Standing on the shoulders of giants

30/06/2024 by Roger Protz

Opinion

A merger has been announced that, for once, is good news for beer drinkers. It will ensure the future of an acclaimed brewery and it will revive historic beers in Burton-upon-Trent. As I reported last month, the breweries are Burton Bridge and Heritage. I’ve now spoken to the manager of the merged company and can put flesh on the bones. Burton Bridge opened in 1982 and has been run by Geoff Mumford and Bruce Wilkinson for an astonishing 43 years. They have Burton beer in their DNA. They worked for Ind Coope in Burton and were involved in designing the recipe for Draught Burton Ale, the only beer brewed by a national brewer that has won the Champion Beer of Britain award. At Burton Bridge their range of beers included Stairway to Heaven, Golden Delicious, Bridge Bitter, Burton Porter and Bramble Stout. After the hard slog of mashing and boiling for 43 years, Geoff and Bruce were keen to retire but they were adamant they would only sell to a trusted partner. It has come in the shape of Heritage, owned by Planning Solutions that ran the National Brewery Centre on land owned by global brewer Molson Coors. The brewing plant was first called William Worthington and specialised in reviving old Bass beers such as a cask version of Worthington E along with Charrington IPA and Offilers' Bitter. Molson Coors owned the Worthington brand name and wouldn’t release it or allow the brewery to make the legendary 19th-century IPA Worthington’s White Shield. As a result, the name of the brewery changed to Heritage and head brewer Steve Wellington, now retired, brewed a beer called Masterpiece (5.6 per cent) that is White Shield in draught form. Molson Coors closed the brewery centre in 2022 and Heritage had to look for a new site, which will be at Burton Bridge. Emma Cole of Planning Solutions is the manager at Burton Bridge, and she has recruited Al Wall from Cloudwater in Manchester as head brewer. He has quickly made his mark by winning second place for his Spring Ale in the annual Burton Ale Trail competition. “I am standing on the shoulders of giants,” he said, “and I know I can make some great beers here.” Cole said new brewing kit will be installed as the Burton Bridge equipment is past its sell-by date. She stressed many of Geoff’s and Bruce’s beers will continue to be brewed and she will add Masterpiece among other Heritage ales. “The recipe for Masterpiece has changed a bit over the years and I need to go back to find the original one,” she said. She plans to revive Burton Bridge’s Empire Pale Ale (7.5 per cent), a bottle-conditioned beer that was Geoff’s and Bruce’s great love and cemented their relationship with Burton-upon-Trent. It won CAMRA’s champion bottle-conditioned beer award in 1997 and it’s brewed in the Burton 19th-century tradition with just pale malt and brewing sugar, with no darker grains. The hops are English Challenger and Styrian Goldings from Slovenia. Before the beer was bottled it was aged in cask for three months at the brewery to replicate the length of a sea journey to India in Victorian times where the Raj, the top echelon of civil servants and army officers, demanded a pale and refreshing beer. Cole said she also plans to bring back Bass’s P2 Stout and will also brew some barrel-aged beers. Michael Stickland of Planning Solutions said: “The merger opens the door to new opportunities and sets the stage for innovation in the brewing landscape. Watch this space for exciting developments.” One of the developments is under wraps at the moment but if it comes to fruition, it will restore a historic method of brewing that will once again make Burton the capital of beer. As the man says, watch this space.