

## Address to the Brasenose College 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Dinner

Ladies & Gentlemen:

I hope now that you can enjoy some cheese and perhaps some coffee, tea or port, or if you're partial to something stronger, the cash bar on the ground floor is open.

I asked a couple of distinguished alumni if they would kindly consider addressing our company here tonight, but regrettably they were otherwise committed and so the honour falls by default to me. Our topic here is ale, or more properly, Brasenose ale. Now, you may have your views about wine snobs, but let me say there is one thing worse, and that is a beer snob; and I have to confess that I'm a beer snob, so I'm going to enjoy this.

In the course of a little research about BNC, I came across a tradition that frankly I had never heard of: the tradition that, on Shrove Tuesday each year, the college butler would present the fellows and members with a cask of fresh-brewed Brasenose ale, in payment, apparently, for his right to hold the office of Butler. Not only had I never heard of the tradition, and perhaps because I lived in Frewin Hall, I didn't even know the college had a butler.

We don't hear much about Shrove Tuesday in this day and age. For those who may have forgotten, it's the day before Ash Wednesday, and therefore last day before Lent. It is the day when the devout 'shrive' themselves, that is to say when they confess and are absolved of their sins. It is a day when all the fat and the eggs in the kitchen are used up in preparation for Lent, the month when such excesses were to be avoided. In French, it's called Fat Tuesday or Mardi Gras; in Latin, it was Goodbye to Meat, or Carnevale. And at Brasenose, it was the night when that year's brew of Brasenose Ale was delivered to an expectant and appreciative throng.

On Shrove Tuesday of each year – as best I've been able to piece it together, but if anyone has a clearer picture, please say so - the butler, when he delivered his cask of ale, recited the Ale Verse for that year, and received the proceeds of a whip-round among those present. The tradition seems to have been well established by 1705, which is our oldest record of a Brasenose ale verse, when a rather elderly butler spoke these words:

With age and sickness, though unactive grown,  
My duty still shall in my verse be shown,  
And, while my strength and sprightly heat decays,  
My grateful Muse still her attendance pays:  
For Aristotle sure will ne'er admitt,  
From want of health to argue want of witt.  
But though my rhymes should heavy be, and dull,  
My bowl shall still be good, shall still be full.  
For while this yearly tribute here I bring,  
'Tis much at one, whether I say or sing;  
And if the criticks should my verse expose,  
The bowl sounds well in downright honest prose.

It's marvellous, isn't it – redolent of the age of Queen Anne, redolent of Alexander Pope,

eulogist of Isaac Newton, these words were penned and spoken only a couple of years before the Act of Union between England and Scotland.

The trail of collected ale verses picks up again in 1806, in the midst of the Napoleonic Wars, when a legendary college personality by the name of Heber penned the following words about the then Butler, Mr. Barker:

Attend, ye freshmen, to my tale,  
And do not me mistake,  
I sing the praise of College Ale,  
For Mr. Barker's sake.

When Bacchus thro' the Indian land  
Pursued his conquering way.  
He held a hop-pole in his hand,  
And rode upon a dray.

Oh! may my verse be strong and clear  
To spread its glory wider,  
Not windy, like to bottled beer.  
Or gripe-compelling cyder,

But clear as amber, bright as gold,  
That all men may admire.  
While I in lofty terms unfold  
The fame of our Entire.

I've taken some editor's licence with all these verses for the sake of brevity and to avoid some of the more pretentious allusions to the classics.

A couple of decades later, in 1826, we're well into the romantic age and these characteristic and marvellous ale verses were penned:

Touch, touch the tuneful lyre,  
Make the joyful strings resound :  
Ale, blest Spirit, doth inspire,  
Ale with smiling hop-wreath crown'd.

See, the welcome Brewhouse rise,  
See, the priest his duty plies,  
And, with apron duly bound,  
Stirs the liquor round and round.

Youthful Wit and Attic Salt  
Infuse their savour in the Malt,  
And Love and Harmony combine.  
To confer their gifts divine.

The dismal reign of muddy beer,  
Has fallen with the ended year,  
And amber Ale, in golden days,  
To Brasenose a visit pays.

Then touch, touch the tuneful lyre.  
Make the joyful strings resound :  
Ale, blest Spirit, doth inspire.  
Ale with smiling hop-wreath crown'd.

Don't you love this stuff?

On Shrove Tuesday two years later, in 1828, our friend Mr. Heber makes another appearance, in these lines:

High o'er the windings of a vault  
That joins the new-born house of malt,  
Where still in fame a Fabric grows  
That proudly rears her Giant Nose:  
That nose that snuif'd with Spartan scent  
The track that God-like Heber went,  
And bids her brazen sons aspire,  
And fans the Poet's infant fire:  
While brooding in my long arm'd chair,  
A steamy vapour mounts the air,  
And as the fumes my soul relax,  
Sleep seals my eyes as close as wax-  
When lo! a Shade of wond'rous size  
In gait like Bacchus seem'd to rise.  
But thrice as fat — so round and hale  
As tho' he swill'd not wine, but ale ;  
His grisly beard he 'gan to stroke.  
He wav'd his hand and thus he spoke: —  
Hast thou not heard the festive tale,  
The mystic wonders of the new-brew'd ale?

The book from which these verses are taken was printed for private circulation by a Robert Roberts, in Boston, Lincolnshire in 1878. Somehow or other, it was discovered, scanned and posted on the web by the Internet Archive in San Francisco. This created a lot of hilarious corrupted passages, which gives the reader a good laugh.

In 1836, the tuneful theme returns, in verses that invoke King Alfred the Great to tell the story of the origins of the whole tradition of Brasenose ale:

Touch, touch ye the tuneful chord, and sing  
Of that olden festival,  
When Alfred sate at his royal board,  
And drank of his foaming Ale.

Oft had it pass'd on that merry day,  
When the Prophet-king upsprang,  
And the vaulted roof and trophied walls  
With cheers of his courtiers rang.

"Few years, I ween, shall pass away,  
"Few kings give up their sceptred sway,  
"Ere there shall ope its portals wide  
"A College rear'd in Gothic pride;

"Far fam'd for many an age to come,  
"Call'd from my own Brasinium.  
Yes, College, henceforth charter'd be,  
And Brasin-huse yclep'd by me.

Thy foaming Ale in future days  
Shall be the theme of deathless praise;  
Shall weave a strain to tell the tale  
Of Brasin-huse and its matchless Ale.

The Butler too, whose right shall be,  
A right for ever held in fee,  
His tenure — it is all I ask,  
"A yearly present of one cask,

"Shall, as each Shrove-tide passes by,  
"Right gladly to the cellar fly,  
"When Bursar, Fellows, Scholars, all  
"Shall hie them to the College Hall."

Here we have both an explanation – one explanation at least - of the origin of the name of the King's Hall and College of Brasin-Huse, that is to say a brewhouse, but also a prophesy of the "yearly present of one cask".

And so it goes. From 1846, after 30 years of peace, Queen Victoria on the throne, and constitutional reform well on its way, a young Charles Darwin is doing some thinking, a young Charles Dickens doing some writing, and things get a little more relaxed. We now hear this sort of thing:

Come, troll the jovial flagon,  
Come fill the bonny bowl,  
Come, join in laughing sympathy  
Of soul with kindred soul;

For merry Shrovetide's festival  
Invites me to the tale.  
To sing the annual praises  
Of our Butler and our Ale.

We'll skip ahead now to 1871, when over 50 years of peace in Western Europe is

shattered by the Franco-Prussian War, from which the Anglo-Saxon world stood clear, as the Pax Brittanica covers a quarter of the world's lands and all of its oceans. India pale ale has been invented, with extra hops, so that it'll retain some taste after spending months in barrels being shipped from Great Britain to the troops in India.

Now we have these rousing lines:

Beer! Beer! Beer!  
Bring me the nut brown ale,  
Let it be bright and clear,  
And let not the flagon fail.

Beer ! Beer ! Beer !  
Where is the best to be got?  
Seek for it far and near,  
In hostel, in hall, and cot.

But the ale of the ruddiest dye,  
The ale that most genial flows.  
Is the ale that the privileged buy  
At the sign of the Brazen Nose.

Just before this published record comes to an end, one of the best verses of all was written for 1876 and is set to the air of Men of Harlech. Tradition tells us it describes a seven year-long siege of Harlech Castle between 1461 and 1468, when the garrison held out in the longest siege in British history. The song was featured in the movie "Zulu", as well as in several other flicks.

The Brasenose version goes:

Men of Brasenose, good ale's streaming  
Brightly in your tankards gleaming,  
Joints are on your tables steaming  
On this jovial night.  
Let the liquor golden  
All your hearts embolden ;  
If we knew  
What's in the brew,  
Would make us much disgusted.  
'Twas an ancient Brasenose fellow  
Who quaffed deep our liquor mellow,  
Till his nose had blossomed yellow.  
Golden as his beer.

Now that nose is made immortal,  
Proudly fixt above our portal.  
And its presence shall exhort all  
To adore our beer.  
Back let fancy wander  
On the past to ponder,

(Every day  
We stay away  
Will make us all the fonder,  
Let each sacred tower and gable.  
And our statue, Cain and Abel,  
And Shrove Tuesday's well-spread table  
Rise to memory clear.

Marvelous, isn't it? A college that came up with this stuff deserves another 500 years and let us hope it comes to pass.

If there are any amongst us who'd enjoy a little sing-along later, when perhaps we're feeling relaxed, friendly and no pain at all, I've got some extra copies of the words and sheet music for Men of Brasenose. Just let me know.

Thank you for coming to our dinner tonight, thank you for your faith that it would be worthwhile, and I truly hope you found it so.