

Ullage and Spillage

by J.Random

Thirty years ago, the first Great British Beer Festival was held at Alexandra Palace in London. Looking down from the gallery revealed a sight to thrill the beer-lovers soul. Rank upon rank of casks set up on scaffolding stillage in the cavernous hall. Thanks to the palace's stone construction, the British definition of room temperature, and autumn weather, no artificial cooling was needed and most of the beers were in good condition.

Though I remember little, there is photographic evidence (below) I was there. No prizes for guessing which of these long-haired oiks is my younger self. One of the other oiks went on to brew for Truman then John Smiths. Another of our classmates brewed for Bass and is now director of the Brewing Museum in Burton on Trent. Microbiology/biochemistry clearly helps appreciation of the art, and the science of fermentation.

We were not CAMRA members though we did have an unofficial Abbott Ale Appreciation Society. Besides Young's and Fuller's, Greene

King's premier product was one of the few ales available cask-conditioned in a number of London pubs. When cellared and served well, it was nectar of the gods. Half the time it was god awful. What we were each drinking in that photo I couldn't tell you, but the range of expressions suggests we were not all supping the same thing. I do remember pouring one seriously-contaminated sample down the toilet. Even at that early age, I was aware my liver had limited capacity and we were drinking 20oz pints; none of your 4oz tasters or, horror of horrors, 1oz sips. My collection of commemorative glasses (The '77 had a nasty encounter with a dishwasher) proves I was there every year until Ally Pally burned in 1980, and the festival was held in tents. A year later it moved to Leeds which was too expensive to reach on a student loan.

I decided 2007 would be the year I attend both the Great American and the Great Canadian Beer Festival, not to mention the Canada Cup of Beer (Damn. I swore I wouldn't mention the Canada Cup of Beer). This started me thinking, what makes a great beer festival? I have previously outlined in this esteemed Journal (What's Brewing Nov. 05) a few things that do not belong. Organizers of a



The Abbott Ale Appreciation Society at the 1977 Great British Beer Festival

certain 2007 event, henceforward not to be mentioned, clearly did not read that article. As with most event organization, it is not the big obvious components that make or break a beer festival. It is an accumulation of the less noticeable. The following are my personal top twelve key factors.

- A policy of including only craft breweries and brewpubs with their own brewer.
- A broad selection for all tastes including plenty of cask-conditioned beers.
- No more beers than could be tried during the festival without acute alcohol poisoning.
- A minimum of 4 oz tasters.
- An outdoor location with provision for rain/sun shelter for all participants.
- Hyper-efficient token sales
- One token free on entry so one can at least drink in the token line-up.
- Brewers available for discussion.
- Low key but effective security.
- Plentiful supplies of water for rinsing and rehydrating.
- Entertainment that fits with beer festival atmosphere
- Enough toilets to accommodate all that beer.

As somebody with no official position with CAMRA and nothing to do with the organization of the GCBF, I would like to congratulate the organizers for scoring 11 out of 12 (I'm a tough marker and I hate line ups).

And then there was the GABF, an indoor event, sponsored in part by Anheuser Busch and featuring the Molson-Coors pseudo-microbrewery, with 1oz sips of 1981 beers (that is a number, not a date). Even if you attend all four sessions, you would have to drink the equivalent of close to 25 20oz pints in each 5 hour period to hit all 1981. Beer is free once you have paid your entry ticket, but I am sorry, there is no way I can evaluate a beer by one ounce, hardly enough to line the untutored palate. After the first three, I gave up trying to record what I had almost tasted because I had to line up for the next one. Many of the brewers were on hand but the line-ups precluded much discussion. With only 1oz of beer per line up, I spent all my time in line ups. The toilet line up moved fast, but 1 oz of beer did not even keep you supplied while

waiting for a pee. The entertainment seemed to consist of big screen TVs showing the game, comedians you could not hear and a truly weird silent disco (headphones). Day one I focused on stouts and porters, day two I focused on bitters and milds, with precious few of the latter. That was the theory, but I did keep getting sidetracked by some of the well known IPAs and some tempting barley wines. I found just one cask-conditioned beer. They get two out of ten for effort (two categories N/A). Been there; done that; tick; won't be back.

I note IPAs seem to have become the most common type of beer at festivals these days and perhaps that's as it should be. After all, the most famous festival of all, Munich's Oktoberfest, was focused on the consumption of strong beers brewed to last through summer without going off, just as IPAs were brewed for shipping to India with minimal deterioration. Some people are confused that Oktoberfest is held in September but originally it celebrated the approach of October and the resumption of brewing. The idea was to use up the remaining stocks of the strong, stable beers brewed the previous March, otherwise known as Märzen that had been stored (lagered) in caves and root cellars over the summer. Prior to the understanding of microbiology and the advent of effective sanitizers, beer brewed in summer commonly went bad. Hot continental summer favoured multiplication of the vinegar fly, the same *Drosophila melanogaster* used in university genetics classes. The vinegar fly problem may also explain lids on German bier steins. There was less of a problem in the UK's cooler summers, so the tradition of storing strong ales did not develop until squad-dies in India demanded better beer. I have never attended Oktoberfest but I did accidentally end up at the Köln beer festival of 1975 in the biggest tent I had ever seen. I suppose we could have been drinking Kölsch but my memory is nowhere near good enough to know. Entertainment was classic German brass bands and there was a firework show above the Schloss on the hill in the evening. Tough to score after 32 years but I figure it still beat the GABF. There was only one beer available, from the Königsbacher brauerei, but delivery by buxom frauleins sure beats line ups any day. §