

Paul Theakston is brewing again in Masham

Michael Jackson hears what the vicar thinks of the new beer.

Ever since Paul Theakston admitted that he was planning to brew again, and in Masham, we have been wondering what his beer would be like. The first person to sample it was the vicar. His tastebuds were a little numb because he had just been to the dentist, but he did bless the brew. He was back later for a proper tasting, and his full verdict will reach the public of Masham when the parish magazine hits the pews tomorrow.

When it comes to beer, the vicar, Brian Abell ("As with Cain, but with a second 'l'," he says), is not easy to please. His previous parish was Tadcaster, which has a Bass brewery and now both John and Sam Smith's. His new living, further to the north, is on the way to challenging Tadcaster for the title of Yorkshire's beer capital.

There is a small brewery of sorts in the vicarage at Masham: the Reverend Abell home-brews what has been described - in the complimentary sense - as "a mean beer". But the town has long been the home of the famous establishment of T and R Theakston. And now there is Paul Theakston's new Black Sheep Brewery as well. With his own homebrews, the vicar leans toward the strong barley wine he makes to sustain himself, in monastic tradition, through Lent. From Paul Theakston's Black Sheep Brewery, he brews the Special Bitter, he told me on the quiet. In tomorrow's parish magazine, he will "highly recommend" Black Sheep's Best and Special for their "unashamedly old-fashioned, well-hopped bitterness". He reminded me that it was his duty to take special care of the black sheep in his flock. As for the Theakston brewery itself, the vicar has an affinity with its dark, sweetish, Old Peculier.

There are rumours in the town that he plans to offer a bottle of one or more of these beers to the Archbishop of Canterbury, as a memento, when he visits Masham next Saturday.

Not that Masham has ever been over-awed by bishops or deacons or the like, arch or otherwise. As a rich wool-trade centre in medieval times, in the "golden prebend of York", the town established a degree of independence from its diocese. It was thus deemed a "peculier" parish. The Peculier Court of four-and-twenty men (no women allowed) meets twice a year to propose church wardens and dispose apprentice grants to help the youngsters of the parish (a recent benefaction was to a brewery worker).

The Reverend Abell, who chairs these meetings in his role as the Peculier, explained to me that they do not like to waste time on rumination. The object is to get into the King's Head as quickly as possible. The record is nine minutes.

Masham's 2,000 souls have four pubs and a town hall. "Masham is a town, not a village," I was firmly told. It has had breweries for as long as anyone knows, probably since the days of abbeys in the Yorkshire Dales. It stands at the point where the waters of Wensleydale meet the Vale of York, which grows the odd bushel of barley for malting. It would be satisfying to pretend that the "Mash" in the town's name is pronounced as in brewing, but it is not, "Mashim" is the way to say it.

There is still a ghost of a brewery behind the site of the Bull pub and there was probably another attached to the Old Bear. In mid-Victorian times, two tiny freestanding breweries were built, limestone miniatures of industry, each with the same distinctively steep pitch to its nave-like maltings. One belonged to Theakston's, the other to Lightfoot's, and they are a mere half-mile apart, each visible from the other.

Theakston's, beer-makers since 1827, took over Lightfoot's in 1919, closed it - but left it standing. It has since functioned as a maltings and, more recently, as a grain and feed store. Now, it is brewing again, as Black Sheep.

The story of Theakston's and Black Sheep could have been written by any number of Yorkshire novelists. It would begin with a deathbed scene, in which Frank Theakston, stricken with a sudden illness at the age of 45, talked to his son Paul about the importance of brewing and the family's long history in Masham. "It was the kind of serious discussion one has at times of great difficulty," recalls Paul today, still affected by the memory.

Trained as a brewer, Paul became managing director at 23, and is credited with helping ensure the survival of the tiny company. It could no longer meet demand for its products by the time the Campaign for Real Ale was in full throat, and Theakston's bought a second brewery, in Carlisle. To finance its growth, the company introduced outside shareholders, and eventually the family lost control.

When shareholders wanted to sell, a larger northern brewing company, Matthew Brown, and a Scottish distiller, Grant's of Glenfiddich, emerged as possible buyers. If a sale was unavoidable, Paul wanted to go with Matthew Brown, while his cousin Michael favoured Glenfiddich. With the two sides of the family at odds, the affairs of tiny Theakston's from Masham wound up in the High Court in London, debated by famous silks and merchant bankers.

Paul's side won, and he remained at the brewery as Theakston's was acquired by Matthew Brown. A few years later, that company was swallowed by the yet-larger Scottish and Newcastle, which invested in Theakston's, proclaiming it the "jewel in our crown". In 1988, Paul Theakston was offered a job elsewhere in the group.

His father's words, and five generations of family tradition, were not forgotten, however. "I wanted to stay in Masham, and to brew," he recalls. He left, and began to plan his own brewery.

He approached the grain-and-feed company that owned the old Lightfoot's brewery, and told them he wished to buy it. To make it work again, he would need access for malt trucks and drays through property that belonged to Theakston, and he feared that this might be obstructed by the big bosses at Scottish and Newcastle. The seed-and-feed company obtained the access, then sold the premises to Paul.

He raised a million pounds, three-quarters of it under a Business Expansion Scheme, to finance the brewery. When another small country brewer, Hartley's of Ulverston, Cumbria, ceased production, Paul snapped up its cast-iron mash-tun and copper kettle. From Hardy's and Hanson's brewery of Nottingham, he bought second-hand Welsh slate fermentation vessels of the classic, double-deck "Yorkshire Square" design that had been retired in favour of stainless steel.

The Yorkshire Square system makes especially rounded beers, and Hardy's and Hanson's were kind enough to supply their yeast to ensure the perfect marriage.

Black Sheep's head brewer Paul Ambler is a Yorkshireman who trained in Burton-on-Trent. He has chosen barley of the hard-to-find Maris Otter variety, malted in Yorkshire; the hops are Fuggles, from Hereford and Worcester, and Goldings, from the renowned

China Farm in east Kent. Even the dipstick to measure the height of fermentation is the classic ash favoured by stone-square brewers.

To my palate, the Black Sheep Best Bitter is notably smooth and firm, very dry, with a hint of fruity acidity in the finish. The Special has the same characteristics, but bigger flavours, more maltiness at first, then a flowering of resiny hop toward the finish.

These beers are more malty and hoppy, less yeasty and fruity, than those made at Theakston's, and the distinction is intentional. If Black Sheep ever makes a strong ale, it will be different in style from Old Peculier. The idea is to extend Masham's brewing tradition, not to attack its best established brewer.

The deep feelings that divided the family were current a decade ago, Paul emphasised. He took me for lunch with Michael, who is still a director of Theakston's. Michael complimented Paul on the creaminess of his beer, though we drank it as a guest ale on "neutral ground", a John Smith's pub. By this weekend, Black Sheep's beers will be guest ales in about a hundred pubs in Yorkshire as well as the Tap and Spike chain nationally.

As I left Masham and looked back, two plumes of steam were emerging from the roof-tops, rich with the aroma of malt. One came from Black Sheep, the other from Theakston's.

No steam was emerging from the Vicarage. The vicar wasn't brewing. He was putting the parish magazine to bed.

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