

Scottish Hopping To Real Ale

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Like most men, I struggle with my primal self. It's genetic. Put in Freudian terms, the battle between my id and my superego can be epic. And in the age of #metoo, the dilemma has grown. The pendulum has swung too far. One aggressive move and a man's career can derail. I feel the walls closing around me, my room to move shrinking. My instincts to bed every woman I see are reducing from a king-sized mattress to a cot, the size of which I only remember from a tour in Iraq. Today's rules put men like me in the equivalent of a feminazi re-education program instead of ceding to my genetic makeup and behaving like that great seducer, Don Juan. I'm not boasting here, but there are times when I've given the legendary womanizer a run for his money, especially in the days of internet dating.



But I'm here to discuss beer. One specific type of beer: cask ale. Since cask ale is its best in the United Kingdom our journey was to Scotland. We started in Newcastle, England, immediately jumping a train to the town of Whitley Bay. Located ten miles northeast of Newcastle, Whitley Bay was a jewel, which I could see even in the emerging days of winter. Sandy beaches spread from a boardwalk that overlooked the North Sea. Even with the cold winds of early December, people strolled or jogged along the boardwalk. Given the weather, there were no bikinis to admire.

With the 1980s decay of England's coal industry and the subsequent loss of jobs, Whitley Bay had become a seasonal tourist resort. Since we were there to meet locals,

December was a good month and I pushed the thoughts of bikini-clad babes on the boardwalk from my thoughts and settled in to enjoy the beer.

Our guides, the Blokester and Mr. Wetherspoon, were essential in that regard, as was the 2019 publication of the Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA)'s Good Beer Guide the Blokester carried. I admit to times when I wondered if the Guide was even needed, however, as our English companions were lifelong CAMRA members and relied on their memories more than on the essential book for the location and evaluation of real ale.

Real Ale

I should explain here that cask ale and real ale mean the same thing: beer brewed and fermented, then put into a cask for its final carbonation. It is generally served via a hand pump. Real ale has lower carbonation level than keg beer and the carbonation is natural due to a small amount of fermentable sugar added to the cask before capping. This differs from keg beer, which is force carbonated and served at a colder temperature.

Real ale is also generally lower in alcohol, with most examples hovering around 4% alcohol by volume (ABV). This enables the drinker to consume more. While inevitably getting a little squiffy

from the alcohol, he won't get so spannered that he loses his shoes on the way home, something that happened to me on my last trip to Germany after too many liters of rauchbier. A lower alcohol is also beneficial in performing for a woman, something I'm genetically designed to do.

True to form for los Testigos de Cerveza, the traveling group I was a part of stopped for a pint of the cask before checking into the hotel. The Phoenix Tap, a local pub with a small brewery added to it, had a wonderful Bitter on. Spanish City Blonde, at 4.2% ABV, was light, hoppy, and delightfully drinkable. Brewed by Whitley Bay Brewing, the brewery had relocated into the impressive former bar/ hotel where we now drank.

British Blonde ales are different than in my country, where they are often a transition beer for those who don't really like beer. In the UK, a Blonde is worth drinking and this one was a welcome cure for the jet-lag we felt. It was also a good introduction to the beer style for the two real ale novices we'd brought on the voyage.

Hours later we dropped our luggage at the local Premier Hotel, a favorite of Mr. Wetherspoon and part of a chain which I cannot complain about given the price and cleanliness. I ordered my own room, of course, something I'd learned to do on previous Testigo voyages given the vast amount of snoring and snorting of the group's members.

Once back in downtown Whitley Bay, we headed to Left Luggage, a small microbrewery that served several beers made on premise. I drank the porter, a chocolatey (not roasty!) delight that at less than 4% ABV, was extremely drinkable. It was at Left Luggage that I first encountered what I was to see in numerous microbreweries throughout England and Scotland: a slapdash brewing system more closely resembling an over-sized home brew getup. The brewing equipment had been made for some other industry like dairy or pharmaceutical. No buttons activated anything, no rakes pushed spent grain out of the mash tun, and the fermentors were un-jacketed. Yet many of these glorified home brew systems were making good beer. This observation made me feel right at home as I'm proud to say that I make stellar beer on a primitive system, proving that it doesn't take bells and whistles.

Cask Rejection

By the end of our voyage's first evening, it was apparent that the two novices we'd taken on the voyage didn't enjoy cask ale like we did. That was understandable. They had never drunk it and needed time. You can't simply come from America, where cask ale is rare, and be expected to change instantly. Add that to the fact that despite its artisanal beer boom, the UK holds the dubious distinction of having the lowest percentage of female beer drinkers in the world. My thinking on this is that women need a higher level of alcohol to overcome the social restrictions on their primal selves. After all, women have the need-to- breed gene, too. And excess consumption can ruin a diet. I know the dietary restrictions well; if I didn't drink beer, I'd be ripped and wouldn't have to rely on my wit to accomplish the reproductive drive.

Since this story is about Scotland, enough of Whitley Bay except to say that I highly recommend a visit during the summer months, when the beach is filled with bikinis.

Late the next morning we boarded a train to Edinburgh. We had a target, a pub of course. The Guilford Arms was a short walk from the Edinburgh train station and served an impressive array of real ales. Again I ordered a Bitter, the traditional British ale. The pub was crowded given our mid-day arrival, but we were able to wedge ourselves into a pair of tables as people departed. It was here that we were to meet two other travelers, Capn and the Sea Hag. Given that the voyage already involved the Blokester, Mr. and Mrs. Wetherspoon, Nuco, Medio, Honeyman, and the two novices, I had grown a little nervous about the size of our group. Which of the eleven noisemakers was I going to be stuck rooming with?

Scottish Manliness

Scotland's history is a metaphor for what I'm trying to say about the male being. The country's history is rife with the exploits of manly men raiding villages and ravaging maidens, then retreating to their castles to guzzle ale. The Scots descended from a fierce people that originally roamed Ireland (Ireland being obviously eponymous). Called Scots even then, their clans were so manly that as early as 142 A.D. the Roman emperor at the time built a wall to keep them out. Antonine's Wall, named after the Antoninus Pius, lasted only eight years, indicating the folly of walls as a way to keep people in or out of desirable land.

Unlike the stone-built Hadrian's Wall to the south, Antonine's Wall was made of turf and wood, with forts lining its top and a giant ditch fronting the Scots. There is a lesson here that goes beyond the folly of building walls to isolate one's self. It's one the English practiced well. For while the Scottish clans battled one another, their southern neighbors united to defeat the invading Danes, then move northward to conquer Scotland. William Wallace, one of the Scots most ferocious leaders, paid the price. After being defeated and captured, he was brought to London, hanged, and quartered. Quartered means chopped into four pieces, a practice used so that the treasonous could be displayed in different places as a sign of the victor's sincerity.

But while brutal, the English rulers were no dummies. They sent armies to battle when unavoidable, but also put Machiavelli's tactics to ones use by bringing Scottish rulers into the royal fold. Whether it took an army or a royal wedding, union was sought and by 1707 English and Scottish rulers had bred a Scottish-born leader, Queen Anne. The brilliance of this move in terms of a land grab led to Scotland becoming an essential part of a British Empire led by London. The empire ruled across the globe—after America had broken free, of course.

It was to the industrial engine of the British Empire we now headed: Glasgow.

The Glaswegian Region

Glasgow was an hour's train ride to the west of Edinburgh. The blue collar, deindustrialized city lay on the Clyde River, far enough from the firth of Clyde and Irish Sea to avoid siege, but close enough to create and ship the goods needed to expand the British Empire. Since we'd already sampled a couple pints of cask, our arrival in the historic city was followed by Mr. Wetherspoon's finding our lodgings.

Interlude:

"Look at that stride," Medio observed as the Likely American began to distance himself from the group. "He walks like a landowner surveying his fields."

"Quite a stride," Nuco agreed.

"Does he know where he's going?"

"I doubt it, but he looks pretty confident."

Novice 2 caught up to the two Testigos. "Where are we?" she asked.

"We're lost," said Nuco, unconcerned. He had traveled with his two English friends before and grown accustomed to their disorientation. For descendants of the British Empire, it was as if they were born before geodesy and Isaac Newton's deduction of the earth's shape. They followed a cell phone map as poorly as in previous days using an A to Zed.

"I'm worried," said Novice 2. She was on her first trip abroad and her phone GPS wasn't working.

"You can always call an Uber," Medio suggested.

"You're not funny," Novice 2 replied. Medio was referring to their first evening abroad. After the veteran Testigos had retired, the two novices decided to continue celebrating at a local karaoke bar. After a song or two, they retired to their hotel room where Novice 2 ordered a dose of McDonalds cheeseburgers and fries from Uber Eats. Instead of getting a late night delivery at the hotel, however, the meal was delivered to her home in the States.

Finally, in an attempt to address the novice's concern about being lost, Medio pointed ahead. "Just follow the bald-headed fascist."

The walk to our lodgings was bad, the student-filled rooms Mr. Wetherspoon reserved even worse, so I immediately bowed out, hiking back to the center where I'd spotted a Marriott Hotel. I wanted a big room with a king-sized bed, private shower and no sniffling and snorting during the night.

Once I'd settled into my new digs, I texted Novice 2 to determine where the group was headed. I could have predicted that the decision was to meet at a Wetherspoon, a chain of pubs that served cask ale and a large variety of foods. They were not to be found, however, so I set out on my own to explore the city and the pubs where I'd have a wee swally. Or two because in Glasgow, you never have just one wee swally.

As my lack of contact with the group lengthened I grew worried. One can only tour the holiday stalls around Glasgow for so long, dodging the German made sausages and kiddie rides before growing bored. Had my offer to the novices of a hot shower been taken the wrong way? Both were females who I would have banged, but concern with how I dealt with my primal self shouldn't have played a role. The shower was located outside the bedroom, behind a closed door.

Finally, with boredom rising, I decided to implement what I have since called The Highland Option, and texted Novice 2: "Ready to taste some high end Scotch? It's on me." That would bring them running.

Interlude: Bavaria in Glasgow

"I like this pilsner," Honeyman said, setting down his glass. It was the following day and los Testigos sat in West, a Bavarian-style brewery serving lagers and an ale or two. They had just finished touring The People's Palace, a museum dedicated to showcasing Glaswegian protests against the ruling class. The museum was right up Honeyman's alley while requiring a post pint or two.

"Helles is good, too," Nuco said, pushing the unfiltered, unpasteurized beer across the table. "The Brewer said this place would never last when we visited it years ago. Said the British would never take to a German style of beer."

"I guess he was wrong," Medio piped in. "Should I try the hefeweizen?"

"Where are the girls?" Capn asked in a remarkably smooth tone. His legendary crankiness seemed to have disappeared in the Scottish wind.

"More importantly, where is the American?" Medio asked.

"Probably searching for a Landlord," Nuco said. The Likely American had sung the praises of Timothy Taylor's Landlord since sampling one amid the pre Christmas bustle in Leeds two years previously.

"I think the Landlord's gone off a bit," Medio said.

The group all looked at the acknowledged expert on cask ale, The Blokester, who simply nodded, unwilling to make a judgment call on the British beer while drinking a German one. Since Brexit, the Blokester had grown concerned about Germany's increasing influence over Europe. Hadn't they won the last great war? And with an idiot in charge of America, the usual British foil to continental overreach, British uniqueness had grown tenuous. These thoughts preoccupied him, making a Timothy Taylor criticism seem unpatriotic.

Edinburgh Rebellion

By the time we returned to Edinburgh, I could see divisions in the group. I get it: who travels with a group of eleven people and no tour guide?! It was chaos and while my anarchistic, leftist friends enjoyed that type of atmosphere, nothing gets done without a strong leader.

The rebellion began as soon as we left the train station. Sensing a need for a pint of cask ale, Mr. and Mrs. Wetherspoon decided to stop at—you guessed it—a Wetherspoon pub. They served cask ale, Mr. Wetherspoon insisted, but I suspected that he and the Mrs. wanted another helping of haggis.

The Wetherspoon decision was unacceptable to the other Testigos, including the Blokester, who, acting like some reverse Benedict Arnold, sided with the rebels and led the march back to

The Guildford Arms.

The division in the group was just what the doctor ordered. While the loyalists gathered in the Guilford Arms, Nuco, Medio and I went next door to Cafe Royal. An amazingly ornate bar with a Victorian interior, the pub also displayed tile walls fashioned by Royal Doulton, an historic ceramics manufacturer. A circular bar in the middle of the pub served eight different cask ales—mostly Scottish, which meant darker and maltier given the colder temperatures up north. Cask ale in Scotland was also named on a shilling basis, from a 19th century system of invoicing. 60, 70, and 80 shilling beers meant greater amounts of alcohol, thus higher prices. It made sense as Adam Smith, the author of the first modern text on economics (...the Wealth of Nations) was Scottish, born in a small town not far from the city we now toured.

Given the wildness of travel, I wasn't surprised about the split in the group and its eventual reunion. It's one of the characteristics of foreign travel: despite all the planning and preparation, it often feels you're flying by the seat of your pants. With this group confusion was a desirable condition, leading to unexpected incidents one could embellish upon once back home. I was correct, of course, and by liftoff time we were one again.

Since this trip was for beer, I'd like to finish by making one general observation. Scottish beer, long known for being darker and maltier than its cousin beers to the south, has changed. The growth of microbreweries has brought lighter and hoppier beers to Scotland. The country's beer scene has evolved, become more diverse in its offerings. As I see it, the American beer revolution has washed up on the shores of this great country and appears here to stay.

Cheers, mate.