

LAMENTED BEER IS BEST YET

by
Oliver Phillips

As with smoking, I had to work at drinking beer. As a teenager, I did not like the taste that much and I opted, instead, for stout and cider. That was a comparatively lethal concoction that rendered me a menace on my bicycle, although cycling home through the woods and Cassiobury Park from the Clarendon Arms one or two nights a week did not involve much traffic.

I decided to go easier on stout and cider after I had fallen off my bike in Rousebarn Lane on the way back from one such night at the Clarendon. My wheel got caught in a rut at the side of the road and, when the rut came to an abrupt end with a protruding tree root, so my association with the wheeled steed was terminated.

They say your life flashes before you on such occasions, but at 18 or so, I did not have much of a life to run through the mental projector.

It is funny the things you remember. I know I was singing Lonely Winds by The Drifters at the time, which could not have been a pretty sound, for the fauna of Whippendell Woods, but I believe I ceased singing as I became airborne. I sped through the air for what seemed quite a long time and landed on my shoulder, rolling over to one side.

As my bike came to a crashing halt, the front headlight shone upwards and caught in the glare was the agonised face of one of my friends, as he realised he was set to run over my prostrate form.

This he did, narrowly missing ruining the prospect of fatherhood, one of his pedals passing a glancing blow on the side of my head, as his front wheel continued on its path over my shoulder.

On the Monday morning, as I arrived with my arm in a sling nursing a broken collar bone, the sports editor at the old West Herts Post suggested I did not mention the fact I had been drinking to the powers that be. It would not go down well in the office, he suggested.

The accident changed my life and my drinking habits. It would be too risky for me to cycle with an arm in a sling, and so a friend contacted a pal of his. He had a large car, so I was driven out into the country and, upon reaching a pub, we went inside.

"Four pints of bitter and a Cherry B and a Babycham" ordered the first in and, before I had a chance to protest, I had a pint of bitter put in front of me.

As you can see by Cherry B and Babycham, we knocked around with some fast women. It should be said, in fairness, probably they would have preferred a gin and tonic but, in those days, that would have cost 2s 6d as opposed to 1s 4d we paid for our bitter.

So, you can see, it had to be real love to buy a gin, and tonic.

I sat down in the new surroundings, grabbed a packet of crisps to help me offset the bitter taste and took what was truly my first sip of well-kept Benskins bitter.

I was not aware then many publicans were somewhat casual about putting the slops back in barrels or cleaning the pipes and half of south west Herts did not drink Benskins in the condition Sir Joseph and company, intended.

All I knew was I was a teenager, had a broken collarbone and was experiencing the quality of beer I felt I could drink forever.

I searched in vain for a similar pint in Watford, but never found it, so I found myself returning to that country pub and, with the briefest of interruptions - I have been going there regularly for 40 odd years since that first visit.

Benskins bitter, well-kept, was a delight and it led me to appreciate other ales. I often wonder, if other publicans had served Benskins of that quality, if it would have faded from the local drinking scene.

Eventually, it was replaced by Ind Coope, which I found acceptable and, later, Benskins was revived and served at The Cock at Sarratt and continued for a number of years.

Since then, Benskins has become a rarity. You can get an excellent pint at The Swan in Bushey and then there is The Railway down near the station.

Sadly, Watfordians have to travel "abroad", to the likes of the Red Lion at Chenies to taste Benskins as it is meant to be. Mike, the landlord there cut his drinking teetill at The Cock, and knows how to keep a good beer. He contends it is simple, but it is an art elusive to so many it seems or perhaps, with the proliferation of lagers and bottled beers, they are not that bothered.

To taste a truly well-kept beer is always a special moment. Sometimes, you are even caught by surprise when you taste the quality of it - but for the breathalyser, I would see Mike more often.

I popped in the other Sunday for lunch and he promptly poured me a pint of Benskins.

"I have news for you," said Mike. *"There will be no more Benskins ale after January (2002). They are ceasing production at Burton."*

So the beer, on which so many people in the locally were reared, is to cease to exist. The local brewery, which employed generations of local workers, has long since closed and the memory of its close association with the town has dimmed.

As with everything, you get used to it and the limitation of only an occasional pint of Benskins has been compensated by my familiarity with Brakspears and Sussex ales.

Naturally, the lack of local, regional or even national demand has sounded the death knell for Benskins ale. But why, I wondered, when so many different ales are available now, has Benskins bitten the dust?

There was a time when you could make a phone call and they would provide you with up-to-date information on Benskins. But that was before Ind Coope took charge, or Allied Domeq or Carlsberg Tetley or Bass or Interbrew or whoever else is in the chain of take-overs since Benskins was first bought.

The other week, I phoned Carlsberg Tetley Brewery Limited in Leeds.

No one there had heard of Benkins beer. I phoned Interbrew and experienced the same response. It was similar at Bass, but then it was pointed out they were on a skeleton staff for a fortnight over Christmas.

I phoned Carlsberg-Tetley in Leeds again last week and was referred to the marketing/communications offices in Northampton.

"The boundaries are a little blurred with them so I apologise if they will pass you around" said a lady at Leeds.

Eventually, after being passed on a couple of times, after some ten or 12 calls, I was cold Donna Cresswell was the person I needed to speak to but she was out. I suspected Donna might be just another link in the chain, so I contacted Bass, because Benskins has been brewed at Burton-on-Trent for years.

Again, I experienced that feeling of being a hot potato.

"Benskins? That's not one of ours is it?" asked one voice.

When I insisted it was, they passed me on. Another lady answered, accompanied by a loud explosion. "Sorry. Someone has just stood on a balloon," she explained. "*I think you want the museum.*"

I was resigned. "*Quite probably. Benskins will be in a museum by the end of the month*" I agreed.

I spoke to two more before I got through to Steve Wallington, head brewer of the Bass Museum Brewery, a commercial enterprise affiliated to the company but with a large degree of independence.

They turn out some 20 barrels a week from a working 1920s brewery, which is open to visitors.

"*No, not Benskins. I am not aware of it. Is it brewed in Burton?*" asked Steve.

A few more calls and eventually I got through to Paul Hegarty, who had a head start on most at Bass, because he was born and raised in Pinner.

"*Benskins. You couldn't get away from the stuff in Pinner. It is not ours, but it is brewed by Carlsberg Tetley, who took over Allied Domeq, -who in turn took over Ind Coope and, therefore, Benskins.*

"*It is brewed in Burton by Carlsberg-Tetley.*"

At last, I had found someone in a brewery conglomerate who admitted to knowing Benskins, even if it was not in his neck of the corporate woods.

A helpful individual, he said he would ring me back and he did, with a number and a name: Donna Cresswell. So Donna was the key to it all, after all.

Donna returned my call and confirmed what we had suspected.

"*In February, production of Benskins is going to cease,*" she informed me. "*Consumer demands declined and the number of outlets too. It is produced by Bass at Burton. We own the licence and we would be in position to sell it if we were offered at the right price. We have no immediate plans to sell the brands but we are open minded on the subject.*"

After doing a little research, Donna came back again. "*I have found out something that surprised me. They have not been brewing Benskins at Burton since 1998-99. Then it was transferred to Leeds.*"

In the meantime, Interbrew have divested themselves of some of their portfolio by the Monopolies Commission and Coors, the American-based giant is picking up the pieces.

Amid all this streamlining, Benskins will just cease to exist and, from the calls I made to Leeds, Luton, Burton and Northampton, it appears the brand has slipped through a crack in the corporate floor, its death almost as unsung as its life since leaving Watford.

Perhaps a micro-brewery might take on the task of brewing Benskins, and there may even be a case for selling it under another name. But, having the ingredients, as anyone knows, is nowhere near the same as having the recipe.

While Steve Wallington at the Burton Brewery Museum have old brewing books, others may just have a list of ingredients.

"We try to keep the old brands alive such as Worthington E and White Shield. But, with so many micro-breweries around, there is probably more choice of ales than used to be the case. There are more than 300 micro-breweries in this country," he explained.

Worthington E was a national beer, unlike Benskins which was regional, so there is more demand for E which, as the advert used to sing the message to us, was *"the way you like it"*.

By the way, that has a local connection to that E advert, for the bass voice that used to sing us that final line was Alan Grant, former publican of The Boot, Sarratt, who featured in Sing Something Simple on the box.

Anyway, the Burton Museum is unlikely to be brewing Benskins for old-time's sake because there is not the national demand.

The problem is that anyone brewing Benskins would have to fork out for the license and, while some pubs still sell it now, many of them are tied and would not be able to take it from a micro-brewery.

The alternative is to just call it something else, so one day, you might find you are drinking Benskins but it is called something else.

The news of Benskins' demise came as a surprise to our local CAMRA contact, Tony Smith.

"A good pint of Benskins is a joy," he said. *"It is very regrettable something that has been to central to Watford's drinking life will be no more. It is part of the town's heritage and, while brewing ceased in Watford in the late 1970s, the beer was still associated with the town."*

I contacted Mike at the Red Lion, Chenies. "They have offered me cack in place of Benskins", he told me. *"The discerning drinker wants something better for their bitter and they don't mind paying that little bit extra."*

With that, he poured me a pint and watched as I drank it. It tasted remarkably familiar.

"We're still selling Benskins until it ceases to exist," he explained with a twinkle in his eye. *"You've just had Vale's best bitter. They are a micro-brewery."*

I looked at the tap.

"Yes," he said. *"Vale's Best Bitter, although personally, I just call it Bens."*

This article was extracted from the column "Just a Word", which appeared in The Watford Observer, Friday, January 18, 2002. The Society is grateful to the Editor for his permission to reproduce it.

BHS FACT FILE

Benskins of Watford have opened a new store with a capacity of 3,000 barrels at Chalk Farm Road. This is within the premises of the goods depot for the London and North Eastern Railway Company.

BREWERS' GUARDIAN FEBRUARY 1871

