

From Ashes to Glory

by Simon Watkinson

Given that the output of all British microbreweries combined accounts for just 2 percent of the domestic beer market, it seems astonishing that a tiny micro situated behind a pub in a sleepy Somerset hamlet could influence the American craft-brewing scene. And it's even more bizarre that two of its three directors knew absolutely nothing about real ale or brewing when the venture started, especially as the business has more than tripled in size since then.

Before joining forces with Rob Viney, who was the sole proprietor/brewer of Ash Vine almost 12 years ago, Chris Clark and younger brother Paul ran a business that sold processed tree bark to garden centres for use as mulch.

Wanting more of a challenge, and being a regular at the White Hart Inn in Trudoxhill, Chris cheerfully put a proposition to Rob one night in August 1987: "You brew the beer, and we'll sell it!" Chris didn't quite know what he was letting himself in for.

Three months later, on a rainy day in November 1987, the two brothers started work in co-running the Ash Vine Brewery. "I remember the day well. It was absolutely lashing down," recalled Chris, now the sales and marketing director. "We were both absolutely hopeless; neither of us had a clue what was going on!"

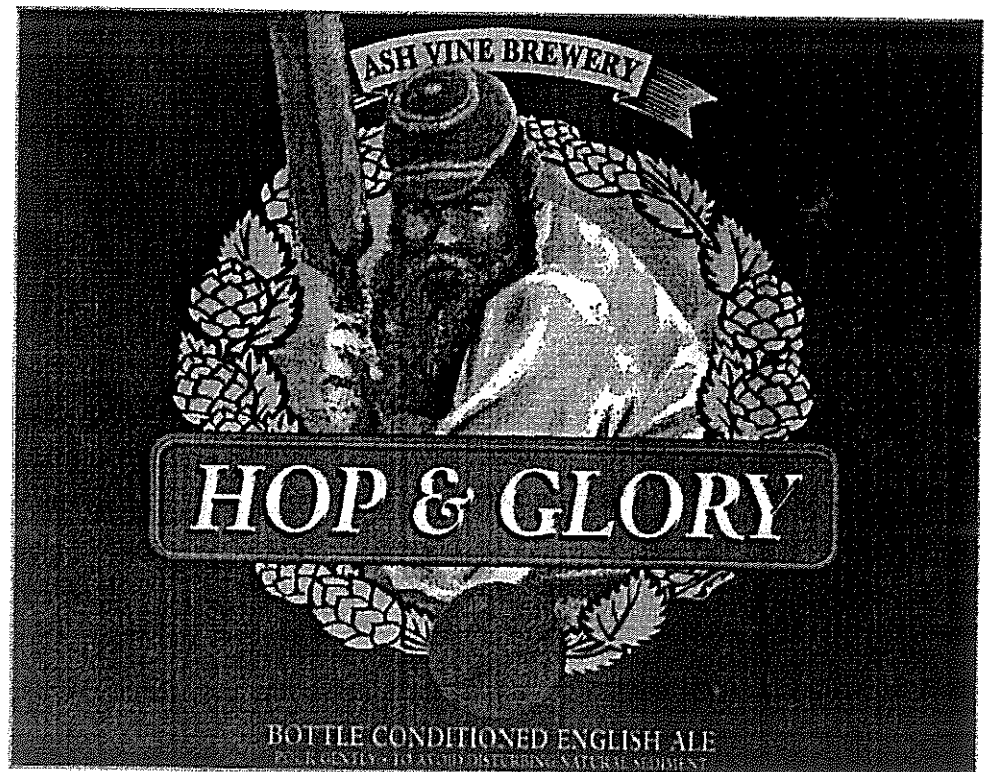
Today, the relentless toil and dedication of everyone at Ash Vine has certainly paid dividends and ensured that a once-insignificant concern that initially produced just 10 barrels (one barrel equals 36 gallons) of ale per week has blossomed into a venture offering immeasurable benefits to the local

economy. Of the 70 people employed on a part- and full-time basis, 40 live locally, and eight work on the brewing side, which is now overseen by a head brewer, an assistant brewer and two brewery apprentices.

All Ash Vine beers are brewed traditionally with the emphasis on flavour. Ash Vine Bitter (3.5% abv), Challenger (4.1% abv), Hop & Glory (5.0% abv) and Decadence (4.5% abv) are brewed year-round with barley from floor malsters Westcrop of Warminster and Tuckers of Newton Abbot. The hops used are Challenger, Fuggles, Goldings and Styrian Goldings from Charles Faram of Worcester. Penguin Porter (bottled) and the 4.2% abv Black Bess

(the same beer, but a draught version) are brewed from October to March.

In today's cutthroat, high-tech world of brewing, the visionary attitudes of Ash Vine's directors have aided the "green" conservationist lobby with donations from "themed" beers going to such causes. In 1993, Ash Vine brewed a monthly series of beers designed to raise ecological awareness. Beers such as Toxic Waste, Acid Rain, Flammable Liquid, Apocalypse, Global Warming and Fallout were brewed to keep environmental issues uppermost in drinkers' minds. £2.50 from every firkin sold was donated to Surfers Against Sewage, an action group based in St. Agnes, Cornwall. The campaign



was so successful that in February 1994, Chris presented them with a cheque for £1,700 on the beach at St. Agnes in Cornwall.

With over 250 outlets nationwide, Ash Vine's own pubs are responsible for 30 percent of total beer sales. In addition to the White Hart Inn, Ash Vine has three other very popular pubs. The Pig and Fiddle in Bath, the Fish and Fiddle and the 7,000-square-foot Frog and Fiddle in Cheltenham, which opened in January 1999, have been a lifeline in slack periods and have helped boost annual turnover to £3 million plus VAT. Ash Vine is a member of the Small Independent Brewers' Association (S.I.B.A.) and was one of the founding members of the Wessex Craft Brewers Cooperative, incorporated in December 1995.

"Consistency is the hardest and most important aspect of brewing. It's so difficult to develop a following for your products when you have limited resources, and so easy to lose it through poor beer," Chris commented over lunch. Yet Ash Vine has certainly achieved a high level of consistency with its Hop & Glory. This was one of the first beers from an English micro to be bottled in 500-ml bottles. It's brewed solely with Maris Otter pale malt and Golding hops. It received an excellent write-up by Roger Protz in *The Observer* in his analysis of six of the finest bottle-conditioned ales (BCAs). In fact, he rated it as the best of the bunch and a "star buy." He further deemed it "a stunning beer of enormous depth ... having a spicy aroma and flavour with powerful hints of cloves and bubble gum."

In May 1997, 12 pounds of Ash Vine yeast — once described by independent yeast analyst James Brewster as "the nearest to perfect" he'd ever seen — were sent via courier in a picnic cool-box crammed with ice packs to Mike Hall in Canada. It was used to ferment 16 barrels of a recipe brew identical to that of Hop & Glory. Some 35 pounds of yeast was then cropped from this first brew and duly sent to Mike Hall's brewing school in Baltimore. This was a precursor to Hop & Glory being brewed under license in the United States. The ales fermented with this yeast are drunk by thousands of U.S. citizens, as Global Brewing Services, based in Maine, uses

it whenever they set up a craft brewery in the States.

And still, Hop & Glory goes from strength to strength! It won a silver medal in the Strong Bitters class (4.5% to 5.0% abv) at the 1997 International Food Exhibition held in Earl's Court, London. It's now among the top 40 best-selling bottled beers in the U.K. Hop & Glory was also the official beer of the British Sporting Heroes Exhibition last winter at the National Portrait Gallery in London, which chronicled British sporting excellence over the past 350 years in paintings, drawings, prints, sculptures and photographs.

Standing below the painting of W. G. Grace called "Behind the Old Lords' Tennis Courts" by Archibald James Stu-



Chris Clark with bottles of "Hop & Glory" underneath a painting of W. G. Grace at London's National Portrait Gallery.

art Wortley (1849-1905), Chris remarked, "It is by sheer coincidence that James Huntington-Whiteley, the compiler of *The National Portrait Book of Sporting Heroes*, which shadows this exhibition, noticed W. G. Grace on the label of our bottled Hop & Glory on the shelf of his local supermarket. He then suggested to the gallery that they buy some for the exhibition, and an order for 10 cases ensued."

Chris continued, "As Hop & Glory is a traditionally brewed strong bitter ale, I wanted its label to feature somebody who was both quintessentially

English and reminiscent of a bygone era. W. G. Grace immediately sprang to mind, as he was a gentleman whose brilliance with the bat epitomises the true spirit of cricket, which may now have sadly been lost forever."

In the past, 11 barrels, or 2,000 bottles, of Hop & Glory were brewed each week. But as its nationwide popularity increased (it is now widely available in U.K. supermarkets) and the demand for Ash Vine beer outstripped brewing capacity, larger premises were actively sought. The move to a unit on an industrial estate a few miles away was completed in the summer of 1998 — a move not without its problems. The Cleaning in Place (CIP) system failed to perform as anticipated for almost a month, and before the problem was pinpointed as an infected yeast strain, Paul Clark traveled twice to the Crown Buckley Brewery in Wales for the Ash Vine strain of yeast.

Ash Vine's new 5,500-square-foot home in Frome was officially opened by the Marquess of Bath on November 23, 1998. To coincide with this inauguration, Ash Vine launched a new beer, Longleat (4.5% abv), which is brewed with raisins and brandy essence to impart a subtle marzipan finish. Its label portrays the house's ancient beer records, which reveal that in the 18th century, prodigious amounts of ale were fermented for the workers and other parties and usually rolled out by the hogshead (54-gallon casks).

The recipe of Longleat has been formulated to tie in with the house's traditions and as a toast to a game remembered by Lord Bath called Snap-dragon in which a tray of raisins was set on fire with brandy. Then, in a darkened room, the raisins had to be plucked from the flames and eaten while still on fire. This game gave us the phrase "to get one's fingers burned."

After Lord Bath cut the tape to release a bottle of Longleat to smash against a fermenter, he expressed his delight that Frome had a brewery again. Ash Vine's directors presented him with an enlarged, framed version of the label of Longleat.

Lord Bath then scurried away with bottles of the beer to take to the State Opening of Parliament the next day, where he was going to try to interest the House of Lords' bar

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to sell it! Longleat was released early in 1999 as a bottle-conditioned ale.

Over coffee, I asked Chris about the key to Ash Vine's success. He replied, "The three golden rules of brewing are: hygiene, hygiene and hygiene. Without that, you have nothing!" That just about sums up the delicate business of brewing and marketing real ale on a relatively small scale.

Looking back over the past decade, Chris remarked, "The last 11 years haven't been easy. Along with my monthly sales target exceeding £45,000, the job entails sheer mental and physical exhaustion. I was first motivated by fear," Chris admitted. "Fear of a creditor failing to pay up, fear of my mortgage payments getting in arrears, fear of all this lot folding and employees losing their jobs. Although this fear has now receded, it never totally goes away."

Nursing an espresso, the 35-year-old sales director who admits that receiving calls from the bank manager and having nothing to eat for lunch but cheese sandwiches from the sandwich van are the worst part of the job, conceded, "Nitro-keg and the millions of pounds of advertising money behind it could finish real ale. Sadly, it's brewed solely with the balance sheet in mind."

Chris continued: "People have to work harder today than they've ever worked. They deserve choice when they go to their local pub: the choice of a flavoursome local or regional ale, not a limp glass of carbonated chemicals."

As he picked up his mobile phone to go to another meeting, he stressed, "Trying to consolidate real ale on the British beer map is difficult. Our ales always leave here in peak condition, but they may encounter a hazardous journey from cask to glass at the pub." Before disappearing out the door, Chris insisted, "The alternative-named beers were initially brewed to raise awareness of important issues that we thought weren't getting adequate media coverage and, less important, to ease the stresses of having the bank on our backs. It just took off from there, really."

"It's all about entertainment," he emphasized. "Our Movie Classic ales were very popular four years ago, especially Gone with the Bar Maid, Ale House Rock and Rebel Without a Drink. Brewing different recipe beers

each month can cause confusion and put pressure on the brewing staff," he admitted. "But if we've brought a smile to drinkers' faces, then it's all been worth it!"

As I was admiring the new plant before leaving, I met Rob Viney. Given the 1,000 or so miles Chris drives each week visiting clients, I asked him when the private jet would be purchased. His reply epitomised the whole craft-brewing scene worldwide: "Our aim here with greater capacity and better equipment is to produce a better quality pint more efficiently." Just then, Chris received a

call on his mobile confirming the deal to export Ash Vine beer, through wholesaler AVS in Kent, to Sweden.

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