



Engineering brewer

Sophie Atherton tells the story of how Firkin brewpubs turned a tunneller into a brewer

It would be an exaggeration to say

I moved to Kent so I could drink Gadd's beer, but only a slight one. I first met Eddie Gadd around seven years ago. I was writing about green hop brews for *BEER* and he was one of the early enthusiasts, going on to co-found Kent Green Hop Beer Fortnight. He's an enthusiast full stop, so it's something of a surprise to hear that he's recently stood down as head brewer of the brewery he founded more than 15 years ago.

"To be honest, Jon [Stringer] was proving to be too good. I had to let him have the title. He's an amazing young brewer and I suspect if I didn't [step aside], then I'd lose him some time in the next five years and I didn't want to do that. [Also], I run two pubs, I'm a director of a packaging line and I run [the] brewery, so I'm completely distracted from making beer; it was just a sensible and logical thing to do," he tells me.

Just the things he's currently involved in demonstrate that a Gadd CV would be quite a document. Yet he can easily do without one. The beers tell you all you need to know about his experience, skill and passion as a brewer. We'll come on to Dogbolter (5.6 per cent ABV), but before that, let's consider some other Gadd classics. In many cases, that's honestly what they are: classic

examples of the style – created from Eddie's passion for British cask ale.

No. 3 (5 per cent) is a genuinely pale ale of the sort that probably wowed drinkers when pale malt was first invented. With crisp bitterness and lemon and lime hop character from judicious amounts of East Kent Goldings, it is a lip-smacking delight. No. 5 (4.4 per cent) is a traditional best bitter packed full of flavour. It features a restrained level of caramel-toffee sweetness and subtle shades of dried fruit with the sort of proper hop tang that gives bitter its name. Winter on the east Kent coast can be pretty darned raw, but Gadd's Oatmeal Stout (4.6 per cent) makes the colder months more bearable. Silky smooth, rich, dark chocolate with a healthy bitterness, it's the sort of beer that makes you stay in the pub even if you only meant to pop in for a quick one.

The world of beer might have been

denied one of its best brewers if Eddie had been more passionate about tunnelling. After studying mining engineering at Imperial College in

London, he worked in a Cornish tin mine, the Channel Tunnel and for London Underground. But, despite supping many a pint of Younger's No. 3 (4.3 per cent) in the student bar, it was a desire to be his own boss that inspired him to become a brewer. He took a job in the Flounder & Firkin pub in London's Holloway Road while waiting for his next tunnelling contract to start and saw a way he could have his own business.

"I worked behind this bar and it had a

brewery in the basement. The brewer seemed to have a very cool lifestyle. He'd start work at six, but he'd finish by half-two/three o'clock and he'd sit at the bar; he had a beer allowance. I got quite envious of his lifestyle, so I went down and checked out how he made his beer.

"In engineering, I knew I wanted to be the boss as soon as possible, because I'm not a very good employee. [In fact], I'm a terrible employee... but I didn't have the patience to be the boss of a tunnelling company [and] I certainly didn't have the cash to start my own, but I looked at this little five-barrel brewery in the Flounder and I realised I could make a brewery this big, and if I saved up, I could probably afford to do it."

Having that brewery of his own was still a way off, but soon after this

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epiphany, Eddie was offered some work washing casks at another Firkin pub, further work filling them, and not long after, became a trainee brewer. Founded by David Bruce (now at West Berkshire brewery) in 1979, Firkin was an incredibly successful chain of brewpubs and well ahead of its time. Eddie joined in 1993, after David had sold up, and it was then owned by drinks and restaurant industry conglomerate Allied Domecq.

An early achievement in his brewing

career marked him out as a real ale hero from the beginning. In 1994, just six months after he started brewing, a cask of the now legendary Dogbolter – a strong porter-style ale – brewed by Eddie was entered in the International Brewing Awards (IBA). No ordinary competition, the IBA is considered the Oscars of the brewing industry, and is judged solely by professional brewers. Dogbolter took bronze in the strong ales category (for beers between 4.7 and 6.9 per cent).

“I got rung up... and even the woman who was telling me said, ‘I can’t believe this... and nor can anybody here. Nobody your size or any brewer remotely your size has ever won anything at this competition before,’” explains Eddie.

He and his fellow Firkin brewers attended the awards ceremony and he recalls polite clapping as the winners were announced, until it was his turn to collect an award. “I went up and the whole room was cheering. People were standing up and clapping me on the back, shaking my hand and it just absolutely blew me away. [It was] a popular winner because it was from such a small brewery, and all these other brewers were just so happy that we’d won a medal; it was a really moving experience.”

Over the next few years, Eddie went on to open a number of new Firkin pubs, setting up their breweries and making beer, before being sent to the Netherlands to do the



Eddie Gadd and Andy Clapham, the then manager of the Ferret & Firkin in Lots Road, Chelsea

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same there. Although his career with Firkin didn’t end as well as it had begun – in 1999, the pubs were sold to a new owner that immediately removed the brew kits and made all the brewers redundant – it gave him the brewing experience that would make him so well respected in the industry and resulted in the opportunity to buy the brewing kit he trained on. And so, in 2002, Eddie’s Ramsgate brewery was born, albeit having a somewhat protracted birth. It began as a sort of brewpub in the Belgian Bar close to the Royal Harbour, in a partnership that turned sour before the place had even opened. Despite this, Eddie kept brewing there.

“To be honest, the plan was just to have an income and hopefully something that might look after us when we got old. We didn’t really have any conception that it might have growth, we were just grateful to be able to pay the bills and have a modest income, but we also had access to lots of beer, which was nice.

“We just plugged away, and the quality of the beer improved and then

it hit a point where I understood what I was doing, and the customers did [too]. Then, the number of our customers multiplied and suddenly we’d found our feet. We began to understand who we were and what we did, and therefore we were able to communicate that with customers and they buy into it now.”

Mention beer to almost any taxi driver on the Isle of Thanet and they will tell you about Gadds. It goes beyond talk, translating into some of the best beer I’ve had. It’s tempting to lump this in with a ‘locavore’ diet – eating and drinking only local produce – but Eddie says it’s about producing the best possible beer.

“It’s purely practical. It’s because this style of beer and method of brewing works at its best when it’s brewed locally. It’s delivered fresh, it’s understood by the people around it, so it’s drunk really quickly. In those circumstances, cask ale can absolutely thrive – so that’s why we’ve kept it really local.”

It’s a beer success story of the best kind: local brewery makes fantastic beer and decides to keep doing what it’s good at, instead of expanding and finding out too late that bigger doesn’t always mean better. Which is why, although you can have bottle-conditioned versions delivered to your door, you’ll very rarely find Gadds’ beer outside east Kent. In any case, the truest way to enjoy Eddie’s beer is in cask – ideally at the seaside.

