Veteran breweries celebrate milestone

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Opinion

Born in the USA was released by Bruce Springsteen, the UK miners’ strike ends, EastEnders premieres on the BBC and Roger Moore’s last Bond film, A View to a Kill, hits cinemas. There was plenty happening in 1985, so you would have been forgiven for not necessarily noticing the foundation of a couple of small independent breweries at the time. In 2025, however, they are hard to miss as they are businesses which have now become true pillars of the industry. Yes, Wye Valley of Herefordshire and Titanic of Staffordshire are both celebrating their 40th anniversaries this month, with a brace of epic parties being held to mark the milestone birthdays. Wye Valley brewery was founded by Peter Amor. He had started his career as a lab technician for Guinness at the Park Royal brewery in London, then moved on to shift brewing for a number of years. Deciding to move out of the capital, Amor found a job with Bulmer’s cider before determining to go into business for himself. Working with a partner, Amor set up the Abbey brewery in Nottinghamshire. It never really got off the ground, so he took the kit to the Nag’s Head in Canon Pyon and the Wye Valley brewery was born. After a short time, brewing was moved to the old stable block of Wye Valley’s first pub, the Barrels, in Hereford. From 10 brewers’ barrels at the Nag’s, the brewery was now able to produce 110 barrels a week. The business remains in the hands of its founding family. After a pupillage at Young’s, Peter’s son Vernon joined the brewery in 1997 and became MD in 2002. Under Vernon’s leadership, and thanks to his careful eye for quality, Wye Valley has grown astronomically. That growth was facilitated by the business’ last move, to a nine-acre former cider mill in Stoke Lacy, also in 2002. That gave it room for manoeuvre for a while, but a new brewhouse was built in 2013 that was bigger and more sustainable, with a solar array installed into one of the neighbouring fields in 2015. Now the brewery is producing more than 1,000 barrels a week and continues to expand as well as to invest in renewable energy. For many people, the quintessential pint from Wye Valley brewery is Butty Bach – named after the Welsh phrase meaning “little friend”. It has won Beer of the Festival three times at the Great Welsh Beer Festival as well as picking up many regional awards for the best premium cask bitter. However, since its launch in 2022, its nitro stout, Nightjar, has been threatening to steal some of Butty’s limelight, seeing a 100 per cent sales growth in a year over 2024 and now being stocked in more than 100 pubs in the West and Wales. Titanic brewery’s story is no less dynamic. It was founded in Burslem, Staffordshire, by pub landlord, John Pazio, who wanted to offer some more interesting beers to his customers. He named it in honour of Captain Edwards Smith, the captain of White Star Line’s Titanic, who was born in Stoke-on-Trent. Brewing began at the Travellers Rest in Middleport with Premium, a best bitter, that would later evolve into Anchor. Keith Bott began his brewing career with Titanic in the early years, and then bought the brewery with his brother David in 1988 when Pazio was sadly no longer able to continue with the business. After a spell in Dain Street, Middleport, the brewery was next moved to Harvey Works on Lingard Street in Burslem in 1991. The final move to Callender Place, also in Burslem, took place in 1991 where the business was able to install a 50-barrel brewery. Like Wye Valley, Titanic has built up a small but popular tied estate including traditional pubs like the Bulls Head in Burslem and Roebuck in Leek, as well as a chain of eight “bod” cafe bars which span from Alsager to Lichfield. While Titanic is celebrated for the wide range of beers it produces, the release of its Plum Porter in 2011 was a watershed moment for both the brewery and the industry. A genre-defining speciality beer, the fruit-infused porter was intended to be a one-off seasonal release but is now a key part of the core range, having won many awards and attained the status of a true classic in many cask ale drinkers’ eyes. It seems safe to say that a sharp focus on quality, a hands-on approach by the brewery owners and the development of a popular tied estate have all played a key role in the success of these two businesses. But it is notable that they also share a commitment to traditional beer styles, while also being unafraid of innovation and modernisation, which may help to explain their longevity. Also celebrating 40 years in 2025 is the Isle of Man microbrewery, Bushy’s, which first brewed Bushy’s Ale in November 1985 in the cellar of what was to become Bushy’s brewpub on Victoria Street in Douglas.