute;
- ◆ better able to make direct comparison between different types of drinking establishment without those differences interfering with the assessment;
- ◆ indicative of what the pub is like today rather than a report on how it was in the past;
- ◆ altogether more focused on what a *beer ticker's* pub rating scheme ought to be about: its choice and quality of beer.

With this last point specifically in mind, v4.0 has just two elements to pub rating:

- ◆ a categorisation of the pub based upon the range of real ales available;
- ◆ an assessment of the quality of the beers on offer.

Pub Classification

Definitions

There are four main classifications in the new scheme of things, **A** to **D**, together with a number of incidental ones for pubs where a full assessment has not been possible. The four main classifications have been devised purely to give an indication of the likelihood of finding new and rare real ales at the pub. It had been my original intention to make available an additional marking (a plus or a minus) to reflect other, exceptionally good or bad features the pub possessed such as service, location, food, accommodation or ambiance. I have rejected this as too subjective; all you will get with this new scheme is what is stated in these definitions:

Moorfield Pub Rating v4.0b2

Pub Classification

A A pub specializing in new, rare and one-off beers.

B A pub where beers from a variety of smaller, independent breweries predominate over standard beers.

C A pub where, in addition to standard beers, one or more guest beers are available.

D A pub where only standard beers are available.

K A pub known to serve real ale but for which there is insufficient information upon which to make any further assessment.

NAA Real ale is not always available.

NRA No real ale.

NRF No real ale and no redeeming features.

A **standard beer** is any one of the following:

- (a) A beer from the core range of a brewery whose products are usually available at the pub in question;
- (b) A house beer stated or implied to have been brewed especially and exclusively for the pub in question;
- (c) A nationally marketed beer brand.

A **guest beer** is any beer that is not a standard beer.

Commentary

Whilst there is a definite intention in this scheme to rank pubs (a category **A** pub being rated higher than one in category **B**), it should always be remembered that the category a pub is placed in is based solely on the one criterion. In any other respects a category **D** pub might, for all sorts of reasons, be a far better place in which to drink beer than another that is in category **A**. I am also making no attempt to say whether a pub in one category which regularly sells beer of poor quality is, in any way, better or worse than one in a lower category which always serves its beers in tip-top condition. That is for you to decide based on your own priorities.

When assessing into which category a pub should fall, it is not expected that it shall be a stand alone assessment based only on the facts as they present themselves during a particular visit. It is intended that each pub's assessment will be built upon all the first hand evidence gathered during previous visits together with reliable third party information. It is acknowledged that pubs can be 'up and down' but there should be no question of giving the 'benefit of the doubt' to a pub: the assessment should reflect what, on the balance of probabilities, the hypothetical drinker may expect to find were she to visit it in the immediate future.

Of course, there will be cases where it is not clear cut into which category a pub should rightly fall. This is where a picture, built up over time, of patterns and trends, will provide the best guide to what a pub is likely to be offering on a day to day basis. In cases of doubt, consideration may be given not just to the prominence of guest beers over standard beers but also the prominence given to real ale in general compared to offerings from the toxic waste dispensers.

It is not my intention that the *number* of different beers a pub may have on offer, at once or over time, will, necessarily, determine the category into which it falls; it is the *nature* of what it offers that counts; the interestingness, rarity, newness and originality of the offerings should always be of primary consideration. A limited but regular showcasing of rare beers or new breweries should generally be considered to outweigh a frequent procession new or different beers from a predictable range of breweries that habitually or contractually supply the pub.

For similar reasons, it is also my positive intention that even the very best of brewpubs will find themselves assessed in category **D** if they offer nothing more than beers from their own core range. However rare their beers may be away from the pub, the fact is you're only ever going to score each of them once and when you've had them, you've had them. The assessment of such a pub should, therefore, reflect the likelihood of finding something different on a subsequent visit.

Assessments should ignore what the pub is offering during occasional, or even regular, designated beer festivals and reflect, where possible, only how the pub performs on a day-to-day basis. The assessment should reflect what the hypothetical drinker is likely to find on an unplanned, random visit to the pub. So, for example, while the infamous Black Horse monthly beer weekends and festivals provided a source of new and rare beers probably, in its heyday, not rivalled by any other pub in the land, they did not reflect what you would have found during the other thirty-nine weeks of the year.

Where, in order to maintain quality, a pub offers fewer beers during quieter trading periods and, as a consequence, a markedly less interesting range of beers, an assessment may still, but not necessarily, reflect what it does during busier times based on the assumption that the hypothetical drinker is more likely to make a chance visit during those busier times.

While it should be straightforward enough for a seasoned beer ticker to assess pubs into categories **B**, **C** and **D** from one-off or a limited number of observations, category **A** will only ever be justified on evidence accumulated during several visits over a significant period of time.

I do not believe more than a handful of pubs will enjoy the accolade of being placed in category **A**. Category **A** is reserved for those pubs at which any beer ticker has a high probability (by her own standards) of scoring not just new beers but *interesting* new beers. A pub whose new beers are sourced from only a narrow and predictable range of regular breweries will not meet the 'interestingness' standard required to be assessed into category **A**. Similarly, a pub is not guaranteed to be assessed in category **A** just because it has no standard beers; the variety, newness and, in particular, the rarity, of its offerings must be carefully considered. A pub may fall into category **A** notwithstanding the number of standard beers on offer if the variety, newness or, in particular, the rarity of its guest beers outweighs the ordinariness of the standards.

Standard Beers

Regular Breweries

When looking at what constitutes a brewery whose products are usually or generally available at a particular pub, any and all reasons why that is so, contractual or otherwise, should be disregarded.

Core Range Beers

A brewery's 'core range' should be taken to include any of its beers that are generally available on an on-going, day-to-day basis plus any 'seasonal' or 'occasional' offerings which, whilst not available continuously, are likely to reappear in the market at some point in the future.

House Beers

That a house beer might be known to be another beer re-badged and not, therefore, brewed especially or exclusively for the pub in question is not relevant: it is the intention, stated or implied, that makes a beer a house beer.

Nationally Marketed Beer Brands

I have made no attempt to define what a 'nationally marketed beer brand' is; I have assumed that you will generally know one when you see one. Be aware that I deliberately use the term *beer brand*; that a particular *brewery* may produce one or more really boring beers for the mass market does not preclude the possibility that it may, from time to time or even regularly, also turn out some interesting and worthwhile scoops which should be treated accordingly.

Ambiguity

That a beer may be a standard beer in one pub (for example, at the pub where it is brewed) does not preclude it from being a rare-as-rocking-horse-shit guest at another.

Disclaimer

That a beer may satisfy criteria that make it a standard beer does not imply that it is in any way of inferior quality; it merely suggests that it is a beer likely to be of little interest to most beer tickers.

Beer Quality Scoring

Basis of the Beer Scoring Scheme

Although, of course, the scoring of beer quality can be very subjective and therefore at odds with the stated aims of the overall scheme, I feel it is essential, nevertheless, that a pub's rating includes a clear indication of the quality of beer likely to be available in addition to simply the range of its beers. For most beer tickers, the game is *not* just about numbers, it is about the enjoyment of quality, craft beers: as a beer ticker you may desire to visit pubs with all the rarest beers ever produced but you might also want to be forewarned of those where the beers are likely to be cack.

In an attempt to maximise objectivity in assessing beer quality, I have opted to use a system based, unashamedly, on CAMRA's National Beer Scoring Scheme (NBSS). It has, I believe, the virtue of robust simplicity; something that will work without needing to understand, remember or refer to complex technical material and that, above all, will *still* work when you're as pissed as a fart.

It was my original intention that this scheme and the NBSS should be more-or-less compatible with one another in that someone using my scheme and someone else using the NBSS should come up, most of the time, with an equivalent score for the same beer. During development and testing, however, I have made refinements and modifications that have taken my scheme on a somewhat different path.

The main differences can be summed up as follows:

- ◆ An eleven point scale (**0-10**) instead of the six point (**0-5**) scale of the NBSS.
- ◆ Definitions for each of the scale points that reflect my (beer tinker's) perspective: that is, drinking a beer on the assumption that I might never have the opportunity or inclination to have the same beer again, no matter how good it might be.
- ◆ Definitions for each of the scale points that leave only minimal scope for personal preference in beer styles to influence the score awarded together with an algorithmic approach to the assessment process that further enhances the scheme's objectivity.

Scale Point Definitions

The NBSS only has explicit definitions for the six points (**0-5**) on its quality scale. In application, however, it seems to allow for the awarding 'in-between' scores (for example, **2.5** between **2** and **3**), effectively making it an eleven point scale, without ever guiding the assessor on why, when or how she might arrive at such scores. As I developed and adapted my own scheme, distinct definitions for the 'in between' points seemed to evolve quite naturally and coupled to my preference for storing integers where it is not necessary to use decimal or floating point values, my scale runs from **0** to **10** and allows no further in between scores.

Moorfield Pub Rating v4.0b2

Beer Quality Scores

- 0: Undrinkable** A beer so bad you could not drink it; you either took it back or left it unfinished.
- 1: Bad** A beer you should have taken back but which you drank anyway because it was a tick.
- 2: Poor** A beer with clear faults; not bad enough to justify taking back but you drank it grudgingly.
- 3: Defective** A beer with perceptible defects but drinkable as a one-off.
- 4: Acceptable** A drinkable beer, competently kept and served but which didn't inspire.
- 5: Passable** An acceptable beer with just a little something to interest the palate.
- 6: Good** A well kept, well served, tasty beer; one you would be happy to have again as a social drink.
- 7: Commendable** A good beer with some noteworthy characteristics.

8: Excellent A beer in excellent condition with interesting, complex flavours. A beer you would be pleased to recommend to those who trust your judgement.

9: Dangerously Drinkable One of the best beers you've ever tasted.

10: Perfect Perhaps the best beer you are ever likely to find. A score to be awarded sparingly, if at all.

Method of Assessment

During the development of this beer scoring scheme, increased objectivity has been the main driver for all the changes and adaptations I have made. One of the problems with a product as infinitely variable as real ale is that there is always scope for contradiction in a single mouthful of the stuff. You could, for example, have a beer which might fit your understanding of the definition of score **eight** but about which there is something not quite right and so you give it a **six** or a **seven** instead.

This scheme is **not** intended work in that way. Each beer subject to assessment starts with a default score of **zero**: we assume, unless and until we have tried it, that it is undrinkable. We will then test the beer to see whether we are going to drink it anyway. If not, its score remains at **zero** and the assessment is over. Otherwise we increment the score to **one** and then test the beer to see if its faults would justify taking it back for replacement. If so, the score remains at **one** and the assessment is over. Otherwise we increment the score to **two** and test the beer against the definition for score **three**. We continue in this manner until we find a score definition that the beer does not live up to (or we have incremented the score to ten) at which point the assessment ends and you have your score. The following pseudo-code defines the process precisely:

```
function getBeerScore() {
    $score = 0;
    while ($score < 10 && qualityAtLeastAsGoodAs(qualityDefinition[$score + 1]) {
        score++;
    }
    return $score;
}
```

So, in the example we started with, a beer with attributes suggesting a score of **eight** but which is found to be defective in some way could score no more than **three**.

Commentary

When awarding beer quality scores either in this scheme or the NBSS, you should try to remain objective and avoid allowing your own personal likes and dislikes (either for a particular style of beer or a particular brewery's products) to unduly influence your assessment. As a beer taster you will soon have had enough beers for you to be able to recognize the salient characteristics of each different style of beer and, even if you're not a great lover a particular style, to be able to judge how good, bad or indifferent a beer is compared to how it *should* be. That said, it is still about *enjoying* your beer and the mark you give it should, to some extent, reflect what *you* thought about it, not what anyone else would have you think about it.

As I have already stated, one of the adaptations I have made to the NBSS is to amend the quality score definitions to better suit the habits of the beer tucker. This has meant removing from the definitions reference to the likelihood of wanting to drink a beer again as an indicator of quality. The assumption I am working with is that you will not, however good a beer might be, want to do so, particularly during a single session, while there are more winners to be had.

I have made an exception at score level **six**. I have taken the view that incrementing a beer score from **five** to **six** means that you are crossing a distinct boundary from a mediocre beer that you tick perfunctorily to one that you (or the hypothetical drinker) might actually enjoy drinking for its own sake. For this reason, I have included as part of the test for score **six** the question asking whether you would gladly have the beer again if (hypothetically) you were to have it as a social drink.

(Social Drink: When you have cleared all the available ticks in a pub but the rest of your party is not ready to move on, you might have a 'social drink' rather than head off to the next pub on your own. A social drink may also be one you have when you enter a pub with no winners but, not wanting to be rude by leaving without at least drinking something, you have as the best of a dud lot.)

When assessing a beer, don't drink with your eyes. If you have a beer that is cloudy (whether it's meant to be or not) don't dismiss this out of hand as a fault; find out with your mouth how good or bad it really is. This should particularly apply if the person serving you warned you beforehand that it was cloudy but you accepted it anyway. To avoid bringing down unwarranted dis-clamation upon a pub, you may also want to avoid making any assessment of a beer that the publican has warned you was no good and only let you have knowing you needed it for a tick.

As an initial thought, I believed it would not be possible for a beer tucker following the Moorfield Pub and Beer Ticking Rules to be able to award a score of **zero** on the basis that if she had not finished a beer she would not be able to record it as a drink. That, of course, is nonsense **and I will be making suitable adjustments to the data definition so that a drink of a particular beer can be recorded with a quality score of zero but which (by definition) cannot count as a tick because it was not finished.**

Scores of **nine** and **ten**, I believe, should be awarded but rarely. You should be able to remember drinking these beers, without looking up your records, months and years after the event because they were so good.

There is one issue which neither this scheme nor the NBSS addresses: that of deciding if a beer is no good because of poor cellarmanship at the pub, because of problems at the brewery or just because it's a duff recipe. I don't have sufficient technical brewing knowledge myself to devise a system that could overcome this and I feel that the scheme's robust simplicity would be

lost by attempting to do so.

Current Status of the Scheme

Use of version 3 officially ended on 1 March 2008; no new assessments have been made since then and no existing assessments have been maintained.

Ongoing software developments will map all relevant data from version 3 into version 4 in due course. Any code that manipulates, uses or displays version 3 data will be deleted as and when time allows.

Version 4.0 is currently being tested in live mode by me, once more, assessing every pub I visit and every beer I sample. As the scheme is now effectively in 'beta' testing I do not envisage any significant changes to the structure of the scheme either for pub categorisation or beer quality scoring although tweaks to the definitions on either of the scales may yet be made to take into account any circumstances I may not yet have considered. Until I settle upon a final release of the scheme, I will not be making a permanent record of any of my assessments and none of them will be published.

Future Development

- ◆ The main area that this initial definition does not address is how the assessment of individual glasses of beer should be used to arrive at a definitive guide to the general beer quality at a particular pub (or of a particular brewery for that matter). Using simple arithmetical averages is an obvious starting point and using weighted averages that give greater importance to the most recent observations a straightforward next step. This all pre-supposes, however, that the differences between one scale point and the next are all the same (as the difference between three apples and four is the same as that between eight apples and nine). Of course, they are not: each point on the beer quality scale is more like a pigeon-hole than a mark on a ruler.
- ◆ More sophisticated use of the data to monitor and identify how a pub may be changing, for good or ill, over time and thus allow the scheme to better serve as an indicator of what it may be like in the immediate future rather than just a record what it was like in the past.
- ◆ Ideas on how to make this a collaborative project are not yet even on the drawing board but this remains an aspiration. As it is intended to be a collaborative project, I would welcome any ideas, suggestions or comments you may have. email.
- ◆ Publication of the underlying database remains a work in progress; watch this space.

Handy Pocket-Sized Guides

The two scale definition guides are available as .pdf files for you to download

and print at A6 size to carry around as handy *aides-mémoire*.

TODO: Make the rating scale definitions part of the database.