

Tested by pigeons, drunk by the landlord

Michael Jackson is toasting Yorkshire Day with a Timothy Taylor's bitter - his Beer of the Month

Timothy Taylor's brewery has won 15 awards and commendations in the past dozen years at the Great British Beer Festival. This week its Landlord Ale, the most persistently prize-winning of its beers, stands to win another in the Champion Beer of Britain competition, which immediately precedes the opening of this year's festival on Tuesday afternoon.

This competition is run by the Campaign for Real Ale but in competitions, judged exclusively by brewers, Timothy Taylor's has won 60-odd honours since the Twenties. When a magazine asked head brewers to name their most admired contemporary, they chose Allan Hey of Timothy Taylor's. The brewery's slogan is "like beer used to taste" and its robust Landlord Ale, full of succulent malt and leafy hops, is my beer of the month and my choice of pint today, which is Yorkshire Day.

If the name is not on every drinker's lips, that could be because Timothy Taylor chose a hidden location for his brewery, founded in 1858. Beyond Leeds and Bradford, in the dale of the river Aire, the little wool town of Keighley is no metropolis, but Timothy Taylor moved a mile farther into the Pennine moors when he married the landowner's daughter in the village of Ingrow. Her family were Methodists, but apparently did not object when Taylor built a brewery there. Taylor's grandson, born John Taylor, knighted, made Lord Lieutenant of Yorkshire and taking the title Lord Ingrow, at 75 is still known as "the boss" at the brewery.

You can still take a steam train from Keighley to Ingrow on the Worth Valley line to Haworth (with Timothy Taylor's beer in the buffet car). Behind what looks like Ingrow city wall, up a cobbled track, is Timothy Taylor's Knowle Spring brewery, its Yorkshire sandstone buildings dating from the 1860s and 1918, with a lawn and orchard (once a northerly vineyard) and the original family house behind.

From the beauty spot of Malham, source of the Aire, water flows about 20 miles through limestone and black rock to a lake under the brewery. "Does the limestone leach more flavour out of the barley malt?" I asked Allan Hey, the head brewer. He agreed that it might, but felt it did more to underpin the resin notes of the hops.

He is a brewer of firm opinions. One is that barley should be sown in spring if it is to make good ale. He is known in the industry for his preference for a variety called Golden Promise, grown mainly for the whisky industry around the Moray Firth. Mr. Hey is comforted by the rain of Scotland. "It makes for a juicy barley, not those steel-tipped grains you sometimes get in England." If you see a tall man with a moustache painstakingly counting out 100 grains of barley

malt on top of a cask and leaving them for the pigeons, you can be sure he knows what he is doing.

Mr. Hey was born into a Yorkshire brewing family and has been doing the job himself for half a century. He reckons there is no better way of establishing the percentage of unsatisfactory malt than to see how many grains the pigeons spurn.

Farmers want to grow varieties that produce the biggest yield, and the big brewers seek barleys that eke out the most fermentable sugar; but, and in so many aspects of life, the greater the volume the lesser the flavour. The marginal savings involved in such "cost-efficient" barleys are significant to a big brewer, but inconsequential to a small one. Several small brewers are concerned about the disappearance of classic varieties: Mr. Hey has at least managed to secure Golden Promise for next season, but he cannot count on it in years to come.

A merchant offered Mr. Hey some winter-grown barley malt. He made a test brew and found it astringent. A member of the Timothy Taylor's boards he served it "at the next board meeting. Said nowt. Board said right away it were no good." Mr. Hey adds hops three times to his beer. The first addition is of the soft Fuggles variety, bought from three or four farms in Hereford and Worcester.

The second addition is earthy, aromatic Goldings from a couple of farmers in Kent. Mr. Hey had a worry there a year or two ago when a farmer, upon whom he relied, relinquished his land to Channel tunnel excavation.

The third dosage is of the yet more aromatic, rounded Styrian Goldings hybrid, grown in Slovenia. Mr. Hey is not the only British brewer to employ this variety, but he is a particular champion of it. "Trouble in Slovenia was a problem last harvest, but they managed to pick them. There were more leaves and branches than usual, but not enough to cause difficulty." He is fond of his open brew-kettle. "i don't like kettles that boil under pressure. It's like using a pressure-cooker for vegetables. They never seem crisp and fresh, and the same is true when brewing beer." When the expanding brewery acquired an additional kettle second-hand, with a lid, he converted it.

Timothy Taylor's has been using the same yeast for at least 30 years. It is a hybrid of the John Smith's and former Oldham Brewery yeasts, and Mr. Hey reckons it produces a beer with a "polished" clarity, firm "mouth-feel" and quenching finish. Open fermenters are used, too.

The brewery has a range of beers, including the malty Golden Best (which I would call a pale mild), a fruity Best Bitter, the toffee-ish Ram Tam (a winter old ale) and a sweetish Porter. Landlord was created in the Fifties when the sales manager, Captain Tillotson MC, said he needed something to sell in the mining areas. Nothing got the coal-dust out of the miners' throats like Barnsley Bitter, from a rival brewery.

Timothy Taylor's Landlord has become a cult beer in Yorkshire, as Barnsley Bitter once was (until it was acquired by Courage and then closed). Alliterative names might help, but the fullness of flavour is what really counts. That barley-sugar maltiness is never cloying; that resinous

hop character offers the perfect edge. They are deftly balanced without canceling each other out. This is more the balance of the fighter versus the boxer. Or the Featherstone Rovers' loose-forward versus the Keighley scrum-half.

I could go today to the Grouse, on the moors above Oakworth, to drink a toast of Landlord Ale for Yorkshire Day. But I think I will go when the rugby league season starts.

Yorkshire Day has its origins in the exploits of a white rose regiment in the victory of Minden, on 1 August 1759 during the Seven Years' War.

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