

A great British beer tour

British tourists on holiday in France often wander into wineries though there is not always a great deal to see before the sampling. Whisky-makers have realised the consumer is curious about the contents of the bottle and there is a good story to be told about their craft, so at least 600,000 people visit Scottish distilleries each year.

Sometimes the entire populations of France and Italy seem to be nosing around Aberlour, Bowmore or Cardhu, or raiding the Glenfiddich gift shop for bottles of whisky, malt-flavoured mustard and marmalade, branded golf umbrellas and tweed jackets. This is good for whisky and wine, tourism and Scotland, but what about England and Wales? Who organizes a bottoms-up in a brewery?

I asked the question of the Brewers' Society and the answer surprised me. The society reckons more than 200,000 people a year visit breweries. Most are in organized groups, though an interested individual who phones in advance can usually be added to one of these parties.

The tours are often on midweek afternoons (Friday is customarily a clean-up day at small breweries). Many, befitting their barley malt and hops in cramped buildings, seem uncertain whether they should be flattered by consumer interest or treat it as a nuisance. Only a few are organised to receive a constant flow of visitors (as the whisky distilleries usually do), but the number is increasing.

Fired by the growing interest in beer, the Brewers' Society is encouraging its members to open their doors to the public. A "Brewery month" has been announced for September, after this year's barley and hop harvest.

I would start the month in the most important barley-growing region, East Anglia. On the borders of Norfolk and Suffolk at Southwold, the pretty Adnams brewery is opening its doors to the public for the whole of next month, though visits must be booked in advance (by letter, to Adnams' Sole Bay Brewery, Southwold, Suffolk IP18 6JW).

When Adnams has run the juices from its barley malt, the spent grain goes to feed the pigs, sheep and cattle on the brewery's

own farm, which will also be included on the tour if visitors have an eye and nose for such arrangements. My own nose is more attuned to the wonderfully aromatic Adnams' Extra and a pint at the Harbour Inn. I would be inclined to make a day of it, and book dinner and a room at the brewery's hotel, The Crown (0502 722275). Adnams also has its own wine shop and kitchen store.

In the waiting town of Bury St Edmunds, monasticism began brewing. Tours of the Greene King brewery fill quickly, but some places are always reserved for booking through the local tourist board (0284 764667). Like most breweries, Greene King offers a sample or two, but has no

licence to sell take-home beers. While you are in Bury, pop into a pub and buy a bottle or three of the brewery's cellar-aged Strong Suffolk to take home for a holy moment. The cellars lead to tunnels where the monks are believed to have hidden in turbulent times.

After the infusion of the barley malt comes the seasoning of hops. In the heart of Kentish hop country, England's oldest brewery, Shepherd Neame, is organising an open house on the bank holiday Saturday, Sunday and Monday. The brewery, in Court Street, Faversham (0795 532206), was founded in 1698, though parts of its buildings are 13th century and others are Georgian and Victorian. The office door is surrounded by mouldings depicting hops.

On those days the brewery will be open to visitors with no reservations necessary (10am-4pm). Like so many of Britain's old established independent breweries, it is full of antique equipment that is still in use. The barley malt meets the brewery's own well water in a teak mashtun such as I have never seen elsewhere. It is probably even older than the bulbous copper kettle which dates from 1897 (if it ain't broke, don't replace it ..).

Families will be welcome and there will be an open day at the nearby Homestall Hop Farm, which grows soft fruits and apples for the pick-your-own enthusiast. There will be dray and tractor rides at the hop farm.

The brewery is also providing a map of the hop-growing district, with a key showing which varieties are grown where. For the less botanically inclined there are the addresses of a dozen pubs, including one or two favoured by hop-pickers in the days before machines did the job.

In the Weald, Kent's other hop-growing district, the Larkins' hop-farm and tiny brewery at Chiddingstone welcomes visitors by appointment on Saturday mornings (0892 870328). The name dates from the farm's owners in 1250 and has nothing to do with any television series. Try the happy Larkins Bitter at the Castle Inn.

In London, once the centre of the hop trade, the Young's brewery is a virtual urban farm with drayhorses, guard geese, peacocks for a spot of colour, and the brewery's (live) ram emblem. Tours must be booked in advance (081-870 0141). If you pop into one of the local Wandsworth pubs afterwards, snap up a bottle of the wonderfully happy Young's Export to take home as an aperitif.

A couple of miles up the Thames at Chiswick, the Fuller's brewery will tack you on to one of its tours (081-994 3691). These end in the 200-year-old cellars, which also house a small bar and museum. You can buy a beer to take home. I recommend a bottle of the strong, fruity Golden Pride to save for a winter's night.

Which is the most interesting brewery in Britain? Candidates must include Brakspear's on the Thames at Henley (with a tasting room full of angling trophies) and Hook Norton, a classic Victorian tower brewery at Banbury, Oxfordshire. Unfortunately the prettiest brewery,

Donnington (with waterwheel, millpond and wild fowl) at Stow-on-the-Wold, is too small to cope with visitors.

And what is the most interesting brew? It could be the one you make yourself. Bass's Welsh brewery is inviting guests to help make beer: if you would like to join in, explain why in a letter to the brewery, to "Brewer for a Day", The Brewery, Crawshay Street, Penarth Road, Cardiff CF1 1TR.

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