Return of an old friend

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Opinion

The first time I drank Boddingtons Bitter I refused to leave the pub. I was in Hyde on the edge of Manchester, en route for a meeting with the graphic designer of the Good Beer Guide. I was late for the meeting as I stayed in the pub for just one more pint. I lived and worked in London at the time and had access to such fine beers as Fuller’s and Young’s. But Boddingtons was something different. Graham Lees, one of CAMRA’s founder members who hails from Manchester, put it succinctly: “Boddies is best.” It was the beer that made strong men weep. When there were regular breakouts from Strangeways Prison in Manchester, the joke was that the prisoners were trying to get into the neighbouring brewery to find some decent beer. The brewery dated from 1778 and became Manchester’s biggest beer producer. In 1902 it brewed mainly mild but that had changed dramatically by the 1980s when bitter accounted for 90 per cent of production. Boddingtons made the classic mistake of getting too big for its boots and attracting interest from national brewers. In 1982 it bought the Oldham brewery and two years later it took over Higsons of Liverpool. It then owned 530 pubs, the biggest estate in the North-West. In 1989, with members of the Boddington family losing interest in running the brewery, it was sold to Whitbread. The national giant grew production to 850,000 barrels a year and Boddies vied with John Smith’s and Tetley as the top-selling cask beer in the country. When Whitbread left brewing in 2000 it sold the company to the Belgian group InBev, best known for Stella Artois lager. When InBev became the world’s global beer maker AB InBev the writing was on the wall for Boddingtons. Strangeways closed in 2004 with keg and can versions of Boddingtons moved to the Samlesbury plant in Lancashire. Cask Boddies was brewed briefly at Hydes brewery in Manchester but then disappeared. It’s wonderful news that revered Manchester brewer JW Lees is to restore Boddies Bitter for Mancunians and drinkers further afield. I was told by Peter Laws, the former head brewer at Strangeways, that the sublime taste of the old Boddies was the result of pale malt being blended with a special syrup made for the brewery by Tate & Lyle in London, once famous for its Golden Syrup. When Tate stopped making syrups, Boddingtons switched to using cane sugar. The end result was a symphony of rich, honeyed malt and generous hop bitterness from Fuggles, Goldings and Whitbread Goldings. I look forward to tasting the new version. I shall pause at a suitable pub in Hyde and refuse to leave until I have had my fill of this – hopefully—still divine delicious golden ale. The news is not so good for Young’s Bitter and Special. The Wandsworth brewery in South London ranked high in the affections of beer lovers. In the dire days of the keg counter-revolution in the 1950s and 60s, the Young family had stayed true to cask. It reaped a rich reward from the 1970s when CAMRA boosted the fortunes of the cask sector. But as with Boddingtons, the Young family lost interest in brewing and closed the plant in 2008. It still owned the beers and needed them for its large pub estate. They were brewed for a few years at the Charles Wells brewery in Bedford, with Ken Don, the former head brewer at Wandsworth, overseeing the transfer and ensuring the beers were still made with the finest Maris Otter malting barley and Fuggles and Goldings hops. As with Boddies, Young’s drinkers revelled in the superb balance of rich malt and spicy hops the beers offered. The quality was maintained at Bedford but when Wells sold the plant to Marston’s the beers moved to Banks’s brewery in Wolverhampton and went into a downward spiral. Frantic activity followed. A merger formed the Carlsberg Marston’s Brewing Company. With Carlsberg the major shareholder, all the Marston’s breweries were closed or will close, leaving just the Burton brewery, where the Young’s beers will finally reside. Thankfully, Jennings, the former Marston’s brewery in Cumbria, has been saved by locals. CMBC didn’t last long. Before you could blink, a further merger created Carlsberg Britvic: Euro fizz meets soda pop. Marston’s is now a pub company, its Burton brewery owned by the new Carlsberg group. The current versions of the Young’s beers are a travesty of the great Wandsworth ales. They are called London Original (3.7 per cent) and London Special (4.5 per cent). Leave aside the absurdity of calling beers brewed in Wolverhampton “London”, the end results are distinctly shabby. Original is drinkable but bland while Special is syrupy, lacking any distinctive hop character. It’s also too dark, part of the absurd trend to call bitters and pale ales “amber”. I emailed Young’s chief executive Simon Dodd telling him of my distress at what had become of his beers. I suggested he should buy them back from Carlsberg Britvic and have them brewed by a more supportive company: Sambrook’s, which occupies part of the old Young’s brewery, would be the perfect fit. Mr Dodd didn’t reply but he could afford to buy the brands. In 2023 Young’s paid £162m to buy the City Pub Group, growing its estate to 279 pubs. Young’s is not short of a bob or two but is clearly not bothered by what Carlsberg Britvic brews in its name. It’s a tragedy but, Bacchus be praised, Boddies is back.