History in a glass

The Source As 'craft' beers attract a new generation of drinkers, *Natalie Whittle* goes in search of real ale at Britain's oldest brewery

The first welcoming light we see in Faversham comes from a pub. Stepping off a Friday evening train from London and walking into the dark streets of the Kentish market town, we find the shops shut and no one to be seen. It is down to the Railway Hotel pub to emit a cheerful yellow glow from its windows, followed yards later by another, lit up like a reassuring beacon, The Limes. Both are tied to Shepherd Neame brewery, whose bold red insignia sits above the pub signs.

"Sheps", as it's known locally, is the largest employer in town. Along Faversham's streets you can walk past eight more Sheps pubs that pull pints for the local population of 20,000. To say this is a company town is no exaggeration; in previous generations Shepherd Neame would even benevolently repair the church bell or pay for the Christmas lights. But, at heart, it's really a beer town — its ready proximity to Kent's famous hops and to fine, chalk filtered water gives it a history of brewing that stretches back even before the long Sheps reign. An Anglo-Saxon trading boat that had been carrying hops was found in the nearby marshes in 1970, while a 14th century document references 86 "ale wives" working in Faversham — women rather than men were on brewing duty in the Middle Ages. (Medieval ale was safer to drink than medieval water, so "small beer" with a very weak alcohol by volume of about 0.2 per cent was a daily drink — as well as a liquid for mothers to wash their children in.)

Today, the explosion in popularity of so-called "craft beer" is driving the opening of microbreweries in disused railway arches and warehouses in cities across the UK, but a trip to Faversham offers an education in the history and flavours of a more traditional brew. Shepherd Neame is Britain's oldest surviving brewery, officially founded in 1698 though brewing had already been taking place on the same site for 125 years before that. The brewery offers tours and tutored tastings most days, and packages with accommodation in one of the town's historic pubs — ideal as a short beery break for anyone who lives in, or is visiting, London.

Pushing at the door of the Sun Inn, a 14th-century inn that is now a Shepherd Neame pub-with-rooms, we are greeted by a bustling scene. A covers band is tuning up for a set of Bob Marley and The Clash. Leather armchairs by an inglenook fireplace are occupied by gossiping drinkers and their children playing board games. The mantelpiece and the bar are garlanded with pretty strings of dried hops (Kentish, naturally) and pewter tankards. Upstairs, the bedrooms were refurbished last year to reflect current fashions — the ancient beams, which had been covered up, are now exposed once more.

Back at the bar we settle in for pints of Whitstable Bay and Spitfire Gold (Sheps of course) before dinner, both are fresh and hoppy. Real ale — as we will learn — is a live product, unpasteurised, unfiltered and still fermenting in the cask. So, unlike artificially carbonated "keg beer", it tends to taste better the closer you are to the source — and we are no more than 200 yards away.

The next morning we explore the Saturday market, an encampment in the market square of bric-a-brac sellers and fruit and vegetable stalls — apples, potatoes and carrots from Kent, and even a few hop vines for sale. But in Faversham there is no avoiding the brewery: whichever way you walk you seem to end up there. It certainly seems to have entranced a few of the men in the small group that gathers for the afternoon tour. "Good to see some familiar faces," says the leader with a wry wink to the die-hards who have done this tour several times before.

Inside there is the immediate ferrous scent of damp industrial metal. A brewery, let it not be forgotten in the age of the hipster craft brewer, is far from glamorous. We clamber up to the brewing floors past an impressive circuitry of pipework twining in all directions. In 2015, some 65m pints of beer were brewed here (including for licensed brands that might make a real ale enthusiast shudder: Asahi and Samuel Adams Boston Lager).

We begin by tasting the malted, roasted barley — a light roasting produces a light or pale ale, while a deep roasting makes porter or stout; we chew the grain to note its chocolatey flavour. The malt mill crushes the grain to "grist", which then mixes with hot water in the "mash tuns", large vessels made of oak and a type of bronze. The resulting "wort" is moved to the "coppers" (actually made of steel), where the hops are added and the mixture boiled.

This is where Kent — and Sheps — comes into its own. The first hops were grown in Kent in the 16th century, before anywhere else in the UK, and today 80 per cent of the hops at Shepherd Neame come from within 25 miles of the brewery. The dried hop pellets are crumbled into our palms — these impart flavour, aroma and bitterness to the beers — and on the tongue their taste is strikingly strong, acrid even.

Passing stained-glass windows depicting Sheps history, we move on to the "cathedral of beer", full of tall cylindrical fermentation tanks where yeast is added to the cooled wort to convert the sugars to alcohol. The tour then meanders through ephemera from the past: a gallery's worth of old pub signs advertising creaky bygones such as the Bonny Cravat or Simon the Tanner; and a garage of previous transporters such as a handsome 1951 Reliant van.

The Sheps fans lick their lips visibly for the final stage: a six-part tasting. By the time we reach Double Stout — a bottled beer brewed to an 1872 recipe — we have learnt that malted barley equals a clear beer, while the addition of wheat will make it cloudy; if the head sticks to the side of the glass, it is called "lacing" — a high compliment to a brewer. My preference is for the Early Bird spring ale, brewed with Kent golding hops, but I don't manage to finish the samples (which are gladly downed by the father and son bonding at the next table).

Before catching the train home, we set off back into Faversham's ancient streets in search of a sobering cup of tea.

For more from the series, in which writers travel to the home of a celebrated product, see ft.com/thesource

From top, left to right: stained-glass windows at the Shepherd Neame brewery; the brewery gates; hop-picking at Parsonage Farm, Kent; the Sun Inn; a room at the Sun Inn; the brewery chimney and roofs of Faversham ; an Austin 7 delivery van
Jason Dodd; Tim Stubbings

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Natalie Whittle was a guest of Shepherd Neame (shepherdneame.co.uk). A brewery tour, plus one night at the Sun Inn, costs from £99 for two people, or £174 for two nights

Short cuts

Italy Lake Iseo in northern Italy is about to emerge from the shadow of its more celebrated neighbours — Lake Garda and Como — thanks to a major installation by the artist Christo Vladimirov Javacheff. Better known simply as Christo, his previous works include "Wrapped Reichstag" in 1995 and 1983's "Surrounded Islands", in Miami's Biscayne Bay. His new project, the first major work for more than a decade, is "The Floating Piers", a series of walkways stretching 3km over Lake Iseo, made of floating polythene cubes and clad in 70,000 sq meters of shimmering yellow fabric. Open for just 16 days, from June 18, the piers will connect two islands on the lake, and the fabric will extend into the streets of lakeside towns. L'Albereta, a five-star hotel surrounded by vineyards a few minutes drive from the lake, is offering a two-night package for two people, including lunch on one of the islands, for €1,100. Meanwhile tour operator Black Tomato has a three-night package, staying at the Bulgari hotel in Milan, from £1,325 per person. *albereta.it; blacktomato.com*

Christo's 'Surrounded Islands'

UK Virgin Trains East Coast has unveiled the first of its "Azuma" trains that will operate the London to Edinburgh route by the end of 2018. At a ceremony at King's Cross station, Sir Richard Branson called the trains "a new dawn" for rail in the UK, though they will reduce the journey time between the English and Scottish capitals by no more than 22 minutes. The trains, made by Hitachi, are capable of 140mph but the line is restricted to 125mph. That speed is already achieved by the Class 43 locomotives that have been operating on the route since the late 1970s, but the new trains make time gains by accelerating faster. *virgintrainseastcoast.com*

France The LVMH group — the luxury conglomerate whose brands include fashion houses, perfumers and watchmakers — is opening the doors to 51 of its premises for Les Journées Particulières, a three-day event across five countries in May. Online registration for free tickets opened this week. Among the venues open to the public for the first time are the Fendi headquarters in Rome, the Guerlain production site in Chartres, and the Louis Vuitton Atelier in the Vendée. *lvmh.com/lesjourneesparticulieres*

Tom Robbins

Fendi's headquarters in Rome

POSTCARD FROM . . .

COURCHEVEL

My back straightens as I hear the radio crackle and a female voice comes over the airwaves. "Signal, this is Central Secours," she says in French. "You have a child with an injured hip at the top of the Mickey piste. He hit a wooden post." I feel worry creep in, but for the six ski patrollers around me, these emergency calls are part of daily life.

We are sitting inside their patrol station, a two-story wooden hut complete with a kitchenette and sofas, high above the French ski resort of Courchevel. It is next to the summit station of the Saulire cable car, 2,738m above sea level, and I have caught the last lift of the day to join the patrol as they close the slopes, part of a new, weekly event called Sunset Tracks.

Up to 15 people can sign up for the two-hour sessions that run every Thursday and are free (refreshing in a resort that's developed a reputation for mountainous prices). The idea is to give skiers a glimpse into the lives of the 45-strong team responsible for their safety on the mountain, from marking out the pistes to avalanche control. If weather conditions are good, this can include a simulated search for an avalanche victim and a demonstration of dynamite used to trigger avalanches safely while the pistes are closed.


Matthew Cook

When I arrive, however, thickening fog engulfs the patrol hut, so I head straight inside, through the boot room where patrollers' backpacks hang neatly on hooks, up a spiral staircase and into the office. Our group includes a woman who has skied in Courchevel for 50 years, a couple who prefer activities rather than après-ski, and a young skier who got lost and came inside to warm up.

I sit next to Agnès Chiapale, one of Courchevel's four female ski patrollers, or *pisteurs*. She tells me she loves her job for its variety. "No day is the same: one minute you're marking out pistes, the next you're rescuing someone with a broken arm. And you get to ski for work — you can't beat that."

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Despite such perks, being a pisteur isn't a dropout holiday job, as many skiers assume. Applicants must pass two five-day courses, including advanced first aid, overseen by the Association Nationale des Pisteurs Secouristes (ANPSP), then skiing tests both on and off piste. If successful, four weeks' training on everything from meteorology to skiing with a sledge follows, including a two-day exam — practical and oral — at the end. While there's nothing stopping English-speakers applying, the training is conducted in French. "Most of us see it as a career," says Chiapale.

Perched on the edge of a desk, Philippe Roche, the piste manager, starts by explaining the day-to-day runnings inside the patrol hut. One patroller, the *permanence*, mans the station, responding to calls and deciding which patroller to dispatch to a casualty. Everyone else is responsible for two pistes each, opening them every morning and maintaining them all day. Other jobs include setting off controlled avalanches using hand-tossed charges, for which pisteurs earn an extra €35 a day because of the added risk. There is also a remote-controlled system called Gazex, which, at the touch of a button, ignites a propane-oxygen mix inside pipes high on the mountainside, creating a blast that triggers an avalanche.

Courchevel's four patrol stations work together to cover the area, along with the central switchboard (Central Secours). When the radio call comes in about the child with the injured hip, it is designated to the patrol in the "Signal" area, closest to the accident.

We head downstairs, where a dozen blue-and-orange "blood wagon" sledges hang from the wall. Stuart Griffin, a 34-year-old ski patroller on exchange from Crested Butte, Colorado, tells me that the wooden, orange variety are lighter and faster than their blue metal counterparts, but can be more painful for a patient. "If you're off-piste, the blue sledges can act like a submarine, but the orange ones can be jarring," he says. "You pick your sledge according to the terrain and injury."

We snap on our skis to begin the patroller's last job of the day: a final sweep of the slopes to ensure no skiers are left and to prepare the pistes for the grooming machines by moving signs and markers out of the way. The more we descend, the more the falling snow lessens, until it eventually gives way to a sky tinged with pink and, below us, gloriously empty pistes. I carve my final turns enjoying the privilege of being last on the mountain, and the satisfaction of having glimpsed a side of the ski resort that most visitors never see.

Ellie Ross

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The Sunset Tracks experience is free, see courchevel.com. Ellie Ross flew to Geneva as a guest of British Airways (ba.com)