

June 17th 2005

On CAMRA

By Dónal Thompson



To beer or not to beer

"You can't be a real country," said Frank Zappa, "unless you have a beer and an airline. It helps if you have some kind of football team, or some nuclear weapons, but at the very least you need a beer."

In the 1960s England won the football World Cup, developed its nuclear capabilities and had its national airline immortalised in the Beatles song "Back in the USSR". But its beer was disappearing fast. The brewing industry had suffered from some kind of civil war and many of the regional breweries has closed down.

With little or no competition the big players started to sell beer which was not made in the centuries old traditional fashion. This new beer was full of gas and as tasteless as soda water.

Something has to be done!

So, in 1971 the Campaign for Real Ale was born. CAMRA, as it became known, started to raise people's awareness of the rubbish they were drinking and began to support the opening of new traditional breweries.

When they started there were only six independent, small breweries in England. Today there are hundreds.

Other pressure groups such as Greenpeace have learned from CAMRA's determined and well-organised campaigns.

Every year they publish "The Real Ale Guide". This includes all the pubs in the UK which serves good, quality beer.

It is thanks to CAMRA that the Draconian opening hours of British pubs have been relaxed. They also actively promote the idea of the 'pub' as a centre of the town's social life.

Imagine the Rioja region's wine were under threat from some Californian conglomerate who wanted all red wine to taste the same. Then imagine a group of wine lovers fighting and winning - saving the Rioja for future generations. Well, that's what CAMRA did in Britain.

Beer has been brewed and drunk in Britain since before the Romans invaded. It is produced by the biological process of fermentation. To have let this icon of national heritage fall into the profane hands of gin drinking businessmen would have been nothing short of treacherous.

The names of the varieties of beers are pure poetry - Martson's Pedigree, Theakston's Old Peculier, Daniel's Hammer, Orkney's Skullsplitter and there is even a beer brewed in Stoke-on-Trent, famous for going down well, called Captain Smith's Titanic Beer; named after the city's most famous son and his unlucky ship.

There are over 50,000 CAMRA members in 180 branches throughout Great Britain. Next time you visit, why not check out CAMRA's website at www.camra.org.uk and find a real British pub with real British beer.

Then just walk in, order a pint and enjoy being in the heart one of Great Britain's greatest traditions.

Cheers!