

Elveden Ales

Ian Hornsey

Real ale consumers, and beer enthusiasts generally, have been fortunate to witness the birth of many small breweries over the last twenty or thirty years, some of them blessed by being situated in extremely attractive surroundings, as well as producing extremely good beer. Few, if any, however, can match the grandeur of the setting, and the sense of history that pervade when visiting Elveden Ales on the outskirts of Thetford, in Norfolk. The brewery is sited on the Elveden estate, at 23,000 acres, reputed to be Britain's largest farm, and the ancestral home of Edward Guinness, the fourth Earl of Iveagh, known as 'Ned' to his friends. The estate, together with the magnificent 70-bedroom Elveden Hall, was purchased by the first Earl from the executors of the Punjabi prince, Maharajah Duleep Singh, in 1894, and has a wealth of connections with the late-Victorian era.

Elveden Ales is the brainchild of farmer Ned Guinness, head of the brewing dynasty, and the redoubtable Brendan Moore, proprietor of the nearby Icen brewery, in Ickburgh, and is situated in brick and flint estate outbuildings, so typical of the unique Breckland landscape. Brewing duties are carried out by

Brendan's daughter, Frances, who is thus an example of a once common species in England, the brewster. Frances went up to Manchester University in October 2004 to read mechanical engineering, and whilst she is immersing herself in her books in that fine city, Brendan keeps the mash-tun ticking over in Elveden. For Lord Iveagh the enterprise is the realisation of a lifetime's ambition, his father having been a 6th generation brewer.

The ethos of the new brewery is such that only locally-grown raw materials are used in their beers, and that, as soon as is practically possible, these will all be grown and processed on the Elveden estate itself. Indeed, the trial brews that were conducted at Icen used malt produced from Elveden barley, and hops grown by Brendan at his Ickburgh brewery. When the estate is eventually able to supply all of its own brewing raw materials, it will have recreated the situation prevalent in Medieval and Tudor times in England, when all grand houses and their estates were self-sufficient in their beer and food requirements. The opening at Elveden was originally planned for the summer of 2003, but, the inevitable complications associated with planning

consents for listed buildings, meant that production did not commence until early 2004, on- and off-licences being obtained in January of that year.

There was much discussion between the partners as to the style of their inaugural beer, the result of which, unsurprisingly, came out in favour of a stout! Accordingly, the immense brewing archive at the Guinness James's Gate brewery in Dublin was scoured and a suitable recipe selected. The final trial brew at Icení in 2003 led His Lordship to proclaim of the new beer: 'There is nothing like a bit of choice. I love Guinness and it has an excellent recipe, and therefore my allegiance will now be split between Guinness and the new brew'. It is not without significance that industry commentators have noted that Elveden Stout bears an uncanny resemblance to 'the black stuff', a major difference being that, thankfully, none of it is subjected to the dreaded 'brewery conditioning', which effectively means that it is a non-living product. No, the sturdy 5% A.B.V. Elveden Stout is a live cask ale. In July 2004, a second beer, Elveden Ale, with a strength of 4.8% A.B.V., was added to the portfolio

As it turned out, the first commercial brew of Elveden Stout was mashed some 245 years after the renowned Arthur Guinness first commenced his little enterprise in Dublin, and, if there is now a huge disparity, between the output of the new venture and that of Guinness Brewing worldwide, then it should be

remembered that Arthur's initial capacity at James's Gate was around six barrels per week, the present approximate production level at Elveden. The brewing equipment was assembled by Brendan, and is essentially a conventional five-barrel plant, consisting of hot liquor back, mash-tun with sparge apparatus, direct gas-fired copper, wall-mounted plate heat-exchanger (chiller), and two closed fermentation vessels. The pale malt used is all locally-grown Maris Otter, generally regarded by brewers as the doyen of malting barleys whilst the enhanced colour is imparted by a mixture of coloured malts and roasted barley. Boadicea (a new dwarf variety) whole leaf hops are boiled for an hour in the copper, and after a primary fermentation period of four days, the green beer is matured in oak whisky casks for three weeks before being packaged. The sumptuous beer is available in cask and bottle-conditioned form, some 75% of the current production ending up in their aesthetically pleasing 500ml. stoneware bottle.

As was the original intention, a fair proportion of the beer produced is sold via the adjacent, estate-owned, Courtyard Food Hall and Bistro, where all kinds of local produce are available to stimulate ones gastric juices. Indeed, the ideas relating to the brewery at Elveden were crystallised just after the farmers' market had started on the estate, and it had become obvious that there was a substantial demand for a local beer. Another major outlet is farmer Teddy Maufe's new

Real Ale Shop at Branthill Farm, Wells-next-the-Sea, Norfolk, where, like the Food Hall, a wide variety of beers from the East Anglian Brewers' (E.A.B.) co-operative can be purchased. E.A.B. was set up in 2002, with the aid of funding from the East of England Development Agency (E.E.D.A.), and the aim, in its own words: 'That by networking with farmers E.A.B. aims to produce beers brewed with local malts, and to make ales available to local communities through farmers' markets'. As a consequence, most participating brewers refrain from cramming their beers into pubcos at suicidal rates of discount, and concentrate instead on procuring sensible prices for, what are, after all, hand-crafted products. Much of the Maris Otter used by Elveden, and some other E.A.B. brewers, is grown by the aforementioned Teddy Maufe in north Norfolk, and floor-malted specifically for them by Crisp Malting of Great Ryburgh, near Fakenham. Monthly farmers' markets, of which there is a substantial example at Elveden, have become an important facet of rural life, especially in East Anglia, and there is a perception that an increasing number of people are anxious to know more about the origin and mode of preparation of their food-stuffs; information that only a small number of producers have been able, or willing, to supply. In an exciting new development due to commence this summer, Elveden Farms is launching a regional food hub which will assemble a broad range of food and drink from across the region to service the growing demand for fully-traceable quality local produce.

Unlike many micro-brewers, Elveden will refrain from the temptation to produce a whole gamut of 'monthly special' beers, and, instead concentrate on brewing their core products, and the occasional, meaningful, one-off commemorative beer. In fact, Frances was brewing such a thing when I visited Elveden on 9th September 2004. The brewery had been commissioned by Colchester & N.E. Essex CAMRA to brew 'Harwich Charter Ale', a 10% A.B.V. beer, which was to be available at the 3rd Harwich and Dovercourt Bay winter ale festival later that year. The festival was to form part of the 400th anniversary celebrations of the Harwich Royal Charter, and the beer was to be a recreation of Samuel Allsopp's 'Arctic Ale', originally brewed by the famed Burton brewer in 1852. The original brew was for a naval expedition that left Harwich for the Arctic, under Sir Edward Belcher, in order to search for the famous 'lost expedition' led by Sir John Franklin in 1845, which disappeared whilst looking for the North-West Passage. The 1852 ale was commissioned by the Government, and was sufficiently strong to withstand severe weather conditions, and a long journey. A chronicler of the day described Allsopp's arctic beer as: 'mellow as old burgundy and as nourishing as a beefsteak'.

On the day of my visit in 2004, Frances and Brendan were furiously trying to attain the required original gravity of 1090° for their version of the brew, and when I arrived, Brendan's first words to me were: 'What do you know about the

use of malt extract?'. Having never used the stuff at Nethergate, I had to cast my mind back to the early summer of 1981, when I was training under head brewer Wally Pateman at the now defunct Paine & Co., of St. Neots. Then, using malt extract, we were trying to achieve an O.G. of 1100° that day for Paine's Royal Wedding Ale (Lady Di, and all that). Then, as at Elveden, the landmark O.G. was attained and was the stimulus for much in-house celebration! The Elveden ver-

sion of the arctic beer was extremely well received, and, given time, might well round out to attain the characters of an 'old burgundy'. Watch this space!

With a sound business sense, a clear notion of their customer base, and a determination to be self-sufficient in raw materials, the Elveden brewery would seemingly point the way forward for small, rural, brewing concerns in the UK.



Figure 1. Taking wort from mash tun.



Figure 2. Mash in tun after wort removal.

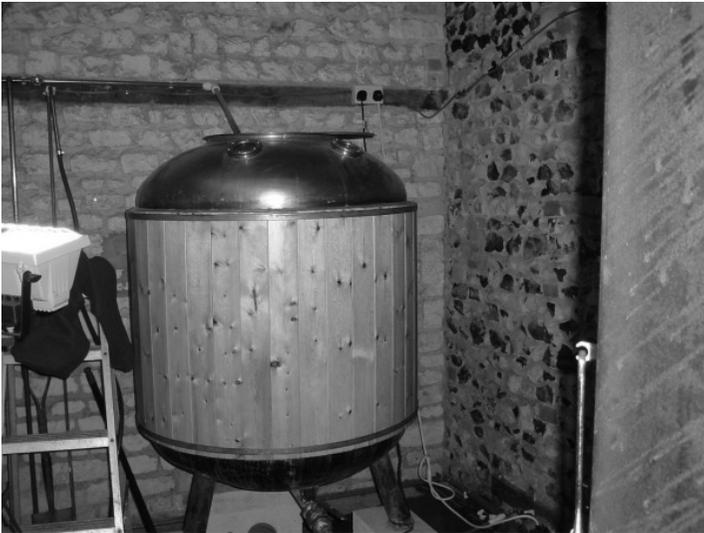


Figure 3. Fermentation vessel.



Figure 4. Copper (kettle).



Figure 5. Copper, showing direct-fired gas burner.



Figure 6. Wall-mounted heat-exchanger (refrigerator).



Figure 7. Adding hops to copper.