Goodbye to all that – it didn't last long

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Opinion

So, RIP Carlsberg Marston’s Brewing Company. It didn’t last long. Formed in 2020, like Monty Python’s famous parrot, it is no more and has gone to meet its maker. In January, the Danish giant bought the soft drinks company Britvic for £3.3bn. It’s one of the biggest mergers in the British drinks business and gives Carlsberg control of Pepsi Max, 7UP, Tango, Robinson’s and R White’s. That’s Robinson’s orange juice, not the family brewer in Stockport, you’ll be relieved to hear. The merger has created Carlsberg Britvic, the UK’s biggest supplier of fizzy drinks, including lager, to pubs and off-trade supermarkets and stores. Marston’s, a once-famous Burton brewer of fine beers, is now a pub company and just a sad footnote to British brewing history. In the short life of CMBC, Carlsberg – which chaired the company and controlled 60 per cent of the shares – closed or planned to close Banks’s, Jennings, Ringwood and Wychwood breweries. In common with Heineken, which has shuttered Caledonian in Edinburgh, the reason for the closures is Carlsberg’s mantra that sales of cask beer are in free fall. The Danes and the Dutch should listen to Sir Tim Martin, boss of JD Wetherspoon, who said last month that “real ale was rocking” in his pubs. It’s the same encouraging message when you turn to independent brewers. In Yorkshire, both Timothy Taylor's and Theakston say sales of cask have recovered from Covid and are on the increase. Taylor's says it’s selling more Landlord and other beers than before the pandemic. In the Peak District, Thornbridge reports that most of its production is cask and sales are strong, aided by the adoption of a Burton union fermenting system acquired from Marston’s and axed by Carlsberg. In Suffolk, Greene King has launched a series of Fresh Cask Releases seasonal beers for 2025 and is preparing to build a new brewery in Bury St Edmunds at a cost of £40m. It’s now the undisputed biggest cask beer brewery in the country. In a similar vein, Shepherd Neame in Faversham, Kent, has a monthly series of Cask Club beers alongside its regular ales Master Brew, Spitfire and Bishop’s Finger. Both Greene King and Shepherd Neame have large pub estates, and they are supplying them with regular and seasonal cask beers as a result of genuine consumer demand – a concept lost on the likes of Carlsberg and Heineken. The closure of Banks’s brewery in Wolverhampton defies logic. It’s capable of producing 100,000 barrels a year and is considered to be the giant of the Black Country, famous for its mild and bitter. When all the closures are completed, Carlsberg will own just one brewery in Burton. Even with planned expansion, it won’t be able to cope with all the beers once produced by the Marston’s group, so many much-loved beers from Jennings and Ringwood will go down the memory hole. Molson Coors, an American-Canadian conglomerate that owns Carling lager, has also wielded the axe. It has “rested” production of the famous bottle-conditioned Worthington’s White Shield at a time when IPA as a style is enjoying a world-wide renaissance. It has no interest in the beer but refuses to sell it to independent brewers who would like to take it on. It has also pulled the shutters down on the National Brewery Centre, a museum that traces the history of brewing Burton and the wider country. Britain now lacks a museum devoted to the traditions of beer making, its deep roots in society and our unique styles of ale. The closure of the centre meant the Heritage brewery had to leave the site where it recreated old Bass and Worthington beers, including a cask version of Worthington E. It was keen to take on White Shield, but Molson Coors was obdurate in its determination to own the beer but no longer produce it. Heritage has now merged with the Burton Bridge brewery and has found a new home. Another victim of Molson Coors has not been so fortunate. The Leinenkugel brewery in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, in the United States, is 157 years old. It was founded in 1867 by Jacob Leinenkugel from Germany who chose the site in Wisconsin as the soil was ideal for growing both grain and hops. The brewery produces traditional German-style lagers, including pale, dark and Oktoberfest, as well as a range of shandies. In 1988, the family made the serious error of selling the company to Molson Coors on the assumption the group would continue production at the original site. But MC announced last month it was closing Chippewa Falls and would move the beers to its main plant in Milwaukee. Jake and Dick Leinenkugel, the sixth generation of the family, contacted MC and said they were prepared to buy back the plant. They have not had the courtesy of a reply. The global giants are on a mission to centralise production in a few large centres and to weed out any beers that are not mainstream lagers. In Britain we are losing not only cask ales but also vital elements of our brewing heritage. I would remind the managers of the Marston’s non-brewing pub company of the medieval saying: “He who sups with the devil hath need of a long spoon”. Since writing this column, Jennings brewery has been acquired by two local entrepreneurs who plan to restart brewing at the site. read the update here.