

A BRIEF HISTORY OF A MUCH-TRAVELLED JAZZ CLUB 1971 - 2019

THE EARLY DAYS AT THE CLAYTON ARMS, MARLOW: The present Club has its origins in The Chilterns Jazz Appreciation Society which began in the early 70s as a record recital and discussion group meeting in the back room of The Clayton Arms, Marlow. The Society supported, but were not directly involved with, live jazz at Marlow's Cross Keys organised by vibes player Dave Greenaway but also co-presented a couple of concerts in conjunction with The Chalfont Centre. Record evenings broadened into jazz film shows (cine film – this was just before the video age!) and we were one of the first places to show the newly discovered film of Charlie Parker. A curious crowd from all parts packed the Claytons to see Bird on screen. Guitarist Mike Drake provided a live interlude, and this inspired the start of a few live gigs. The first was in June 1976 with a local band Solstice. They were very loud and electric and upset the darts team and serious real ale drinkers in the front bar. The main problem with The Claytons, however, related to the tiny room – 30 was a full house! With interest and attendances growing we looked for somewhere bigger after less than a year.

1977 THE BELL AT MAIDENHEAD: Here the problem was just the reverse. Disappointing crowds of only 20 or 25 were lost in the huge 200 capacity hall and there was no atmosphere. Don Rendell played for us for the first time and we twice enjoyed the Pat Crumly / Frank Toms band "Edge".

1977/1982 THE FIREFLY AT BOURNE END: Opened with Don Rendell in July 77, this was one of our best and most fondly remembered venues. The little function room with corrugated iron roof soon played host to a weekly procession of some of the greatest names in our music, thanks to a reciprocal deal with the Pizza Express Jazz Club in Soho. These big USA stars (most no longer with us) came over for Tuesday/Saturday residencies at The Pizza but warmed up with us on a Monday night, the "deal" being that we would collect them from the airport and return them to the Pizza flat. Backing from trios led by Al Hall, Frank Toms and sometimes Fred Hunt, Tony Lee and Brian Lemon. Sonny Stitt, Wild Bill Davison, Buddy Tate, Al Cohn, Benny Waters, Bud Freeman and Eddie Lockjaw Davis were just a few of the famous characters who were great to meet and easy to deal with. Jimmy Witherspoon and Al Haig were less easy and gave us a few problems, but their music was appreciated! We alternated the USA visitors with top British names and Peter King, Don Rendell, Barbara Thompson, Terry Smith and Art Themen were regulars. The 85 capacity room was full most Monday nights. Only a few flirtations with the "avant-garde" proved less popular. The Humphrey Lyttelton Band sometimes appeared and one of Humph's books describes how he had to get the front row of the packed audience to hold the music as there was no room for the stands! A change of landlord and policy meant the end of the road for us and the end of five unforgettable years. The Firefly is now demolished and replaced with housing.

1982/1983: WOOBURN GRANGE: A smart nightclub with grand piano in a large and comfortable room. Wooburn Grange (since demolished) was the exterior setting for the hit TV series Fawlty Towers, and USA clarinet maestro Kenny Davern was amazed to discover he was playing in the building made famous by his favourite TV show. More big names came to see us and Wooburn Grange provided our most memorable night ever when Duke Ellington's legendary singer Adelaide Hall appeared with Michael Garrick on piano. Vocally, Adelaide was past her best, but charmed a capacity crowd with her marvellous personality and stories of The Duke. She was a wonderful lady and got a standing ovation. The gypsy band "Waso" with a young Fapy Lafertin provided terrific Django-style music. Controversial "goings on" in the venue at weekends made the National Press, and we left.

1983/1984: MASON'S, BOURNE END. A small but cosy function room similar in size to The Firefly. More big names, USA and British. A good venue! The room was nicely suited to guitar gigs and Herb Ellis, Charlie Byrd and Fapy Lafertin all showed up at various times. Other highspots were a live BBC broadcast with Georgie Fame (they paid his fee!) and our first meeting with the brilliant Scott Hamilton. Fats Waller's original guitarist Al Casey played some swinging stuff and had some great stories. Another moved caused by a change of landlord, and another pub that has now disappeared.

1984: BENSON'S NIGHTCLUB, HENLEY: Not a success. Our regulars did not care for the aggressive security on the door or the high price of drinks, although it was a smart place also with grand piano. There were only 4 gigs at Benson's but one of our most ambitious ever bookings turned into a bit of a nightmare as 200 fans fought for 100 available tickets to see the Dutch Swing College Band on tour. After much hassle, a few months rest!

1985/1993 MARLOW FOOTBALL CLUB: The Clubroom had a good capacity and excellent attendances enabled us to book some more of the big names and some complete bands. Basie's star trumpeter Harry Edison was outstanding (Frank Toms on piano!) and a very ambitious date saw the touring Benny Goodman Alumni visit us (top Goodman stars including Barney Kessel but with Britain's own Dave Shepherd taking the clarinet lead). A live BBC broadcast with Barbara Thompson's Paraphernalia was great as was Mike Carr on Hammond B3 with Dick Morrissey. Humph's band played the Football Club four times and we even survived a gig with the short-fused but brilliant cornet star Ruby Braff. Scott Hamilton's beautiful tenor sax provided a very special night, but everyone seems to remember the gig that the superb stride pianist Ralph Sutton arrived a little "over refreshed" and wanted to sing as well as play. However by majority opinion the standout event again featured a lady: USA Blues Diva Angela Brown (Bessie Smith reincarnated) took the place apart, backed by Keith Smith's Hefty Jazz, and a tape still exists of that marvellous night. During the period here the local paper, who have always been supportive, began calling us The Marlow Jazz Club and as result we dropped our rather cumbersome previous name. Some good times, but we eventually fell foul of renewing the music licence requiring major changes to the Clubroom facilities. Neither Football Club or Jazz Club could afford it. A shame. Music licences these days are a little less expensive and with fewer stipulations.

1994 /1999 THE CROSS KEYS, MARLOW: We had the rear bar on Monday nights. A bit cramped with space for only about 45 punters, and there was sometimes noise from football on TV (and the occasional punch-up) in the front bar. The reduced capacity necessitated a mainly a Best Of British policy along with the resident Frank Toms Trio, although the likeable Spike Robinson, who had moved to the U.K, often came along. One November night we put Peter King alongside the USA multi-instrumental star Nelson Rangell. It worked a treat and packed the place to the rafters. Ex "Messenger" Jean Toussaint was another big international star. One night the albino Atlanta bluesman Piano Red, who was on a British tour, dropped in with his manager Ron Watts and played some great boogie. The retirement of landlord Geoff Love and the pub's sale ended a good five years.

1999/2000 THE CROWN HOTEL, MARLOW: Not remembered with much affection. We were allocated the raised rear bar area which was comfortable enough, but the move had been arranged with the enthusiastic directors of the pub's holding Company. The on-site Manager was not as co-operative and we did not feel at all welcome. There were however a few good gigs. Japanese singer/pianist Keiko McNamara came in one night and duetted with Peter King. After that we needed a friendlier venue and I went to have a chat with Ted at TJ O'Reilly's. The historic Crown building is no longer a pub.

2000 to 2007 TJ O'REILLY'S, MARLOW BOTTOM: Some good times here with gigs on a fortnightly basis for over 6 years. The Eaves Suite was separate from the main pub and had its own entrance and bar. For the first time we had enough space to fit in a Big Band, and The Chosen Few Jazz Orchestra and The Willie Garnett Big Band were regulars but most gigs featured our excellent Frank Toms Trio backing one or more top star guests, including Scott Hamilton. Probably unfair to pick out our top attraction but appearances by the mighty Jean Toussaint were awe-inspiring, whilst the amazing talent of guitarist Gary Potter delighted us on many occasions. We began to experiment with previously unheard "partnership" bookings, throwing together guest stars who had never met before. Most were successful and produced great jazz. When our local BBO (Berks Bucks & Oxon) Big Band became homeless, TJ's were pleased to take over their Charity Concerts and we were delighted to help out with publicity, amplification etc. Our time at TJ's came to an end in January 2007 with controversial plans being passed to replace the function room. Later the pub closed down.

FROM 2007: THE ROYAL BRITISH LEGION HALL, STATION APPROACH, MARLOW:

Both Jazz Club and BBO Big Band made speedy arrangements to move into the centre of Marlow and into the large and comfortable British Legion Hall, right by the Railway Station. By general consent our best ever venue with the stage space to present a Big Band. Some memorable gigs and usually reasonable crowds who enjoy the friendly atmosphere and the Real Ale! Most major British stars have paid us a visit, with Derek Nash, Art Themen, Gary Potter, Alan Barnes, Vasilis Xenopoulos, Jean Toussaint and Peter King always popular. Less regular "traditional" events have included Lillian Boutte from New Orleans and the popular Bessie Smith inspired Julia Titus also known as "Ma Bessie". U.S.A. "tourists" have included Howard Alden and Harry Allen. We also occasionally set up a "Joint Presentation" with Christ Church URC in Oxford Road, Marlow who have a superb Bechstein piano, and one good piano date featured, from the U.S.A, the Oscar Peterson protégé Lenore Raphael. Alto sax and flute maestro Greg Abate was another U.S.A. star at the church. In 2017, for various reasons we cut down to one gig per month, but late 2019 it is hoped to revert to fortnightly events. The Club has recently produced two CDs, one of Gary Potter and the other "Ma Bessie". When musicians give permission to record the results are often broadcast on Marlow FM.

ALL ARE VERY WELCOME!