

What's brewing in Wales?

Scott Waddington of the Independent Family Brewers of Britain (IFBB) takes a look at the place of family brewers within the brewing industry in Wales

Despite a number of larger brewers closing in Wales over the past 20 years, the brewing industry is becoming increasingly vibrant. The continued success of the larger brewers that remain, coupled with the emergence of a number of smaller, individual microbrewers have injected a boost of life into the industry.

Both Brains in Cardiff and the Felinfoel Brewery in Llanelli are members of the IFBB, an organisation set up in 1993 by a group of 28 family-owned breweries that aims to promote British beers and protect the unique heritage of family brewers in Britain.

The IFBB has found that Welsh consumers tend to drink less of the traditional cask beers compared to the rest of the UK, and instead tend to favour keg ales or lager, which obviously presents a challenge for heritage ale brewers.

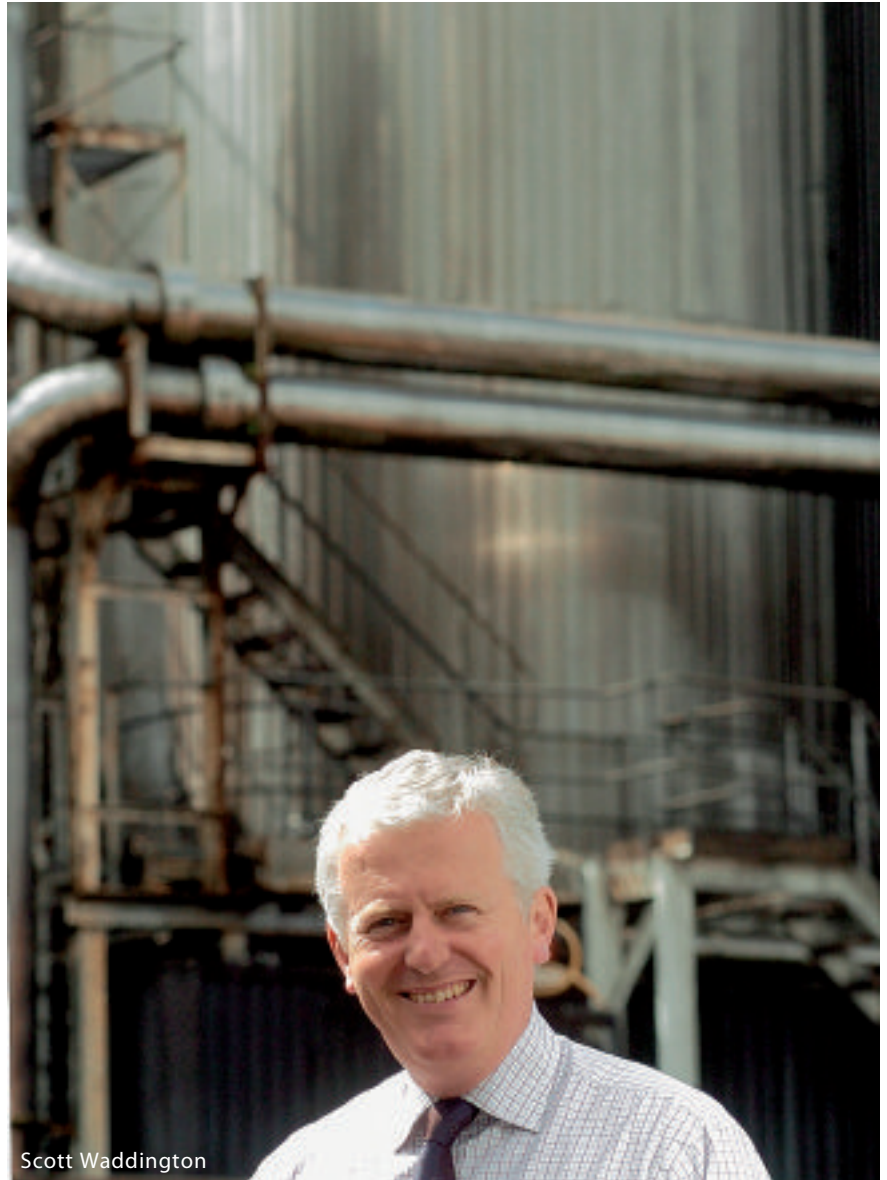
Compared to the rest of the UK, there are generally fewer brewers in Wales, reflecting a lower propensity to drink traditional cask ale. Also our smaller population tends to be more spread out than the rest of the UK, which creates challenges for brewers serving the more sparsely populated areas.

The main issues affecting the brewing industry in the UK have been labelled by some commentators as the 'perfect storm'. These include very poor weather over the summer last year which heavily affected the drinks industry; the introduction of the smoking ban which sees smokers having to congregate outside their chosen establishment – not ideal in poor weather conditions; the deterioration in consumer confidence as the credit crunch hits and the cost of living rises steeply; and finally, a further increase in beer duty by 4p a pint by the Chancellor, which seems to totally ignore all of the issues that are challenging the industry.

Unfortunately, there is a relatively poor perception of pubs and alcohol following a stream of media coverage about the new licensing legislation and linking this to binge drinking. There is very little written about the positive role that pubs play at the heart of their communities as a place for people to meet and enjoy their leisure time responsibly.

A key issue for brewers in Wales – and indeed across the UK – is how we can encourage people to both remain in, and join, the industry as a career choice. The licensee role can be a really fulfilling career, be it a manager for a pub chain or running their own business as a tenant or lessee. Whatever the style of operation, the quality of the licensee is paramount to the success of a pub business.

The IFBB has recently embarked on a recruitment drive to attract more licensees



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to run their high-quality pubs. Both the tenanted and managed houses present a rewarding career choice as they are very much geared towards families and offer comprehensive training to their licensees.

Obviously, there is little the industry can do to improve the present climate of the UK's economy. However, difficult trading conditions mean that all operators are trying to improve the quality of offers that their customers receive to encourage them to make that extra visit to the pub in a week.

The industry has to do more to convey the positive aspects of the brewing and pub industry and these messages need to be delivered through a unified single voice to help to recruit more people into the industry. The IFBB is hoping to attract younger

people to choose running a pub as a career option by pointing out all the benefits of working with a family brewer. These benefits are a long-term perspective and include a commitment to continual investment in their pubs, training, high cellar standards and a great range of high-quality beers and cask ales.

Beer is one of the few genuinely regional products still recognised in the UK. It offers a massive amount of diversity in terms of styles, colour and taste. All of us within the industry, whether family-owned brewers or the larger pub companies, need to continue to do all we can to keep the industry alive and kicking.

■ **Scott Waddington is chief executive of SA Brain and Co.**