

Siobhan Buchanan delves into Scotland's brewing history, in search of its iconic breweries and unique styles

As we all know, Scotland has been famous for its whisky for centuries, and this delicious nectar is only as good as it is because Scotland has some of the finest water on Earth. However, Scotland's booze history actually started way before whisky was around; our wee corner of the globe has one of the richest brewing histories in the world.

There is evidence that the Picts were fermenting drinks and preserving them with heather, rather than hops, during the Early Middle Ages. But speculation and research also suggests that the Scots were brewing a version of beer as early as 4000 BC, although this drink would have been more like a fermented wet porridge with aromatic plants added for flavour - yum.

Fast-forwarding to Medieval times, it was monasteries that were at the centre of the brewing revolution in Scotland, especially around the areas of Glasgow and Edinburgh. The

Canongate area of Edinburgh was even nicknamed the 'Charmed Circle' because of its underground channels of water, and at one point there were dozens of breweries in that part of the Old Town making use of the bountiful, pristine water. At the end of the 19th century, it's rumoured that the first commercial brewery in Scotland was established at Blackford in Perthshire after King James IV wanted to buy a barrel of ale he really enjoyed.

Then came the Edinburgh Society of Brewers in 1596, established because brewing was beginning to be organised on a more enterprising scale. But by the turn of the 18th century domestic brewing still dominated, and we only started to see the bigger names in brewing pop up in the mid-late 1700s, such as William Younger's brewery in Edinburgh (initially in Leith, then



gies a wee heavy

PHOTO: Unplash/Adam Wilson



Belhaven Brewery, Dunbar

in the Holyrood area). Hugh and Robert Tennent's brewery near Glasgow Cathedral (the Tennent family actually started brewing in the mid-1500s), and Belhaven Brewery in Dunbar.

Thanks to the industrial revolution, the mid-1800s saw the encroachment of bigger, urban breweries upon the smaller, rural breweries, thanks to the easy delivery routes provided by the new fancy railways, and the advancement of technology meaning more beer could be brewed for cheaper.

This period also saw the rise of lighter-bodied and paler-coloured beers, and the demand for lager grew across the UK; Tennent's lager rose in popularity pretty rapidly, which led to it building a brewery especially dedicated to making this beer in 1890 on what is now its Wellpark location.

A brewing powerhouse, by the turn of the 20th century Scotland had a whopping 280 breweries, but over the next 70 years this dwindled down to a measly 11, thanks to the expansion of the larger city-centre breweries which dominated trade, and the restriction of ingredients during the two wars in the first half of the 1900s. Now, though, we are firmly in the midst of a brewing revolution, with over 100 breweries currently operating across the country.

Home grown styles

Scotland has its own particular styles of beer, which tend to be rich and malty, thanks to the soft water and the abundance of barley available for malting - the most notable and popular style nowadays being the utterly splendid Scotch Ale or Wee Heavy.

The names of Scottish beer styles have an interesting history; when brewing started to be more of a commercial exercise in the 19th century, it was exported all over the world, and the beers were referred to by different measures of 'Shilling'. They were denoted by the / - symbol preceded by a number - Table and Harvest beers at 28/- and 36/-, Light and Mild at 42/- and 48/-, Pale Ales at 54/- and 60/-, and Heavy and Export beers at 70/-, 80/- and 90/-, the higher the number, the higher the tax levied on the barrels of beer for exporting.

In the 20th Century, the shilling system petered out and was replaced by the terms 'Light', 'Heavy' and 'Export'. The 90/- is commonly known as the 'Wee Heavy', since it tends to be



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*BAR RAISED



CIES A WEE HEAVY

The Hanging Bat, Edinburgh

stronger in ABV, taste, colour and body, and because it was typically served by the third (hence the 'Wee'). It also tends to be what people associate with the term 'Scotch ale'.

What's the deal with Scottish styles nowadays?

The brewing revolution has certainly not skipped Scotland. But, surprisingly, the popularity of the Wee Heavy/Scotch ale has declined here, although it does remain a popular style choice for a heavier, maltier beer in other countries - most notably America (including the big names such as Sierra Nevada, Odell's, Cigar City, The Bruery, and Oskar Blues), and even in Iceland, where

Einstock has its Icelandic Wee Heavy.

It seems a shame to me that this beautiful style of beer has fallen by the wayside in favour of more modern, accessible 'craft beer' options, but there are a few breweries still producing 80/-s and Wee Heavies. Edinburgh's Stewart Brewing is renowned locally for its 80/- on cask. Cross Borders makes an absolutely sublime Wee Heavy, and Broughton Ales' Wee Jock 80/- is, in my opinion, woefully under-appreciated. Many other breweries up and down the UK sadly only brew Wee Heavies during the winter months or as a Christmas

special, but limited Scotch ale is better than no Scotch ale, to be honest.

Looking at historical beer styles, the heather ale has been revived in the last decade or so, most famously by Williams Bros with its Fraoch Heather Ale, who also make what looks to be the only traditional Scots pine ale, too. And new kids on the Glasgow block Epochal make beers inspired by 19th century

Scottish brewing traditions with a modern twist. Hopefully more breweries in Scotland will follow suit and revive these historic styles so they are not forgotten in years to come.

Gies a Wee Heavy, or gies death.

