

BREWING STORIES INTERVIEW, 29.3.2019, AT THE RAM BREWERY TACK ROOM, WANDSWORTH

SUBJECT: Cyril Springer – African-Caribbean heritage

**SUMMARY: Cyril worked for Young's brewery for ten years, up to its closure in 2006. He worked as a packer and shipper in the warehouse when he joined Young's and he progressed to the more skilled work in the Cold Room. Cyril was a cricketer and rugby player for brewery teams and became a shop steward. He was the chief steward at the time the brewery closed. He remembers the brewery as busy, crowded and noisy, but with a happy working atmosphere born of its history as a family business.**

I was born in Chelsea, in 1966. My father worked on radar for Racal-Decca, my mother was a Care Assistant in a London hospital.

I worked at Young's Brewery from 1996 until the brewery closed in 2006. I had no family connection to the business but I'd grown up in Wandsworth and some of my friends were working there. It helped knowing some of the people that worked there - it made it easier to settle in. Throughout my childhood the smell of the brewery hung over the town. The smell was something we were all quite used to. My first impression of the brewery, when I started work there, was of surprise at how busy it was – so many people bustling about on such a small site.

I found the first day there hard work, but I got used to that. The atmosphere was quite relaxed, a lot of strong men and strong characters, but no malice – though there was quite a lot of ragging. I did a variety of jobs: filling cases for pub orders, emptying trucks of their kegs – some returning empty, some arriving full because we bottled and distributed for other breweries too. I drove fork-lift trucks and stacked beer in the warehouse. Everyone did a bit of everything. Teams of two or three, working with a checker, made up orders for pubs.

It was a noisy job in a busy place with lots of vehicles coming and going. Everything flowed, and it all worked, but you had to see it to believe it. Lots of tanks holding different beers and ciders on a very small site. Hard to believe how so much (activity) could be crammed into so small an area.

There were mishaps. I once punctured a keg of lager with one of the prongs of my fork lift. And a strap broke on a case of bottled beer and all the bottles fell down around my fork-lift truck – I was sitting safely under its roof, but broken glass and spilt beer were everywhere around! No good worrying about it, we just had to clean it all up and get on with the job.

After two years there I got a new job in the brewery's Cold Room. This was a very different kind of work. For a start it was cold...5 degrees all day and cold running water on the floor, everywhere. It took me another two years to learn all about the Cold Room jobs. My skill set and my knowledge of brewing increased a lot: filtering beer; centrifuging beer; gassing-up...We wore rubber boots, you couldn't wear boots with laces because of the cold water running everywhere, the boots would leak.

In the Cold Room lager went from a tank into kegs. It was all on one long production line that started with the kegs being washed out and sterilised and finished with them full of beer, ready for the lorry.

I learned so much in the Cold Room. Once you'd gained some experience you could tell what was happening to the beer by the smell. It was a hard-earned skill. I was sorry that I couldn't go on to another brewery job when it all finished.

Delivering kegs and casks to pubs could be quite dodgy, because the ramp skids down to the cellars from the pavement outside were often in poor condition and rolling barrels down them was risky. Two or three runs a day was normal. Amalgamation with Wells' brewery changed our work a lot,

there was more work than ever and more runs to wine bars and clubs that we hadn't dealt with before.

I worked with Rob, he was known as 'Mr. Burns' – from The Simpsons TV cartoons – because he always wore a tweed jacket. I used to moan to him about the work. He always said to me "it's 'cause you're black". His mate turned round and said "you can't say that to Cyril", but Rob wasn't bothered.

There were great perks. Every July you'd get a bottle of whisky, every Christmas you'd get a turkey, a bottle of port and a bottle of sherry. You signed-on with the brewery knowing that alcoholism could be a problem. But the company would help you with an alcohol problem before they sacked you. For most of us it was like working in sweet shop – the novelty soon wore off.

We could buy used company cars at a good price. I bought one myself.

There were hazards: acids and caustics were used to clean the tanks – never mix the chemicals and handle them with care! Health and Safety at work did improve over the years I was there. Staff went on training courses, both for H&S and for quality control, we worked to ISO standards in the brewery.

When people left there would be a party, lots of friends and a happy atmosphere. We played cricket – at Lords, and rugby – at Twickenham, against teams from other breweries, and sides from our pubs. The cricket was 20-20, long before that format became fashionable. We were a good side. We won more often than we lost. There were inter-brewery dances and parties in pubs. The cultural mix was quite varied but we all worked well together. Not so many women. A lot had left when the bottling plant was mechanised, just before I started, but there were still women in the canteen and in the offices – until they closed the canteen. That took a lot of the heart out of working there. We no longer ate together. We went to cafes and a nearby McDonalds in small groups, but it wasn't the same. The canteen was supposed to be demolished to make room for a vehicle park – it was small site and very busy. But they found out that it was 'listed' and they couldn't touch it. We wanted them to re-open the canteen but they didn't. By then they were thinking about selling the brewery anyway.

There were characters there: Mike Tucker – a young tearaway and a know-all; Ashley, who wanted to be a manager and always wore a white coat; and Darren – a practical joker. We'd have our revenge on Darren by holding him over the (River) Wandle! Our Foreman, George Ballard, was a character. He was very knowledgeable about the job, but he didn't say very much. Still, if you were stuck he'd always have an answer. I took over from him as chief shop steward. I was Shanghaied into shop stewarding. The lads were fed-up with the steward and voted him out. I was cricket captain and good at getting stuff out of the company for the lads on the team – so they asked me to take on the steward's job.

We all used to visit the dray horses the brewery kept. We'd feed them minty sweets. The Chairman, John Young, loved his horses and his stable boys were good ones. Seeing six horses with their polished brass pulling a dray was a splendid sight.

When they closed the brewery and made us redundant, they were very good. They spent £50,000 on training courses for their workers, for retraining. There was support getting new employment and with writing CV's. Closure upset everyone but the company made us all a good package. I bought a house in Chessington with it. It was hard at the end, giving others advice and trying to make sure that everyone was happy with their package. I met a friend through the rugby who worked in

pensions – so I got a list of good questions to ask on behalf of the men and I could talk about it (with management).

I went to work on the railway, I've been there 11 years now – a Ticket Inspector out of Wimbledon depot. Today is my first time back here in 13 years. I was shaking...I've passed the place many times and it's sad. Going back in has been hard on me, emotionally.

Young's was a wonderful, once-in-a-lifetime job! Long hours, but the money was good. We enjoyed coming to work because the atmosphere there was good.

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