

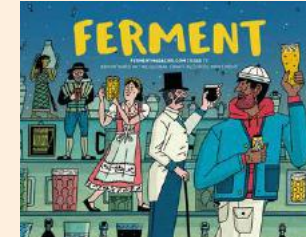
## Camping in cider's belly

Anthony Gladman reports back from the Ross on Wye cider festival



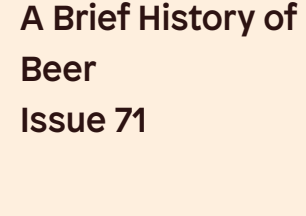
— Anthony Gladman

Saturday 23  
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I'm heading to the Ross on Wye cider festival. There are lots of reasons for this trip but foremost is a desire to immerse myself in a world I'm keen to learn more about. Cider is a culture, a community even more close-knit than beer. The best way to understand it is to dive in, drink with its makers, talk with its lovers.

Partly I just feel burnt out and need to get away from my desk. I need some nature. I will be camping for the first time since my schooldays and the D of E expedition. I like rambling, with paper maps and compasses, so I guess you could say I've always been camping-adjacent. Even so, I'm a little nervous.

Thursday: *Arrival*

My wife needs the car so I leave London by train. I carry everything for the weekend packed on my back: tent, sleeping bag, spare clothes, a small stove. I also carry the stress and the worries of everyday life, coupled to the background weight (emotional and physical) of living through a global pandemic.

This hidden freight affects me more than the backpack. When my bag grows too heavy I can put it down. When delays make my anxiety flare, that proves harder to shrug off. A cancelled train at Worcester leaves me fretting for 90 minutes as I wait for the next. I foresee that too falling prey to staff shortages; my arrival delayed until evening; daylight fading before I've put up my tent.

*Here's a tip I learned the hard way: pay attention when you first unfold your tent*

It takes me seven hours to reach the village of Peterstow, not far outside Ross on Wye. When I finally walk into Broome Farm's Old Orchard that no longer matters. It is beautiful and peaceful. This is exactly what I need.

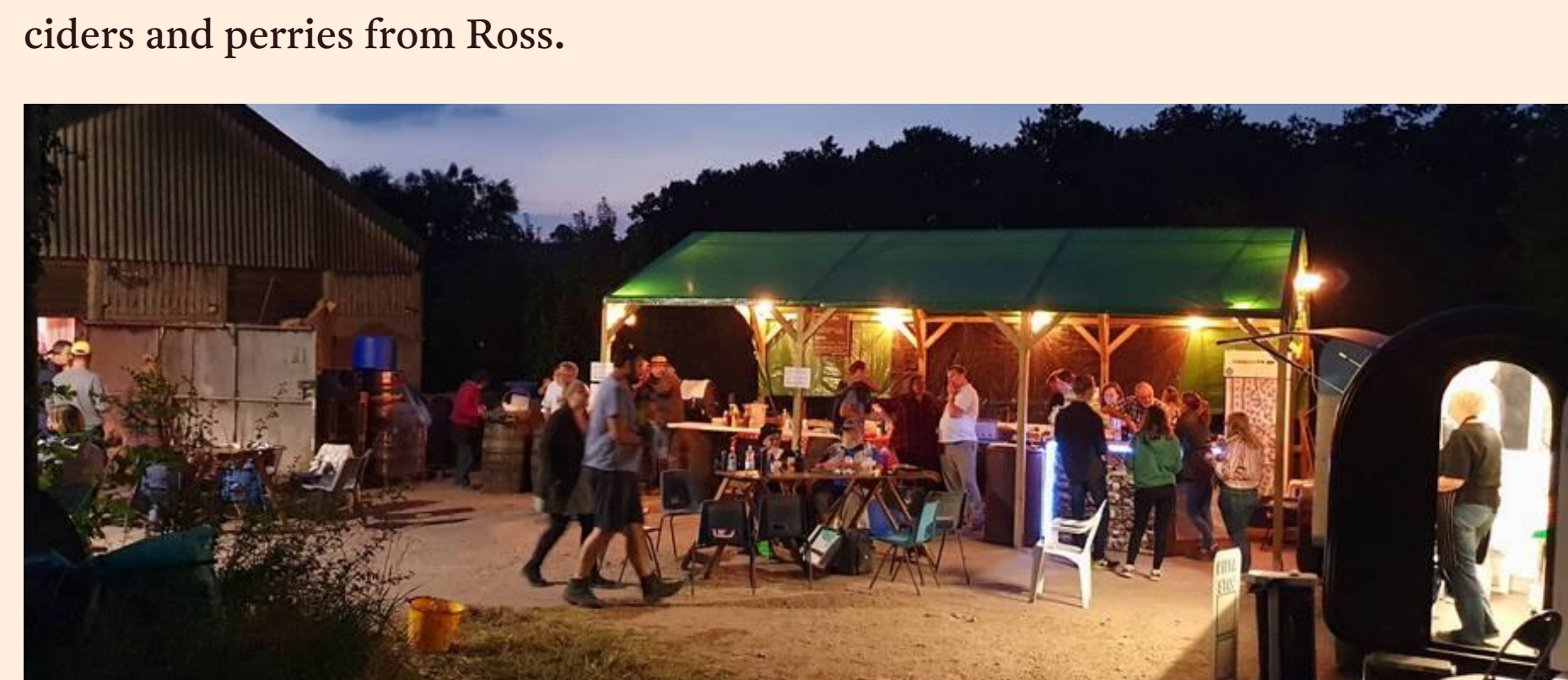
The Old Orchard is sparsely planted compared to the others on the farm. Elsewhere trees march in ranks up the hillsides leaving shaded grassy rows between. Here is more of a field with a few trees dotted around. Most people have avoided the open ground and pitched their tents huddled close to the apple trees. I choose a spot towards the far corner by a tree as yet unclaimed.

Friends who do this sort of thing all the time had advised me to look for a site as flat and as level as possible. You'll notice any slope, they said, especially at night when you're trying to sleep. I peer at the long grass. It looks flat enough to me. I kick a few windfall apples away and set to work with my tent.

Here's a tip I learned the hard way: pay attention when you first unfold your tent.

When it's time to leave you'll want to fold it back up in the same way, down to the same shape and size.

As the sun dips behind the trees I finish making my camp and head to the barns. The main festival begins tomorrow but tonight there is the Ross on Wye Cider Club to look forward to. Some of the best cidermakers in the country have gathered here to taste eight new ciders and perries from Ross.



My favourite is the C1 Foxwhelp 2020. This was made from an off-year's harvest, when the trees give less fruit. Albert Johnson, cidermaker at Ross, says what the trees do give in these off-years is better. This cider bears him out. Normally a Foxwhelp will wallop you in the face with its acidic zing. This is soft and restrained, allowing the underlying strawberry, honeysuckle and vanilla flavours to shine through.

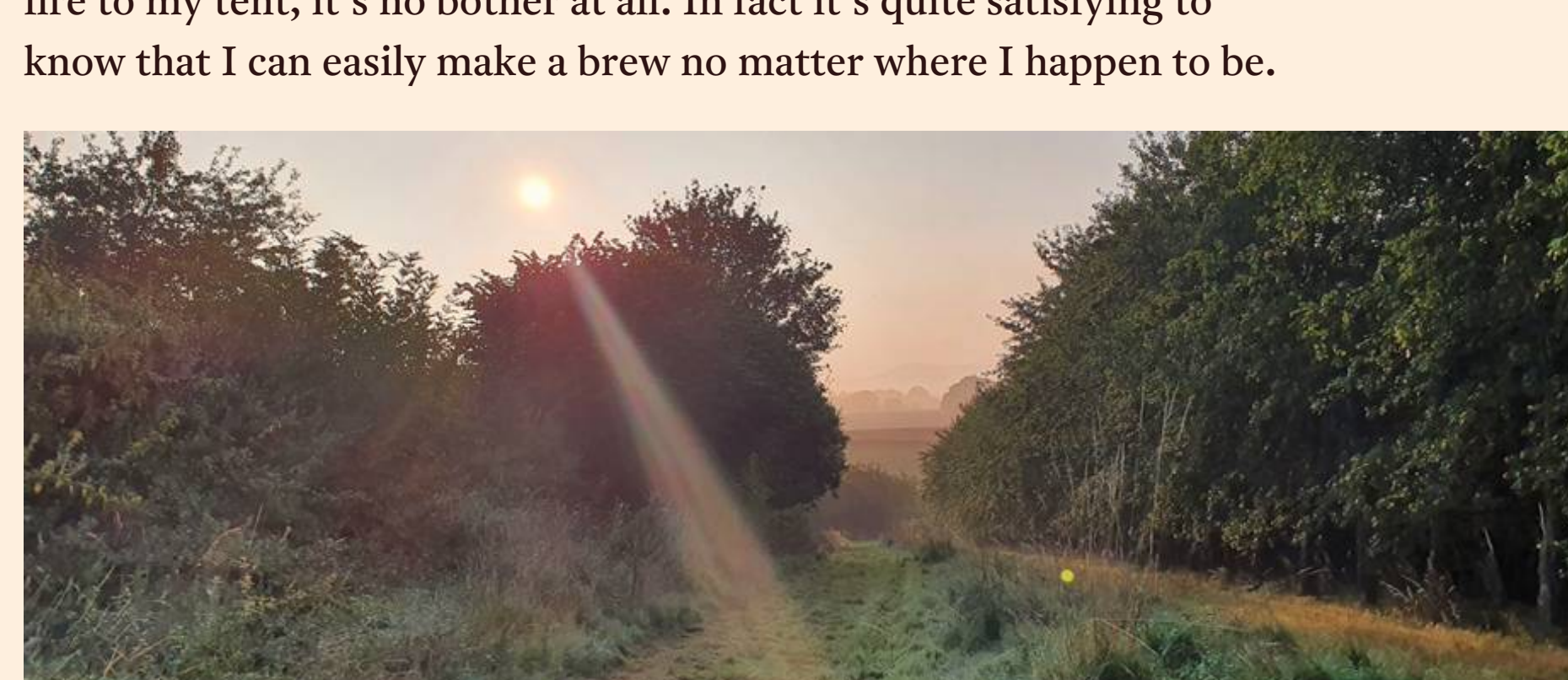
As we taste each bottle, Albert stands among our tables and tells us its story. With each one his task of making himself heard becomes a little harder. Allocated seating has us grouped with strangers and acquaintances. As the cider flows and we all warm up, our conversations grow more raucous. As we drain the final bottle people are already swapping tables and milling around. Then we head over to the cider barn and the real drinking begins.

Friday: *Immersion*

I wake crammed into one corner of my tent with my feet uphill of my head. Damn. I hadn't noticed the ground wasn't level when I crawled into my sleeping bag — blame the apple brandy — but I was feeling it now.

I'd heard a few tent flaps being unzipped, or zipped back up again, but when I add to that chorus to poke my own head out the orchard is quiet. It is not quite nine. People are still sleeping it off. I hear snores somewhere nearby.

I want tea. Some people, car campers less constricted by size or weight when deciding what to bring, have tables upon which rest heat rings and sets of pans. I have a tiny little stove that screws onto the top of a gas canister. It seemed quite wobbly and top-heavy so I also brought some feet to place underneath which extend its base to a more solid looking radius. Once I am sure I won't scald myself or set fire to my tent, it's no bother at all. In fact it's quite satisfying to know that I can easily make a brew no matter where I happen to be.



Soon after I crunch along dusty paths between the orchards, exploring the farm. I seek a view out to the fabled May Hill in the distance beyond Ross on Wye. Legend has it that if you can see the hill then you're in true perry country. I bump into Adam, a cider writer I'd met the night before, who is now clutching an apple bigger than his fist. It seems like a fitting thing for him to be doing.

Later, in the cider barn, we chat again. I revisit the Ross on Wye and Queer Brewing collab, 'Dancing Required', on keg this time as opposed to the 750ml bottle from last night. Pith then described it as the IPA of cider. On the bottle I got bitter people but not a lot else. On keg it reveals its fruity core and becomes its full self. Now I can taste what they meant.

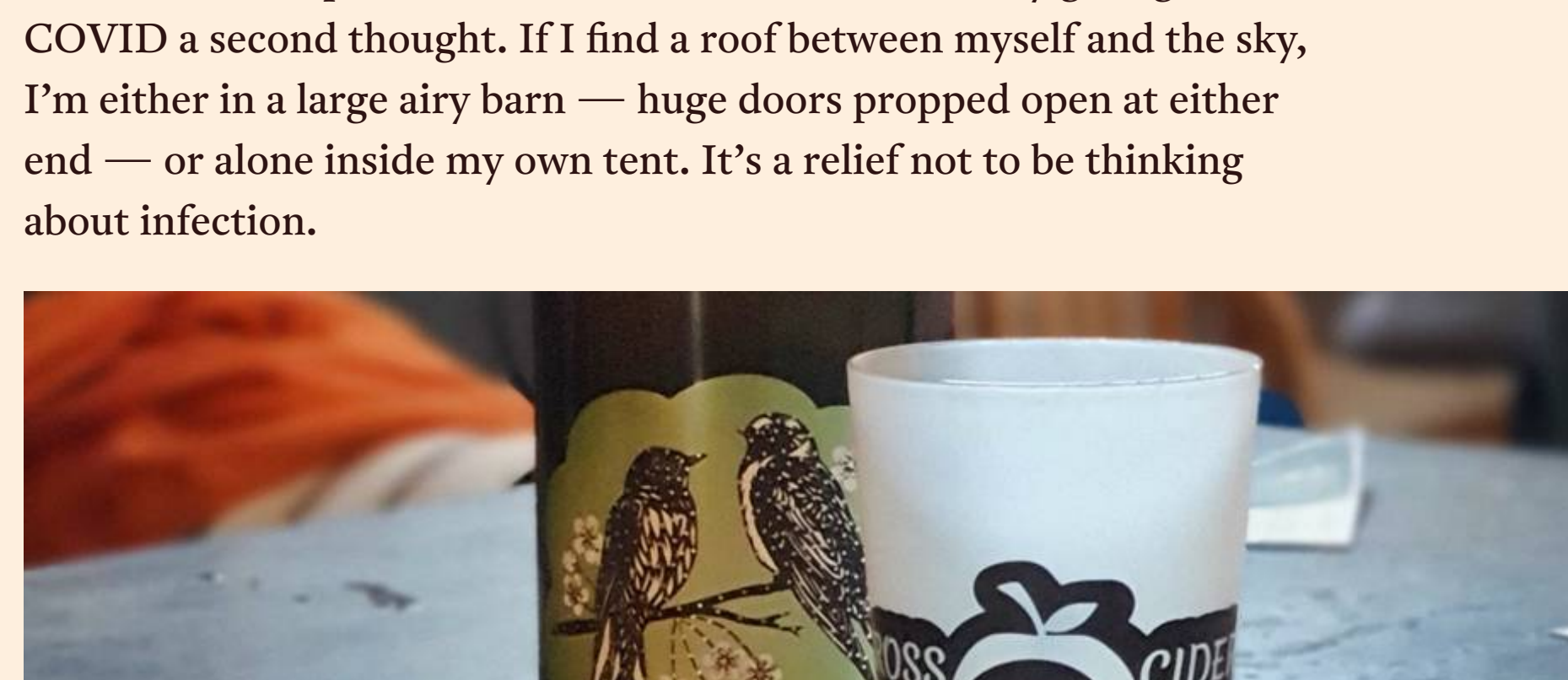
Phill Palmer, of Upland Cyder, presses an unlabelled bottle into my hand. Phill is lauded in cider circles but little known outside them. This is 'just a little something' he's made to prove a point: that you can make approachable, commercial-style cider without using water, sugar or concentrate. If he wanted he could sell an awful lot of this, but he's not interested in that.

Later still there is live music and dancing. I realise I've not seen either in an awfully long time. The crowd is keen to cut loose. I stay outside where people drift from table to table chatting, often putting faces to names from online, forging new connections. The night ends late, in deep rural darkness, as I wind through the orchard to find my tent again. Perhaps if I faced the other way, I tell myself, the slope might not be as bad.

Saturday: *Celebration*

The festival has grown and more tents have sprouted in the orchard. Even so, Albert has kept numbers smaller than past years because of COVID. "Usually you wouldn't be able to walk down beside the barn," he tells me. "It would just be rammed."

I estimate I'm outside 14 hours in every 24. The fact that so much of this event takes place outdoors means I feel safe, barely giving COVID a second thought. If I find a roof between myself and the sky, I'm either in a large airy barn — huge doors propped open at either end — or alone inside my own tent. It's a relief not to be thinking about infection.



Today has the same rhythm as yesterday. Some people head into Ross or Hereford for lunch. Around mid-afternoon we drift in small groups towards the cider barn. Guest cidermakers Bartestres, Gregg's Pitt, and Rob Castle are here, all with perries that capture my attention. There's time to talk them over, to find out why perries are so fickle, why the drink is so special.

I join an impromptu bottle share back in the orchard. Later there's a low-key rush when word spreads that the slow-cooked brisket is ready at last. The evening sees more music, more dancing, more chatting. I talk about perries and May Hill with 'ciderologist' Gabe Cook and Rob Castle in the perry orchard as the twilight deepens.

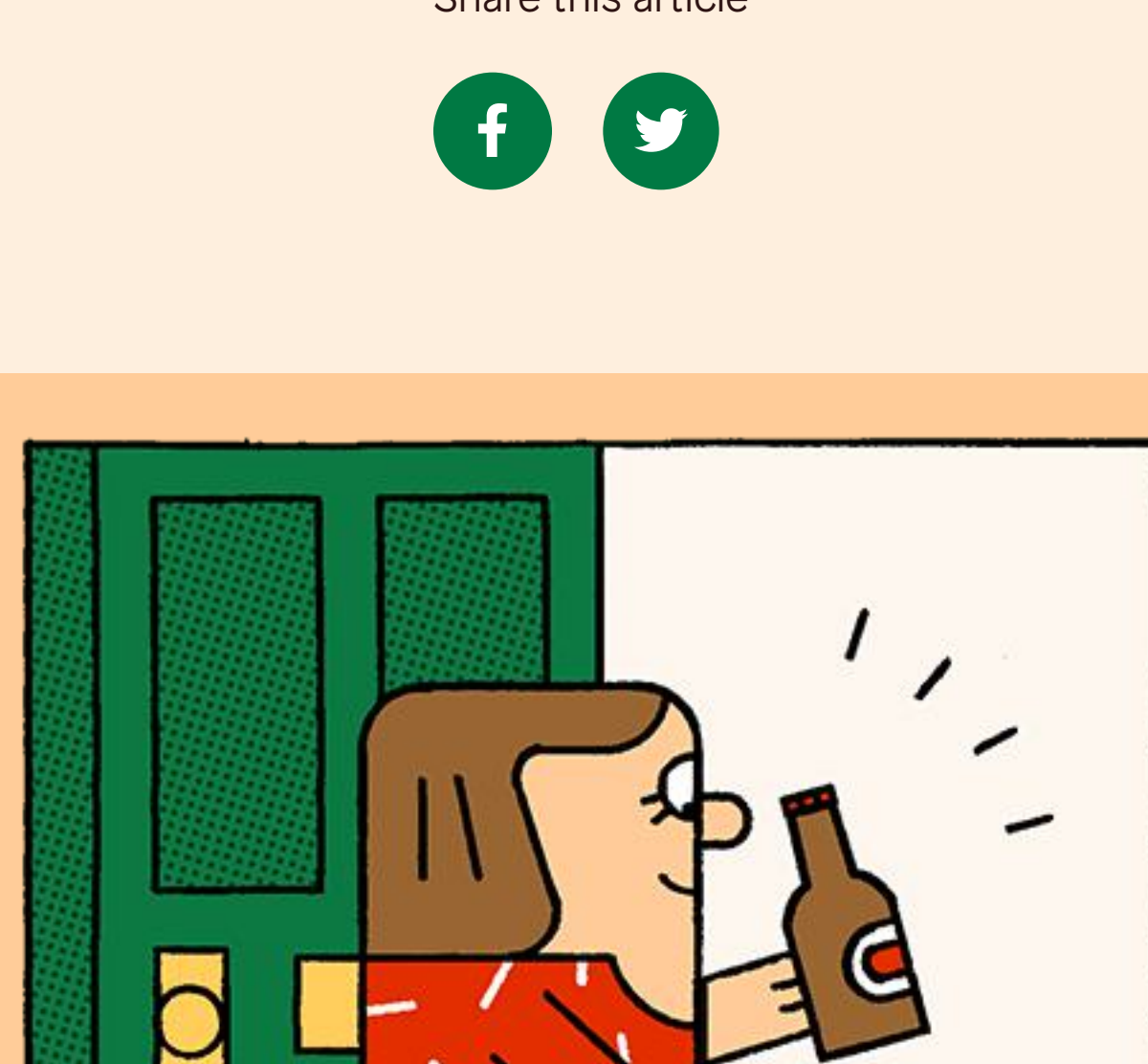
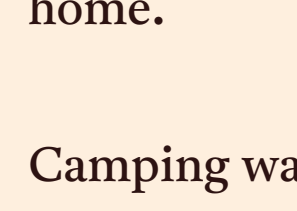
Later, as I settle down in my tent, music drifts across the valley from the direction of Ross on Wye. It is loud enough to compete with the music still coming from the barns. I lie back and try not to roll too far downhill.

Sunday: *Reflection*

Time to pack up. The festival doesn't end until 5pm, and camping can stay until tomorrow. For me, however, another day of drinking and another night of camping would be too much. I have my temporary home packed away and compressed onto my back again by mid-morning. I say a few goodbyes then begin the long journey home.

Camping was more fun than I had anticipated, helped by amazing surroundings and good weather. The people I found there were warm and welcoming, keen to share their love for a drink they hold dear. More than anything this weekend I rediscovered the joy of bonding with strangers over a shared passion. I hope to be back again. Next time I might just rent a car.

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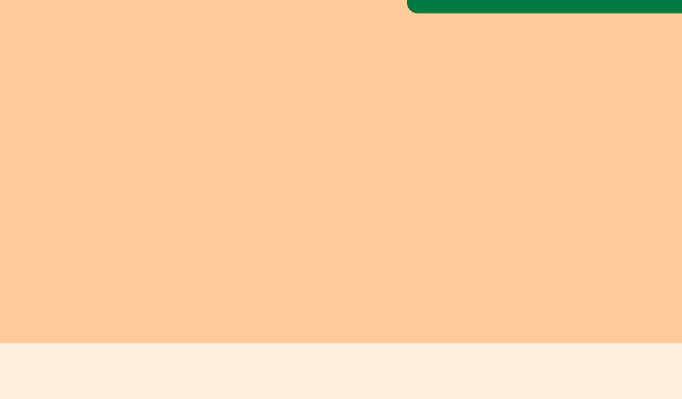
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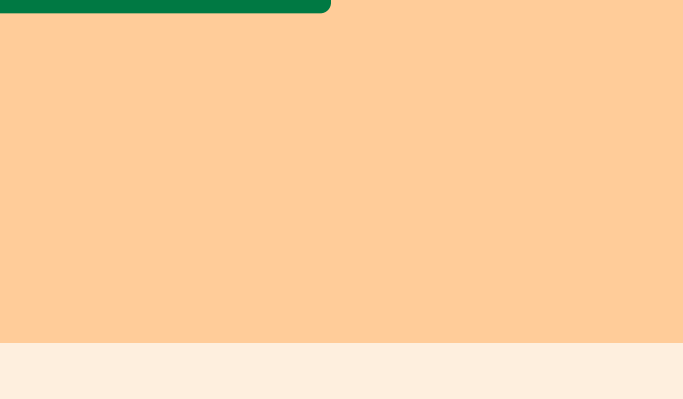
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