

UK REGIONAL AND FAMILY BREWERS GET CRAFTY

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Cask beer has been making a comeback for some time. From the home of this living beer comes a report from our friend and correspondent, Brewer Ian Bearpark.

Apart from a few small pockets around the world, notably the USA, cask conditioned beer is unique to the UK, and some of the biggest suppliers are the regional and family brewers. These companies are often 100-200 years old and are facing stiff competition from the numerous small local breweries that have been springing up all over the country.

For the consumer and those of us that like to try new, different, and very local beers, the choice now available is outstanding. The UK has always suffered a disproportionate duty on beer, where every 0.1% ABV costs £0.019, or £0.46 on a 500 ml bottle of 5% beer. With supermarkets often selling beer at less than the

cost of the, duty there is immense pressure on the traditional consumption in pubs. The rate of pub closures has slowed down, but many still face difficult financial circumstances, particularly those who belong to the big pub companies, such as Pubco's, for example.

Regional and family brewers also run pubs, and these generally have a less debt than the Pubco's but face the same issues. In addition to the cheap beer in the off trade, the regional brewers face competition from new small breweries, many of which are operating at less than 5,000 hl per year and pay half the excise duty of the more established companies. →





Daniel Thwaites' new Mash Tun and Copper 2-vessel Brewhouse.

There is also an increasing consumer preference for the latest beer of the week (or month) which makes it more difficult for the regional breweries to maintain regular sales of their main brands to the Pubco's.

So what to do about these pressures? Carlsberg is the biggest brewing group in Scandinavia, and you have to admire them for meeting the rise in small, innovative brewers by building their own: Jacobsen. Several UK regional brewers have taken the same approach by producing more challenging, innovative cask beers (as well as wheat beers and other styles not normally associated with the traditional company).

A few small UK breweries have been making cask beer for some time. Shepherd Neame have owned a 5 UK bbl (8 hl) plant for several years, using it for experimenting and then selling

the results through their own pubs. Former Head Brewer David Holmes said they never had difficulty selling the beer, with pubs always wanting to know when the next one would be available.

Elgoods in East Anglia installed a small plant a while back; a 10/5 bbl plant installed before head brewer Alan Pateman joined 19 years ago. They now have an extra mini FV as well. The plant is in regular use to fulfil low turnover volumes of cask beer and small (3000 L) batches designated for bottling.

Another family brewery, Holts in Manchester, has a small brewhouse capable of brewing 10 to around 35 bbls. It is capable of operating independently of the main brewhouse, or can be integrated if required. It has a 1 tonne capacity grist case supplied by the main brewhouse mill, a 1 tonne capacity mash tun with rake discharge, a 20 bbl copper/hop back, a wort

cooler, hop seed filters, and an aeration point. Plant wort mains supply four 35 brl glycol cooled square FVs with selectable dual temperature probes and dual glycol jackets.

Alan Dunn at Black Sheep Brewery in North Yorkshire has taken a slightly craftier approach. Although they have a 100 brl brewhouse, their hopback is only capable of handling 25 brls, so Black Sheep is installing a 25 brl FV to make the most of the reduced size.

Harvey's, near the south coast, has made a real feature of their small brewhouse. Head Brewer Miles Jenner says 'I bought the plant in 2002 from a microbrewery that was closing down at Birling Gap, near Seaford. It had originally been installed at a David Bruce "Firkin" pub. It is a 5 brl plant and takes on a multi-faceted role: part museum, part training and part product development. As the leaflet states, we also reproduce old recipes from closed Lewes breweries and offer the resultant brews to local pubs to enhance the brewing heritage of the town. Last year, we brewed a prototype for our Royal Nuptial Ale using seven different varieties of Sussex hops, and added Sussex honey to the copper. We also reproduced an old, 1913 recipe from the Southdown & East Grinstead Brewery, which closed in 1919. Their "Cooper" beer looked very risky on paper but turned out remarkably well, and we were amazed by its longevity on broaching a cask six months later. Hop trials are planned with new varieties this year'.

In the North of England, a convert to cask ales is my own brewery, Daniel Thwaites. The company is planning to move to a new site, and this move will include a development brewery. We have already installed a 20 brl plant which will be taken to the new site. The plant was built in Bury, close to the brewery's Blackburn home, and has a combination mash tun/copper brewhouse with three 20 brl FVs, and both hot & cold liquor tanks. It taps into the brewery steam supply and has been installed in an old part of the brewery that used to house the cask washing conveyors 30 years ago. The plant will supply the bottling line and a single head cask washer/filler.

Last year, Daniel Thwaites produced 12 monthly beers, a challenge in the old brewhouse, and two of them were produced in collaboration with friendly small brewers: Lancaster Brewery (a rich, complex porter) and Kirkstall in Leeds (an American IPA). Both companies buy yeast from Thwaites, and although we are competitors in the market place, the unique spirit of cooperation is still at work.

Other breweries in the UK are modernising their main plant. Two family owned examples are Hall & Woodhouse in Blandford Forum (in the south) and Robinson's in Stockport, near Manchester. Both are building new brewhouses with modern energy efficient plants, and are considerably smaller brewlengths to do more flexible brewing options. Hall & Woodhouse are building a complete new brewhouse (T Musk) on existing land. Robinson's is rebuilding in the current brewhouse building and installing a Steineker plant. Both are due on-stream in 2012.

While all this has been going on, the micro/craft brewing sector has not been standing still. Although cask conditioned beer has benefitted most from the small brewery installations, Thornbridge, Brewdog and Ilkley Breweries have produced a range of either unfiltered or unpasteurised beers in keg. But that is another story. ¹



We also bought 3 X 20 brl enclosed fermenters and assembled the plant upstairs in the redundant old cask washing area, conveniently located behind the bottling tanks. Cooling water is supplied from a stand-alone chiller unit.



We have a 20 brl plant from Vincent Johnson Fabrications of Bury, Lancs. Nice to be able to buy locally