

PUBLICITY SHY DUO HAS SOMETHING TO SHOUT ABOUT

Two blokes. Eleven pubs. And Arthur Taylor never even knew they were there!

Brunning and Price is a small pub company, based just outside Chester. It runs 11 pubs, all righteously real-aled, mainly in Cheshire, Shropshire and North Wales, plus a couple of far-flung houses, one in Sussex, the other in Kent. You may not have heard of them – they should be there in the Pub Groups section of the 2004 Good Beer Guide, between Brakspear and Burtonwood, but, mysteriously, they haven't made it.

Jerry Brunning and Graham Price weren't even sure they wanted to talk to me or to What's Brewing. They had a debate about it between themselves and agreed, reluctantly. It's nothing personal.

"We don't do much in the way of publicity," said Jerry when we finally met. "We see our pubs as primarily for regular customers, locals – we aren't too bothered about passing trade. We appreciate everything that CAMRA has done and is doing but we aren't dependent on them. All the serious beer drinkers round here know about our pubs. We don't need this interview."

So, a slightly nervous lick of the pencil and I ask the first frail devil's advocate question: "Why do you insist on real ale in your pubs?" Jerry looks at me over his spectacles, sternly, doubtfully, in a you-are-wasting-my-time sort of look:

"That's a stupid question and you know the answer, surely?" says he. "Name me a keg beer worth drinking." Luckily, I manage to swing the conversation to when Jerry and Graham first met – and that released a flood of nostalgia and total recall of the Bell, in Outwood, Surrey, circa 1981.

The Bell was Jerry's first pub. He was in his early 20s, but took to the job like a duck to water. Graham was a customer, and then a helper-out behind the bar. He remembers: "The pub had an extraordinary social mix, locals, City businessmen, forestry workers, all sorts. And everyone seemed to be having a ball. Conversation as soon as you walked in. There was a choice of terrific cask beers, a shelf of malt whiskies, a good wine list. Good food, too."

Jerry and Graham became best drinking buddies and began a long search for the explanation behind the possible reality of the ideal pub, which involved drinking a lot of beer and exploring a lot of pubs. Graham had a long stint with a monster brewery and pub company in the North-East whose name should perhaps be kept secret.

"I learned a lot – mainly how not to do things," he says. "The entire management strata were only interested in profit and loss. They treated all the pub managers and staff as pawns, idiots or potential thieves. They weren't interested in beer – most of them didn't like pubs. It was a nightmare."

Jerry kept on running, buying and leasing pubs and clambering up the learning curve. They finally got together as business partners in 1988.

Their first northern pub was the creation, the invention, of the Old Harkers Arms in Chester, Jerry's home town. Go in there now and you will find a warm, welcoming, chatty, city boozier down by the canal that looks as if it has been there forever. Jerry tells the tale of one old boy who drinks in the pub and tells everyone he's been drinking there since he was a lad. In fact, as you will see from some of the before-and-after pictures on the wall, the place was the dank, dark and very damp ground floor of a furniture warehouse.

I have to say that the conversation ran a lot more smoothly in the Old Harkers. "One of the things we decided early on," says Graham, wrapping himself around a pint of Harkers Silver Pale Ale, brewed specially for the pub

by the Osset Brewery, “was that the first thing you should see on entering one of our pubs is the bar and the beer pumps.

“We do good wines, splendid malt whiskies, excellent food – but these are pubs first and foremost.”

Jerry is on his second pint of Derwent Harvesters Ale in next to no time and agrees. “We want the pubs to look homely, a bit domestic even. Lots of polished wood and brass, books and pictures, that sort of thing. We don’t have juke boxes or fruit machines, dartboards or pool tables.”

I am sipping a half of a wheat beer new to me from Okells, the Isle of Man brewery, and notice that the description of the beer, on a board behind the bar, is exactly what I think and therefore worth stealing: “Doesn’t taste like a wheat beer. Elderflower on the nose, strong alcohol finish.” It is nice to see beer notes as well as wine notes up on the chalkboard. Personally I think a pub needs a games room, but decide to keep quiet about it.

The beer range here seemed extraordinary. Besides the aforementioned exotica, they had Thwaites, Flowers and Boddingtons bitters on tap. I ask if the company has a central beer purchasing system. Jerry almost chokes over his pint and that doubtful who-is-this-bloke look clouds his brow again.

“Absolutely not,” he says. “All our managers sort out their own beers, wine, whiskies and food. If they ask for help, we give it, that’s all. There has to be a choice of cask ales, but we don’t tell them what to stock. If you go round more of our pubs, you will see they’re all different – it depends on the manager’s own tastes and, of course, what customers ask for.”

Old Harkers isn’t in the Good Beer Guide, although most of their other pubs are. They are slightly puzzled by that, but not unduly worried. Graham thinks it may be because of the pricing policy – the beers are not cheap. (Brunning & Price is also the Pub Company of the Year in the 2004 Good Pub Guide and all its 11 houses have a full and fulsome entries in it).

At this point, Graham decides a change of scenery and beers is in order, so we hurtle off to the Grosvenor Arms in Aldford, a village just south of Chester. The Grosvenor is on the Duke of Westminster’s estate and I remember going there a lifetime ago to interview the Duke’s gamekeeper, who had written his autobiography. Norman, the said gamekeeper and an absolute gem, turned up in cap, tweed jacket, waistcoat with silver watch chain and fob, and plus-fours, and didn’t look at all out of place on a couch which was a wave of maroon plush and backed by curtains of the same dignified hue.

What I didn’t realise is that between that long-ago day and this, the place had been sunk, abandoned and boarded up by its previous owners. Brunning & Price had rescued it, spent a fortune on refurbishment and reorganisation, and launched another successful ship.

We hit another splendid array of cask beer pumps, quite different from the last lot. I plump for a pint of Caledonian Deuchars IPA, which of course was the Champion Beer of Britain 2002.

“We spotted it through one of our managers and had it in a couple of our pubs 12 months before it won the competition. We were pleased with that,” says Graham. I am pleased that they have the Deuchars customised pint glasses – when you get to the bottom, there appears a flowing froth-wreathed inscription that reads “You’re due a Deuchars”. Jerry didn’t know that. I feel I have scored my first and possibly only point.

They are on course to open a 12th pub near Whitchurch in Shropshire in spring. “I think we’re getting close to our optimum size,” says Jerry. “Maybe another three or four, that would be it. If we get too big we wouldn’t know the people and it wouldn’t be fun.”

In the interests of independent reporting, I took myself and wife off, days later, on an unescorted no expenses-claimed two-day pub crawl of some of the other Brunning & Price houses.

I really can't really fault them. Sensational dramatic locations by the river – the Corn Mill in Llangollen and the Cross Foxes at Erbistock, near Wrexham. A wonderful Victorian house and house party (it was a lunchtime leading up to Christmas) at the Pant yr Ochain, north of Wrexham. The consummate village pub, juxtaposed with classic Cheshire sandstone church, the Dysart Arms at Bunbury.

Most, it is true, were preoccupied by food, but in every case the bar was there, the staff were friendly, and the beer philosophy was upfront and evident. The Plassey brewery from Wrexham – “We put the ales in Wales” – was well represented. At the Corn Mill, the lady behind the bar made sure we had a taste of several beers from the Goldthorpe Brewery (Wolverhampton, by the way), before we chose the one we wanted.

Graham has to have the last chuckling word. “It’s great running a pub company. You walk in, ask for a pint of the new cask beer. They give it to you and you don’t have to pay.” Doesn’t sound like another grisly London suit with Japanese or German money behind him and thousands of pubs ground under the heel, does it?

* Brunning & Price, Yew Tree Farm, Saighton, Chester CH3 6EG. Tel 01244 333100. Look out for the company’s highly entertaining and informative web site: www.brunningandprice.co.uk. Apart from anything else, this gives a full list of all 11 pubs and their locations.