

BUTTS BREWERY

by

Roy Bailey

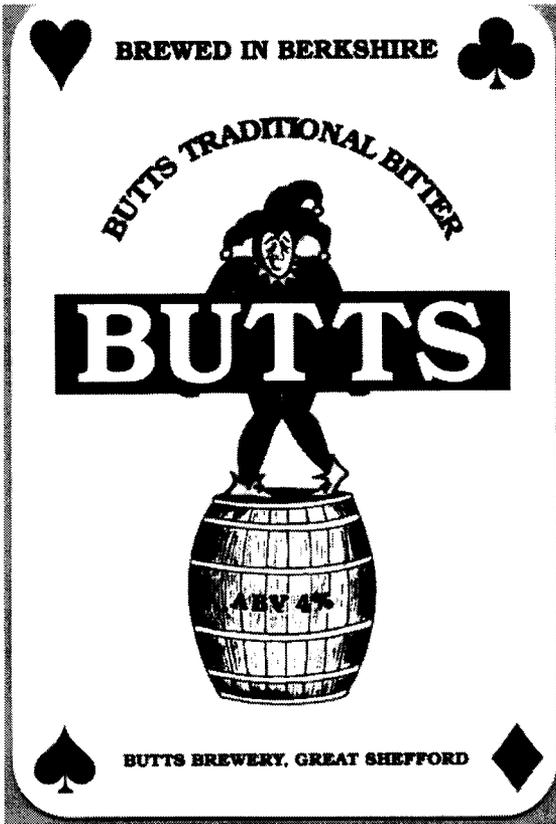
Butts Brewery was set up at Great Shefford in September 1994, and became the first commercial brewery in West Berkshire since the Phoenix Brewery of Newbury dosed down in the 1920s.

Founder Chris Butt is a Somerset lad who was educated at Reading University, where he took an honours degree in biotechnology, and then became a partner in a food production company in Newbury until it was sold in 1991. Looking around for a new career at the age of 29, he decided to join the growing ranks of micro brewers, although he had no experience of the craft. *“I was never into home-brewing”,* he said. *“I was more interested in pub culture. I'd spent a lot of time in pubs, and brewing was a way of spending more!”*

So he spent some time as a pupil with his local brewery, Butcombe in Somerset, and when they expanded in 1993, he purchased their old 15-barrel plant. This had to remain stored on a friend's farm for 18 months while Chris searched around the Newbury area to find the right premises - no easy task. He eventually alighted upon half of a converted Dutch barn which had just become vacant at Northfield Farm, on the A338 just north of Great Shefford village.

Finding the finance was another big problem. Chris's house in Newbury provided no equity, and the banks were unhelpful, so he advertised for venture capital and found someone who came up with the majority of the money. The balance was provided by the father of a friend who, on reading Chris' business plan, diverted money earmarked for a PEP into the brewery. Such altruistic saints are few and far between!

The first brew of malty Butts Bitter (4% ABV) was rolled out in October 1994 and found a ready acceptance in local pubs. It proved to be a very popular guest beer in The Swan at Great Shefford, and sales increased steadily in local free houses. Chris launched his second beer, Jester, (3.5%) which was quickly followed by a stronger version, Barbus Barbus, at 4.6%. This is the Latin name for the barbel (Chris is a keen fisherman). These two rich, aromatic beers are much hoppier than the bitter and have proved extremely popular with local CAMRA members.



Sadly, just after the launch of Barbus, some technical problems occurred and Chris was forced to close the brewery for a few weeks. The problems have now been solved and the brewery is back in full flow.

The most momentous event for Butts Brewery since its formation was the purchase of The Swan at Inkpen by Bernard and Mary Harris. Having got to know Chris by purchasing the brewery's spent grams to feed the cattle on their organic beef farm, the Harrises offered him and his girlfriend, Delia Chamberlain, the opportunity to be the licensees of their newly-reopened pub. This meant a guaranteed outlet for Butts beers, and so Delia manages the pub while Chris looks

after the cellar and continues to run the brewery.

Butts beers are brewed with Pipkin pale and crystal malt from Tuckers of Newton Abbot in Devon - a traditional floor malting - and hopped with whole Goldings and Fuggles from Herefordshire. A third, special variety of hop is used in Jester and Barbus. Like many micro-brewers, Chris will not divulge the source of his yeast, but his food technology training and skill with a microscope enables him to propagate it from brew to brew and spot any problems. The 15-barrel plant with two fermenters means that there is plenty of capacity for future expansion, although the premises are rather cramped - especially with the purchase of another 50 new firkins.

Chris's partner, Alan Glenny, is a local businessman who works in Reading, so running the brewery has hitherto been a one-man show, but with the increasing success of his beers and the involvement with The Swan, Chris has taken on Dave

Price of Hungerford - initially to deal with marketing but with a view to eventually becoming a partner. This should give the Head Brewer a little more time to pursue his favourite sport of cricket!

At present Butts brew twice a week, and the beers go out to some 40-50 outlets within a 30-mile radius of Great Shefford. These include Just William's in Hungerford, The Plough at Eastbury, The Butt at Aldermaston, and The Horseshoe in Mildenhall. In addition, Chris makes a fortnightly trip to deliver to about a dozen pubs around his former home in Somerset, returning with real scrumpy to sell in The Swan at Inkpen.

Butts Brewery has now been joined in this area by the West Berks Brewery at Frilsham, and there are two more further east, but there is a certain cachet about being the first for over 70 years.

BHS FACT FILE

A writer in the Liverpool Post remarks:- "Those who are now enjoying the beauty of the heather - and those who only pine for it in exile - may not be aware that the first weeks of September are the best time for brewing heather ale, made nowadays from equal quantities of heather tops and malt. It is drunk chiefly in the West Country but there was a time when it was the precious possession of Scotland alone, and was a far more wonderful beverage than it is today. The lost secret of the ancient heather ale has been celebrated in many ballads and stories: it was the extermination of its manufacturers by the later Celtic invaders that ended the industry, members of the "trade" dying rather than reveal the mystery to their conquerors.

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