

Pilgrimage to Faversham

The Carmelite friars at Faversham in the county of Kent serve the National Shrine of Saint Jude, Apostle and Martyr. St. Jude is referred to in the Bible as one of Jesus' relatives and Apostles, and a letter often attributed to him is preserved as part of the New Testament. He is widely known amongst Catholics and other Christians as the "patron saint of desperate cases". However, it was not to the Shrine that a party of some 19 Old Askeans, wives and friends made the trek to Faversham on Thursday 7 March, although there is nothing more desperate than an Old Askean in search of a pint. Yes, it was to the shrine of English beer making that our intrepid party made the trek into deepest Kent. The Shepherd Neame brewery in Faversham is the oldest brewery in the England. While 1698 is the brewery official founding date, there is clear evidence that its heritage pre-dates this.

Records show that in 1525, William Castlock, the brother of the last abbot of Faversham, was exporting and importing beer. It was an association with beer that the Castlocks maintained and by 1550 John Castlock, his son, was leasing the abbey brewhouse. By 1570, he was the owner of 18 Court Street, where brewing has continued ever since.

We had a fascinating talk and tour where the beer making process was explained. Beer is made from four basic ingredients: Barley, water, hops and yeast. The basic idea is to extract the sugars from grains (usually barley) so that the yeast can turn it into alcohol and CO₂, creating beer.





The brewing process starts with grains, usually barley (although sometimes wheat, rye or other such things.) The grains are harvested and processed through a process of heating, drying out and cracking. The main goal of malting is to isolate the enzymes needed for brewing so that it's ready for the next step.

The grains then go through a process known as mashing, in which they are steeped in hot, but not boiling, water for about an hour, sort of like making tea. This activates enzymes in the grains that cause it to break down and release its sugars. Once this is all done you drain the water from the mash which is now full of sugar from the grains. This sticky, sweet liquid is called wort. It's basically unmade beer, sort of like how dough is unmade bread. The wort is boiled for about an hour while hops are added. I didn't know until the tour that hops have antibiotic properties which probably explains why one feels so good after a few pints!

Once the boil is over the wort is cooled, strained and filtered. It's then put in a fermenting vessel and yeast is added to it. At this point the brewing is complete and the yeast works its fermentation magic. Basically the yeast eats up all that sugar in the wort and spits out CO₂ and alcohol as waste products. The beer is then stored, and either bottled or put into casks or barrels.

After the brewery tour we had a sample of six beers ranging from pale blonde to black. Each with its own aroma and taste. I think that my favourite was Shepherd Neame IPA, a bottled beer but at 6% ABV it is definitely not a session beer!

During the tour we had also had a history lesson encompassing James II, the Battle of the Boyne and tax evasion in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – did you know that there was a tax on land but not on gardens, so hops are grown in a hop garden and thus no land tax was payable.

After the tour it was over the road to The Phoenix a splendid pub owned by Andy our beloved president. A most enjoyable meal accompanied by a few pints was a fitting way to end an educational and most enjoyable day.