

Long may the Speckled Hen range free

Michael Jackson's Beer of the Month outlived the Abingdon MG car plant it commemorated and is now in demand all over England

This weekend I intend to leave behind conspicuous consumption, stride out of the house resolved to abstinence, and go for a walk in the country. Only when exercise and fresh air demand it will I have one restful draught of something tasty. My plan is that it will be a pint of Morland's taken on the upper reaches of the Thames, somewhere near Abingdon.

Not every drinker is yet familiar with Morland's. There was probably a brewhouse in the Benedictine monastery at Abingdon in the 1100s, but Morland's has been in business, at first probably as a farm brewery, only since 1711.

The Georgian landscape painter, George Morland (1763-1804), was a member of the family, and that is how brushes and palette come to feature in the trade mark of the brewery. Apparently Morland was a bit of an artist in both respects, and the brewery likes to remember his custom.

Workers' cottages from those days still stand, along with two former buildings with their kiln shapes intact and the active brewhouse, built in 1910-12. The brewery is in the traditional tower design, in which the ingredients are hoisted to the top and flow down by gravity, mingling until the finished beer is casked in the cellar. In red brick, laced with lattice windows and topped with skylights, it makes its own stylish contribution to the architectural flourishes of Abingdon (which used to be the county seat of Berkshire but was somehow ceded to Oxfordshire).

A bigger maltings in the town now supplies the brewery. The water flows from the Berkshire Downs and the Chilterns into wells beneath the building. The barley-malt and water are seasoned with hops (whole blossoms, not pellets or extract) from Hereford, Worcester and Kent. The elements meet in three copper kettles. The smallest of them, a mere 60 barrels, was bought second-hand in 1910, and became the birthplace of Old Speckled Hen.

This creature is a character in the folklore of Abingdon, and had its beginnings with another local industry, MG cars. The nickname Speckled Hen was originally applied to a demonstration model MG with a gold-flecked black body made from cellulosed fabric, produced when the marque moved to Abingdon in 1929.

When the factory celebrated its half-century, the brewery made a celebration ale -- Old Speckled Hen. Because it was created for a 50th birthday, it was made to an original gravity of 1050. This figure is a measure of the density of malt sugars in the brew, but the last two numbers give a clue to the final alcohol. A beer of 1050 will usually have about 5 per cent; Old Speckled Hen

actually has 5.2 per cent. The head brewer, Bill Mellor, says he simply aimed to create a beer of that gravity, with an appropriately full colour and flavour but with the dryness and easy drinkability that is Morland's house style.

It is my view that this characteristic dryness owes a great deal to Morland's two-strain yeast, which the brewery has used for an extraordinarily long time. These strains have been at Morland's since 1896 and are believed to have come from Charrington's now-defunct brewery in Mile End, east London.

Yeast produces different flavours according to the density of sugars with which it is required to work. At this gravity it creates a beer with a complexity of gently pear-like fruitiness and dryish, nutty maltiness. The hop bitterness in the finish is relatively restrained. The brewery workers were reputed to like Old Speckled Hen so much that they decanted off a little to drink, unfiltered and unpasteurised, as "real ale."

The year after the birthday, the MG factory closed and the marque moved back to its original home at nearby Cowley. The brewery kept Old Speckled Hen in its range, but only as a bottled beer and exclusively for its own pubs. Not only small car plants, but also independent brewers, were going through uncertain times. Like many local brewers, Morland's made the expensive mistake of believing that its future lay in the production of lager. This was trumpeted in the company's staff journal as "the recipe for the 21st century." A couple of years later, production of lager was stopped.

Then there were test brews of non-alcoholic beers. Fortunately, this blind alley was abandoned before it proved too costly.

"We realised that the future for us lay in ale, not lager," says the brewery's marketing man, Gerald Pridmore. "We saw that there was a renewed growth of appreciation of cask-conditioned ale. We also became convinced that there was a market for slightly stronger ales, to be consumed by mature drinkers in modest quantities.

"People who regularly drink several pints of an evening may be loyal to their favourite, whether it is an ale or a lager, but the customer for a premium-priced brew is different. He, or often she, has a much wider repertoire. It might be an imported lager one day and an ale the next, depending on the mood. These people drink in smaller quantities but want more distinctive products."

Morland's response was to make its Old Speckled Hen available far beyond its own estate of pubs in the South-east, not only in bottles and cans but also as a cask-conditioned draught. It was launched in October 1990, and from the start, demand has exceeded all expectations. I am delighted to welcome it as my Beer of the Month.

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