# Wantage revives medieval parish ale tradition with new DiscipAle brew



The Wantage Parish Ale Festival made a spirited return on June 7, 2023, reviving a long-forgotten medieval English tradition that celebrates community, craft, and culture. This event not only provided attendees with food and drink, but also offered a lively atmosphere filled with dancing, reminiscent of the joyous gatherings of the past.

Held during Whitsun, a significant time in the ecclesiastical calendar, the festival aimed to raise funds for the upkeep of the local church—a practice common in medieval England when parish ales were brewed to support community needs. The brewing of these ales often coincided with festive gatherings, as illustrated in the festival's programme, which noted that the tradition had roots in efforts to fund repairs for churches. This blend of necessary business and merriment took a poignant turn after the Reformation, leading to the decline of such festivities, though they are alluded to in literary works such as Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. In this play, the character Sir Toby belittles the notion of virtue without the pleasures of "cakes and ale."

At the heart of this year's festival was 'DiscipAle', a specially brewed beer crafted by Kevin Brady at Indigenous Brewery in Chaddleworth. This brew combines Maris Otter and Light Crystal grain with a selection of hops—Perle, Fuggles, and Goldings—offering not just a taste of the past but a contemporary take on a traditional ale. The ale was blessed by Katherine, the Vicar of Wantage, alongside Mike, the Rector of the Benefice, symbolising a rich connection between faith and community resurgence. The branding for DiscipAle features art by Katherine, depicting St. Peter and St. James, the patron saints of Wantage and Chaddleworth, reinforcing the festival’s spiritual elements.

Historically, parish ales, also known as church ales, served both social and economic purposes in medieval society. These events were typically held in the spring and often included a variety of entertainments—from music and dancing to plays reminiscent of Robin Hood. Local customs allowed villagers to choose a 'King' for the festivities, which parallels some Christmas traditions, showcasing a sense of camaraderie and celebration among the parishioners.

Though the original celebrations faced suppression in later centuries, the essence of parish ales has seen a resurgence in various forms. For instance, upcoming events in 2025 at St. Helen's Church in Colne indicate that the spirit of the parish ale is not entirely lost; many communities are choosing to reconnect with their heritage through similar celebrations.

As such, the Wantage Parish Ale Festival stands not only as a nostalgic nod to the past but also as a reaffirmation of community bonds in modern times. The event demonstrates how traditions can evolve while still holding onto their essential values and historical roots.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/25223816.wantage-church-revives-tradition-successful-ale-festival/?ref=rss), [[2]](https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/25223816.wantage-church-revives-tradition-successful-ale-festival/?ref=rss)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/25223816.wantage-church-revives-tradition-successful-ale-festival/?ref=rss), [[3]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parish_ale), [[4]](https://www.medievalists.net/2022/12/festivals-medieval-english-village/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/25223816.wantage-church-revives-tradition-successful-ale-festival/?ref=rss), [[5]](https://www.thefreelibrary.com/WHEN%2BWHITSUN%2BMEANT%2BFEASTING%2C%2BFIGHTING%2C%2BFAIRS%2BAND%2BCHURCH%2BALE.-a0586683315), [[6]](https://sacred-texts.com/neu/eng/spe/spe20.htm)
* Paragraph 4 – [[3]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parish_ale), [[7]](https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/12324/pg12324-images.html)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/25223816.wantage-church-revives-tradition-successful-ale-festival/?ref=rss> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/25223816.wantage-church-revives-tradition-successful-ale-festival/?ref=rss> - The Wantage Parish Ale Festival, held on June 7, 2023, revived a medieval English tradition by featuring food, drink, and dancing. The event's programme highlighted the historical significance of parish ales, which were widespread in medieval England and typically took place at Whitsun to raise funds for church repairs. The practice was suppressed after the Reformation, with Shakespeare alluding to it in 'Twelfth Night'. The festival introduced 'DiscipAle', a brew created by Kevin Brady at Indigenous Brewery in Chaddleworth, blending Maris Otter and Light Crystal grain with Perle, Fuggles, and Goldings hops. The ale was blessed by Katherine, Vicar of Wantage, and Mike, Rector of the Benefice. The branding features an icon-based drawing by Katherine of St Peter and St James, patrons in Wantage and Chaddleworth, respectively.
3. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parish_ale> - Parish ale, also known as church ale, was a festivity in English parishes where ale was the chief drink, typically held to raise funds for church repairs. These events were common in medieval England, especially during Whitsun, and included music, dancing, and other entertainments. The practice faced opposition after the English Reformation, leading to its decline. However, some forms of parish ales have survived into modern times, with events planned in 2025 at St. Helen's Church in Colne.
4. <https://www.medievalists.net/2022/12/festivals-medieval-english-village/> - In medieval English villages, spring festivals aimed to raise money for the local parish church, often through events like the 'Church Ale' during Whitsun. These festivals featured Robin Hood plays, morris dancing, mummings, and other folk customs. Villagers also selected a 'King' for the festivities, similar to the 'Boy Bishop' tradition at Christmas. Additionally, during Hocktide, there were events called 'Women's gatherings', 'Men's gatherings', and 'Young Men's gatherings'.
5. [https://www.thefreelibrary.com/WHEN+WHITSUN+MEANT+FEASTING,+FIGHTING,+FAIRS+AND+CHURCH+ALE.-a0586683315](https://www.thefreelibrary.com/WHEN%2BWHITSUN%2BMEANT%2BFEASTING%2C%2BFIGHTING%2C%2BFAIRS%2BAND%2BCHURCH%2BALE.-a0586683315) - Whitsun Ales were traditional feasts held in English churches to raise money for repairs and alms for the poor. Churches brewed their own ale, selling it to fund repairs and support the needy. To maintain a monopoly on alcohol sales during these events, local pubs and taverns were often forced to close or face fines. Larger parishes held these events in bigger venues, featuring dancing to hired musicians, morris dancing, and the selection of local figures as Lord and Lady of the Ale.
6. <https://sacred-texts.com/neu/eng/spe/spe20.htm> - Church-ales, also known as Easter-ales or Whitsun-ales, originated from wakes and were established by churchwardens to raise funds for church repairs. These events involved brewing ale, selling it to parishioners, and often included feasting, music, and dancing. In some cases, neighboring parishes collaborated to brew ales, with profits used for church maintenance. The tradition faced criticism for excessive duration and behavior, leading to eventual suppression.
7. <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/12324/pg12324-images.html> - Church-ales, also called Whitsun-ales or May-ales, were held around Whitsuntide to raise money for parish needs. Notices were sent to surrounding parishes, inviting them to spend money in feasting and drinking for the benefit of the hosting parish. These events could last several days, featuring feasting, music, and dancing. Churchwardens purchased malt and other provisions, and the community participated in various festivities to support the church.