

# The resurrection of Truman's

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At their best, breweries don't just brew beer, they are the face and heart of their local community. The Black Eagle Brewery is definitely one of the greats. For three centuries it was home to Truman's. Today it enjoys a second life as home to hundreds of small companies, bars and restaurants. It provides space affordable to new businesses and offers people the chance to realise their ideas. It has been at the very centre of the rejuvenation of East London over the last decade and is almost as well known now as it has ever been, despite not brewing a drop for 21 years.

For most under the age of 35, the Black Eagle Brewery is the place they first learn of Truman's. So it was with us, an encounter that has led to the re-establishment of one of British brewing's former heavyweights. Working in and around the old brewery for years gave us an image of what the brewery had been in its prime. The Boilerhouse hinted at the power once generated, the Director's rooms displayed the success enjoyed for so long and the chimney stands like a beacon over all around it.

Our age means that we were not even ten years old when the brewing stopped.

We have no recollection of the beer or the changes and turmoil that prefaced its closure. Our knowledge of the days of merger mania has only come from speaking to those who endured it. Furthermore, we had no idea that in 1873 Truman's was (reportedly) the largest brewer in the world. To us, Truman's simply symbolised all that was great about British beer and its breweries.

Our enthusiasm for Truman's was only heightened by spending many a day in its old pubs. The beautiful wood panelled pubs designed by A.E Sewell were always our favourites. We are yet to find a pub of his that we're not astounded by, but all our efforts to uncover more about his life and work have led to nothing. If any readers can shed some light on this most mysterious of men then we would be much obliged. The Golden Heart and the Royal Oak are the local pubs that bear his mark most keenly. Their walls carry the names of past beers in gold leaf, the fireplaces contain eagle shaped bricks, the bars are faultless and the windows perfectly proportioned. However, trying to analyse the parts does little justice to their whole. Like all good things in life, these pubs have to be experienced to be appreciated.

Being constantly surrounded by Truman's day and night made it feel like it was still alive to us, but it was always missing the most important and obvious element. We realised that if we ever wanted to taste Truman's beer then we were going to have to brew it ourselves.

The first step in bringing back the name was to find it. 21 years had seen it make its way from Grand Metropolitan to Courage and then on to Scottish and Newcastle. By the time we got close it was in the shadow of Heineken. To their owners, it represented little more than trademark papers. The best part of two years passed before we could find our way past the myriad of lawyers and start the process of rebuilding Truman's.

The intervening time was used to fully learn the history of Truman's and the Black Eagle Brewery. Our two sources of information were the London Metropolitan Archives and eBay.

To a former historian, the Archives are a goldmine. Every city or town with an archive should count itself lucky. Archives are the most underrated of resources, priceless to anyone wanting to know how their town, business or family grew to be what it is today. We were very fortunate that some of Truman's records and artefacts found their way to the Metropolitan Archives because little else remains aside from the former brewery and pubs.

The Gyle books were the starting point; there is a book for each year from 1814

to the 1920s, with each brew immaculately recorded in great detail. They gave us a flavour for how Truman's beer had developed with time and we plan to return to them when the moment is right for some recreations.

Next we moved to the accounts and production records of the Black Eagle Brewery. They detailed the facts and figures of the past, but it was the essence of Truman's we were after and this we found in letters and photos.

The letters and papers tell of daily life at the brewery. It is inspiring to see Robert Hanbury's detailed brewing notes in the Gyle books of his years just as it was instructive to read Sampson Hanbury's letter scolding his malt suppliers for the poor quality of their product. It is those high standards that we will look to emulate.

The photos brought Truman's back to life in a wholly different way. Whereas the letters were mostly from the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the black and white images spoke of Truman's in the early twentieth, a time of great change.

The first issues of *Black Eagle Magazine* from the 1930s show images of the brewery at work and at leisure. Photographs from annual sports days, the cooperage and the old wharf are personal favourites as they all contain people of the time. The main body of work is a series of albums containing some 600 photos documenting every single pub in the Truman's

estate (we think they were taken around the 1930s). These albums would make a fantastic exhibition. The time it must have taken to photograph and catalogue each pub must have been enormous, but it is far outweighed by its value now.

If the Truman's materials in the archives have a shortcoming it is that, by and large, they only run up to the interwar years. There are newsletters and papers from the latter decades of the last century, but they somehow do not tell the real story. Our knowledge of these later years has come from the former employees we have met, who without exception have all added to our understanding of what came before and why events came to pass as they did.

Unexpectedly, eBay was important. We discovered a couple of books not to be found in the archives, but more fascinating were the hundreds of different objects, each of which offer a little more insight into Truman's past. A small collection of bottle labels, jugs, signs, mirrors and other items have been amassed and will form the basis of a tiny museum when we move to a new brewery.

Our research into the past has guided our actions now. We've decided to return to the original values of Truman, Hanbury and Buxton and to rebuild Truman's on the principles of quality and professionalism. We will have the same dedication

and approach as our predecessors, brewing beer that can be appreciated and enjoyed by everyone. With time and resources, we hope to innovate as they once did as well as to play an active part in the community both locally and in East London as a whole. To do so properly we will need a brewery, which we do not have. The Black Eagle Brewery has long since past from the hands of Truman's and we must build anew.

Our position now means it was never feasible to build a new brewery from the off. Truman's was never a microbrewery for a lucky few; it was a brewer for East London as a whole. Brewing elsewhere was the only option for the early years; Tom Knox and Nethergate were our first choice. They have helped us produce our first new beer of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, 'Truman's Runner', and their experience and enthusiasm has played a big role in bringing Truman's back.

Beer should always be brewed locally and it has always been our aim to build a new brewery back in East London as soon as possible. The new brewery may never be the size that the Black Eagle Brewery once was, but its beer will be every bit as good. With luck, one day it might even grace the pages of this journal.

*Credit is due to Truman's and Richard Dawson for the following photographs.*





















