

Title: Amor, Peter and
Vernon_Interview_Complete
Creators: Rick & Julia Goldsmith
Project: Herefordshire Life Through A Lens
Tagline: Films, stories and exhibitions inspired
by the photographic archive of the Derek
Evans Studio 1950s-80s
Subject: Autobiography, Herefordshire, Brewing,
Pub Culture, Hops
Publisher: Catcher Media Social CIC
Tags: Hops, Brewing, Pubs, Herefordshire,
Heritage, Derek Evans, Photography, May
Fair oral history, heritage, PV,
participatory film-making, community
film

Identifier: Amor, Peter and
Vernon_Interview_Complete
Interview Date: October_19_2017
Location: Wye Valley Brewery, Hereford, UK
Source: Catcher Media Social CIC
Interviewee 1: Peter Amor (speaker, male)
Interviewee 2: Vernon Amor (speaker, male)
Interviewer: Julia Goldsmith (speaker, female)
Camera & Sound: Richard Goldsmith (male)
Producer: Julia Goldsmith
Language: English

Type: Video
Video Format: MPEG-4
Bit rate: 27.7 mbits/s
Frame rate: 25 FPS
Aspect ratio: 16:9
Width: 1920 pixels
Height: 1080 pixels
Scan type: Progressive
Audio Format: AAC
Audio Sampling rate: 48000 Hz
Audio Bit rate: 192 kb/s
Stereo/Mono: Mono
File Size: 8.58 GB
Duration: 44 min 24 seconds

Type: Audio
Audio Format: MP3 audio
Audio Sampling rate: 44.100 kHz
Audio Bit rate: 256 kb/s

Stereo/Mono: Mono
File Size: 82.1 MB
Duration: 44 min 24 seconds

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Libraries, Herefordshire Archive and
Records Centre

Transcript:

PETER

Peter Amor, Chairman of Wye Valley Brewery, started the whole business back in 1985 – seems a long time ago – and now much more semi-retired and involved with the pubs and less so with the brewery run by my son Vernon.

I was one of those children who took the 11+ and then managed to pass it and then went to Ilford County High School, Ilford Grammar School then, and went into sixth form, not certain what subject, it was very science based, I mean I was bottom of the class in most languages but I was top of the class in physics and chemistry and things. I had the opportunity to take in my A-Levels in chemistry, zoology, and botany and my favourite subject was botany, fascinating. You do a lot of work with yeast and other organisms in botany. Again, basically being one of those fortunate post-war baby boomers you didn't go to university, well you had a choice, you either went to work or you went to university. I fancied going to work, so I applied and got a job at Truman's brewery in Brick Lane but at the same time I had also applied to work for Guinness at Park Royal and they paid a lot more money so I went there, and started off as a lab technician working for Guinness in North West London. Stayed for about 18 months doing that. Fascinating business but it would take a whole different film to talk about Guinness as a company at the time. Very hierarchical. But anyway, then applied and got a job as shift brewer, under brewers they were called then, and went on for a number of years doing shift brewing at Guinness and loved it, so it was great. It was better than a university education.

So, having done that and got fed up with London, did various changes at Guinness, and then applied for a job in Herefordshire with Bulmer's cider. Worked there for a number of years and then we parted company and I started, took over and started with a partner a small brewery up in Nottinghamshire. That didn't last very long we were struggling. It's luck really and opportunities, you have to grab them. My partner wanted out, I wanted to keep going and we moved the whole brewing equipment down to a pub called the Nag's Head in Canon Pyon back in 1985. Set up the brewery there, had a quite an enjoyable time doing that, hard work but pleasant. Actually managed to sell 17

brewers' barrels one week and I thought I was going to be a millionaire. Didn't work out then and hasn't worked out now but still we keep trying. And then had the opportunity to take over a run-down pub called the Lamb Hotel in Hereford and moved the brewery to it. So, after 18 months of negotiation with the then owners, Whitbread, did that, and built up and built up and got to the point where it was really, we shouldn't have been doing what we were doing. We were brewing a hundred barrels a week in the out buildings of a 200-year-old coaching house and at the same time trying to run a pub and having lots of pressure from environmental health and health and safety officers with what we were doing, and it was also having a detriment to the pub on the pub trade because of it. We struggled through. And by chance again, another opportunity came up at the site here at Stoke Lacy was on the market, Bulmer's was selling, they did us a very good deal with it, which meant we didn't have to pay out all at once, we'd swing it out over a few years and we moved the brewery out here. And that's when my son Vernon got involved. He'd been started in the brewery, he did a pupillage at Young's brewery in London which I think really did help him out. And, uh, so we moved here and having got it all up and running, we put this brewery in, whereas we were doing 110 barrels a week at the back of The Barrels, we put a nice brewery plant in capable of doing 140 barrels a week. Gentlemanly brewing, which basically meant you brewed Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, cleaned down Friday and had the weekend off. It's now doing well over 700 barrels and nothing like that at all, it's going flat out and that's very much down to Vernon, and the growth etc. has come from him.

We've taken pride in producing quality beer. One great thing that's come out of Vernon's brewing pupillage is that he is much more knowledgeable about brewer than I am. All I produced was this black stuff, but he did the whole range. His emphasis on quality, quality, quality all the time, and it's paid off because we are a lot bigger now and doing well and respected for that quality, the quality that we have achieved here we would never be able to achieve at the Barrels or other previous things. So that's a brief background. A level botany, wonderful subject. They don't do it anymore.

The trade was dominated by the big brewers, and they absolutely dominated, and the real problem you had was finding enough pubs you could sell into, free houses which weren't tied into the main brewers. And the major brewers had basically forgotten Herefordshire because it was remote, long miles for delivery etc, relatively small turnover, huge for me but peanuts to them. So, there was a lot more free trade. I like Herefordshire, lovely place. And coming from London I do like reminding people that the population of Herefordshire is about half of one London borough and it's a much better way of life. The reason for coming to Herefordshire was a combination of things: one is I like Herefordshire, that it was hop growing county came in later

when we were here. It's one of those forgotten counties. I don't think people realise that after the demise of the hop industry in Kent, Herefordshire is the biggest hop growing county in the country. It always peeves me slightly that you see the signs for Herefordshire council with apples all over it and you never see a picture of a hop. So it is a significant industry and that became more of a realisation when we moved here. It wasn't the main reason, but it was a good enough reason to stay.

I really ought hand you over to Vernon at this point, he set up a philosophy that A we were doing some very long distances trying to sell the beer, lots of miles, and he set down the philosophy that he wanted to stay within fifty miles of the brewery where we delivered. It was only that way that we could look after the customers properly. We couldn't look after them a hundred miles away. And the hop growing bit Vernon has developed and come from there. Our local hop merchant we deal with, Charles Faram, which is based over in Malvern way, they are very good and they source our hops for us. So, it's actually a very deliberate policy. It's a proud boast but 80 percent of the hops we use are grown within ten miles of the brewery. And that's a proud boast and perhaps one perhaps we don't make enough of.

Glory times was when son Vernon went to Young's, his dedication to quality etc. etc., it's been really significant and he works hard and does it. Me, I was on a learning curve. Basically, the real problem that I had was that coming from a huge place like the Guinness brewery in London, which has now been demolished by the way, it's no longer there. the Guinness brewery we had a whole new approach to brewing, but we were very traditional, a wonderfully engineered pint, there was no brewing anymore. I don't mind if they have a go at me for that, but it is, it is engineered. So, we're very traditional brewing, and again Vernon's background with Young's Brewery, which is a wonderful brewery, now also unfortunately closed down, that helped, so the significant thing was Vernon coming on board and building up the business from there and with his experience and me looking over all the business, and willing to take the gambles of course. You know, it was a huge gamble to buy this site here. But one of the major changes that have taken place, about a year after we moved here, was they introduced the progressive rate of beer duty, which meant the smaller brewers got paid less duty and therefore had more money to invest in business. Well we gambled and invested it already so it just gave us a chance to grow. So, we were in the right place at the right time so everything worked out well.

VERNON

I'm Vernon, I'm managing director of Wye Valley Brewery. I've been at the brewery just over 20 years this year.

The brewing industry its changed a lot in my time. We were one of a number of small micro-breweries when I started, now we've got over 1700 maybe 1800, you just blink and another one has started up. It's great for the brewing industry I think, it's more competition but its all in all invigorated the beer industry. People are interested in beer. So that's probably been the biggest change, the number small breweries all around the UK.

Another big change in brewing industry is the way people drink beer. Back in twenty years ago when I started, probably about three quarters of beer was drunk in pubs. Now it's less than half. More than half of all beer is bought from supermarkets and drunk at home. That's been a massive change in the brewing industry and how brewers react to that. What we do at Wye Valley Brewery we make cask conditioned, real ale, the stuff you see served through hand pumps and that can only be bought in pubs. So, in a way our market shrunk but the pubs who are good at keeping cask conditioned beer seem to be doing really really well and they are more resilient and are weathering the storm better, which is why you have seen a lot of small brewers, you know, the number is still growing. So yeah, that's been a big change.

First memories really, I can remember the brewery in Nottingham, I visited it a few times, the Abbey Brewery there, but I remember it more when it came to the Nag's Head in Canon Pyon, I can remember I used to cycle out there on my BMX bike in the eighties at the weekend and then particularly at the Barrels, I think I was 12 when dad took on the Barrels in 1986. But it was just fun, there was always a vibe, there was always lots of people, laughter, it just seemed like a fun industry. Making a product that people enjoyed or tell you how great it was and that's the most important thing to remember in whatever you do, to have fun.

But fast forward from that, I was interested in mathematics and science, so I did A levels went to university, didn't really know what I wanted to do and then after that finished, I paid off my debts and considered joining the family business, joining Wye Valley Brewery. We were very small then, there were six of us brewing beer at the back of a pub. But before I started I went to do some training, like an apprenticeship, the old fashioned word was a brewer's pupillage at Young's brewery in Wandsworth. You could make a whole documentary just about them. They were fantastic. The brewing industry is such a great industry to be involved in, it's so sociable. Even though we're commercial rivals with other brewing companies, they were only too happy to help train you, show you things, help you out if you were in a tight spot. And they gave me a year's training and after that I got qualified, you can actually do a brewing qualification, I got qualified and came back to brew beer at the Barrels. And that was in 1997, my focus then was getting the

beer quality right and thankfully we got it right, and then it started to get busier and busier and we needed new premises so we moved out here 2001, built a new brewery in 2002, and every year it's been a bit busier than the year before by doing more of the same, we made cask conditioned beer and very traditional ingredients and recipes and, yeah, that's how I got to be where I am today.

PETER

You see Vernon talks about the social side of things, and he is quite right, particularly brewery salesmen are at each other's throats for different breweries, but the production side always work very closely together. And it is a lovely business that you can be in where you make something from scratch and enjoy it. You know it's not the same if you make a car or a refrigerator or something or a computer. It's actually the social side of it, which a lot of it is about. I think it's one thing we are losing of course, as Vernon quite rightly says, as the switch goes from pub drinking to drinking at home. So, we are losing some of that. So, quality, quality, that's my boy.

VERNON

There's lots of reasons, there's lots of social changes. If you go back in time, say back to the war years, not many houses had electricity, certainly no central heating, they were cold and draughty, people are drinking in pubs, because it was warm and cosy and it was entertainment, you know, there wasn't television to watch, so everyone did that, so fast forward to where we are today, we've got nice warm comfortable homes, internet, Wi-Fi, you know, Netflix, all those things, people go to the gym, they've got all kinds of options, people can afford to go on foreign holidays. So, the pub is one facet of their leisure time, whereas it used to be the major part of their leisure time. So that's one reason why drinking has shifted, also the price differential between pub prices and supermarket prices, you go to a pub, £3.50 for pint and you go to a supermarket and pay ridiculously cheap prices sometimes for an equivalent. That's a big factor as well.

Despite all of this, despite the graphs going in the wrong direction, I'm still confident and optimistic about the future, because fundamentally we are human beings and want to socialise to meet up with each other and a proper traditional pub is one of the last remaining places, you know a proper pub is where anyone can go in, doesn't matter male, female, young, old, rich or poor, you're all equal when you are standing up the bar. It's one of the few places these days when the generations will meet up, where you know an 18-year-old might meet with an 80-year-old in a social environment. So, I'm still optimistic people will still want to do that in years to come.

PETER

I think as well there's been the demise of the traditional landlord. The landlord at one stage was up there, particularly in smaller villages, he was up there with the vicar and the doctor, and the licensee up there as a figure of respect and that's gone with the pub trade. So, the figure of the landlord is desperately important in the sorts of pubs we run and people will want to see it. And it's wonderful, you can throw people out of the pub and you don't have to give them a reason, you just say 'you're ugly get out.'

VERNON

Going back to why pubs have changed I think other factors involved why the pub industry has changed, the cigarette smoking ban came in. Now that's still a raw nerve for some people even now and it's over ten years ago now when the cigarette ban came in, to me it feels like a lifetime ago. I'm for it, I think it's the right thing to do, even though I'm an ex-smoker myself I think it is the right thing to do. Also what a lot of people don't realise is that a lot of the pubs in the UK are not independent, over half of them are either run by big brewers or big pub companies and they've been responsible for the demise of a lot of good pubs by charging too much rent for the landlords, charging too much for their beer and the licensee didn't have the money for decorating and renovating their property and the pubs start to look a bit tired, underinvested, and people won't go to them anymore. And that's a big factor as well. I could talk all day about the evils of the pub companies.

PETER

The Barrels is a good down to earth boozer. It's all those things that Vernon talked about but it has slightly modernised in as much there is an internet connection now if you wanted, and there is still a part of society that wants to come together, wants to meet. But there are huge changes in the pub industry that have come about in the thirty years I've been about. Some of it is caused by the pub owning people, well don't get me on that one. One May bank holiday we were having a charity fundraising event with a local band playing, and it had two policemen, one was the drummer and one was the vocalist, and we do get a lot of police in the Barrels and the vocalist came over and he says, 'oh we love this pub, it's great, you know, you come down here you've got a whole mix of people, I've seen barristers and solicitors down here, and the other side'. Their basic rule is, behave yourself. Don't take drugs, don't fight, end of story your welcome, end of story. You're a human being, come in. So we do get a whole mix of people. It varies throughout the week. Sometimes you get lots of ladies in and sometimes you get a very blokey night. It just creates that atmosphere. I think we've achieved it but I'm not quite sure how to bottle it and sell it. I wish I could.

VERNON

Certainly, when tourists from abroad come to visit Britain always on their list of things to do, alright they might have a plan to see relatives or see particular landmarks and sites and scenery, but they want to experience a proper English pub because there isn't anything quite like it. You know you go abroad you have bars and restaurants but a pub is something that is unique to Britain so I still have faith in pubs in the long term.

I was talking about pubs earlier, some pubs closing and the demise of pubs, but that masks that new pubs are opening up, within the last five years we've had a phenomenon of the micro pubs starting up, and that's people, entrepreneurs, people starting up pubs from scratch, not an old pub where the name's been changed by putting a new sign up. Actually, we've got pub customers of the breweries who are they set up in an old house, they just turn it into a pub, an old chemist, an old pet shop, and they turn them into pubs, and they are sort of distilling the essence of what a proper pub is, where it's really simple. There's no juke box, there's no television, they just have a bar with some beer on and conversation rules the day. And that's an interesting phenomenon that is continuing to grow, people want to drink beer, socialise and just talk.

PETER

Yes, human beings are social animals and they do want to meet together and eventually that will filter its way through and there will, I like to think and Vernon said, there will be a change and it will do a circle and they'll be coming back into the pubs again more because it is that social interaction. You've just got to get the product right. We don't do food, I'm always very wary of going into pubs that smell of chips and there's too many of those that go down that avenue. It's a hugely competitive business. I've played at the edges of it but I wouldn't go back to it. So yeah, thirty years and an awful lot of changes. Aided and abetted of course by government interference, they won't leave well alone. And tend to see the drinks industry, whether it's brewing it or selling it, as a cash cow, so they rob you with rates and beer duty and VAT and are a bit wary of giving the same treatment to Tesco's, Sainsbury's and the other. You go into the Barrels and get a pint for £2.50 and we do have people coming down from London and they hand over a ten pound note for two pints and they get five-pound change, and they think, no two pints, you know, cause they're used to paying nearly twice that price.

VERNON

Herefordshire is the cheapest place to have a beer, a pint of real ale. There are only four ingredients in beer, water, barley, hops and probably hops probably have the biggest impact on flavour and aroma in beer. So, the varieties of hops which brewers use. it's like what a wine maker will tell you about a grape variety and where its grown, it's the same for hop

varieties in beer. So at Wye Valley Brewery we use Herefordshire hops wherever we can. British varieties will suit a style of beer which we brew. If you go to Czech Republic, go to Germany, then drink lots of beer, but brew different styles of beer which use different varieties of hops. Hops are really important. I say we like to use local growers wherever we can. I know all the growers and where all our hops come from. I see them all throughout the year, go and see them throughout the year, go and see them the spring when the hop plants coming up, you know just poking through the ground. And then later on in the summer and then towards the hop harvest in September time when they're picking, you know, just keep I touch with them.

It's really important that we have this relationship with each other that they can see where the fruits of their labours are going to and they then appreciate how we value what they do and how important it is, so that's really key to us. and over the year I try and make a point of going to visit to know all our local growers. We're having a meeting here in a few weeks time the Hereford hop discussion group, where there'll be a whole gang of them in this room.

Ok, its very important to have a relationship with our local growers, I know all of our local growers, the farms, you not just the varieties of hops that we use but I can tell you what farm they have come from, which hop yards that they are grown in, because we call them hop yards in Herefordshire and if you go to Kent they call them hop gardens. So, meeting with the growers throughout the year in the spring time when the hop shoots are growing through the ground and then throughout summer and then towards Autumn time and late August September, when the hops are ripe and ready to be picked and I keep I touch with them all throughout the year. It's important I feel that they see where their hops are going, you know we actually use your hops going into our beer, stress how important that what they produce is to us. and we're all part of the local Herefordshire economy.

There have been times when the hop industry has really been on its knees in Britain and it's gone into decline. A lot of hop growers gave up, particularly in the 80s and early 90s there was a lot of decline because they are hard things to grow, and if the price is poor and they are not getting any money and they think, well, why bother doing this, I could be growing potatoes or wheat instead. so not so long after I started the brewery there was a danger on the horizon that actually the hop industry might dwindle and lose critical mass and just disappear, there won't be any new generations of hop growers coming along. So, we went out and met them all and said, look, don't, just keep doing what you're doing. You know smaller brewers like us, we're only small, there's lots of us and we like to use your hops because they are really excellent quality and they are essential for British style beers. And thankfully that relationship has grown

and strengthened over the years with hop growers and encouraging over the last couple of years, we've seen new hop yards been planted in and around Herefordshire, something which was unheard of even ten years ago, where all you heard was people grubbing up hop yards and pulling them out, now we're seeing new plantings. So, it's small, but it's going in the right direction.

It's really important to us at Wye Valley Brewery that we use as many locally grown hops as possible because you know we need these varieties that they grow to boost our style of beer. So, all throughout the year I keep in touch with our local growers, so in spring time, around April May time when the hop shoots are just poking out of the ground, we go to see them, then in the summer when they are climbing up the wires, and then towards the end of summer, beginning of autumn time when the hops are ripe and ready to pick, it's a busy time for them but we go and see them as well. It's hard work growing hops but that relationship that we have with them is so important because a few years ago, we should say ten or fifteen years ago the hop industry was in decline. All I heard was, oh no, another hop farm has decided to give up, grub up the hop yards and grow something else instead, because you know, hops are hard to grow, I can understand, why do they bother. So, there was a danger not long after I started the brewery that the whole UK Hop industry could get so small that it could lose the critical mass and there would be no new generation of hop growers coming in. So I thought right, I've got to go and meet some and tell them how important what they grow their hops are, how important they are to us, it is important for our business as well. You know they've heard about Wye Valley Brewery, they've tasted our beer and I say, look, that's your hops going into these beers. And what's been really encouraging in the last two to three years we've actually heard of new hop yards being planted in Herefordshire, something which was in my lifetime was unheard of. All I heard was of hop yards closing but now there are some new plantings. And it's small but it's going in the right direction. And all of that is so so important to produce our style of beers. We couldn't make beer like this with American hops, we couldn't make beer like this with German or Czech hops. They are good hops and they go in other styles of beer, but we need these British hop varieties grown under these climatic conditions to make our beer taste the way they should do.

Ok people get very emotionally attached to beer. That's because people associate beer with pubs, socialising, good times. There's statistics out there that show a large proportion of people meet their future spouse, or boyfriend and or girlfriend in the pub in that environment and in their memories they associate that with a setting and with a beer, so a beer is more to people – they get emotionally attached to it, it's more, if you're making, no disrespect to cans of baked beans, or sliced white bread, people don't get that much enthusiastic about it,

it is what it is. But with beer no, it means more to people than just the beer, the flavour the ...everything that goes with it.

PETER

You see for hop pickers, if they were strawberry picking or raspberry picking, you can get fed up with those, but you can never get fed up with a nice beer. And that's what you need the hops for. And the hops are just part of it – a very significant part of – so they think 'yes, we help make British beer' and that's something special.

Why hops? Well I'm going back to medieval times – the significance of hops. They found they used to brew beer with all sorts of things to flavour it, I'm going back to the 1300s/1400s I suppose, probably even further back than that.

VERNON

Beer is the oldest alcoholic drink in the world, isn't it?

PETER

But they found that when they brewed with hops, which weren't farmed then, they grew in the wild in the hedgerows etc., when they brewed with hops the beer lasted longer. And hops, less so than the quantities they would have used, but the hops had an antiseptic affect in the beer and put down the quantity of certain spoilage organisms. And therefore, it became a nice flavour, bitter flavour to the beers. So that's why hops became the dominant flavouring for the beer because of the actual effect of the plants, that hop flowers have, on the product.

VERNON

We're a nation of hop drinkers. Still beer, by far and away, is the most popular alcoholic beverage in Britain because we have a long association with drinking beer because we used to drink it instead of water because it was safer to drink because during its production it had been boiled. But hops weren't always used in beer and strictly speaking we used to brew ale in this country. The strict definition of ale is beer without hops, and so to give flavouring to ale people used to use what was growing around them in their local environment. So, in Britain before say 1400 we used to use heather, bog myrtle, wormwood, yarrow, things like that, anything to give beer flavour. And actually, hops were introduced by Dutch traders in and around the 1400/1500s. So immigration is a hot a political topic at the moment isn't it, and we tend to think of the most quintessential British thing is British beer in a pub. Well actually that wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for Dutch immigrants who brought hops to this country in 1400s. and hops were bought and initially people, Dutch traders came across the North Sea, into Kent and Suffolk to do trade in linen and crockery and pewter that kind of thing and they couldn't get on with British beer because it was sweet and sickly, they thought it was horrible, so they started bringing hops with them and brewed their own

beer while they were over here. Ok I'll be political, imagine the Daily Mail in 1400, it was like, shock, horror, immigrants coming over here bringing filthy ingredients with them, spoiling beer, we don't want it and tried to ban it. But quickly the locals said, hang on, this beer these Dutch traders are brewing actually have a much longer shelf life. It keeps for longer because in those days there was no refrigeration, no pasteurisation, and if you made a perishable good you had to rely on, you hoped it would keep as long as possible before it went off. But beer brewed with hops seemed to last for several weeks, whereas unhopped beer would go off after a few days. So, they thought then, hang on this is actually quite a good idea and hops were introduced to this country. The reason that hops have this preservative quality in beer is the bitter compound that we taste, they are a group of natural chemicals called alfa acid but they taste bitter and are natural antiseptics and they inhibit the growth of spoilage bacteria. The things that make beer go off are the same bacteria that make milk go off, it goes foul and cloudy. It's not dangerous, but it doesn't taste very good. But hops naturally inhibit these spoilage bacteria and preserve the shelf life of beer. Most brewers up until the industrial revolution were women and beer was made up home along with bread making and everything else. And it used to be some that that was almost done every day because beer didn't keep, ale didn't keep. But when hops were introduced, suddenly you could make larger batches of beer and they would keep for several weeks and so that's how hops took hold. But lady brewers were called brewsters and men: brewers. Really up until the 1700s beers was made at home by women and then the industrial revolution came along and it changed then.

We've always made beer in Britain right back to before recorded history. It was a cottage industry, people made it at home, but occasionally people would have some extra ale and they put signs outside their house announcing the fact to the public that you know, come on in I've got some nice beer for sale. But back in medieval times everyone was pretty much illiterate so you couldn't put the words the King's Arms, or the Royal Oak, a physical sign – we have pubs now called the Wheatsheaf well they would have put a wheatsheaf outside the pub, just to announce the fact that the, or a Hollybush, that's another name. Yes, all those things. It was actually a physical sign, rather than text or words, that this is my house but I am opening up the public to come on in and have a beer, have a chat, and that's the origins of pubs and public houses. And to this day people forget that most pubs are still houses for the landlord and landlady, they live upstairs above the shop and they are welcoming you into their house and that's why you observe good behaviour when you are in a pub because you are in somebody's house. Would you swear, and fight and do all these nasty things at home? No, probably wouldn't so why would you do it in a public house. So that's the origin of pubs, they are unique.

PETER

That's the importance of the landlord, imposing those rules, 'you're in my house, behave'. You must admit you get a lot of youngsters who look at you and go, uh? Because they've seen modern trends and too many managed houses, the JDWs and the other ones of this world, they're just a manager wandering around, but when you turn around to people and say, you're in my house, you'll do as I expect or out! A bit of a history.

VERNON

Traditional British beer / ale is still sold in Imperial sized containers, casks. Lagers they're called kegs and they come in metric, 50 litre or 30 litre kegs but British ale still comes in old Imperial sizes. The smallest one is a tiny little cask, that's called a pin, but the next size up, which is the most commonly sized cask you'll find in British pubs is the firkin which is a nine-gallon cask and then the next size up is the kildekin, an eighteen-gallon cask and they are funny sounding words because they are Dutch in origin bought over by Dutch traders in the 1400 and 1500s when they bought hops across. And so, to this day we still sell beer in firkins and kildekins and we wouldn't have those names had it not been for foreigners coming over and introducing them to us. people tend to forget the most British thing we think of has its origins in immigration.