Brothers, a drink to your legacy

A Scots brewery begun by monks in 1415, is still flourishing

More than one British brewery owes its origins to monks, but none remains as rooted in its beginnings as Belhaven, on the coast in the Royal Burgh of Dunbar - 30 miles north-east of Edinburgh. The monks' ghosts were no doubt in Rabelaisian form last week when Beihaven hosted a festival at which it offered beers from almost all of Scotland's dozen or so breweries.

Those early brewing brothers were Benedictines who lived on the Isle of May in the Firth of Forth until they were granted holdings on the mainland, including five acres at Belhaven. The wells they dug there in 1415 (yielding water almost identical to that at the great brewing centre of Burton on-Trent) and their cellars are still part of the brewery.

After secularisation in the 1500s, the brewery provided beer for the Scottish-French expeditionary force garrisoned at Dunbar Castle with a view to invading England. However, a Scottish thirst to celebrate victories in advance muted their impact.

The present brewery was built in 1719, and is among the two or three oldest in Britain. Boswell said its brew was "the best small beer I ever had". In 1827, an advertisement in the London Morning Chronicle claimed that the Emperor of Austria, wishing to have a Scotch ale in his cellar, had chosen Belhaven. He was said to have called the beer "the burgundy of Scotland". One family owned the brewery for more than 250 years. The last brewer of its line, Sandy Hunter, gave me some of my first lessons (practical, as well as theoretical) in the full understanding of fine beer.

For many years Belhaven also acted as a maltings: germinating and kilning the barley that is widely grown in the Borders and supplying not only its own brewery but also whisky distilleries. Two malting kilns from 1719 are still standing. Malting stopped, and brewing was threatened, as the industry became more centralised.

Mr Hunter still lives in the brewer's house and acts as a godfather to Belhaven, but in the Seventies the business was sold to pub and hotel interests. It was then run by a colourful, incongruous collection of characters such as Fred Pontin, Eric Morley (of "Miss World"), Raymond Miguel (the abrasive brand-builder who ran Bell's), and Nazmu Virani (twice) the last-named, now in jail over the BCCI affair, is remembered with respect at Belhaven but the staff were pleased by a management buy-out last year.

I was shown round Belhaven by Mr Hunter, now 73 but still in the pink. From his whinstone house, built in 1799. We walked through an arbour to a rose garden overlooked by the brewhouse, its walls hidden by pear and peach trees. The steam of a brew swirled and hung sweetly over the garden.

That aroma, unaccountably disliked by some people, is released by the boiling of the barley malt with the hops. Traditionally, Scottish beers have emphasised the sweetness of the malt while English ones have leant more towards the dryness of the hop. Why? Perhaps because the cooler weather of Scotland welcomes a more sustaining pint. Or because Scotland grows a great deal of malting barley but is distant from the hop gardens.

Scottish ales have tended also to use dark malts where English ones might not. Scottish brewers' most typical products are their stronger ales, often identified as 80/- or 90/- after long-forgotten prices per barrel.

A beer named Sandy Hunter's Ale is lightly malty but on the dry side, and beautifully balanced. It has only 3.6 per cent alcohol. Mr Hunter quite likes his beer with a glass of whisky. "If you fancy half a dozen pints, you don't want too strong a beer," he observes.

I might settle for fewer, but go for 80/- at 4.2 per cent, or in colder weather even the odd glass of the 90/- at 8 per cent. As a long-time devotee, I find their toffeeish, nutty, smooth malt character better than ever, and enjoy the subtle balance of hops, though I wonder if that typically yeasty fruitiness (pineapple?) is quite as evident as it once was.

Last week's festival marked the 275th birthday of Belhaven's present business and the beginning of "Brewery Month". Throughout September, breweries all over Britain are opening to the public in what has become an annual industry-wide promotion of "the wine of the country". Belhaven has introduced, probably for a limited run, a Festival Ale, golden in colour, with a light maltiness, an aromatic hop character and a modest 3.2 per cent alcohol. Residents of Scotland and the Borders are advised to enjoy it while the beer, and the summer, last.

Belhaven is offering brewery tours through September. Telephone Mary Henderson: 0368 862734.

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