



Sep 28

Seasons Will Pass You By — The Return of Gale's Prize Old Ale

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[Content warning: this feature contains a reference to suicide]

If Gale's Prize Old Ale were a building, it would long ago have been listed Grade 1 by English Heritage as something of exceptional national importance. The survival of this rich, strong, deep, sweet-sour, dark, fruity, umami-laden beer—since the takeover and closure of its original home, the Gale's brewery in Horndean, Hampshire, by the London brewer Fuller, Smith & Turner in 2006—is almost miraculous.

If you've ever wanted to taste the beer, which has a recipe more than 100 years old, then you will get your chance this autumn. The legendary Prize Old Ale is being released again for the first time since 2018, thanks to the dedication and passion of two men determined to keep a unique beer alive.

The beer is produced using the solera system, where a batch of each new brew has a quantity of the previous brew added to it. In return a vat of the old brew is topped up with new beer every year, ensuring the continuity of microorganisms going back year upon year to, in this case, the early 1920s.

John Keeling, the hugely knowledgeable former director of brewing at Fuller's, ensured that the contents of the last vat of Prize Old Ale (POA) were shipped the 50 miles from Horndean to Fuller's brewery in Chiswick, West London, to be kept safe. Henry Kirk, head brewer at Dark Star Brewing in Partridge Green, West Sussex, acquired by Fuller's in 2018, and a fervent believer in the significance of POA, has now brought some of that precious, holy, long-lived vat of ale and its families of organisms down to Sussex.

Now he has brewed a fresh batch of Prize Old Ale to the original Horndean recipe, carefully blended that into the old, well-travelled beer, and then sat by the maturation vessels for the past months while ancient yeasts and other mini-beasts carry out microbiological magic in the dark.



(<https://www.hopburnsblack.co.uk>)

This October the new edition of Prize Old Ale will be bottled and put on sale, each bottle containing a tiny, homoeopathic quantity of every other batch of POA going back to the reign of King George V. Henry, and his masters, the Japanese brewing giant Asahi (which acquired Fullers, and with it Dark Star, in 2019) hopes that drinkers are now knowledgeable enough about mixed-fermentation beers, and what they have to offer, to appreciate Prize Old Ale, which—in the UK, at least—they were probably not when Fuller's first relaunched it in 2007.

Gale's Prize Old Ale would probably not exist if it had not been for the suicide of Gale's head brewer, William Sydney Steel, aged 54, four days before Christmas 1922.

Steel had been highly successful at Gales, steering the firm through the tough years of the First World War. But he had apparently just bought a large quantity of malt at too high a price, and, burdened with worry, drowned himself in fermenting vessel number five.

To replace him, George Gale & Co hired William Barton Mears junior, aged 31, who was then working for Hepworth's brewery in Ripon, Yorkshire. Mears is often said to be a Yorkshireman, though he was actually born in Wolverhampton. The restrictions imposed during the First World War on brewing strong beers had finally been removed in June 1921, and Mears took advantage of this to add a strong, dark, well-aged old ale with an original gravity of 1095° and 9% alcohol, to Gale's line-up.

It quickly won plaudits and was known as Prize Old Ale by 1928 at the latest.



Illustrations by Dionne Kitching

Today Prize Old Ale is almost the last example left of a once-common style of British beer—long-matured old ale—kept for months, if not years, before going on sale. In 1920 these aged ales were called: “the liqueur of the working man... thoroughly matured, to shed [their] sweetness and acquire the wine flavour... a delightful substitute for port wine.”

Mears, who stayed as head brewer at Horndean for more than 30 years, retiring in 1954, kept going with making a super-strong brew, mashed in a 140-barrel cast-iron mash tun, and boiled for two to three hours in an actual copper made from copper, used only for Prize Old Ale, and so old that hot wort would run out from between the cracks in the metal.

The long boil produced caramelisation and darkening of the wort, which was then fermented in wooden fermenters. The beer was originally matured in wooden hogsheads, later changed to a wooden washback made from New Zealand Kauri wood, which had its own unique flora and fauna hiding in the cracks, including lactic bacteria and the like, all adding to the developing flavours. There the young ale stayed for six months to a year before being hand-bottled, hand-corked and hand-labelled in a small outbuilding at the brewery.

In the 1970s Prize Old Ale was one of only a very few British bottled beers still matured in the bottle with live yeast. Gale's kept this up, and used real corks, until the brewery, now rickety and run-down, its interior a warren of runways and wooden steps, disused old open coolers and empty wooden vats was taken over by Fullers in 2006. John Keeling was determined that this unique survival of a lost past should be rescued.

“Prize Old Ale had very little
love from the Fullers board.”

— John Keeling

“We weren't able to take those Kauri-lined tanks, which added as much as the Gale's

yeast to the brew,” John tells me. “So I thought, ‘Why don't we take a sample of the Gale's Prize Old Ale, and inoculate our version of Prize Old Ale with that sample?’ We got them to brew far more Prize Old Ale than they needed, and we brought down an 80-barrel tank-load, and we left it there for at least a year.”

“We then brewed 80 barrels of Prize Old Ale ourselves, with the help of Derek Lowe, Gale's head brewer, took out 20 barrels, inoculated it with 20 barrels from the batch brewed at Horndean, and put the 20 barrels of the new stuff back in the old tank,” John adds.

The beer was bottled with crown caps, rather than corks, to prevent it going flat. “Richard Fuller [then the family firm's sales director] hated the beer, as did our sales team—they didn't know how to sell it,” John says. “Everybody was saying, ‘it's sour, this is not what beer should taste like, can't you ditch it?’ Prize Old Ale had very little love from the Fullers board. So we only ever did two batches [in 2007 and 2008]. But I transferred most of the 80 barrels of maturing beer into our polypin tanks, which were then redundant, and we left it there, always with the intention of doing something with it.”

Fuller's made only a brief attempt to see what bugs were in Prize Old Ale. “There was such a vast array, we never bothered to do any sort of analysis other than to say, ‘well, there's a lot of 'em,” John says. “What we've got to do is try to keep them in some sort of equilibrium.’ I assume there was *Brettanomyces* in there, but a real analysis would have cost money!”



Henry Kirk arrived at Fuller's in 2014, and says that once he found out about the vat of Prize Old Ale slumbering in a tank at the brewery, he became “obsessed” with trying to get Fullers to rebrew it.

“It was the romance of it all—and I was working with Anthony Smith, who had been at Gale's about two years before the sale to Fullers, so he had a lot of information about how they used to brew Prize Old Ale,” he tells me. “At that time I was becoming very enamoured with Rodenbach Grand Cru, so that whole idea of the big long boil, the high ABV and maturing it in wooden vats where it would get that lactic bacteria touch—the idea of resurrecting it was an intoxicating one.”

An attempt was made in 2018 to brew POA at the Marble Brewery in Manchester by then head brewer (and former Fuller's lab technician) James Kemp, and blend it with the older version in barrels that had contained Pinot Noir grapes, Bourbon whiskey and Madeira, which was critically well received, but failed to persuade the brewery to launch a major revival of the beer.

Eventually, after Henry had moved to Dark Star brewery in Partridge Green, Sussex, some 50 to 55 hectolitres of Prize Old Ale were tanked from Chiswick to

Dark Star in November 2019 and kept at 12°C in one of the brewery's fermenting vessels. By this time it had risen to 11% ABV and was tasting like “a subtle Rodenbach Grand Cru—there is the acetic [acid] there, but it's very soft compared to the Grand Cru,” Henry says.

“People know about Brett and lactic acid bacteria in a way that I don't think they did ten years ago.”

— Henry Kirk, Dark Star Brewing

After Asahi agreed to finance a rebrew, Henry consulted a Gale's brewing book from 1989, on which he based the version brewed at Dark Star, with an OG of 1095 and a target ABV of 9%. It had “lots” of start-of-boil hops, all Fuggles and Goldings in equal proportions, a 2½-hour boil and some late hops, aiming for an IBU (international bitterness units) of 45, with a “straightforward” grain bill of Maris Otter pale malt, torrefied wheat, and a 25kg bag of black malt for a 40-hectolitre brew, [“it's quite a lot, but that matched up to what they were doing back in 1989,” Henry says].

The two beers, old, originally made in the wooden washbacks at Gale's in Hampshire, and new, brewed next door in Sussex, have now been blended, to make some 80 hectolitres of beer, and the microorganisms from Horndean are doing their job. Initially, around 10 hectolitres will be bottled by hand, probably into 33cl

bottles, bottle-conditioned and put on sale. If those thousand litres sell out, another 10 hectolitres will be bottled, and so on, but at least 20 to 30 hectolitres will be kept back for blending into another brew, hopefully, next year.

The beer will continue to be called Gale's Prize Old Ale. "You need to keep the name, to explain the lineal history, and the microbiological connection," Henry says, optimistic that this third attempt to relaunch POA will be a success.

"People know about Brett and lactic acid bacteria in a way that I don't think they did ten years ago. I think there's a bit of a renaissance in interest in British beer culture, with stings and milds being brewed again. People struggled to understand what I was talking about for a long time, but they've been willing to come on the journey with me. So I am hopeful."



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For me personally, I feel as emotionally involved in the relaunch of POA as John and Henry. As a historian of beer, I have frequently wondered what old, vanished beer styles tasted like. It's marvellous that with Prize Old Ale we have a direct link to the brews of a century ago. With the big rise in interest in sour beers over the past ten years, are drinkers finally ready to appreciate this unique survivor? I do hope so. If you see it, try it: I'm sure you'll love it.

"[Prize Old Ale] is there to remind us of what went on in the past," John Keeling adds. "Back then people were more used to drinking sour beers. It has a cutting edge to it that sweet beers do not have. It's always going to be a bit of a niche product. But what you want to do is build that niche like we built Vintage Ale."

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Martyn is an internationally recognised expert on the history of beer and beer styles. A widely travelled beer writer and blogger who has drunk in bars and breweries from Norway to Australia, he's spoken on beer and its history at conferences from the Netherlands to Brazil. He has published four books and hundreds of articles about beer and brewing, and blogs at zythophile.co.uk (<http://zythophile.co.uk/>)

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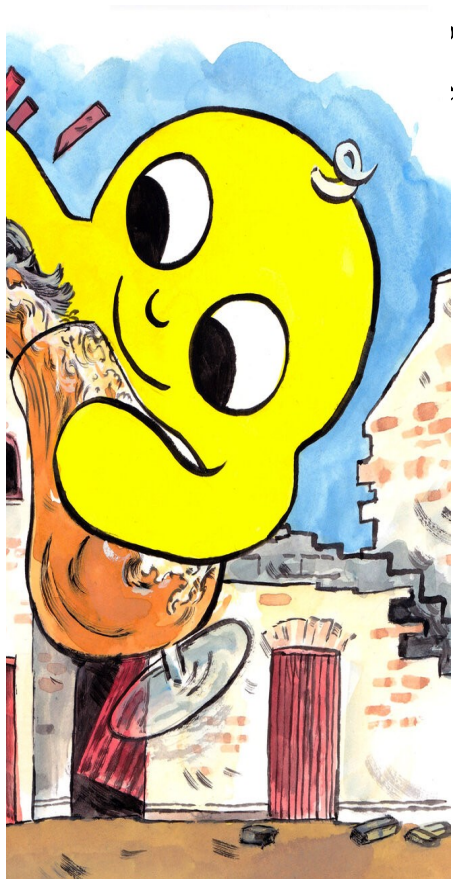


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