

Real Ale Hero: Eddie Gadd of The Ramsgate Brewery by Sophie Atherton



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 John [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 actually making beer so it was just a very 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 the famous Dogbolter below, but before that let's consider some other Gadd's 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%) 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%) 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%) 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, on the building of the Channel Tunnel and also for London Underground. But despite supping many a pint of Younger's No. 3 in the Student Union 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 [t]his 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 and 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 that 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 that I could make a brewery this big one day and if I work[ed] hard and saved up I could probably afford to do it."

Having that brewery of his own was still a way off, but soon after this 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, Firkin was an incredibly successful chain of brewpubs - well ahead of its time. Eddie joined the company in 1993, after Bruce 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 into the International Brewing Awards. No ordinary competition, the IBA is considered the Oscars of the brewing industry and is judged solely by professional, commercial brewers. Dogbolter took Bronze in the strong ales category (for beers between 4.7% and 6.9% ABV).

"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 massive, popular winner because it was from such a small brewery and all these other brewers were just so fabulously happy that we'd won a medal; it was a really moving experience."

Pictured:

Eddie Gadd (right) with Andy Clapham - who was then manager of The Ferret & Firkin in Lots Road Chelsea



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 Holland to do the 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 who 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 originally trained on. And so, in 2002, Gadd'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 and started to build up a local customer base that would make Gadd's into the local legend it is today.

"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 an income, however modest - but we also had access to lots of beer which was nice.

"[W]e just plugged away and the quality of the beer improved all the time 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, really quite quickly, 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."

That solid local reputation is another hallmark of the brewery. Mention beer to almost any taxi driver on the Isle of Thanet (at the northern corner of east Kent comprising Margate, Broadstairs, Ramsgate and surrounding villages), for example, and they will start telling you about Gadd's. It goes beyond talk, translating into some of the best beer I've ever had. It's tempting to lump this in with what's been dubbed a 'locavore' diet - eating and drinking only local produce but Eddie explains it's simply about producing the best possible cask ale.

"It's purely practical. It's because this style of beer and method of brewing - that's so brilliant - works at it's very best when it's brewed locally. It's delivered fresh, it's loved and 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 they're 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 Gadd's beer outside of East Kent. In any case, the truest way to enjoy Eddie's beer is in cask - ideally at the seaside.

Below:
Eddie Gadd with part of his CO2 capture equipment at his brewery.



Article by Sophie Atherton
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Send an email enquiry to:
sophieatherton@gmx.com