

Brunning & Price Original Bitter

We had been thinking about brewing our own beer for many many years, and finally in October 2008 we grasped the nettle.

Who would brew the beer?

At one time we had considered starting our own brewery, but it soon became apparent that it wasn't the right way to go about things – it was taking a sledgehammer to crack a nut. We needed to find an outfit that already had the equipment, the skills and the distribution systems in place, so we could concentrate on getting the style, flavour and price of the brew right. We weren't interested in simply sticking our name on an existing brew by way of a labelling exercise, we wanted to develop a cask ale to our own recipe that we would be proud to call our own.

So the first step was to find the right people to brew the beer for us.



We had a look at a number of breweries and it soon became evident that Phoenix Brewery, based in Heywood, Greater Manchester, were the best fit. They were just about the right size for our needs – big enough to cope, small enough to care, they were professional but friendly, and we got on well with owner Tony Allen. They had established expertise having brewed some legendary beers in their time, and they have well-sorted production and distribution systems.

Phoenix Brewery originally started life as Oak Brewery in 1982. When we first moved up north, developing out of our southerly roots, Harkers in Chester was the first pub we opened. Fran ran the pub in those days, and he soon developed a real enthusiasm for Oak Brewery beers, which featured strongly in the line up, and had a loyal following amongst the locals (who included our then beer writer, Steve Hobman – more of him later).

Interestingly, Oak Brewery beers were also available in the Riverside Hotel in Chester in the 80's, which Jerry Brunning, our erstwhile founder, later bought and turned into a private house. The hotel cat at the Riverside, named Bob, had an unusual feline complaint in that he could walk perfectly satisfactorily in a straight line, but as soon as he turned a corner he fell over, only to get up and walk in a straight line again etc. etc. So Tony decided to call a new beer he was launching 'Wobbly Bob', a legendary brew with an abv of 6.0%, which he still brews to this day.

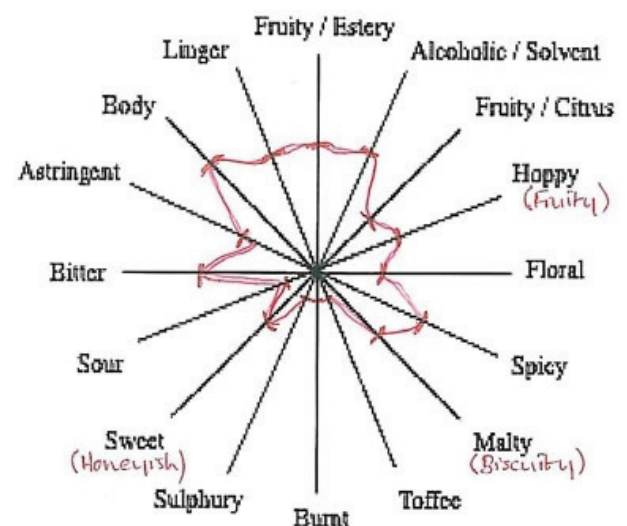
The premises the brewery currently occupies was a former Bass Brewery which had been closed in 1960 after 150 years in operation, but Oak brewery renovated the buildings and moved there in 1991, at which point Tony changed the brewery's name to Phoenix as he scented more marketing potential therein.



Getting the brew right

Having found the right brewer, we needed to put together the right beer, so we began by forming a group of beer enthusiasts from around the company. We met and thrashed out what we should be shooting for in terms of style, flavour, ABV and price point.

Graham kicked the ball from the centre spot by proposing a beer that would be "3.6% or 3.7% dark gold, verging on brown, full-bodied beer with a touch of fruit and malt and a dry finish". Pretty soon other voices had their say and it became apparent that two different styles of beer were being mooted: a golden ale that would be rounded, lightly hopped with a biscuity malt background, the other of which would be amber or tawny in colour, possibly with an aroma of pear drops, with ripe fruit and a tangy background. The group, led by Paul from Harkers, came up with a tasting wheel profile for each brew, and went round to talk things through with Allen.



The next seven months saw Allen brewing and barrelling different brews with subtle variations: the first of which we felt “could do with a little more nutty malt and a slightly less drying finish”.

The next two iterations we felt didn't really do the business, but the 4th brew was “good and looks and smells like the right session ale for us. The amber colour of this one is where we want it to be and the nose was ‘butterscotch’ which followed through to the taste – good and yet not too sweet and not too bitter, well rounded and fairly full flavoured...but it struck us that it was still too hoppy...it was too sharp round the sides which was noticeable and slightly uncomfortable for a session beer.”



The next tweak – brew 5 – was received with mixed emotions – John at the Hand and Trumpet really enjoyed it a gave it a volume test (ie he guzzled 5 pints – purely by way of research, you understand) and decided that the more he tried it, the more he liked it...but isn't that always the case? Paul at Harkers was from the other end of the scale, and felt it had a metallic after-taste and an immediate bitterness that was off putting, although the colour and aroma were spot on.

Another week, another tweak, until we came to brew No.7. By now we had refined our ideas of what we were looking for as something that was dark gold/amber in colour with a slightly honeyed nose, and a taste that was full flavoured and medium bodied with balanced malt and hops and a long dry finish. Brew 7 was very nearly there. Steve Hobman, our resident beer writer, described it thus, “(I felt) that the dry bitterness was a little too overpowering. Although I know a lot of beer pundits who would likely enjoy it, personally I feel for the average drinker this is more a brew to graduate to after slaking initial thirst with something a little more gentle; therefore, in my opinion, not quite the session beer (we) are looking for...I trust this does not sound too negative as I think it does have great promise if that dry bitterness can be slightly tempered.”

This was echoed from around the tasting panel, and so Allen did his magic and dialled out the austere finish, coming up with brew No.8. And that was the one for us. The tasting notes we wrote after extensive sampling of No.8 read ” 3.8% abv. This beer has a gentle and pleasant aroma with a fine dark gold/amber colour and a good creamy head that clings down the glass. Taste wise, this has a malty, fruity sweetness and a long, rounded but refreshingly dry finish.” Compared to the initial brief for the beer, that it be “3.6% or 3.7% dark gold, verging on brown, full-bodied beer with a touch of fruit and malt and a dry finish”, you've got to take your hat off to Tony and his team at Phoenix.

The key ingredients and the brewing process.



Tony is very sensitive about the recipe as he's pretty proud of it, so prizing the information out of him was like trying to open a walnut with a wedge of Brie. Nevertheless, we can say that he used predominantly East Kent Golding hops, with a sprinkle of American Mount Hood hops for aroma. Maris Otter malts were combined with a small amount of Crystal malts, to give colour and body, and the brew is fermented using a yeast provided by Timothy Taylors, which Tony has been growing for some 20 years now.

The water in the brew comes from Ullswater as it is very pure and very soft. The mash was a conventional infusion, boiled for an hour to remove bitterness, with a final charge of hops for flavour and aroma.

And on that particular subject, that's as much as you're going to get.

Pump Clips

While all this was going on, Rob in our office was busy designing the pump clips and beer mats that would accompany the beer. He had found a company who produced cast metal prototypes, and the design process pretty much followed the same development process as the beer itself: countless iterations 'till we were happy. We wanted a steam engine quality to the casting, so it had to be solid and heavy, and coloured in the simple and straightforward B&P green that we then used on our radiators.

The other thing, of course, was that we needed to come up with a no-nonsense name for the beer....After much head-scratching, we came up with an original name, and perceptively called the brew Brunning & Price Original.

