

A Brief History of Taunton Cider



Background

It was the Romans who discovered how to ferment apple juice to produce a pleasing and refreshing drink. Centuries later, the Normans found that the soil in Normandy and Brittany was ideal for growing fruit tree, and this led to a steady growth in Northern France in the planting of orchards and the production of cider. History speculates that, when the Normans conquered Britain in the 11th century, they brought their fruit-growing and cidermaking expertise with them and, finding that the soil in Hereford and SW Britain was similar to their own, started widespread planting of the apple varieties which they grew successfully at home.

Thus was the British cider industry born, and it flourished throughout the South West; every farm would have a small number of apple trees, and many local farmers would make their own cider via a very basic process which gave no real control over quality or alcoholic strength. Many farmers, particularly at harvest time, would pay their farm hands partly in cider, a cheap and tax free alternative to wages! Here and there, farmers would get together to process their fruit at one particular location (cider production was a very small corner of their activity so it made sense for them to produce it in a small cooperatives).

Beginnings

One such came together in the West Somerset village of Norton Fitzwarren, just west of the county town of Taunton, in 1805. This little business continued right through the 19th century, making good quality cider to meet the needs of Norton, surrounding villages, and Taunton itself. And so it might have continued for another 100 years, had not the business decided it need a full time cidemaker and (so the rumour goes) carried out an early act of headhunting in 1911 by offering Arthur Moore - the gardener and part time cidemaker at Heathfield rectory in an adjoining village - an extra one shilling per week to work at Norton Fitzwarren.

With Arthur's expertise, Norton's ciders became very popular and in 1912 the business became a limited company - The Taunton Cider company Ltd. With WWI over it resumed its growth and began to sell throughout Somerset. There was a wobble in 1923, when the government of the day introduced a Purchase Tax on cider, but the Company survived. Cider at that time was still fairly basic; there was no hint of the sparkling and pasteurised varieties to be developed in the 1960s, and as cider had a very limited shelf life there was no question of geographical expansion. So the little Company prospered in its quite and local way, with a handful of loyal and hardworking

employees. All production was in traditional wooden barrels and was supplied to pubs; in the late 1930s the Company flirted with bottled cider, but this form of packaging only took off much later.

Post-War Change

In the years following WW2, there were no major brewers or pub owners. Taunton Cider found itself supplying pubs of numerous area or regional brewers (who all needed a good brand of cider in their pubs to meet the demands of West Country drinkers). But in the 50s and 60s the British brewing industry began to rationalise via a series of takeovers and mergers. Most of Taunton's customers fell victim to this process; for example, the Oak Hill Brewery on Mendip was acquired by Courage, Brutton Mitchell Toms, in Chard, was bought by Bass, Starkey Knight & Ford in Taunton became part of Whitbread, Arnold & Hancock (Taunton and Wivelliscombe) went to Watney, and so on. But this was good news for Taunton Cider, for those larger brewers all needed to stock cider in their pubs and they naturally chose to stock cider that was proving so popular in the pubs of their West Country acquisitions.

So Taunton then embarked on some rapid growth; sales increased steadily and steeply, and the Norton Fitzwarren mill became a very different scene as it was necessary to invest heavily, both in plant and equipment and in capable staff, to meet new demands. The Company's size and profitability became significant, so much so that Bass, Courage and Watney decided to take shareholdings and help to fund the necessary growth. Part of this growth required the widening in the product base; customers in other parts of the UK were already used to bottled beer and other products, thus Norton commenced production of cider in half-pint and two-pint (flagon) bottles to give its brewer outlets an alternative to the traditional draught cider.

New Challenges

This growth, however, was in a fairly settled part of the drinks market. Over the same period, the UK saw the establishment and growth of Tesco, Sainsbury and other supermarkets; Taunton Cider was only available in pubs (the "On" licensed trade), and could not be found either in these new supermarkets or in the more traditional "Off" licensed outlets. Whilst considering how to tackle this imbalance, a parallel problem had emerged in the On trade; nationally, brewers were increasingly putting their beers into steel kegs, rather than wooden casks - should Taunton Cider follow suit with its cider?

These two major strategic challenges were dealt with via a single step; the Company invited Arthur Guinness & Co to take an investment alongside other national brewers. Guinness would have input in two key areas; firstly, it would guide Taunton in establishing national marketing practices which would make the Company's brands known across the On and Off trade sectors and, secondly, the funds injection from the Guinness investment would enable Taunton to provide a keging plant, dispense equipment for pubs, and a huge quantity of kegs to carry Taunton ciders into the pubs for dispensing in the same modern way as beer and lager.

Branding , and the Move to TV Advertising

It was agreed that the strategies would require the creation of a new brand of cider, and a move into TV advertising. Thus in 1972, following very careful market research, the Company launched Dry Blackthorn, and produced a TV advert that cleverly within a 30-second timespan talked about Taunton Cider, Dry blackthorn, and an important existing brand, Autumn Gold. The emphasis of the campaign was that Taunton was a traditional West Country cider producer (where the public expected cider to come from) but was also a thoroughly professional, modern company with brands of high quality. And this strategy succeeded, as steadily the number of Off trade outlets stocking Taunton brands grew, alongside similar growth in keg cider dispense units in pubs.

Inevitably the Company became an important player in the British cider market. a single figure percentage share in the 1960s became 10% in 1973, and by 1992 this had grown to 34% - more than one third of the UK market. And in that same 20 year period - due in part to Taunton's own marketing activity - the market itself had grown fourfold, so by the early 1990s Norton Fitzwarren's production volume had increased some twelve times!

Successful growth placed strains on the business. the best cider is made from special cider apples - bitter sweet and bitter sharp in particular - and it was essential to ensure adequate supply, so in partnership with landowners in Somerset, Devon and Dorset the Company planted over 1,000 acres of cider apple orchards to augment the vital raw material of the future. Accompanying this were increases in storage capacity for juice and maturing cider, new packaging capacity, a burgeoning in the local and long-distance delivery fleets, etc and a parallel increase in sales, technical and administrative staff - by 1993 the company employed 550 people of whom 80 were sales staff based elsewhere in the UK and the remainder in the village of Norton Fitzwarren.

Decline and Fall

The 1990s proved to be years of change and turbulence. The mighty UK brewing industry was under great pressure, and the large brewers were required to break up their pubs empires by the UK Monopolies Commission. The then Board of Directors of Taunton saw this as an opportunity to break away from the consortium structure of the Companies shareholding; Guinness had already withdrawn in 1858, and in May 1991 Taunton underwent a management buyout which saw most of the remaining brewers also withdraw and the Companies shares distributed amongst the staff. In the short term it was a popular move, which led to the public floatation of The Taunton Cider Company in July 1992, but this effectively put the Company "in play" and in 1994 it was taken over by Matthew Clark plc.

This company had previously purchased the business of Showerings Ltd, which produced Cider and Perry in Shepton Mallett, in East Somerset; an unpleasant consequence of this order of events was that Matthew Clark decided to consolidate Cider production at their existing plant, rather than Norton, hence activity at Norton began to run down, with production of all brands progressively transferred to Shepton Mallett. The much truncated Norton site finally closed in 1998. After lying abandoned for several years, the buildings were demolished in 2007 and the site has now been developed with some 600 homes; few traces remain of the once great company which prospered there.

The People

Sadly, the great majority of those 550 employees were made redundant over the final three years (a handful were luckier in being offered jobs with Matthew Clark, either in Bristol or Shepton Mallett). and here tribute should be paid to those 550, for it was the people who worked for Taunton who made the Company what it was. Their pride in their Company, and the jobs they undertook, was always evident to see in their hard work, their unfailing cheerfulness, and their unswerving loyalty - Taunton Cider was fortunate to be so well served by so many for so long!

Aftermath - The New Century

In the first decade of the 21st Century, Matthew Clark was itself taken over by Constellation, an American wine producer which saw Matthew Clark as a base for expansion into Europe. Perhaps inevitably under this new regime Cider started to live in the shadow of the new group's wine products; marketing expenditure on the Cider brands was cut and this of course led to the falling market share and sales. In 2011 Constellation became disillusioned with Europe and sold 80% of that business to an

Australian company, Accolade Wines; a few months earlier the rump of the cider business at Shepton Mallett was sold to an Irish company, Cantrell & Cochrane (the producers of Magners Cider). This was a sadly ironic twist of fate, as cider was unknown in the Republic of Ireland until Taunton Cider launched Blackthorn in Eire in 1984 and created an Irish Cider market from virtually nothing!

Principal brands of The Taunton Cider Company Ltd

Cider products: Traditional Draught Cider

 Autumn Gold (originally a brand of Brutton Mitchell Toms) (bottled and keg)

 Natural Dry (bottled)

 Special Vat (bottled)

 Exhibition (bottled)

 Pommia (originally a brand of the Quantock Vale Cider Co) (bottled)

Post - 1973

 Dry Blackthorn (bottled and keg)

 Diamond white (bottled)

 Diamond Blush (a pink cider) (bottled)

 Red Rock (bottled and keg)

 Cool (bottled)

 Bickneller (bottled)

 Piermont non alcoholic sparkling water with apple juice) (bottled)

 Brody (bottled)

 Copella (pure apple and other juices, produced in East Anglia)

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