

# St. Peter's Brewery, Suffolk

Ian Hornsey

Of the numerous micro-breweries that have been set up since the late 1970s, several of them have made their mark with award-winning beers, and some of them have grown enough to be considered 'regional' brewers. Very few, however, have possessed the marketing acumen to compete successfully with the 'big boys' in a very competitive international market. To my knowledge, the only exception to this is St. Peter's, who, in a little over ten years, have managed to export their products to some twenty countries world-wide, in the process winning a couple of highly prestigious business awards. St. Peter's can claim to be the only British brewer whose main focus is on exporting, and they admit unashamedly that their ambition is to have their brand recognised as THE international brand of English ale.

The brewery was founded in 1996 by ale enthusiast John Murphy who owned 'Interbrand', a marketing company that counted Coca Cola, and Heineken amongst others, as two of its clients. Several years ago, John had a strong hunch that traditionally-brewed English ale was an extremely marketable commodity if it was presented to the world in an appropriate way, and he set his stall out accordingly.

The first step on the path towards achieving his aim was to purchase the imposing (but somewhat derelict) St. Peter's Hall, in the north Suffolk hamlet of St. Peter South Elmham (near Bungay). The moated Hall, dating from 1280, and extended in 1539, with its mediaeval opulence and 300 foot deep well, provided a practical and very 'English' setting for the venture, and so the 'St. Peter's' brand was born. From the outset, Murphy, with his extensive experience in global marketing, was determined to spread his brand name far and wide, and, with the inherent difficulties involved in carting draught beer around the planet, it was obvious that attention would have to be concentrated on the bottled beer market. As part of an overall plan, a very distinctive green bottle was adopted for their products. Said to be a recreation of an 18<sup>th</sup> century bottled pulled from the Delaware River in the US, it certainly does stand out from all the competition on retail shelves, which is exactly what any supplier would die for.

The brewery and offices are situated in renovated farm buildings adjacent to the Hall, and all operations are carried out from this site, including bottling, which commenced in 1997. By 2002 the capacity of the brewery was doubled

and a new bottling hall was built, in order to meet the increasing demand for their products, and expansion has continued since then. The latest phase of expansion, which will cost the best part of £250,000 when finished, saw the installation in May 2006 of two more 25 barrel fermenters and a 75 barrel conditioning tank, and according to Head Brewer, Mark Slater, 'We are now brewing at capacity on this site; sales are outstripping production'. Mark has been in the industry for around twenty years, and clearly enjoys the responsibility of working for such a dynamic operation. He arrived at St. Peter's in March 1999, having gained experience at Ushers of Trowbridge, and a number of other concerns. This is his longest stint anywhere, and, as he freely admits:

I've never had time to get bored here ... there are new challenges every month, and always new markets to explore. [And then he adds:] Everything that comes out of here is my responsibility, and I can handle that.

When I met Mark in October 2007, he was busy sorting out the brewing schedules for January!

As well as numerous awards for their draught beers, St. Peter's have recently won two accolades that recognise their export efforts. In December 2005, they were presented with the Drinks Exporter of the Year Award, at the annual Food from Britain Export Awards, and then in 2006 they received the Queen's Award for Enterprise in the 'International Trade'

category, the winner being announced on 21<sup>st</sup> April, Her Majesty's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Managing Director, Colin Cordy, who joined in January 2004, is justifiably delighted with these awards, and the way that the company is progressing. He is proud to announce that overall trade doubled between 2005 and 2007, and that 'we are already in twenty countries world-wide, and this will increase when the supply situation has been resolved'. When pressed on the latter point, he confirmed that 'we are planning a new production facility, and we are expecting to have this underway within two years'. He added that there was no way that they would want to move totally away from the present site, because the Hall is central to the brand name. He said:

we take the 'Heinz' approach - one brand name, and ours is 'St. Peter's'. The Hall gives the brand real texture and is a great shop window for our beers, attracting several thousand visitors a year to our site.

Colin freely admits that the present site may eventually become a 'show brewery', with the serious work being carried out somewhere else nearby, but the Hall will definitely be retained. Colin also pays tribute to the inspired decision to use the unique bottle for their beers. 'The bottle is the key to our export success, it differentiates us from the rest', he says, adding that 'the bottle helps to sell the beer once, but it's what's inside that gets the repeat sale'. In fact, bottles now take up 94% of their volume.

As well as their success abroad, UK business is expanding in both 'on' and 'off' trade. Of their bottled trade, some two-thirds is exported. Another success, which is relatively unheralded, as yet, is their 4.5% ABV 'Organic Ale', which is finding new devotees all the time. Organic beers comprise around one-third of all St. Peter's sales and this number is increasing. They have also recently launched a Gluten Free beer (G-Free™) which has been very well received.

As many readers will know, St. Peter's had acquired a small estate in which to sell their products, but, with the sale of the De La Pole Arms in Wingfield, this has been reduced to just two, the managed Jerusalem Tavern in Clerkenwell, London, and the Hall, itself, which operates as a

stand-alone business. Running pubs (Jerusalem Tavern excepted) is not seen as part of the St. Peter's core business, but the estate did prove to be very valuable in getting their products recognised.

Although the brewery is situated in idyllic rural surroundings, there are problems associated with such a location. One such is the disposal of brewery effluent, something that is seldom discussed in the public bars of the land. At present effluent is tankered away - an expensive process, and there are plans to set up their own effluent plant at the Hall. This will not be as simple as it might be, because as Mark says: 'it will have to be portable, just in case we have to move, and there's no commercial reason for not moving!' Watch this space.



*Figure 1. St. Peter's Hall.*



*Figure 2. Douglas Fir clad fermenters.*



*Figure 3. Inside the brewery.*



*Figure 4. More fermenters with the malt store in the background.*



*Figure 5. Pumps and filters.*



*Figure 6. The gas-powered 30 barrel kettle.*



*Figure 7. In the bottling hall - The labeler with filler in the background.*



*Figure 8. The eight head filler with change parts hung on the wall.*



*Figure 9. The in-house laboratory used for testing, analysis and quality checks.*