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LONDON DRINKER

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Rayment's - Story inside

Photo: John Law

Alan Greenwood's Beer Diary ●

AFTER SOMETHING is invented there are usually periods of improvements, developments and adaptations. These periods usually pass almost insignificantly in the overall scale of time as people either adapt to the development or it gets superseded by another.

There is one invention however where developments and repercussions just will not cease even though it was invented so long ago it is probably older than the wheel. The invention is the drinking vessel and, to judge from the vexed comments of beer drinkers as they discuss their preferences, even today the invention is subject to reverberations. The cheapest, simplest beer drinking vessel today is the glass straight. It is easy to hold, clearly allows the drinker to see the clarity of the beer, and in no way affects the taste, flavour or palate of the beer. So why do we so often get landed with the big, thick, chunky or dimple glass with handles? Apart from the people with disabilities, who needs handles? Looking round round bars where such glasses are used, you will notice that most people pick them up by the body and not the handle anyway.

Worse than the handles however is the thickness. Whilst they may be O.K. for chilled lagers, the taste and flavour of real beer seems diminished as it fights with the thickness of the glass for that small channel between the lips, through which both glass and beer must vie.

It is most likely that chunky glasses with handles are remnants of the keg, processed beer era. Beers like Tartan, Double Diamond, Tankard etc, because they are usually served chilled and highly gassed, are more likely to overpower the glass thickness. Being initially promoted as 'up market' beers, a glass of more style and substance, like the chunky, helped to justify the higher prices charged for them. Even now there is an up market image to the thicker, dimple glass and there are still landladies about who insist on straight glasses only for the public bar and something better (the dimple) for the lounge or saloon. To my mind that's another big reason for searching out the public bar.

Apart from the dimple and the straight, there are many other design styles of glass drinking vessels, which is all the more

amazing when we find there is virtually only one producer of glasses in this country. The Ravenhead Glass Company, who are a subsidiary of United Glass, a giant company controlled jointly by The Distillers Company and Owens-Illinois Incorporated. They make literally millions of glasses every week, have a range of 180 design variations and can introduce an average of fifteen new styles every year. It would now be almost impossible for a new mass-production manufacturer to start up now, for the finance and organisation would be astronomical. Just one tank furnace alone can hold upwards of a thousand ton of molten glass, which is a lot of glasses and a lot of investment.

With seven out of every ten glasses used in pubs being Ravenhead they do have a dominant hold on the market, but there is always the threat of large foreign concerns stepping in so that Ravenhead have the ever present incentive to contain prices. Design

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London Drinker

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News & Views

● PRICE OUTLOOK — PROMISING?

WE ARE RATHER chuffed to discover that our prognostications about prices falling, which were based on a mixture of common sense and a reading of tea leaves, have been backed by some of the experts. Given the state of the country at the moment one would hope for nothing else.

Brewers, according to one argument, are supposed to be more efficient and more able to absorb costs. We do not take this argument very seriously because, even if it were true, alleged efficiency has never stopped them putting up prices in the past. Remember Lord Vaizey and the economies of scale?

We tend to put more faith in the power of the recession. Publicans everywhere are suffering and are beginning to complain vociferously about the deeds of their tied masters, some of whom have chosen this of all times to up the rents. Surely they cannot put up prices as well? In fact, Bass have done so and also Courage, but so far no one has followed. According to one analyst, Whitbread's swingeing price increases last year may have kept profits up but their share of the beer market took a tumble. They have been significantly reluctant to raise prices this year.

The *Morning Advertiser* has reported that even pubs in the heart of Central London are being hit by the recession, not to mention the lack of tourists. A few may strike lucky with wine bars, cocktail bars, video bars and the like, but the majority will still have to earn a living by attracting the honest-to-goodness pubgoer.

The most serious obstacle to stable prices, apart from the sheer bloody-mindedness of some brewers, may turn out to be the Falkland Factor. When operations began in the South Atlantic, the Government indicated that it had enough money in reserve to pay for the

exercise. As we go to press, hints from Mrs. Thatcher downwards are suggesting that there will be a need for some sort of tax increase. This may well mean that some indirect taxes will go up, in which case beer is unlikely to escape.

In the meantime, please keep telling us about pubs that sell good beer at a reasonable price.

● BROWN COMES TO TOWN

AFTER SMITH of Yorkshire, Brown of Lancashire. Matthew Brown, one of the two major independent brewers operating from Blackburn, are beginning to push their beers into London. Apart from the obvious places such as the Sun in Lambs Conduit Street, we do not as yet have a list of outlets.

The draught beers concerned are Lion bitter, Lion mild and John Peel Special Bitter. Matthew Brown, which started brewing in Preston in 1830, claim to be the oldest public brewery company still trading under their original independent name.

● HOT STUFF

THE RECENT London Beer Festival, held last month at the Horticultural Hall in Westminster, was the first event of its kind in London to be run on a purely commercial basis, with exhibitors paying for the privilege of selling their beer. This differs from the usual CAMRA type, where the labour is voluntary and the beer is bought in to be sold.

Although this may suggest a difference of philosophy, one doubts if an outsider could spot any difference in practice. We found the atmosphere typically friendly and relaxed, though we suspect that the exceptionally hot weather in early June must have affected the attendance, as it did the temperature of the beer. And while an entrance fee is necessary for such events, many considered that £2 for a two-hour session on Sunday lunchtime was a bit excessive.

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ALAN GREENWOOD'S BEER DIARY

and style demands also have to be constantly recognised and perhaps the most significant development came in 1930 with the straight variety but about three quarters up it has a bulge.

This meant that glasses stacked tightly on a shelf touch each other by the bulge. Until

then glasses were being constantly chipped or nicked on the rim when being hurriedly washed or shelved on draining boards. The new glass was introduced as the No-Nick or 'Nonik' and now accounts for the bulk of straight glasses produced. The design also introduced an element of style into the basic development of what is otherwise, a prehistoric invention.

