



# Harvest cheers

Celebrating green hop beer

BY ANTHONY GLADMAN

**As signs of the year's turning go, it's hard to beat a good conker. The first glimpse of that deep burnished brown flesh gleaming up from the grass or pavement never fails to draw out a childhood thrill. They fall from the trees over three or four weeks then they're gone again.**

We see the signs too on our plates and in our glasses. As September ends, Oktoberfest swings around with its Festbiers. And after that, for some drinkers at least, thoughts begin to return to pints of cask ale in a cosy pub. And in southern England (and increas-

ingly beyond), drinkers in the know start to itch for the grassy nettled freshness of a green hop beer.

## The hop garden

Monday, 23 September – Haffenden Farm. The home of Hukins Hops lies just on the edge of the High Weald in Kent. Think deeply wooded countryside. Its hop gardens are spread among the sort of leafy green lanes that are darkly shaded even on the sunniest day.

In the early morning, Cliff and Jane Murphy of Bexley Brewery have come to collect hops that were harvested around sunrise.

Green hop beer is so called because it uses hops that are fresh off the bine. All hops are green in colour but 'green' here means fresh as in untreated – not dried in any way. In the USA such beers are often called 'wet hop' for this reason.

Green also means fresh as in used right away: ideally the brewer will brew with the hops on the same day they are picked. Cliff and Jane aim to have their

delicate cones of Ernest in the brew by midday. That's in about four hours' time.

This is not the original brew day Cliff and Jane had planned. That was supposed to be on the preceding Friday, but Cliff received a phone call late on Thursday to say another hop variety needed taking in first. Cliff had to change his brewing schedule around.

This is how it goes with green hop beer; you're at the mercy of the weather and the crop. Over the weekend the weather broke. Balmy hazy late summer became grey and damp early autumn, the hop gardens now dripping and muddy. You win some, you lose some.

Hukins began harvesting on 31 August, twenty-four days ago. Glenn Whatman says he expects to finish today or perhaps tomorrow, depending on the weather and how much of the remaining crop the workers can bring in. It's a short time to bring in the whole crop.

During harvest the working days at Hukins last between twelve and fourteen hours, which by now in late September lines up almost exactly with the sun as it rises and sets.

"Once it's ready you've got to get it all in as quick as you can," Whatman says. "Some of the bigger farms operate a twenty-four-hour day with twelve-hour shifts."

The workers in the fields are wet from rain and sweat. Those in the barn, where the hops are processed, end their day coated in a sticky yellow film of lupulin. "It stays on you the whole time," Whatman says.

Today they're picking in the hop garden closest to the barn, which means they deliver a fresh batch every five minutes or so. "It's pretty full-on," Whatman says. Little 1960s Massey Ferguson tractors bump up the track, their trailers full of freshly cut hop bines. These lie on a thick tarpaulin to which workers attach hooks that are chained the floor. The tarp and its cargo of hops stay behind as the tractor drives off to collect another batch from the gardens.

As soon as it has gone, workers begin to pick the bines from the pile and hook them on yet more chains, these ones hanging from a track that rises to the ceiling of this vast space. The track lifts the bines from the floor so they can hang down to their full extent -about 2.5 to 3 metres – exposing the hops cones that have grown along their length.

The track chugs along, slowly but surely conveying the bines into the Bruff hop-picking machine. This is a whirring, rumbling, clanking room-sized collection of belts and spinning blades that separates the hop flowers from the leaves and stems.

In the five or so weeks of a typical hop harvest it can process 80 tons of hop flowers. And while it looks like it



Hukins Hops harvest – September 2024

could have your arm off in an instant, it is gentle enough on the hops that even delicate British varieties will make it through unscathed. "The machines you see in Germany and the US are rougher on the hops," Whatman says. "German hops are like bullets so they can take a bit of a beating."

Most of the hop cones that come off the Bruff head straight into enormous

kilns to be dried, after which they are pressed into bales or pelletised. Some, however, are diverted into sacks to be whisked away by brewers waiting to brew green hop beers. Cliff and Jane haul three 10kg sacks of vibrant green Ernest hops into their van and they're off, no hanging about.

The beer they've fetched them for is already brewing. The mash went on around seven in the morning, which is slightly later than usual for a double-shift day like today to allow time for the trip down to the farm and back. The brewery is about 45 miles away in Erith, where London's ragged fringe meets Kent.

"It's funny, driving back in the van," says Jane. "Every year that we do it the whole van smells of hops. It's a wonderful smell but they are supposed to be quite soporific." The trip can take an hour and a half in good traffic. This morning's traffic is not good, and they need to be back in time to get the hops into the boil.

### The brew kettle

Bexley Brewery is not especially large. Its home is in a light industrial unit, the sort with which many smaller brewers will be familiar. It's about 2,500 square feet in all and yet Cliff is hard to find. Eventually I spot his legs and welly-booted feet sticking out of a mash tun. He has lautered his beer and is busy cleaning while over in the kettle the beer



Looking down the row of ripe, ready to harvest hops

slowly works its way up to a boil.

For brewers used to pelletised hops, brewing with green hops can be a challenge as they take up five times as much volume in the vessel. Cliff usually brews with whole-cone dried hops and finds the green hops easier. “From our perspective, they’re a lot cleaner” he says. “Even though there’ll be about 30 kilos in this one, I’ll go in and there’s hardly anything to clean. No scum rims.” This means that on a double brew day like today, Cliff can turn things around and get his second brew on much faster, and he can finish quicker at the end of his shift.

Cliff is brewing two green hop beers this year, one hopped with Ernest and the other with Cascade. Both are relatively simple pale ales so that the hops take centre stage. His mash bill comprises mostly pale ale malt with just a touch of light crystal and some torrefied wheat for body. Cliff tells me he’s aiming for 4.3% ABV. Classic cask ale territory.

He has emptied the Ernest hops from their sacks and divided them between 8 to 10 smaller buckets. This makes it easier for him to get the hops up to and through the hatch on top of the kettle.

Already the hops have lost some of their vibrant green colour and become a duller yellow, some showing spots of brown. Despite this they are still tacky with lupulin and still smell impossibly fresh with aromas of apricot, earthy spice, grass and nettle.

You need to use a lot more hops when they’re fresh. “When people ask me to explain the difference, I always say think of when you’re cooking,” says Jane. “If you use fresh herbs, you need much more than you do with dried herbs.”

She says the difficult part can be fitting the hops into the vessel. Cliff has to push them down with a spade so he can fit more in on top.

“I think brewing sometimes is so monotonous and repetitive,” Cliff says. “And that’s just the way it is. As you get bigger the more repetitive it is.” Which is to say he feels green hop beers are a break from the workaday business of core range brews. “I think there’s just something wholesome about it. Something traditional that people can relate to.”

Cliff and Jane brewed Bexley Brewery’s first green hop beer in 2015. They were still relatively new to brewing and hadn’t heard of green hop beers

**BRINGING IN THE HOPS**



**Massey Ferguson tractor with trailer full of freshly cut hop bines**



**Part way through cutting down the hop bines, next row on the right**



**Arrival at the picking shed, removing the tarp and its cargo of hops**

## STRIPPING THE BINES



Fully extended bines being fed into the Bruff picking machine



Off the picker, and to the kiln (or direct to brewer for green hop beer)

until they began talking to other brewers in Kent, and in particular Eddie Gadd from Ramsgate Brewery.

"He was the one that, in the beginning, pushed it and said this is what you need to be doing," says Jane. Cliff agrees: "Eddie Gadd needs a little mention in this," he says.

Gadd for his part is enthusiastic about brewing green hop beers – which he describes as "like Christmas for brewers" – but also keen to avoid taking credit for the idea. "It's an honour to think I inspire anyone, but Jon Mills from the Foundry in Canterbury was the energy behind the project," he says.

Gadd first brewed a green hop beer in 2010 after a visit from a brewer from Falling Rock Brewery in California. "His Wet Hop Ale was inspiring," Gadd says.

Making the beer is only half the business. You have to sell it, too. That can be hard work at times, in a market that's ever-changing but brewers can usually rely on their green hop beers to do well. Cliff and Jane's son Cameron, who also works for the brewery looking after sales, says customers have put in orders for this year's beer before they even hit the sales list. "That's the perfect scenario," he says. "I think almost half of it is already pre-sold."

Bexley Brewery sells about half of its green hop beers in Kent – a hop festival in Faversham gets a special mention here – and half to free-of-tie pubs across south-east London in Greenwich, Deptford, Nunhead, Norwood and even as far as Brixton. The brewery also has its own pub, The Bird and Barrel, in Bexleyheath.

This year the brewery's two green

hop brews will amount to just under 100 casks. Last year it also made a third, hopped with Bullion. "This year has been up and down for a lot of brewers, so to be on the safe side we've decided to just do two and make sure we sell it all straight away," says Cameron.

As well as being reliable sellers in their own right, Cameron says the brewery's green hop beers also help sell other beers from its range. One customer has already added a cask of Rum Porter to their order. "I presume it's why everybody does one-off beers and specials, because they'll buy from your core range as well."

"To be honest sometimes in the beer industry, although it feels like a bit of a community thing, the sales side of it can feel lonesome, like you're against everybody else and you're all fighting to get into pubs," Cameron says. "When times are tough, especially like this year, you do feel that. But what's nice about this time of year, there's a lot more togetherness. It feels like we've put that aside. Everybody's going to be able to sell some green hop everywhere."

### The pint glass

At the Pembury Tavern, a pint of either of the two green hop beers from Five Points Brewing Company, which owns and operates the pub, will set you back £5.80. That's about 10% more than the average cost for a pint of cask at the bar, but the customers don't seem to mind. "It's a beer that's only available once a year," says founder Greg Hobbs. "They understand it's special, it's unique."

Drinkers at the Pembo, as it is affec-

tionately known, usually work through three casks of beer over the course of a week, with each cask lasting three or maybe four days. The pub's annual green hop beer festival ran over the last weekend in October this year and featured ten beers, including the two from Five Points. On the first day, customers drained a full cask of each of the two Five Points green hop beers in a single day.

The base beer for a Five Points green hop brew is always the same: a 3.7% ABV pale ale made with 80% low colour Maris Otter, 8% Munich, 8% crystal medium and 4% malted wheat.

Brewers bitter the beer to around 10 IBU at 60 minutes with dried Challenger, which Hobbs says provides a good platform for the green hops to shine. They then add one-fifth of the green hops ten minutes before the end of the boil and the rest as the boil comes to an end – all within four hours at most of the hops being picked. Finally they ferment the beer with a clean US West Coast yeast strain.

This year's versions were hopped with Goldings and Cascade hops from Hukins. The Goldings beer had a robust yet balanced bitterness with grass and nettle aromas that finished with a honeyed, earthy spice. The Cascade beer was more forward in its bitterness, with some grassy astringency balanced by a white pepper finish.

This is the sixth time the Pembury has hosted this festival. When it started, it featured mostly smaller traditional breweries. This year there are beers from Verdant and Deya. "When we started the festival I wouldn't have

AT THE BREW KETTLE



Fresh and ripe green hops, still tacky with lupulin and impossibly fresh with aromas of apricot, earthy spice, grass and nettle



Cliff Murphy hoists the 30 kilos of hops up to and through the hatch on top of the kettle

expected those sort of breweries to be doing green hop beers,” says Hobbs. “There’s definitely a resurgence, I guess you’d call it, of younger breweries doing modern takes on green hop beers.”

Verdant’s offering is a 4.4% Fresh Hop Pale Ale brewed with East Kent Goldings. Deya supplied a Fresh Hop Harvest Ale (5%) brewed with Mystic Hops from Townend Hop Farm in Ledbury.

All ten beers were served on cask from a row of six hand pulls at the centre of the bar. For Hobbs this level of visibility is important. It draws drinkers in and allows the pub staff to start conversations about this style of beer that, to some, may be unfamiliar.

“People walk in and they see the hand pulls and the green hops. It’s a talking point more than anything. It’s an opportunity to educate people and hopefully get them excited about this



Green Hop Festival at the Pembury Tavern, 24–27 October 2024

year’s fresh harvest.”

“People won’t generally know that hops are usually harvested then kilned so that they’re able to be stored throughout the year, whereas these ones aren’t,” says Hobbs “It’s an opportunity not just to explain about this beer but also about how the rest of the ingredients come together.”

“To me, green hop beers are the pinnacle of that art of cask beer. It’s such a fun thing to explain that the hops we used, the flowers were in the field a few weeks ago. We were brewing with them within a couple of hours of them being picked off the plants. We get them into the pub as soon as we can. I feel like it’s a shame not to talk about it,” Hobbs says.

For Hobbs, green hop beers showcase not just a fundamental brewing ingredient but also the hard work the hop farmers go through to produce it. He says brewers take the love and passion hop farmers put into their product and turn it into a unique beer that isn’t available year round.

He recalls a visit to a hop farm in Germany he made some years prior, when hop-laden trucks bounced down country lanes scattering loose cones in their wake. “It felt like the towns and villages had a sort of celebratory nature to it all,” he says.

“I feel like that’s what’s missing here. I’d love for that to come over here. We should be proud of the hop farmers that we have left and celebrate what they do.”

A few days later I get to taste the Bexley Brewery green hop beers. Both display the fresh grass and nettle

flavours as those from Five Points. The Cascade version also shares the biting bitterness and white pepper finish, though with perhaps more of the fruity citrus peel and pine aromas the variety is known for.

I am reminded of a comment from Cliff that echoes those of Greg Hobbs at Five Points – a recognition of how much British hops need celebrating: “Hop farms are having a hell of a time. It’s a hard business to be in. They’ve got that small window each year – just one window when it all comes together – and they do terrific stuff.

“It’s a hard business for everyone up and down the chain but it’s nice that everyone from the hop farmer all the way up to the pub seems positive about green hop. I think they’ve realised it’s a fantastic marketing opportunity for people to learn about not just the hops, but English hops. They’re not the soft, horrible ones that everyone thinks about. The Ernest knocks the socks off a lot of non-English hops.”

Tasting Cliff’s Ernest Green Hop Pale, I find I have to agree. The apricot aromas rush from the glass with earthy spice not far behind. To smell it is to step back across the last few weeks and back into the hop garden at Hukins, and to see again in the mind’s eye the vines being cut from their wire trellis and the hop-laden tractors bumping down the muddy track, to hear the rumble and clank of the Bruff picking machine, to smell the tacky yellow lupulin on my fingers. Above all it brings back the faces and the voices of the workers whose long hours of labour made this all possible.