Life, the universe and everything brewing

all in quaffable pint sized measures

History & Heritage
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Sitting under the leafy shade of mature maples in Romsey Industrial Estate, Flack Manor Brewery is unassuming yet busy at what it does best – brewing. Yet, in the quest to find the perfect site, a tremendous amount of brewing and wartime local history was unearthed. Let us begin with the current and take a trip back in time.....

Nigel Welsh, Ann Stantiford and Terry Baker are the three key personalities involved in the creation of Flack Manor Brewery and Nigel, in particular, was quick to realise the potential in the hot bed of local brewing history.

In a case of ‘what you can’t have you want even more’, Nigel found and then couldn’t have, the perfect deep rooted historical site of a unit on the Stanbridge Earl’s Estate.

The stumbling block of some magnitude was the complete absence of mains gas or mains drainage. And with an overriding urge to get brewing, the cliff face of expensive problems forced attentions to something more practical and a little more immediate...which is why the brewery eventually settled in the building of a former meat preparation business on the Romsey Industrial Estate. Already clad out to be cool and hygienic, the site really was perfect.
Pacing the grounds of Stanbridge Earls revealed our first piece of brewing history. Both Roke Manor (now home to Roke Manor Research) and the Stanbridge Earls Estate had previously been owned by the Ansell Brewery of Birmingham – remembered for their famous strapline ‘Ansell’s Bittermen – you can’t beat’em’ and for their passion for Grand Prix racing.
The purchase of the estate by the Ansell's family was in 1935, at the time of the brewery expanding at a rapid rate and with accolades as the largest regional brewer in the UK.

However, their time there was but relatively short lived. Robert Edward 'Bob' Ansell (1917-2004), nephew to the Chairman and later Director, and his cousin Geoffrey (above), had the penchant for Grand Prix racing; Bob purchasing an ERA R9B in 1938 from driver Scribbans (later raced by Geoffrey) and Tongue’s Maserati 4CL during the war years.

Death duties (with Geoffrey and his father dying in quick succession) and the financial drain of GP racing took its toll and the Ansell family were forced to sell the estate, it is believed, around 1950.
In 1942 during the Second World War, Stanbridge Earls became the first ‘Flak Shack’ a rest and relaxation home for Air Force Officers run by the Red Cross. Roke Manor served a similar function and together the bases were known as Station 503. At this time, the Ansell’s had moved into the gardener’s cottage.

The servicemen have fond memories, according to the records, of being ‘pampered’, of competitive sports and of exploring the picturesque surrounding area. The Dukes Head PH is remembered for being open at about 2.30pm, but one had to drink fast for they didn’t stay open long; it was thought that the servicemen would drink them dry and beer would need to be preserved for the locals.
What remains of the Flak era? Apart from fond memories, behind the main gate at Roke Manor is thought to be a small 1940’s airfield water storage facility, a Braithwaite Water Tower but with the tank removed. The estate was later broken into lots and auctioned. Stanbridge Earls became a school founded by Charitable Trust in 1952 and Roke Manor was purchased by the Plessey Company in 1956.

The Dukes Head PH is remembered for being open at 2.30pm, but one had to drink fast for it didn’t stay open long. It was thought the servicemen may drink them dry”
Strong’s of Romsey and Brickwoods of Portsmouth were among the top 200 British Industrial Enterprises in 1948, each with market capitalisation of £4.5m. Ironically both suffered the same fate of a Whitbread takeover and are now just memories. Strong’s, however, left a bit of a legacy......These advertisements appear to be the remaining evidence of the well-known Strong’s Advertising Campaign pre WW2 and post.

It became known world-wide because of its clever positioning on prime railway sites on the route from Waterloo to Southampton; which carried thousands of overseas visitors, not to mention Britons, to the great ocean liners. In addition, American GI’ stationed in Britain would be intrigued by the compelling message and, being appreciative drinkers, no doubt taste and remember this famous beer.
Such information can only now be in the head or in the personal archives of a reader or a reader’s relative or friend. Many artefacts held by Whitbread were sold at a dedicated auction and Whitbread archivist Nick Redman donated the bulk of the archive material to the National Brewing Library. He knew of the Strong Country signs but nothing of the local artist (we assume) who created these masterpieces. We do, however, have a potted history of Strong’s Brewery......
The story begins in 1858, when Thomas Strong leased an existing brewery, the Horsefair Brewery of Romsey. With the lease were 23 ‘tied’ licensed houses but Thomas Strong was to wait until 1883 before purchase of the small estate was possible. Although his reign was short-lived, as he died 3 years after the purchase, Strong’s of Romsey was nevertheless ‘born’. The brewery then goes from strength to strength....
Enterprising, well connected businessman John David Beverley Faber, better remembered in connection with Strong's as David Faber, bought the brewery from the executors of Thomas Strong’s Estate. At the time, the business had deteriorated with production down to 3,000 barrels per year and the number of licenced houses reduced to just 14. This was nothing to a man with such vision, drive and ability as David Faber. Population was, at that time growing rapidly, and industry developing throughout the country. The time for expansion was opportune, and in the same year that he acquired the Horsefair Brewery, David Faber bought out two of his Romsey competitors, George's Brewery in Bell Street, and Cressey's Brewery in the Hundred. The last name had previously acquired William George Lawe’s Brewery in Church Street.

Faber had absolute domination of brewing in Romsey and thereafter enjoyed a monopoly in the town.

"
Faber the Saviour

Many will recognise Davis Faber’s house (left) at Ampfield, about 4 miles out of Romsey.

David Faber was born in 1854 into a distinguished family; his father was Charles Wilson Faber of Northaw, a successful barrister and his mother Mary, was the daughter of Sir Edmund Beckett. A combination of innate ability and valuable family connections must have assisted him greatly in the early development of his Company.

Two of his brothers, Walter Vavasour Faber (1857-1928) sometime M.P. for Andover, and Charles Louis Faber (1862-1897) were for a time associated with him in the acquisition and running of different breweries, whilst two other brothers, Edmund Beckett Faber (1847-1920) afterwards Lord Faber of Butterwick, and George Denison Faber (1851-1931) afterwards Lord Wittenham, were partners in the banking company of Beckett and Company of Leeds.

Another distinguished member of the Faber family, Sir Geoffrey Faber, founder and Chairman of the well-known publishing company, a distant cousin of David Faber, was for a short time a Director of Strong’s.
Because of the zeal and business acumen of David Faber, the small Horsefair Brewery in Romsey grew into a large company of high repute, whose trade covered much of the South of England.

When David died, in harness as Chairman in 1931, he controlled breweries in Hampshire & neighbouring counties; the total of tied pubs exceeded 500.

Significantly, in the wake of all this expansion, David Faber retained the old name, ‘Strong’s of Romsey’; converting his business to a limited company Strong & Co Ltd of Romsey in 1894.
Surviving the war years

Two years before his death, the decision was taken to enlarge and modernise the main brewery and headquarters in Romsey and as a result in 1930, the brewery had a workforce of some 400 and its transport fleet included 5-ton Thorneycrofts and a 12 ton chain driven Scammel.

At about the same time, the old livery was changed from chocolate and gold to the more familiar blue and white. It could be that those celebrated rail side signs started to appear at about this time too, during the 1930’s; although it is also cited that these were evident from 1920. The blue and white livery colours still feature on the hand pumps of ‘Strong’s Country Bitter’.

Even after the death of David Faber, the business continued to grow. However, WW2 put a halt on further expansion. With more and more men being called up for the forces and bearing in mind the labour requirement of Strong’s at this time being in excess of 400, this proved problematic. Although enemy air attacks and the Blitz did little damage to its widespread properties, still a small number around Southampton were destroyed by Nazi bombs. The main brewery in Romsey escaped damage but for a while, its garage space was requisitioned for aircraft storage.
Beer to the Troops

There is a wartime story of Strong’s famous beers being flown out to troops in Normandy soon after ‘D’ Day.

This is a staged shot of the Mod XXX tank being filled and features in War History Online. Officialdom revealed an unusual but winsome touch of humanity, in that the modified wing was officially listed as ‘XXX Depth Charge Fitment’. The more cynical would say it was a useful tool for propaganda services.

When peace returned Strong’s once again began to expand and in its post-war height, the licenced houses totalled some 920 spread over 8 counties. However, in 1969 Whitbread’s, who already had a share in Strong’s, took over the entire company and its days in Romsey became numbered.
The demise of Strong’s

This was the front entrance to the Romsey site, known as the Horsefair. The picture is of poor quality and indicative of the rareness of good quality historical records. Note the sign showing both the Strong’s portcullis logo (to the right of the picture) and the Whitbread tankard (to the left).

Flack Manor Brewery has taken on the Romsey tradition of brewing and the portcullis now features on their logo, in memory of Strong’s but also to tie in with the Romsey Crest, which in addition, embodies ears of golden wheat and barley in reference to Romsey’s tradition of Agriculture and Brewing.

If you go into the Bishops Blaize, a local pub in Romsey, you will see, on the west wall, the Strong’s typical country scene featured – a rare original, albeit without the caption. And the sign – ‘You are approaching the Strong Country’ – that still sits in Alton station, is the only proof that this captivating campaign lived and wasn’t just a dream, a figment of the imagination......
Some facts and figures taken from Romsey duty ledger from 26/9/79 to 26/6/81.

First brew of 'Strong Country Bitter' was on 26th September 1979

Last brew of Mild was on 24th March 1980

Last brew of English Ale was on 9th April 1980

Last brew of 'Strong Country Bitter was on 22nd June 1981

Last brew ever at the Romsey brewery was Whitbread Trophy on 26th June 1981
CHAPTER 4: Past links with Present

‘Wolfie T’ – History meets the present – Flack Manor’s popular Halloween beer
According to a number of eye witness accounts, between July and September every year, a half man, half wolf like figure can be seen pacing around the areas surrounding Romsey’s Broadlands Estate. The sightings of the creature date back hundreds of years and are believed to be the sightings of the popular legend ‘Wolfie T’. The myth dates back to the 17th century when locals would tell tales of Wolfie T to scare the children on Halloween.
We hope you enjoyed the first eBook in a series of 4 which you will find on the Flack Manor Blog over the course of 2014. The competition and questions relating to this competition is now closed although you can join in at any time, for each eBook has its own competition, winners and prizes; culminating in a master prize draw for those who’ve completed the whole set. For more information, visit the Flack Manor Brewery Blog.