

Going Dutch

Adrian Tierney-Jones heads to the Dutch city of 's-Hertogenbosch to see what's brewing



Cask doesn't travel. That used to be my iron-clad opinion when it came to drinking cask-conditioned beer across the Channel (or the Atlantic for that matter). Cask was too highly strung, too sensitive, too likely to fail in its mission if handled in countries where it had no tradition.

For instance, a few years ago I was in Brussels at a reception for the Brewers of Europe, at which several British breweries had cask beers in attendance. One was fine, another so-so, but then the third one stopped me in my tracks, as a weedy Sargasso Sea mouthfeel allied itself to a dissonant note of chlorine. I didn't bother checking out the other cask beers.

In the years since, I have drunk cask beer in Italy, Spain and the US, usually with varying degrees of enthusiasm, especially if it has been brewed on the premises. However, none of it has really made me stand up on a box and deliver a speech worthy of Churchill. The result was, I developed a scepticism and went as far as wondering why you would want to drink cask beer



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abroad, especially where, as is the case in Belgium and the US, there is a wonderful native beer culture. It felt like being on a par with those Brits who go to places like Benidorm and eat approximations of fish and chips or bacon butties, while ignoring the often splendid local dishes.

However, and this is a big however, an evening in the Dutch city of

's-Hertogenbosch (though if you find that too linguistically challenging the other name is Den Bosch), demonstrated that cask can travel, as well as convince locals that it has a place in their lives. The place of my Damascene conversion was Thornbridge 's-Hertogenbosch, a pub just outside the city centre; it opened last November and is the result of a partnership between the Bakewell-based brewery, bar landlord Paul Leeyen and Amsterdam-based wholesalers Bier & Co. If it works, as it seems to be doing, it could be a sign of things to come when it comes to cask on the continent (Bier & Co already has big plans in that direction).

For a start, let's get the terminology

correct. This is most definitely a pub. Inside the L-shaped bar it has the feel of a classic Victorian London pub, the mood suggestive of twilight, shaded and shadowy, day perpetually on the verge of becoming night. It's womb-like in its comfort, inviting and beguiling, a haven that





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I could imagine spending time in even on the brightest of days.

The pub-like ambience continues with the design. Beers are dispensed at a long wooden bar; a gleaming brass rail curves around the base, while bar stools stand alongside, phantom regulars during the day, islands of contentment in the evening (as well as a diverse range of Thornbridge beers, other names in contention include Rogue Ales, Flying Dog and Dutch artisanal breweries).

The back bar is dark-stained wood, mirrors shining like lakes glimpsed in a forest; bottles and glasses, prone, ready to be pressed into action. Wooden beams, which were hidden away when this was called the Golden Key, cross the ceiling,

a brief nod to Brewers' Tudor perhaps? Elsewhere, there are classy black and white photos of Thornbridge plus various other beery mementos, but the most striking sight, as ramrod straight as guardsmen on parade, is the trio of handpumps, all of which deliver Thornbridge's cask-conditioned beers. Tonight, it's the 4.6 per cent ABV Squatters Pale Ale (specially brewed for drinks importers Bier & Co), Wild Swan (3.5 per cent) and Jaipur IPA (5.9 per cent). This is a foreign field of beer that is very much forever England.

Squatters Pale Ale is a pleasing English pale ale, bruised gold in colour, blessed with a mid-palate marmalade-like

oranginess, cracker-like crispness, finishing assertive in its dryness with a bracing thrust of bitterness. It was brewed in with Bier & Co, whose Karel van Broekhoven is also at the pub when I arrive.

"Luckily, I've trained the bar staff here in all the aspects of cask ale just to make them enthusiastic about it and it has turned out well," he says. "They tell their customers all about cask ale and its difference to 'the fizzy stuff', and strangely enough it works! Since day one the pub has sold about four to five casks on a weekly basis, which is great in my humble opinion."

As I drank it, banishing the unpleasant memories of disappointing, poor cask beer previously tasted abroad, we were joined by Paul, who needed no prompting in telling



the tale of how Thornbridge came to be in this part of Europe.

"I had spent three years running my beer bar 't Paultje in town," he says. "It is in the city centre and from the first day of its opening it was very busy, so we needed to get another bar. I also needed a place that would fit regulars in. At our other bar we sell all types of beer, but I felt that the city didn't have a decent pub, so for this I specifically chose an English rather than Irish theme. I much prefer English pubs – I like good beer, food and sport.

"As for the Thornbridge connection, I sold its beers at my bar with Jaipur being one of the best sellers. I once thought of opening a BrewDog bar, but that didn't work out, so I went to see Karel and he


suggested Thornbridge. I then visited the brewery and fell in love with it. It was like coming home.

"The range of Thornbridge's beers is magnificent, and because I fell in love, I wanted to take the feeling I had back to the Netherlands, so that is why I said I wanted to have cask. We're telling a story and that works. I don't want it to be overwhelming and that is why we are not

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in the city centre. We're still outside and people have a reason for coming here. We want to spread the love."

The evening I visited also saw Thornbridge organising the launch of two bottle-conditioned sour red ales; both had been aged in Burgundy barrels and were 7 per cent, one having been infused with cherries, the other with raspberries. Love Amongst the Ruins was the one with cherries, with woody, earthy, balsamic and cherry liqueur notes. It was superlative in its complexity, dry in the finish and to make things even more intriguing, I was handed chocolates that had the beer inside them.

Days of Creation had Ribena, balsamic, vanilla and Mivvi notes; it was dry and fruity, had a quenching sourness and was 



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WHILE YOU'RE THERE, ALSO VISIT...

● Café 't Paultje, Lepelstraat 31a, 's-Hertogenbosch. Paul Leeyen's original bar with a beer list in its hundreds. (tpaultje.nl)
● Tapperij het Veulen, Korenbrugstraat 9a, 's-Hertogenbosch. Cosy and comfortable café

specialising in Belgian beers. (hetveulen.nl)
● Bar 35, Lepelstraat 35, 's-Hertogenbosch. Burgers and Dutch 'craft' beer. (bar35.nl)
● Biercafé Kandinsky, Telegraafstraat 58, Tilburg. A short train ride away, this café stocks

more than 200 beers. (biercafe-kandinsky.nl)
● Van Moll Eindhoven, Keizersgracht 16a, Eindhoven. Brewpub, one of whose standout beers is Zoltan Imperial Stout (11 per cent), matured in Highland Park barrels. (vanmoll eindhoven.nl)



clean on the palate. This one was matched with chicken marinated in stout and the puckered potency of the beer matched up to the food. If I didn't know it was Thornbridge I would have thought I was south over the border in Flanders.

Thornbridge senior brewer Ben Wood told the tale of the beer's creation. "It took two years," he told the crowd, "with sampling every three months, as we were relying on our palates and knowledge of such beer styles. The problem you have in wooden barrels is the porousness. We always say our barrels need a summer, as the wood swells and beer goes into the wood, and when it cools it comes out again."

According to Thornbridge's marketing and export manager, Alex Buchanan, who

had also made the trip, "we have always talked about providing support and doing something different. We are beholden to this and close to the heart of Oud Bruin country, and looking forward to hearing what people think of the beers."

He didn't have to worry about what people thought, as there was general approval not only to the two bottled beers, but also to the presence of Thornbridge's cask beers. "We try and come here every week," a CAMRA member based in The Hague said. "A choice of cask in the Netherlands is really something special."

Meanwhile, Paul told me the tale of how on the opening weekend his mother

came to the pub and tried Jaipur for the first time. "She only drinks Heineken normally, but then tried Jaipur, first on keg and then on cask, and she was blown away. Education is important – people are coming in and they want to know about cask. They are eager to know and surprised when they taste. The flavours are way better than others, keg can be like soda, cask is warmer, so you can taste the beer."

Eleven years after its foundation, Thornbridge once again showed how it remains one of the most vital British breweries about. Cask doesn't travel? It certainly does now.

● **Thornbridge 's-Hertogenbosch, Koninginnenlaan 28-30, 's-Hertogenbosch; thornbridge.nl**