Carlsberg’s wrecking ball swings again

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Opinion

Carlsberg is wrecking Britain’s brewing heritage. Not content with closing four ale breweries, it has now turned the blow torch on a raft of beers, several of them of historic importance. The Danish lager giant calls itself the Carlsberg Marston’s Brewing Company, but Marston’s has sold its brewing interests to the Danes and has become a pub company. Carlsberg controls the group’s brewing side and has closed or plans to shut the Banks’s, Jennings, Ringwood and Wychwood plants. It says it will invest in its one remaining ale brewery in Burton-upon-Trent, but it was a racing certainty that an expanded Marston’s plant wouldn’t be big enough to take on all the group’s beers. Last month the grim reaper struck. The following beers will be axed: Banks’s Mild and Sunbeam, Eagle IPA and Bombardier, Marston’s Old Empire and 61 Deep, Jennings Cumberland Ale and Ringwood Boondoggle and Old Thumper. It’s difficult to believe that any company with half a brain could kill off beers of such importance. Banks’s Mild (3.5 per cent) was once the biggest beer in the Black Country, accounting for 60 per cent of the Wolverhampton brewery’s output. Old Thumper (5.6 per cent) was first brewed at the Ringwood brewery in Hampshire. It was launched in 1978 by Peter Austin, who was called the father of the British beer revolution. He went on to build small breweries in the United States, France and even China. When his Old Thumper won CAMRA’s Champion Beer of Britain award (CBoB) in 1988 it caused a storm of interest and put small independent breweries in the spotlight. A sensible company would cherish such a great beer, but Carlsberg is sending it down the Orwellian memory hole. Bombardier (4.3 per cent) came originally from the Charles Wells brewery in Bedford. It was enormously successful, promoted on television in advertisements featuring Rik Mayall and Bob Mortimer. It became one of the top 10 premium cask bitters but here comes Carlsberg: open the hatch and down the sluice. The death of Marston’s Old Empire (5.7 per cent) is especially painful as I was involved in the beer’s development. Marston’s had been brewing in Burton since 1834, but it never joined the rush to use the mineral-rich waters of the Trent Valley to brew an India Pale Ale.  It belatedly filled the gap with Old Empire and asked me to taste several trial brews. It was made with pale malt and classic Fuggles and Goldings hops, with some American Cascade. My advice after every tasting was “use more hops”. While the finished beer was, to my mind, lacking some of the bitterness of a true IPA, it was nevertheless a fine tasting beer, available in cask and bottle-conditioned formats. A launch in 2003 created considerable media interest, including being featured on TV. You would think, given the enormous fascination with IPA and especially those brewed in Burton, that it would be cherished and promoted. But no – open the plug hole. It could be argued – and I have some sympathy with the case – that beers such as Old Thumper, Bombardier and Old Empire should have remained true to their original breweries. But with some tender loving care in the right hands, they could have been saved for beer lovers to appreciate. Sadly, the “right hands” and Carlsberg are terms that don’t sit comfortably together. The Danes are not alone in causing havoc in the brewing industry. Heineken has closed the Caledonian brewery in Edinburgh, home to another CBoB winner, Deuchars IPA. Molson Coors has shut the beer museum in Burton and “rested” – a euphemism for killing – Worthington’s White Shield, an original Burton IPA from the 19th century and a winner of many CAMRA awards for bottle-conditioned beer. The aim of the global brewers is simple: to sell the same fizzy liquids throughout the world, beers with a long shelf life that require little or no skill to maintain and serve. The brewers have no patience with cask ale that, in sharp contrast, demands well-honed cellar techniques and stays in drinkable condition for only a few days. Carlsberg’s argument that it has been forced to close breweries and axe brands as a result of falling demand for cask beer is fallacious. From Timothy Taylor and Theakston in the North, Thornbridge in Derbyshire and down to St Austell in Cornwall – along with many other independent brewers – the message is the same: cask has recovered from Covid and lockdowns and is prospering.  If you brew cask beer with passion and commitment, people will drink it. But the globals command a frightening 90 per cent plus of the British beer market and action is needed to stop their destruction of our brewing history and heritage. Governments can and should intervene. In many countries beer and other alcoholic drinks are protected. In Belgium, which is similar to Britain in having a rich tradition of historic beer styles, the lambic beers of the Brussels region are protected by both Belgian and EU ordinances. The famous ales brewed by Belgian Trappist monks have a seal of approval to stop them from being swamped and obliterated by commercial “abbey beers” with little or no religious traditions. In both France and Italy, wines are rigorously protected and given strict regional status. French cheese even gets government appellations. Surely if a lump of French brie can get official support and protection, then the British government should use its clout to defend traditional breweries and cask ales. It was the Department of Business and Trade that introduced the Pubs Code to protect publicans from the bad practices of the giant pubcos. The department has the muscle to challenge the global brewers and must be lobbied hard to act. In the meantime, you will be relieved to learn that Carlsberg says it’s committed to cask beer. And pigs are flying over Banks’s brewery in Wolverhampton.