

## THE ROOTS OF GEORGE KILLIAN'S *BIÈRE ROUSSE*

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### Introduction

In this article, the origins of George Killian's *Bière Rousse* are reviewed. It first appeared in 1975 and was brewed by Pelforth (today Heineken France) in Lille, in the far north of France. Pelforth claimed for the beer an Irish heritage, specifically of the ex-brewing Lett family, which became the basis of an elaborate, multi-year advertising campaign. It will be shown that before looking to Ireland to identify a suitable brewing tradition, Pelforth already knew the characteristics of the beer it wanted, indeed had such a beer in the market. It will also be revealed that the accepted idea of the origin of the name 'George Killian's' is not correct, and the 'Killian' part did not originate with the Lett family. Further, the question will be raised as to how far a Lett beer recipe was in fact used by Pelforth. Finally, a view will be taken as to whether *Bière Rousse* had justifiable claim to a Lett red ale heritage.

### Release and origins of George Killian's *Bière Rousse*

As noted above, the beer first appeared in France in 1975. The first sales were a test marketing effort conducted in the South-West supported by magazine inserts and spots on *Radio Sud*. As the brand was well received it was released nationwide the following year. Pelforth remained independent until 1980, finally entering the Heineken fold in 1986. Before 1972 the brewery was called Pélican, founded near the port in Lille by three partners in 1921, although its roots stretch back even further, to 1863.<sup>1</sup> Starting in 1954 Pélican transferred some production to a 25-hectare site in Mons-en-Baroeul, a suburb of Lille. The site originally belonged to Brasserie Coopérative, whose principals were a husband and wife from Lille surnamed Waymel. This brewery's fortunes declined after World War II, as Pélican's increased. From the 1950s Pélican progressively purchased the Waymels' interest and enlarged the Mons-en-Baroeul site, which by the 1970s was a Pelforth showcase.<sup>2</sup> Pélican was known for its

light pils 'Pélican', for the brown Pelforth 43 (inaugurated 1937, later Pelforth Brune), and Pelforth Pale (from 1963, later Pelforth Blonde), but issued other labels as well, as still today.<sup>3</sup>

George Killian's *Bière Rousse* claimed an Irish heritage. The label stated in small script 'George Killian Lett' under the image of a horse's head. An early publicity shot at Picclick shows the label and ruddy colour of the beer.<sup>4</sup> In 1974 Pelforth acquired rights to the name George Killian Lett as well as a beer recipe and know-how from a venerable firm in Enniscorthy, southern Ireland, G.H. Lett & Co. The firm, which still goes strong,<sup>5</sup> was then headed by Bill Lett (more on him, and the name, below). G.H. Lett & Co. had brewed in Enniscorthy since the 1860s and was owned at different times by different branches of the Lett family.<sup>6</sup> Brewing ceased in 1956 but the firm continued as a bottler and distributor of drinks including alcoholic beverages.<sup>7</sup> Prior to cessation of brewing G.H. Lett had made two beers relevant to this story, Ruby Ale and Lett Strong Beer, at its historic Mill Park Brewery.

This history, in varying degrees of detail, has been addressed in press accounts, by beer writers, and by both Pelforth and Coors in promotional publications including websites and adverts.<sup>8</sup> Critical interest in the George Killian's brand was begun in the Anglosphere by Michael Jackson in his 1977 *The World Guide to Beer*. He devoted a couple of hundred words to the 'copper-coloured' beer. With Jacksonian flair, he characterized its origins as '... a Gallic-Gaelic conspiracy worthy of Wolfe Tone'.<sup>9</sup> The beer was a great success for a few years, after which sales levelled off, but it is still produced by Heineken France, successor to Pelforth.<sup>10</sup> In his *The Pocket Guide to Beer* (1984) Jackson stated the beer was 16.8 Balling, 1067 OG, and 6.6% abv.<sup>11</sup> Recent labels show the alcohol content is essentially unchanged, and the beer is all-malt, as it was on release.<sup>12</sup> Due to what he considered a questionable Irish pedigree, Jackson edged close to calling the beer a fake in

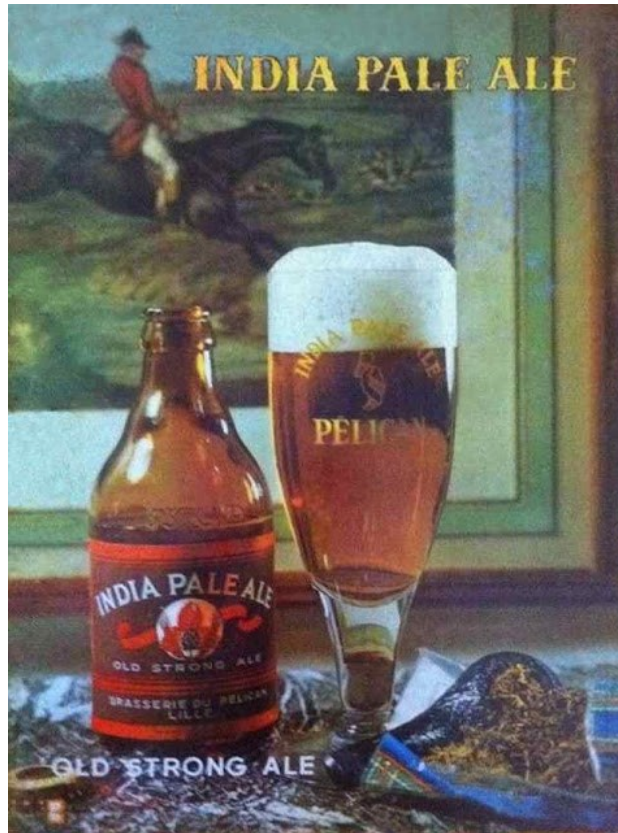


Figure 1. Pélican's India Pale Ale. Source: *Brasseries de Mons* webpage, 'Le Jeu des 7 Erreurs', at <https://brasseriesdemons.blogspot.com/search/label/India%20Pale%20Ale>).

*The World Guide to Beer*, but decided finally it was 'an indigenous French specialty' due to its 'strong, smooth taste' and 'full-bodied', 'malty' character.<sup>13</sup> A lighter and less strong American version, initially called George Killian's Irish Red Ale and now George Killian's Irish Red, emerged in 1981 after Coors acquired the necessary rights from Pelforth.

#### **The French connection; Jean-Rene Ruttinger**

The following examination of the origins of George Killian's *Bière Rousse* uses primarily French sources. Two are especially useful, indeed revelatory, and to my awareness have not previously been considered by beer historians, at least in English. The first is the book *George Killian ou l'extraordinaire histoire d'un gentleman brasseur irlandais, naissance d'un mythe publicitaire*, published in 1990.<sup>14</sup> The author is Jean-René Ruttinger, a French advertising ex-

ecutive who worked for Impact, the Paris agency that devised the George Killian's campaign.

The book is a detailed history of how George Killian's *Bière Rousse* came to be and its subsequent fortunes in the market including for the Coors' version. The book is an excellent read in general, well-written, with many insights, not just on George Killian's history, but advertising techniques and consumer psychology. This paper deals mainly however with the roots of the French George Killian's.

Ruttinger joined Impact in 1965. He left in the late 1980s and in 1990 was working for another Paris advertising agency. If still living he is likely in his mid- or late 80s.<sup>15</sup> The Impact agency had the Pelforth Killian's account for 13 years, from 1973 until 1986. Even before working with Pelforth, Ruttinger had visited Cork in Ireland at the end of the 1960s, to judge a film competition. He was much taken by the country and devotes lyrical lines to things like its



Figure 2. *Bière Rousse* advertisement. Source: French eBay page, 1982 George Killian's advert, at <https://www.ebay.fr/itm/361551410910?mkevt=1&mkcid=1&mkrid=709-53476-19255-0&campid=5338722076&toolid=10001>).

peat-scented air, sylvan countryside, invigorating maritime atmosphere, smoke-wreathed pubs, and warm, genial people. In 1973 Impact won the bidding to create a new brand and publicity campaign for Pelforth. At Pelforth, he worked with two employees, Charley Jonville and Pierre Rius. Jacques Bonduel, a senior executive of Pelforth and son of a Pelforth founder, had overall charge of the project.

Pelforth made it clear to Ruttinger that it already had a beer type in mind, in fact it had a product in the market with the qualities desired, Pelforth India Pale Ale, but it wanted a strong advertising theme built around the beer to support a nationwide launch. Up to 1973, this beer was distributed in *Département du Nord* only, Pelforth's historic regional market. The brand was subtitled (also in English) Old Strong Ale. A rare image appears in the French historical website, *Brasseries de Mons*, the second main source in French.<sup>16</sup> Numerous pages in the site deal with Pelforth brewery history and the origins of both George Killian's *Bière*

*Rousse* and the India Pale Ale. The India Pale Ale shown forms part it appears of a historic group of labels released in 2021 to commemorate Pelforth's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary.<sup>17</sup>

Ruttinger states that the beer's reddish colour, which he sometimes calls amber, impressed his Pelforth contacts, as did the taste and the fact that the beer was all-malt. Jonville and Rius also noted the beer had done well in blind tastings for its category, the premium-priced *bières spéciales*. This category (writes Ruttinger) formed the apex of the French beer market pyramid. At the base were popular-price, low-alcohol beers, the *bières de table*. The middle rank was *bières de luxe*, or beers about 5% abv, consumed in smaller measures. Pelforth wanted to introduce a new product in the apex or top category, which fetched the highest price. Pelforth felt it could not compete as effectively in the other brackets due to competition from brewers such as BSN (full name: Bousois-Souchon-Neuvesel, today Groupe Danone). Whereas Pelforth already had a strong position, 26%, in the



Figure 3. Bouteille de Pelforth 43 Brune (33cl). Etched and embossed label. 'Scotch' as used here was an occasional additional description by Pelforth, really meaning just strong. Source: Jlcavey, Wikipedia Commons [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:AC9A0007\\_s.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:AC9A0007_s.jpg).

special beers, a base it could build on, the more so as 48% of Pelforth's production was in this category, much of it Pelforth Brune.

*Brasseries de Mons* states Pelforth India Pale Ale was especially favoured by students.<sup>18</sup> Ruttinger writes that the fan base was small but loyal, growing only by word of mouth. The thinking was with the right advertising approach the beer had significant potential throughout France. Pelforth India Pale Ale originated before World War II. *Brasseries de Mons* includes comments by the son of retired Pelforth executive Jean Deflandre that Pelforth India Pale Ale had the same recipe as Pelforth 43 except it was not 'caramelized'. Deflandre senior had spent time at an English brewery in Kingston-on-Thames before World War II and developed an appreciation for English brewing, including pale and strong ales. Pelforth 43, which was top-fermented, was one result. The India Pale Ale was another, which the

son characterised as an amber, unfinished Brune – before, that is, caramelization would have turned it brown.<sup>19</sup>

Ruttinger put his mind to work, based on the brief to find a foreign beer with the qualities of the India Pale Ale that was anchored in a genuine local tradition, one around which an advertising campaign could be built. France, and Pelforth specifically, were considered unsuitable for this purpose, as if a notable tradition existed for such a beer, people would be aware of it. European nations were canvassed, with each rejected in turn until Ireland finally was picked. Great Britain was ruled out because its national symbols were too well-known in France, had become clichés (unfairly in Ruttinger's view). He wrote, using English words to emphasize his point, that in France, Britain was '... *les church's et le stilton, le pudding et les bobbies, les horse-guards et la jelly*, and so on ...'. Turning to the Netherlands, he noted Heineken was closely associated with that country, and the

same applied for each *nordique* nation in turn: each had a 'grande bière'. The European southern countries, for their part, were too oriented to wine and sun, not beery enough, whereas it was the opposite for Belgium. Germany had the objection of too close an association with beer festivals and carousing, which were antipathy for the French.

Of all nations surveyed, Ireland emerged as best candidate, for two reasons. First, despite the ubiquity of Guinness stout, it was not associated in France with Ireland since most French people (Ruttinger asserts) thought Guinness was British.<sup>20</sup> Second, advertising campaigns in France had not capitalized on the touristic and cultural attractions of Ireland, so the field was wide open. Ruttinger, too, recalled with pleasure his late 1960s trip to Cork. The prior experience deepened his conviction that Ireland was the right country to find a suitable beer and backstory. In 1974 Jonville travelled to Ireland armed with a list of breweries in both Ireland and Great Britain. First, he met a Guinness executive, J.F. Brown whom Jacques Bonduel at Pelforth knew. After hearing Pelforth's plan, she suggested Smithwick's Ale, which she said presented '*quelques analogies*' [certain connections] with India Pale Ale. The idea was put aside as Guinness made it clear it was offering distribution only, not to have it made in France.

As eight of the surviving ten breweries in the country had links to Guinness, these were non-starters. The other two (Beamish & Crawford was one although not named) were not suitable for various reasons. Jonville had exhausted his list for Ireland. But being particularly tenacious - *il s'excite* in the face of failure, wrote Ruttinger - he plumbed a list of 20 former breweries given him by Guinness to see if one might fit. One reason Ruttinger thought he did this is, Jonville's father had been in the textiles business and seen his business close due to unrelenting industrialization and international competition, just as, wrote Ruttinger, so many artisanal French breweries were forced out of business by large, mass production breweries. Ruttinger thought Jonville was prompted by the desire to restore to commercial life a traditional business destroyed by modern business forces. Jonville went through the Guinness list of ex-breweries but again, most did not work for his purpose, could not be traced, etc. The last on the list was G.H. Lett & Co. in Enniscorthy, Wexford County. Returning to France, he recommended to Ruttinger that they visit. They did so, in July 1974, taking bottles of Pelforth India Pale Ale with them so the head of the firm, Bill Lett (1926-2010) could appreciate the type of beer Pelforth hoped to find in Ireland. Lett extended a friendly welcome and made a good first impression on the visiting Frenchmen. Ruttinger recounted Lett's reaction after tasting Pelforth India Pale Ale: '*Mais, c'est ma bière, s'était écrié Bill, ma Ruby Ale, c'est exactement elle!*'.

[But this is my beer, Bill exclaimed, my Ruby Ale, it's exactly that!]

Ruttinger and Jonville were charmed by Bill, the venerable brewery buildings and old-fashioned office, Bill's wife Phoebe, the family Labrador Mandy, and Bill's overall personality and manner of doing things. On returning to France, Pelforth sent a few cases of Pelforth India Pale Ale to Bill. Bill had them tasted, first by his father George, then brother Jack and sister-in-law Mary, other relations, employees, friends, and friends of friends. All were in accord that it was just like Bill's Ruby Ale. Evidently these tasters were old enough to remember Bill Lett's beer when Bill last brewed it, in 1956.

Bill gave a bottle of his Lett Strong Beer to Ruttinger, garnered from the few cases he had left. It was one of the brands G.H. Lett & Co. made before ceasing to brew. The others were Enniscorthy Ruby Ale and Wexford Pale Ale. An image of the labels may be viewed online in auction sites.<sup>21</sup> In 1990 when Ruttinger wrote the book, he still had the brown, half-pint bottle Bill gave him. He recites details from the label that accord with surviving examples today. In Ruttinger's telling, the Ruby Ale and Lett Strong Beer are not distinguished, other than inferentially the latter was stronger, and closer in ABV to Pelforth India Pale Ale. While Ruttinger does not comment on the colour of the Strong Beer, I think it had to be reddish like the Ruby Ale. If it was not, why did Bill send its recipe? He could have sent the Ruby Ale recipe adjusted for a higher ABV. He didn't need to; his strong beer supplied the need. Notable too is that Smithwick's 1950s-60s Barley Wine, its strong beer at the time, was described in advertising as both 'ruby' and 'beer' (not ale). It is likely that Lett Strong Beer was similar in character, given Smithwick's prominence at the time.<sup>22</sup>

Ruttinger writes that his visit convinced him, '*Avec George William Lett, la bière rousse de Pelforth c'était trouvé un pays, des racines, une tradition, une famille, un père spirituel and nourricier*'. [With George William Lett, the red ale of Pelforth found a country, roots, a tradition, a family, and a spiritual and nurturing father]. He mentions Bill's reddish beard too, that it was an appealing characteristic for the brand image being created. Ruttinger asserts that Lett, based at his 16-room home at the former Mill Park Brewery, projected a natural dignity and respect for those around him and the natural world, in sum an authenticity that suggested to Ruttinger the idea of '*gentleman-brasseur*'. This theme later was much used in *Bière Rousse* advertising, in which Bill played a prominent role. The storylines often resulted from visits to Ireland by Ruttinger and a production team who photographed Lett and his family in atmospheric venues. These visits also inspired lyrics written by Ruttinger for

**SKANDIA FOR IRISH FOODS**

MONKS Bread: white 28c, raisin 33c, and whole wheat 38c loaf	BIRDS CUSTARD ..... 25c
IRISH HAM Dublin (whole) 98c lb.	URNEYS HOLIDAY ASST. .... \$1.39 up
CARRIGEEN MOSS from Tralee Reg. \$1.00 now .. 79c pkg.	CHOCOLATE ..... 39c bot
BONELESS HAM SLICED \$1.39 lb.	WILLWOOD SAUCE ..... 79c B.T.
By Piece ..... 98c lb.	'PS COFFEE ..... 39c per bot.
LIMERICK BACON Sliced ..... 59c 1/2 lb.	New RUBY LEPRECHAUN Barley WINE - BEER ..... 39c per bot.
By Piece ..... 98c lb.	Breakfast MARMALADE 49c & up jar
BLOOD PUDDING ..... 79c lb.	Corning IRISH HONEY 5lb. can \$3.49
BEEF IN GRAVY (Im.) .. 39c Tin	IRISH TEA POTS ..... \$1.69 ea.
BEEF STEW (Imp.) ..... 59c	SWEET APTON Cigarettes 55c pkg.
LAMB STEW (Imp.) ..... 59c	MCCANTON'S Barilla & Collem Soap .... Reg. 29c now 3 for 75c
'RISH STEW ..... 49c	H.P. Sauce reg 39c; our price 29c bot
SODA BREAD ..... 33c ea.	MCCANN OATMEAL reg 79c Our Price 69c ..... 2 lb tin
SCONES ..... 4 for 17c	"MICK McQUAID" Smoking Tobacco ..... 65c
JAMS (Imp-All Flavors) .. 39c jar	SWEET APTON Cig. .... 55c pkg.
BOLANDS FRUIT CAKE \$1.39 pkg	DI LISK (Dulce) ..... 29c pkg.
MCCANN'S OATMEAL 2 lb tin 69c	COMB HONEY ..... 98c box
BISTO ..... 25c pkg.	

**OPEN ALL DAY SUNDAY TO MIDNIGHT**  
**244 FLATBUSH AVENUE, BROOKLYN, N. Y.**  
**PHONE: NE 8-1077**      **Send For Catalogue**  
**LARGE SELECTION OF YOUR FAVORITE IRISH CANDIES**  
**For Quick Delivery Send Check & M. O. Postage Collect**

Figure 6. Skandia advertisement for 'New Ruby Leprechaun Barley Wine - Beer' distributed in the USA. Source: Fulton History Newspapers, *The Advocate*, New York, 30 August 1958, at <https://fultonhistory.com>).

songs, often Celtic tunes, used in radio spots. Some advert narratives and lyrics are reproduced in the book and have a lulling *chanson* sound and rhythm.

Ruttinger states that Bill rued having to abandon the ancestral family occupation, and, working with Pelforth gave him the chance to recover the tradition in a manner of speaking. Correlatively, Pelforth's India Pale Ale, top-fermented and of British inspiration as Ruttinger knew, had located an ideal environment, a sentiment that permeates the book. And so, after steady negotiations in Enniscorthy, Lett, assisted by a cousin who was a solicitor, signed a deal with Pelforth. As noted, he also provided a recipe to Pelforth, with his know-how. According to Martyn Cornell's recent article on Irish red ale, Bill in an early interview told a journalist he sold his recipe for strong beer to Pelforth, not Ruby Ale.<sup>23</sup> This is consistent with Bill providing a sample of Lett Strong Beer to Ruttinger, and likely to Charley Jonville as well.

From then on, writes Ruttinger, the term India Pale Ale was abandoned in the branding, as the name had to be related to the creator of *Bière Rousse*, Bill Lett. In contrast to this account, webpages of the *Brasseries de Mons* site, especially taken together, rather suggest George Killian's *Bière Rousse* was a rebrand of Pelforth India Pale Ale. The son of Jean

Deflandre is quoted in part, '*... on est allé chercher un brasseur Irlandais, George William Lett. Il avait la tête de l'emploi et c'est lui censé avoir inventé la bière sur les publicités*'. [... Pelforth sought out an Irish brewer, George William Lett. He had the right look and is the one credited in the advertising with having originated the beer].<sup>24</sup> The webpage author then expresses the view that the original beer of Enniscorthy had '*aucun rapport*' [no connection] with the George Killian's *Bière Rousse*. Elsewhere in the site, Jean Deflandre, albeit speaking generally, is quoted (2002), "*Il n'y a rien de plus facile que de créer une nouvelle bière, il suffit de changer l'étiquette*". [There is nothing easier than creating a new beer; you just have to change the label].<sup>25</sup> While these statements are quite suggestive that *Bière Rousse* was simply a rebrand, they fall short of proof positive. We need to know what happened in the brewhouses, and these sources, while deserving careful consideration, do not go that far.

In the book, when Ruttinger first introduces Bill, he calls him George William Lett. Ruttinger and Pelforth presumably derived William from the short form, Bill, used by Lett.<sup>26</sup> The French webpages I mention also describe Bill as George William Lett, but do not discuss how 'Killian' in the brand name originated. Bill descended from George Lett,

‘Grandpa George’ in the book. Grandpa George inherited the brewery in 1903 from related Letts who had brewed since 1881.<sup>27</sup> Bill Lett’s father was not a brewer; he was a farmer. Bill’s uncle Charles was the brewer and designated Bill to continue in that role since Charles was childless. With the brewery came the 16-room house Bill inhabited with his wife Phoebe and their children. Bill’s brother Jack (d. 2005) received for his share the Hollyfort farm, called Hollyforth in the book, which had been the seat of Grandpa George.

### Naming the beer

Initially, George William was selected as the name of the new brand. Rittinger felt it ‘rang’ well especially for radio use, and had a generous sound, like its taste. He envisaged hearing in bars the order: ‘*Garçon, une George William’s, s’il vous plait!*’ [Waiter, please bring me a George William’s!]. Pelforth’s lawyers reviewed the legal suitability of the name, but a problem emerged: a Frisian Dutch aperitif was called John William.<sup>28</sup> The lawyers felt this could raise an issue between its producer, Siebrand, and Pelforth even though John William was not a beer. Pelforth was counselled to choose another name. Pelforth tried to buy the John William name from Siebrand, so invested was it in George William, but this was not successful. Rittinger and his associates at Impact researched alternatives and came up with George Killian. They had learned Killian was the name of a saint associated with Ireland, even multiple saints at one time, and liked its sound. The lawyers reviewed the name, and this time gave the green light. So Pelforth added Killian to Bill’s name as it appeared in the first labels of *Bière Rousse* and still does today: George Killian Lett. Rittinger writes, ‘*Nous avertimes alors Bill qu’il disposait désormais d’un prénom supplémentaire, ce qui eut le don de beaucoup l’amuser.*’ [We therefore notified Bill that henceforth he had an additional first name, which greatly amused him].

In fact, it seems even William was never part of Bill’s name. Obituary notices for Bill Lett, who died on 6 December 2010, describe him as George John Lett.<sup>29</sup> The explanation for the nickname Bill appears unknown.<sup>30</sup> A grandson of Bill, born in 1986, bears the genuine birth name George Killian Lett, and as of 2014 was managing director of G.H. Lett & Co. Ltd.<sup>31</sup> Presumably this naming resulted from the notable success of George Killian’s *Bière Rousse*, but in the ascending line and branches above Killian Lett, it appears the name Killian was never used. Countless articles and other accounts dealing with the history of Irish red ale and George Killian’s *Bière Rousse* refer to Bill Lett as George Killian Lett. The reality is quite otherwise. Certainly, the name George Killian worked like an Irish charm once in the market.

Initially, the label for George Killian *Bière Rousse* stated, ‘Irish Top Brewing’ and ‘Red Ale’, not *Bière Rousse*. Due to a consumer complaint, Pelforth was summoned before a government inspector who alleged the label suggested the beer was Irish-brewed, hence was misleading. Rittinger appeared with the company lawyer to argue the contrary. They asserted, for one thing, that the recipe was Irish. The inspector brushed this aside, demanding the label be revised to state Pelforth brewed the beer in Lille. Rather than contest this view, Pelforth decided to change the label to read, ‘*Brassée par Pelforth*’, and ‘*Bière Rousse*’. Rittinger felt this a good result in the end as the new phrases were more comprehensible for most consumers, not as ‘*hermétique*’.

### Last thoughts

As earlier stated, after ceasing to brew in 1956 the family continued in business by bottling and distributing drinks, including beer, made by others. The deals with Pelforth and Coors clearly improved the fortunes of G.H. Lett & Co., perhaps ensuring its survival these last decades. A further result was to bring Mill Park Brewery closer to its roots, as Pelforth ended a kind of surrogate for restoration of family brewing, ditto for Coors later. It was the perfect deal in other words, each side got something tangible from it. Consumers also benefitted. The Irish storyline evidently appealed to them and, no small point, the original *Bière Rousse* received plaudits for its quality. Beer eminence Michael Jackson was most complimentary, while American beer writer James Robertson, in his 1984 *The Connoisseur’s Guide to Beer*, delivered an encomium capped by the phrase ‘fantastic brew’.<sup>32</sup>

In 1983, due to the burgeoning international trend for light beers, the recipe was altered, although an all-malt grist and the brand name were retained. Rittinger’s preference was to introduce a George Killian’s Light, as he thought it would re-invigorate sales, but Pelforth demurred. Coors, for its part, from the start of its license lightened the taste, and reduced the alcohol. Coors later turned the beer from an ale into a lager, although whether the taste was much affected is an open question.<sup>33</sup> Certainly the creation of *Bière Rousse* and its imaginative advertising campaign were striking achievements. British advertising guru David Ogilvy, the ‘Father of Advertising’, even called Rittinger’s work ‘spectacular’, adding the adverts were ‘among the three best in the history of all beer, including British, American and German’. High praise indeed. In the wake of the launch, Impact earned numerous industry awards and yet further accolades, as recounted in the book

At the end of his account Rittinger expressed the wish in poetic phraseology that brewing will one day resume at Mill

Park Brewery, to make Ruby Ale. He thought with the advent of microbrewing this was now feasible. Resumption of brewing would indeed, in many ways, be the logical next step after what Bill, Pelforth with Ruttinger, and Coors achieved, although it has not occurred to date. With the benefit of history, we can see these parties really engaged in proto-contract brewing, the type common in craft brewing today where a family that formerly brewed hires an established brewery to make its beer again. Typically, the family ‘fronts’ the brand, often appearing in personalized marketing.<sup>34</sup> For his time, and given the circumstances he faced, that’s what Bill Lett did.<sup>35</sup>

Yet, from a beer historical standpoint, one must pose the question: to what extent did Pelforth use Bill’s (strong beer) recipe for the *Bière Rousse*, if at all? Likely a clear answer will only be available when brewing records of both breweries for the relevant times can be examined, a prospect that seems unlikely. But this much is clear: Irishman and ex-brewer Bill Lett presented well dimensions of being Irish and of ale drinking. And to all appearances, especially for the first George Killian’s *Bière Rousse*, he promoted a beer in character very similar to beers he had brewed years earlier. In this regard we should remember that India Pale Ale, as a style, originated in the British Isles, of which the Republic of Ireland was long a part. Pelforth India Pale Ale was an outlier in French beer culture ca. 1970. Even should it finally be established that *Bière Rousse* submitted to no or little influence from Lett brewing procedures – that *Bière Rousse* was Pelforth India Pale Ale *simpliciter* – Enniscorthy was a worthy natural home for such beer. In this sense, taking all with all, I say George Killian’s *Bière Rousse* represented well the Letts’ red ale tradition.<sup>36</sup>

## Acknowledgement

Many thanks to Tim Holt for his good advice and assistance to finalise the text of this paper.

## References

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3. See in Heineken France website brand histories at <https://www.heinekenfrance.fr/nos-produits/nos-marques/pelforth/>, accessed 28 September 2021. Other French webpages cited in this paper disclose further aspects of this history illustrated by lavish period photos and evocative *objets*.
4. French Picclick, <https://picclick.fr/PUBLICITE-ADVERTISING-056-1982-Biere-Georges-361551410910.html?refresh=1>, accessed 28 September 2021.
5. See company website at <http://www.ghlett.com>, accessed 29 September 2021.
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7. ‘Irish Red Now Here, But Not In Ireland’, *Chicago Tribune*, 22 March 1990, at <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1990-03-22-9001240194-story.html>, accessed 28 September 2021.
8. See e.g., Molson-Coors’ website, *George Killian’s*, at <https://www.georgekillians.com/story>, accessed 28 September 2021. Also, Jackson, M. (1988) *The New World Guide to Beer*. Philadelphia: Running Press Book Publishers, p.181. For an extended look, Martyn Cornell’s blog post cited in Note 6. There are many other treatments, including in English and French Wikipedia. The website *Beer Food (History) Travel* published by ‘Liam’ contains a recent three-part series on Irish red ale history which is useful for overall context while not touching questions raised by this paper. See the third part (blog post) dated 29 September 2021, which links to the earlier parts, at <http://beerfoodtravel.blogspot.com/2021/09/brewing-history-irish-red-ale-part-iii.html>, accessed 29 September 2021.
9. Jackson, M. (1977) *The World Guide to Beer*. New York: Ballantine Books, Division of Random House, and Toronto: Ballantine Books of Canada, p. 181.
10. See e.g., the current listing for a six-pack at the large supermarket chain Auchan, <https://www.auchan.fr/georges-killian-s-georges-killian-s-biere-rousse-6-5-6x25cl/pr-C1222023>, accessed 28 September 2021. The beer is still available nationwide in France and is brewed at different locations of Heineken France.
11. Jackson, M. (1982) *The Pocket Guide to Beer*. London: Frederick Muller Limited, p.93.
12. See in *Colnect* site, a 2018 label, stating ingredients as water, barley malt and hop extract: [https://colnect.com/en/drink\\_labels/drink\\_label/91434-Biere\\_Rousse\\_Georges\\_Lillians-Pelforth\\_Heineken-France](https://colnect.com/en/drink_labels/drink_label/91434-Biere_Rousse_Georges_Lillians-Pelforth_Heineken-France), accessed 28 September 2021.
13. Jackson, M. (1977) op. cit.
14. Ruttinger, J-R. (1990) *George Killian ou l’extraordinaire histoire d’un gentleman brasseur irlandais, naissance d’un mythe publicitaire*. Paris: Le Pré aux Clercs. All information in this paper pertaining to the Lett family and origination and subsequent course of George Killian’s *Bière Rousse* was sourced from this book, unless otherwise indicated herein.
15. As noted in the text, the book, *ibid.*, states he joined Impact in 1965 and had a varied career earlier, hence the estimated current age if living.

16. See at <https://brasseriesdemons.blogspot.com/search/label/India%20Pale%20Ale>, accessed 28 September 2021.

17. *ibid.*, but see also these related pages: <https://brasseriesdemons.blogspot.com/2002/01/entretien-avec-jean-deflande.html> and <https://brasseriesdemons.blogspot.com/2013/07/lhistoire-surprenante-de-la-biere.html>, both accessed 28 September 2021, as well as the webpage included at Note 25. For clarity, I cite these pages for their discussion of the origin, make-up, and market of Pelforth India Pale Ale and its connection to *Bière Rousse* as well as the practice of Brasserie Pelforth in that period to create new brands by re-labelling existing ones, but not necessarily beyond.

18. See page included at Note 16. (*‘L’India Pale Ale avait un succès relatif dans la région surtout auprès des milieux étudiants’*). Students seem a reliable bellwether of changing beer tastes, as real ale and craft brewing history amply attest.

19. *ibid.* The caramel was a liquid or dry, heated brewing sugar, one of the many types that breweries used then or now, or caramel malt. Today, the label of Pelforth Brune includes as ingredients malt and *‘caramel aromatique’*, the latter likely a liquid dark sugar. The label for George Killian’s *Bière Rousse*, as noted in the text, states all-malt, so indeed a difference between them is the former uses caramel and the latter does not.

20. Ruttinger does not explain this assertion in the book, which possibly is questionable.

21. For Ruby Ale and Wexford Pale Ale, see sixth row down, at <https://www.the-saleroom.com/en-gb/auction-catalogues/loddonauctions/catalogue-id-loddon10006?page=12>, accessed 28 September 2021. For Lett Strong Beer, see in Worthpoint at <https://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/lett-co-ltd-enniscorthy-strong-beer-310423679>, accessed 28 September 2021.

22. See ‘Time’ advert reproduced in ‘Liam’s’ blog post cited in Note 8. Time Barley Wine was Smithwick’s Barley Wine rebadged for a time in the 1960s. In New York, and possibly elsewhere in the U.S., from 1958-1960 a ‘New Ruby Leprechaun Barley Wine - Beer’ was distributed, with the Irish American community in mind. See sample advert in the *Advocate* (New York) 30 August 1958, p.10. Retrieved from <https://www.fultonhistory.com>, accessed 2 October 2021. Seemingly a private label, perhaps bottled by Smithwick’s.

23. See Martyn Cornell’s blog post cited in Note 6.

24. See webpage cited in Note 16.

25. See at <https://brasseriesdemons.blogspot.com/p/bouteilles.html?m=0>, accessed 29 September 2021. The practice described was common in breweries around the world at the time.

26. Perhaps Bill Lett described his name to them as ‘George William Lett’. At the time, and given that few new brands are successful, I doubt Bill Lett would have lingered over such a thing. Given his nickname was Bill, it makes sense he described his name this way to Pelforth and Ruttinger – if he did.

27. See Martyn Cornell’s blog post cited in Note 6.

28. An image appears in this eBay listing: <https://www.ebay.com/itm/323367238181>. The Siebrand firm still exists but this particular brand is no longer marketed to my knowledge.

29. *Irish Times*, ‘Family Notice for LETT George John (Bill) (Brewery House, Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford) - December 6, 2010’, at <https://notices.irishtimes.com/death/lett-george-john/7530705>, accessed 28 September 2021. See also in the *RIP.IE* site a similar notice, dated 7 December 2010, referring to Bill Lett as ‘George John (bill) Lett’, at <https://notices.irishtimes.com/death/lett-george-john/7530705>, accessed 28 September 2021.

30. Martyn Cornell’s blogpost, see Note 6, suggests the nickname Bill helped distinguish Bill Lett from his father and grandfather, both also named George. This seems plausible.

31. ‘Change to Craft Beer Sees Change in GH Lett’s Focus’, *Independent*, 5 September 2014. Ruttinger’s book, published 1990, states of Killian Lett, ‘already born four years now’, so 1986 as birth year is an inference’.

32. Robertson, J.D., (1984) *The Connoisseur’s Guide to Beer*, Aurora, Illinois: Caroline House Publishers, Inc., p.184. Almost certainly the beer he reviewed was the original formulation.

33. The Canadian Alan McCleod compiled as an adjunct to his website, *A Better Beer Blog (Second Gen.)* a list of glosses or corrections to the *Oxford Companion to Beer*. Apropos ‘Irish red ale’, he states in part: ‘Cooor’s brewed-under-license George Killian’s Irish Red Ale initially was brewed with a top fermenting yeast (see Papazian’s *Microbrewed Adventures*) but was later switched to a lager yeast. In 1983, the GABF program described it as using “...a special yeast that leans toward bottom fermentation but works at temperatures above 50 degrees F.”’. See at <https://abetterbeerblog427.com/oxford-companion-to-beer-commentary/articles-i/>, accessed 28 September 2021. ‘Leans’ toward bottom-fermentation and working above 50 degrees F. suggest an attempt was made to match or approach the palate as produced by top-fermentation.

34. A recent example is the revival of the historically significant Allsopp’s pale ale in the UK. Boston Beer Company in the United States with its Samuel Adams brand is another, early craft example.

35. It was unlikely Bill could have found an established brewery in 1970s Ireland to make beer under his label, even had he thought of this, given the massive dominance of the industry by Guinness.

36. And therefore, I differ with Martyn Cornell, who recently characterized the *Bière Rousse* as ‘an entirely bogus style of beer’ (see Note 6). I would add, while the title of Ruttinger’s book includes the words (translating to English) ‘creation of an advertising myth’, ‘myth’ should not be over-emphasized here. The book insists on the primacy of Bill Lett, the ex-brewer Irish gentleman, to enliven the advertising message, on his reality and genuineness in the natural and human world of Enniscorthy and Ireland. The word myth is better understood not as creating an inauthentic story, but more for building a mystique, or legend, around the person of Bill Lett, creator of the *Bière Rousse*.