Britain's Classic Beer Styles

IN THE WORLD OF BEER, Britain is best known for the style known as Bitter which, in the 20th century, developed from the pale ales first brewed in Victorian times. But there is far more to British beer than Bitter. Older styles have reappeared while the likes of golden ale, fruit beer and wheat beer have been fashioned in recent years to give further choice to drinkers. In this briefing, **Roger Protz** gives an indication of some of the great beers available in British pubs and recommends some of his favourite versions of each style.

PORTER & STOUT

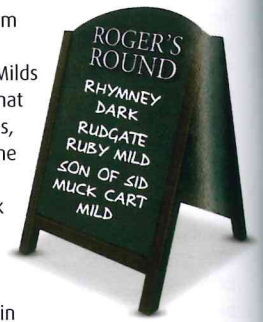
Porter was a London beer that created the first commercial brewing industry in the world in the early 18th century. Porter started life as a brown beer and became darker when new technology made it possible to roast grain at higher temperatures to obtain greater colour and flavour. The strongest version of Porter was dubbed Stout Porter or Stout for short. The name Porter was the result of the beer's popularity with the large number of porters working the streets, markets and docks of 18th-century London.

Porter and Stout were exported to the rest of the British Isles and, as a result, Arthur Guinness built his own Porter brewery in Dublin. During World War One, when the British government prevented brewers from using heavily-roasted malts in order to divert energy to the arms industry, Guinness and other Irish brewers came to dominate the market. In recent years, Porter and Stout have made a spirited comeback in both Britain and the United States, with brewers digging deep in to old recipe books to create genuine versions of the style from the 18th and 19th centuries.

Look for a jet-black colour with a hint of ruby around the edge of the glass. Expect a dark and roasted malt character, with raisin and sultana fruit, espresso or cappuccino coffee, liquorice and molasses. The beer should have deep hop bitterness to balance the richness of malt and fruit.

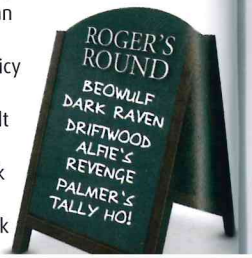
MILD

Mild was once the most popular style of beer in Britain but it was overtaken by Bitter in the 1950s. It was developed in the 18th and 19th centuries as a less aggressively bitter style of beer than Porter and workers to refresh them after long hours of arduous labour. Early Milds were much stronger that modern interpretations, which tend to fall in the 3% to 3.5% category, though Rudgate's Dark Ruby Mild at 4.4% is more in keeping with earlier strengths. Mild is usually dark brown in colour, due to the use of well-roasted malts or roasted barley, but there are paler versions such as Banks's Mild, Timothy Taylor's Golden Best and McMullen's AK. Look for rich malty aromas and flavours, with hints of dark fruit, chocolate, coffee and caramel, with a gentle underpinning of hop bitterness.



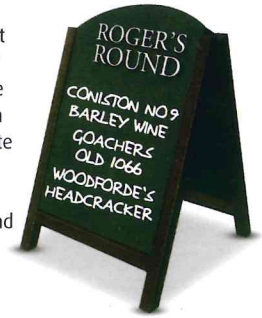
OLD ALE

Old ale is another style from the 18th century, stored for months or even years in wooden vessels where the beer picked up some lactic sourness from wild yeasts and tannins in the wood. As a result of the sour taste, it was dubbed 'stale' by drinkers and the beer was one of the components of the early blended Porters. In recent years, old ale has made a return to popularity, primarily due to the popularity of Theakston's Old Peculier and Gale's Prize Old Ale. Contrary to expectation, old ales do not have to be especially strong and can be no more than 4% alcohol. Neither do they have to be dark: old ale can be pale and bursting with lush malt, tart fruit and spicy hops. Darker versions will have a more profound malt character, with powerful hints of roasted grain, dark fruit, polished leather and fresh tobacco. The hallmark of the style is a lengthy



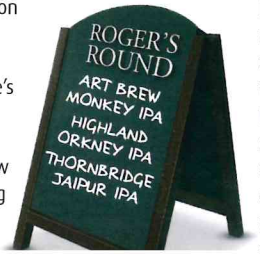
BARLEY WINE

Barley wine dates from the 18th and 19th centuries when England was often at war with France and it was the duty of patriots, usually from the upper classes, to drink ale rather that French claret. Barley wine had to be strong – often between 10% and 12% – and was stored for as long as 18 months or two years. The biggest-selling barley wine for many years was Whitbread's 10.9% Gold Label, now available only in cans. Fuller's Vintage Ale (8.5%) is a bottle-conditioned version of its Golden Pride and is brewed with different varieties of malts and hops every year. Expect massive sweet malt and ripe fruit of the pear drop, orange and lemon type, with darker fruits, chocolate and coffee if darker malts are used. Hop rates are generous and produce bitterness and peppery, grassy and floral notes.



IPA

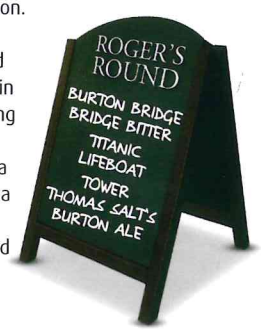
India Pale Ale changed the face of brewing in the 19th century. The new technologies of the industrial revolution enabled brewers to use pale malts to fashion beers that were pale bronze in colour. First brewed in London and Burton upon Trent for the colonial trade, IPAs were strong in alcohol and high in hops to keep them in good condition during long sea journeys. IPA's life span was brief, driven out of the colonies by German lager. But the style has made a spirited recovery in recent years, brewed with great passion in both Britain and the U.S.. In Chicago, Goose Island's IPA is arguably the finest American interpretation of the style while in Britain Marston's Old Empire and Meantime's IPA are just two modern versions of the style arousing new interest. Look for a big peppery hop aroma and palate balanced



BURTON ALE

As the name suggests, the origins of Burton Ale lie in Burton upon Trent, but the style became so popular in the 18th and 19th centuries that most brewers had 'a Burton' in their portfolio and the expression 'gone for a Burton' entered the English language. Bass at one time had six different versions of the beer, ranging from 6% to 11.5%: the stronger versions were exported to Russia and the Baltic States.

In the 20th century, Burton was overtaken in popularity by pale ale and Bitter but it was revived with great success in the late 1970s with the launch of Ind Coope Draught Burton Ale. But when Allied Breweries broke up, the beer moved first to Tetley's in Leeds and then J W Lees in Manchester, where it's brewed in small batches but is worth seeking out: it's based on the recipe for a once-famous bottled beer, Double Diamond Export. Other Burton Ales exist under different names today: Young's Winter Warmer was originally called Burton. Bass No 1, brewed occasionally, is called a barley wine but is in fact the last remaining version of a Bass Burton Ale. Look for a bright amber colour, a rich malty and fruity character underscored by a solid resinous and piny hop note.



PALE ALE

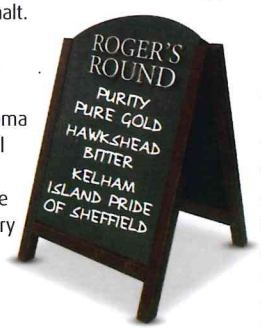
The success of IPA in the colonial trade led to a demand for beer of a similar colour and character in Britain. IPA, with its heavy hopping, was considered too bitter for the domestic market, and brewers responded with a beer dubbed pale ale that was lower in both alcohol and hops. Pale ale was known as 'the beer of the railway age', transported round the country from Burton upon Trent by the new railway system. Brewers from London, Liverpool and Manchester built breweries in Burton to make use of the local, mineral-rich water to make their own versions of pale ale. From the early years of the 20th century, Bitter began to overtake pale ale in popularity and as a result pale ale became mainly a bottled product. A true pale ale should be

It should have a spicy, resinous aroma and palate, with biscuity malt and tart citrus fruit. Many beers are called Bitter today but are in fact pale ale, Marston's Pedigree being a case in point.

BITTER

Towards the end of the 19th century, brewers built large estates of tied pubs and they moved away from beers stored for months or years and developed 'running beers' that could be served after a few days of conditioning in the pub cellar. Bitter was a new type of running beer: it was a member of the pale ale family but was generally deep bronze or copper in colour due to the use of slightly darker malts, such as crystal, that gave the beer fullness of palate. Best is a stronger version of Bitter but there is considerable crossover. Bitter falls into the 3.4% to 3.9% band, while Best Bitter is 4% upwards, though a number of brewers dub their ordinary Bitters 'best'. A further development of Bitter comes in the shape of extra or special strong Bitter of 5% or more: Fuller's ESB and Greene King Abbot being well-known examples. With ordinary Bitter, look for spicy, peppery and grassy hop character, a powerful bitterness, tangy fruit and juicy/nutty malt.

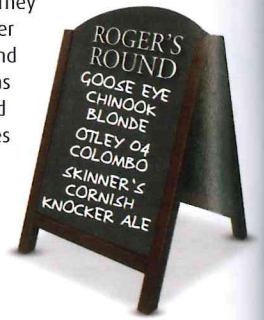
With Best and strong Bitters, malt and fruit character will tend to dominate but hop aroma and bitterness are still crucial to the style, often achieved by 'late hopping' in the brewery or by adding hops to casks before filling.



GOLDEN ALE

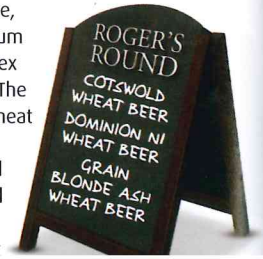
Golden ales have become so popular, with brewers of all sizes producing them, that they now have their own category in the Champion Beer of Britain competition. Exmoor Gold and Hop Back and other brewers quickly followed suit in a rush to win younger drinkers away from mass-produced lagers to the pleasures of cask beer. The style is different to pale ale in two crucial ways: golden ale is paler, often brewed with lager malt or specially produced low temperature ale malt and, as a result, hops are allowed to give full expression, balancing sappy malt with luscious fruity, floral, herbal, spicy and resinous characteristics.

While brewers of pale ale tend to use such traditional English hops as Fuggles and Goldings, imported hops from North America, the Czech Republic, Germany, Slovenia and New Zealand give radically different hop notes to golden ale. As a result, golden ales offer a new and exciting drinking experience. They are often served colder than draught Bitter and some brewers, such as Fuller's, have installed special cooling devices attached to beer engines to ensure the beer reaches the glass at an acceptably refreshing temperature.



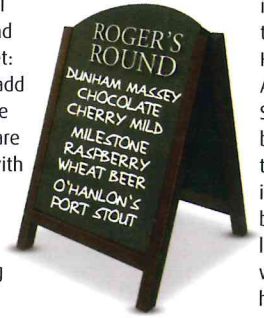
WHEAT BEER

Wheat beer is a style closely associated with Bavaria and Belgium and the popularity of the style in Britain has encouraged many brewers to add wheat beer to the portfolios. The title is something of a misnomer as all 'wheat beers' are a blend of malted barley as well as wheat, as the latter grain is difficult to brew with and needs the addition of barley, which acts as a natural filter during the mashing stage. But wheat, if used with special strains of yeast developed for brewing the style, gives distinctive aromas and flavours, such as clove, banana and bubblegum that make it a complex and refreshing beer. The Belgian version of wheat beer often has the addition of herbs and spices, such as milled coriander seeds and orange peel – a habit



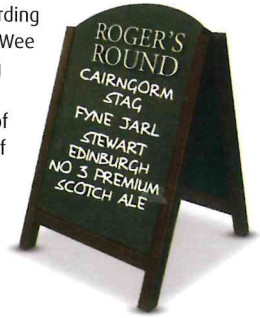
FRUIT/SPECIALITY BEERS

Brewers have become restless in recent years in their quest for new flavours that will help them reach a wider and more appreciative audience for their beers. The popularity in Britain of Belgian fruit beers has not gone unnoticed and now many home-grown brewers are using fruit in their beer. Others have gone the extra mile and add honey, herbs, heather, spices, and even spirit – brandy and rum feature in a number of speciality beers. It's important to dispel the belief that fruit and honey beers are sweet: both fruit and honey add new dimensions to the brewing process and are highly fermentable, with the result that beers that use the likes of cherries or raspberry are dry and quenching rather than cloying.



SCOTTISH BEERS

Historically, Scottish beers tend to be darker, sweeter and less heavily hopped that beers south of the border: a reflection of a colder climate where hops don't grow and beer needs to be nourishing. The classic traditional styles are Light, Heavy and Export, which are not dissimilar to Mild, Bitter and IPA. They are also often known as 60, 70 and 80 Shilling Ales from a 19th-century method of invoicing beers according to their strength. A 'Wee Heavy' or 90 Shilling Ale, now rare, is the Scottish equivalent of barley wine. Many of the newer brewers in Scotland produce beers that are lighter in colour and with more generous hop rates.



Only accept perfect pints

Remember, you're the consumer, forking out a high price for beer, so don't be afraid to take your pint back to the bar if:

- It's either too cold or too warm. Cask beer should be cool, not cold – but bear in mind that some golden ales are meant to be served at a lower temperature than Milds and Bitters. At the other end of the spectrum, it's a myth that real ale should be served at room temperature. Warm beer tastes bad, as the temperature creates unpleasant off flavours. If your beer smells of acetone, vinegar or stale bread, take it back.
- The pint has no head, is totally flat and out of condition.
- It's not only flat but hazy and has yeast particles or protein floating in the liquid.

If you get the response 'Real ale is meant to be warm and cloudy', invite the publican to join the 21st century. If the Marque plaque, get in touch with Cask Marque. Otherwise, let us know at the *Good Beer Guide* – **camragbgeditor@camra.org.uk**.

And please go back to the bar if you are served a short measure – less than a pint (or half-pint) of liquid in the glass. Drinkers lose millions of pounds a year as a result of short measures. It's an outrageous rip-off. CAMRA beer festivals serve beer in over-size glasses that ensure drinkers always get the amount of beer they have paid for. Most pub owners refuse to use over-size glasses, preferring brim-measure glasses that allow them consistently to serve short measures. It's a scandal. Don't put up with it.