Prepare to engage the enemy

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Opinion

There is a moment in the very wonderful film Star Trek: First Contact when Captain Picard picks up his phaser rifle and declares, with all the Shakespearean gravitas that actor Patrick Stewart can muster: “Not again. The line must be drawn here. This far. No further!” It feels to me, after attending the latest Cask Seminar, that real ale urgently needs to find its “no further” moment. Cask sales have been going south for decades. My always-handy BBPA Statistical Handbook tells me that cask ale and stout accounted for almost 17 per cent of draught beer sales in 1980, with that figure down to 6.6 per cent in 2019. The situation has worsened post pandemic. Speaking at the seminar, John Malone of Greene King quoted a figure of 18 per cent fewer pubs serving cask beer since the industry reopened. Quality – or rather lack of it – goes to the heart of the issue, with Malone reporting that 70 per cent of cask drinkers say they’ve been served a bad pint post-pandemic. Which ought to be shocking, but really isn’t any more. Paul Matthews of Timothy Taylor revealed that, when planning a recent visit to London for the brewery’s board, he decided that fewer than half of the 10 pubs selling the capital’s highest volumes of Landlord could be trusted to serve a quality pint. Again, shameful, but really not unexpected. Paul Nunny of Cask Marque said significantly fewer pubs are putting themselves forward for audit, which we can presume is because they either no longer stock cask ale or have little or no confidence in the quality of their product. One could go on, but the fact is, 50-plus years since CAMRA was formed specifically to champion cask ale, and 25-plus years after the brewing industry set up Cask Marque specifically to improve and audit cask beer quality, both sales and quality are going backwards at a rate of knots.        Nunny told the seminar he believes cask is on the way to becoming simply a niche product, while beer writer Pete Brown suggested the future lay in a far smaller number of ‘cask shrine’ pubs, and a few towns where a thriving cask culture remains. Is that it? Do we keep, as Captain Picard would have it, falling back and allowing the enemy to capture more ground? Or do we draw the line here? It seems any fightback is going to have to come from grassroots rather than the beer industry. The Drink Fresh campaign, which was trialled last year, won’t be going ahead due to lack of sector funding. Anyone who recalls similar now-defunct campaigns such as Beer Naturally, Beautiful Beer and There’s A Beer For That will be wholly unsurprised at the big brewers’ unwillingness to put their hands in their pockets. There’s no magic bullet, but things that did emerge from the seminar were that active and engaged CAMRA branches, smaller craft brewers producing interesting cask beers, pub operators prepared to invest in training and dispense quality, and consumers willing to pay a fair price for a fresh, artisan pint, are all proven to make a difference. If cask is going to thrive, we’ll have to save it one pint at a time. Prepare to engage the enemy.