

SCOTCH WHISKY REVIEW™



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Style over substance

It's not the cost; if you make something expensive you make it attractive; Johnnie Walker Blue Anniversary is £2,000 as well. It's not the splendid presentation (Big J Blue is just as sumptuous) it's the concept that annoys me.

600 Johnnie Blues, versus 260-odd Ardbeg 1965s suggests that Walker has the handicap, but no matter the availability/price ratio you still have thousands of disappointed, deprived customers, honest sellers can't win, even at the price of four Ford Anglias bought in 1965. No, I accuse this Ardbeg 1965; is it such a rare beast? I checked our Stock Lists and saw we offered a 1963 Ardbeg between 1994 and '97 for £45.00. Even the fabled Signatory 1967 bottling of dark, sherried Ardbeg was available for two seasons at 89 smackers.

Fair do's; Ardbeg has top cachet, especially in Europe (well, Sweden) – not so much here, a status blown to buggery by others such as Macallan or Glenmorangie yet retained by sensibly-priced Springbank. Ardbeg succeeds as it sits at the extremity of flavours, boasts a suitably tempestuous history and is staffed by great personalities*, a special experience. New producers trying to out-Ardbeg's peating levels won't dull Ardbeg's status – they have no provenance. (All this is by-the-way).

It's the presentation that bugs me.

It's a museum piece, hey! It's magnificently done (a duty sticker might be an improvement). But a museum piece?! In a thick glass case, fancy locks, plinth, cotton gloves, cleaning pack, shiny outer box (with umpteen other outers); there has certainly been no more extravagant presentation, it also rates on the tacky scale – all-be-it not significantly.

But this is a whisky from a working distillery. There will be more, it's not a one-off or an icon of design (like the Anglia). It's about the year that Maltmill closed. Has any one got a bottle of Maltmill? The wee distillery next to Lagavulin? If you have, curators everywhere are ready for you; they could legitimately preserve the only bottle. Ardbeg's new owners are practising the seagull management we expect from incoming bland managers and we've had some horrors recently – the re-bottling of Highland Park, or Jura, ouch! Many of these twits have been preoccupied in advising us on responsible drinking, a perfect oxymoron. Such imbibing involves starting at six with a dry sherry and working the evening through the whole sideboard till a breakfast of kedgeree soused in absinthe usually in time for carriages at six – if you can make it.

Ardbeg is a working distillery, thankfully not a lost cause like Port Ellen. 40yo Ardbeg is to be savoured, celebrated, NOT to be preserved. Scotch whiskies are made only for drinking, for enjoying (either responsibly or with restraint). Some distilleries are defunct; this can be mourned, you can legitimately preserve one example, but Ardbeg has a history of 40yo whiskies way, way ahead of it. Let's drink! And take the empties to the bottle-bank – without troubling the Royal Bank. ■



*Minus one great personality now, it appears

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SCOTCH WHISKY REVIEW

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Indian takeaway

It would appear that we were somewhat previous in suggesting that Whyte & Mackay had done a deal to sell Invergordon Distillers. It now seems as if W&M may now sell off some of its major brands, or even be bought in its entirety, when it was confirmed recently that talks were taking place with Indian drinks giant, UB Group.

W&M has had a supply and marketing deal with UB subsidiary Shaw Wallace since 2001 and UB distributes its wares in India. Now it appears as if Vijay Mallya's firm, the third largest distiller in the world, is on the hunt.

The firm was also linked with a purchase of Invergordon, though it was reportedly scared off by the high asking price. UB, which controls 70% of the Indian spirits market, is also on an acquisitive roll and is keen to start selling its own Indian brands on the European market.

W&M recently posted a £3m pre-tax loss, despite an upturn in sales. The City however is said to be warming to the £100m restructuring strategy to focus on the premium market and cut reliance on the Invergordon bulk/own-label business. W&M's losses have fallen by almost £11m

in three years. The question is whether CEO Vivian Imerman (who owns 90% of the shares in W&M) will cut and run, or prove to the City that his strategy was correct – and drive the asking price up further.

Although initial reports suggested that Mallya only wanted Jura, Dalmore, Glayva (and Vladivar) it seems unlikely that Imerman would sell the very brands at the centre of the premiumisation strategy, a move which would leave him with the W&M blended business... and a division (Invergordon) that he's just tried to sell. All of this points to a buy-out (or joint venture) being more likely.

Mallya (who is a member of the Indian upper house) has been accused of exerting considerable influence on the Indian government's continued refusal to drop its duties on imported spirits [see right] and is vocal in his criticism of EU regulations which define whisky as a cereal-based spirit (his Indian brands are an admix of molasses and grain). This has made him Public Enemy No.1 on the sub-continent as far as the SWA is concerned.

The fact that Mallya may now become a member of the SWA is not without a certain delicious irony. ■

The serious bit

The takeover talks come just as an EU Report on the issue has concluded that India is in 'blatant violation' of World Trade Organisation rules. Under the current tax regime Scotch whisky can be forced to pay up to 550% more in tax than domestically produced spirits. The report is seen as a final warning to the Indian Government before the EU directs its complaint to the WTO.

At the moment, imported spirits are charged between 25% to 150% in "additional duty" and, since earlier this year, an "extra additional duty" of 4% has been levied. In addition, each state within India has the right to charge its own rates of duty. The whisky industry sees India as having huge potential and many firms view it as an easier market to build than China since there is already a history of whisky consumption in the sub-continent. As it stands, despite exports of £26m, Scotch whisky currently accounts for less than 1% of India's 100 million case spirit market. ■

Oak Cross

Unbowed by the rebuff given by the SWA to its Spice Tree (RIP), Compass Box's newest addition, Oak Cross is a continuation of the firm's experiments with mixing different oak types. This time Compass Box's French cooperage has custom-made American oak casks fitted with new French (sessile) oak heads which have been toasted to specific levels.

The whisky is a vatting of Teaninich and malts from "the villages of Brora and Carron" (answers on a postcard please) all of which have been aged in American oak. As with Spice Tree a percentage of the subsequent vatting has been married and matured for "several months" in the oak cross casks.

Compass Box is confident that its new baby will be declared legal as mixing and matching different wood types is common practice when repairing casks. Although Compass Box was named 'Innovator of the Year' for Spice Tree in the same week as the SWA deemed it illegal, John Glaser claimed he was not bitter, nor that he was tempted to call his new whisky Mr Hewitt's Nightmare. ■

Whyte, Mackay and Robbo

Timing is everything. Until the Indian takeaway story hit, this summer's hot story was the shock resignation of David 'Robbo' Robertson from Jon Mark and Robbo's Easy Drinking Whisky Co. for "personal reasons". He is to take up a newly created post dealing with "innovation"... at Whyte & Mackay. Presumably his old firm will now have to change its name to JM and ?'s Easy Drinking etc etc...

Alarm bells were first rung when Mark was spotted being Keepered under the title 'strategy and planning director, Edrington Group' *1 rather than as part of JMR. This has led people to wonder whether the arms-length relationship between the firm

and its easy-drinking satellite has now changed. A shift of focus from the UK to the US market also seems to be on the cards.

Incidentally, what price a UK retailer – formerly closely associated with JMR – bringing out their own version soon?

LATE NEWS: Although having a symbol in a title never did ? and the Mysterians any harm, it appears as if Robbo's name and cartoon likeness will forever be enshrined on the JMR labels. It is unclear however whether he will now be David, Dave, Davey or Robbo and how, after years of dressing like a surfer, he copes with the strict sartorial regime of Richard 'don't call me Dickie' Paterson. ■

*1 A prize of the publisher's choosing to be awarded to the first person able to tell us what this title actually means

If you have anything for inclusion in these pages, please e-mail news@scotchwhiskyreview.com

The SWA has ruled that Arran cannot finish one of its whiskies in a Calvados cask because the firm could not prove beyond all doubt that it had been traditionally used in the past. Before everyone gets over-excited and start chuntering about overpaid, high-handed Edinburgh lawyers laying down the law, allow me to quote from that august body's guidelines on finishing: "If members wish to use any other type of cask for the maturation or 'finishing' of Scotch Whisky, the onus would be on them to establish that that type of cask had been traditionally used in the industry and to provide evidence to that effect." I have requested to see the requisite paperwork showing that barrel-loads of Château d'Yquem were quaffed enthusiastically by Ileachs in the 19th century.

Rules of etiquette No. 1. Say, for example, you are at the launch of a new whisky... let's call it Glen Gould Vintage 1994. If your host asks you if you'd like a dram, accept immediately. Do not, however ask for a whisky which is owned by a different company, say, Rosebank. This approach will not demonstrate your independence even if you are, for example, the new editor of a whisky publication.

It must have gladdened Diageo's heart when they received a private order for three cases of Johnnie Walker Blue Label. I wonder if the fact it came from a Mr Zuma of Johannesburg to celebrate his acquittal on rape charges gave them pause for thought. Probably not. What is it about Walker and its target consumers? Franco, Saddam Hussein and now a man still facing corruption charges who believes you won't catch AIDS if you shower after sex.

A whisky-loving acquaintance decided that he would treat his wife to a weekend's still-bagging in Speyside recently (lucky woman). Googling for potential accommodation his eye was caught by Glenlivet Lodge which was not only conveniently situated near the eponymous distillery but seemed to offer everything a couple could wish for... provided they were open minded about the behaviour of their fellow guests. "I thought swinging had something to do with golf, or Johnnie Walker," reports our slightly flustered correspondent. "What's more I've now got to explain to the wife what I was doing looking at such a site."

Talking of which... I was wondering if anyone can identify the big-wig at a major distilling firm whose wife recently discovered that their property portfolio included a small flat in Chelsea Harbour of which she was hitherto unaware. I'm led to believe the apartment was used for entertaining his young niece...

Cutback corner: Which smallish division of a major distiller approached a retailer asking to "borrow" a corner of their stand at Glasgow's Whisky "Live" as they couldn't afford the full price for a pitch?

The curse of the SWR? No sooner had the ink dried on our in-depth interview with Peter Russell (last issue) than the news came in that his firm Ian MacLeod had sacked its entire salesforce. According to our source, victims of the cuts included: "some old bloke, a girl and a chap called Julian."

But, we speculate, why? Surely the main role of the team was to flog Isle of Skye. Does this suggest IoS no longer forms part of

Ian MacLeod's plans? If not, who will buy it? Perhaps it may be of interest to someone who already has whisky interests on Skye. Were that the situation it might be a clear case of *noblesse oblige*...

New distillery corner. We hear that building work has actually, finally, amazingly, started at James Thompson's Ladyboy (sorry, LadyBANK) Distillery in Fife. Whether the cloud over the site is the dust of construction or smoke blowing over from 'Disgusted of Kilchoman' is anyone's guess. Whate'er the case, Ladyboy [*that's enough, ed*] is playing catch-up with (not so) Daftmill whose new make was tasted recently in Edinburgh. The man from Del Monte pronounced it "clean, malty, sweet".

For those of you who might be remotely interested there's still no news of the first sod being dug at Blackwood's "Shetland" "Distillery". The ever-helpful SWR is happy to suggest to the firm that it negotiates with Airdrie District Council to rename one of its suburbs after the northern islands. Then, finally, all its products could be accurately labelled. It's either that or sell the whole shebang to Pernod.

The search for Richard Gordon's replacement at the helm of the SMWS continues, albeit in somewhat eccentric fashion. Our arts correspondent, in Edinburgh "to catch up on some culture", reports how he saw one Society executive racing out of a pub in hot pursuit of faded entertainer Les Dennis crying: "You like whisky, don't you?!"

If it was down to the SWR we'd just give Pip Hills a bell. ■

A question of duty

Sources close to SWR tell us that the run-up to the imposition of UK Duty stamps is chaotic, to say the least. Perhaps the Labour government is – not for the first time – taking Russia as its role model; bottles have to be withdrawn from sale there if they don't carry the tax stamps, even though the stamps have yet to be printed! Meanwhile, in Blighty, many producers have not been advised on action by

HM Customs & Excise and some major distillers are in a spin with many products not being available. Examples include Talisker 18, Mortlach and Lochnagar. No wonder there are so few new releases coming out. Loss of sales revenue is a certainty for many involved in the industry. A source very, very close to SWR suggests that the company that makes the world famous, award-winning Loch Fyne has just bottled another batch but

could not get stamps in time for the bottling run so, when stock is drawn off by the world's favourite whisky retailer after October, it will have to be shipped to another bond, opened, duty labelled, and reshipped.

Presumably that nice Mr Brown is putting together some form of compensation package even as I write – from the fuel duty involved... ■

TALES FROM THE UNDERBACK

Cassic Mats Cruise

Shareholder pressure is believed to be behind the most recent series of cutbacks at Diageo. Not only does it appear that there are now only two managers covering the distiller's entire Speyside estate, but swingeing cutbacks are resulting in the renaming of distilleries in order to save on paint, printing costs and thread. This latest, alarming development was first revealed when the fleeces for this year's Classic Malts Cruise were divvied out to green-faced participants. Said garment carried the names of the three distilleries to

be visited: TALISKER, OBAN, and LAGAVUIN. Given it is impossible that the world's largest drinks producer could forget how to spell the name of one of its flagship brands, the cut-back option is the only plausible explanation. This was found to be the case when **SWR** went on a spying mission to some of the drink's giants other sites (see photos, below).

Rumours that Cardhu is also to change its name were hotly denied. "We'd never entertain such a ludicrous idea," said A Spokesperson. ■



Librarian alert!

Have you always lusted after a copy of Joseph Pacy's *Reminiscences of a Gauger*? Perhaps a copy of Ian MacDonald's *Smuggling in the Highlands* would complete your whisky library?

If so, relief is in sight. You no longer have to scan the web or drag all the way to Hay-on-Wye or Wigtown to scour obscure bookshops – and then pay hundreds of pounds for a dingy copy. Whisky bibliophiles (*should that be 'bookworms'?* Ed) Ian Buxton and Neil Wilson are about to

launch Classic Expressions which aims, in the words of their website, "to bring rare and exorbitantly expensive classics of whisky literature back to life".

This they will do by taking a copy of the original text; making a high resolution digital scan; cleaning it up like new and printing a new and highly collectable limited edition facsimile copy in a nice binding for a small part of the cost of the original.

Sounds good. Look out for their website at www.classicexpressions.co.uk ■

Situations vacant

When writing a job ad it is important to convey information that will attract suitable candidates. However, you don't need to give away the entire brand marketing strategy...

The purpose of the Brand Ambassador's role is to build the brand's image, awareness and assist in driving distribution. This will be achieved by building trade and consumer relations. The role involves extensive travel within the Eastern part of the US, as well as occasional travel to Scotland to host distributor, trade and consumer visits.

Key Accountabilities:

Develop and display passionate brand advocacy for The Macallan at all times

Shared responsibility for increasing brand's US presence over the next 3 year term as supply constraints are reduced

Key responsibility for ensuring the trade presence of the Macallan is optimized in the United States market. Focus on 18 year old + variants, as well as high-end in/out

Educate and train key distributor staff on The Macallan

Provide consumer PR assistance to Brand Management Team and Public Relations team regarding internal and external communications with respect to the Brand

Raise awareness and depth of distribution. Develop opportunities for Brand Educational events, organize and manage the events in line with PR strategy

Increase distribution and sales of \$1500+ variants via networking and organizational skills in executing high end dinners and events

Promote The Macallan via word of mouth and through one on one interviews with journalists

Completion of nosing and tasting sessions across ranges of audiences of the entire Macallan range

Monitor and report market observations across entire scotch whisky portfolio, reporting on key social, economic and political variations and trends and develop PR policy accordingly

Highlight for management any gaps in distribution and/or other problems in the retail trade.

Oh, so that's how you do it. ■

Alfred Barnard is unwell

as told to Jon Allen

Returning to traditional values

Nearing our destination of Inverness's airport, the cab driver on the long journey from Talisker on Skye started talking about a number of his relatives who used to work in the city's three former distilleries.

These were Glen Albyn whose site was given over to a supermarket in 1986; its near neighbour Glen Mhor (before being razed to the ground in the same year, ten years short of its centenary); and Millburn, whose buildings now house a link in the Beefeater chain of 'steakhouses', queasily named The Auld Distillery.

After visiting two of them in the 1880s for my seminal survey (GM not being extant at the time), I wrote that the distiller's office at Glen Albyn was linked by telephone to the company's head office a mile and a half away. Interesting for the time, but I also referred to Millburn's 'capital offices' – what was I thinking? (It pains me to imagine that I might be in no small measure responsible for the obsession amongst the malt whisky drinkers of today with the dullest of details.)

The driver and I got talking about the perks of working at Inverness's distilleries.

His best story told of workers who dutifully turned up at seven o'clock for the start of their shifts – only to have it pointed out to them that it was the wrong seven o'clock. Late or early, 12 hours adrift is truly impressive.

I recalled the Munro-bagging gentleman Bob Christine, who retired as Manager of Dalwhinnie, telling me of arriving at 5am for his first day in the industry at Oban distillery to be given a dram.

His first thought – that he had landed at Work Heaven – was short-lived as it dawned on him that the alcohol was to numb the hellish horror of working on the malting floor.

It would have been in the 1970s. Since then Health and Safety regulations have become more and more stringent.

Having inebriated staff in close proximity to heat and spirit was indeed pretty perilous.

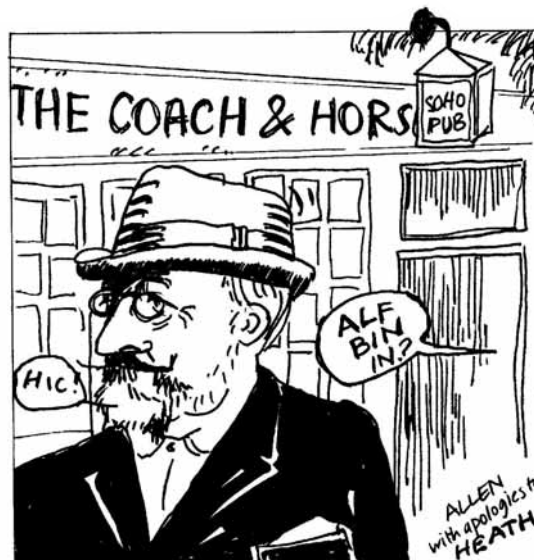
Fires at distilleries were not rare. Talisker's last conflagration in 1960 occurred during the wee small hours. Something in the still house that should have been closed was left

open and the inevitable happened. The company's minutes conclude that there was no rational explanation for the error. I think any of us may be able to come up with one.

Now with new distilleries – or at least plans for them – leaning heavily on tradition, it strikes me they should genuinely return to the good old days.

Kilchoman is Islay's first new distillery for 124 years and boasts of reversing the mass production of the industrial revolution by rejuvenating the old tradition of a farmhouse still.

Actually, I note, the site has already had a fire – so perhaps the enterprise is more authentic than I gave it credit for.



Let's see a revival of drinking the wash (8% beer nicknamed Joe). And the blandness of pubs near these new distilleries could be ameliorated by selling smuggled new-make spirit in optics labelled 'White Hearse'.

Incidentally, I looked up Joe – the colloquial name for wash taken illegally from the washback to drink – in my dictionary of slang. The closest definition was what US students called beer in the 1970s – their misunderstanding of the 1930s slang for coffee.

On reflection, even the Kilchoman bumpf sounds a tad too corporate to my ears – what about a return to illegal stills?

But there's more scope for introducing traditional ways than in production. The last time I toured Glenlivet, I was told that just two people were making the whisky but around 20 showed visitors around.

So, following the example set at Oban, and given how obnoxious some visitors will inevitably be, let guides anaesthetise themselves by helping themselves liberally to the product in the manner of ye olde worlde distillierie worker.

This will also put an end to ritualistic and dull distillery tours

At Glen Tobarone, guides swigging from bottles secreted about their person will rebelliously sneak coach parties off to look at the stills in the unsightly sheds, rather than the coal-fired ones included in the official tour. At other distilleries, visitors will be beckoned conspiratorially towards ultra-modern computer-controlled systems behind closed doors marked 'PRIVATE'. And, after filling the wee dramming glasses to the brim, guides will have to conclude each tour by telling one visitor, 'I love you, you're my best mate'.

This would instil Experiential Customer Relationship Marketing at the Brand Home as I believe distillery visits are described in these times – with the finest traditional values.

Dear Reader,

I was shocked to spot in the last issue of **SWR** a profanity in the column of our esteemed proprietor. I was going to make so bold as to recommend that he at least used bad language that is whisky-related. Sadly, such oaths are thinly represented in my lexicon.

My favourite entry is *Whiskbroom* – with which, in late 19th century America, meant drunkenness. A temperance campaigner went into a haberdasher's in a State where the sale of alcohol was prohibited. She wanted a brush known as a whiskbroom and was offered one 'with' and one 'without'. On enquiring about the difference, she was shown one 'with' which had a small bottle of whisky hidden amid its bristles.

Henceforth, this organ's eloquent and bearded editor shall be dubbed 'Whiskbroom with' and whenever I have the pleasure of his company shall expect his facial furniture to be well-stocked with miniatures. ■

Why greed isn't good

by Dave Broom



If truth be told, it was the white gloves which tipped me over the edge. The asking price (£2,000 a bottle) is ludicrous of course, but it's the addition of the white gloves which makes the release of Ardbeg 1965 the most absurdly pretentious idea yet from the half-baked minds of luxury whisky marketeers. Who wears white gloves? The Queen probably, Japanese taxi drivers, oh and snooker referees who, let's face it, are also used to handling a load of balls. What does Glenmorangie think it is? A perfume company? Oops! Forgot. It is. Ardbeg 65, its price tag, its hand-blown glass made from Islay sand (something even Bruichladdich hasn't thought of) and the white gloves smacks of LVMH viewing whisky as operating in the same, absurd, fashion as the perfume industry; a place where style will always triumph over content.

I'm less concerned about the price simply because I've long given up on trying to work out quite how whisky firms work out their prices of their top-end offerings. Asking thousands of pounds for a bottle smacks of... well greed would be the first word to spring to mind. Greed and playing on the desires of deluded numpties who think their lives will not be complete without this bottle. Maybe the 1966 should come with a free box of tissues.

I know what the marketing department's reaction will be when the price question is raised. "If people don't think such a rare whisky is worth the money they won't buy it." It's hardly a valid answer. We all know a 'rare' official bottling from Ardbeg (or Port Ellen, Brora, Dalmore etc) can demand a stratospheric price because there will always be consumers who are sufficiently obsessive to shell out for it.

Top-end whisky is aligning itself with top-end wine, in a rarified world where the liquid itself is unimportant because these bottles are bought as investments, or fetish objects. In many ways, the price has become the signifier, not the contents of the bottle. Whisky, in other words, has ceased to function in the way in which it was originally intended... a drink. The super-rich (or deluded, the terms are often inter-changeable) buy top-end wines as trophies. They'll never drink them.

The same applies to whisky collectors.

This isn't restricted to Ardbeg. Perhaps distillers are suffering from a shared over-inflated sense of worth which has driven up the asking price for rare official

bottlings (rarely, you may have noticed, independent bottlings!) of Macallan, Glenfiddich, Balvenie, Dalmore, Bowmore, Glenlivet, Glenfarclas etc etc. They're all at it.

This upwards shifting in price is all part of malt's attempts to reposition itself as a luxury product. I have no problem with this in principle. Malt has plenty of luxury cues: scarcity, heritage, the notion of being hand-crafted, the perceived higher quality of the product itself, all of which add to the whole experience of drinking the brand.

Top-end whisky is moving in the same direction as top-end wine, a rarified world where the liquid itself is unimportant



The luxury market is changing however. It is no longer the preserve of the uber-rich. It is no longer simply about, dare I say it, bling. Luxury has become affordable and as it has, so a luxury product such as malt whisky has to justify its price. Although malt isn't a mass-market drink (see last issue's rant) it still needs to be careful not just to slap a high price tag on itself and wait for the consumer to buy into its new position. Brand owners are confusing collectors with luxury consumers. The collectors' demands and justifications will never change. They want the bottle at whatever price and would be delighted if LVMH added a strand of seaweed from Ardbeg's shore as a way of 'adding value' The consumer, however, is

changing. He may want luxury, but the brand needs to offer 'value'. It isn't sufficient just to have a lovely bottle, some gloves and a story.... the taste of the liquid is what is important.

If malt is to become luxury it needs to engage with these consumers, not withdraw into the esoteric world at which Ardbeg 65 is aimed. The people who buy a Patek Philippe watch will wear that watch in order to tell the time, just as the owner of a Rolls-Royce will drive the car to get from A to B. Malt whisky however is in danger of forgetting that its primary function is as a drink.

In the past couple of years we've seen Macallan and Highland Park repositioning as luxury brands by basically repackaging themselves and doubling the price. Is the liquid twice as good as it was before? Of course not. The price rise is down to a shift in image and, looking at Macallan's sales figures, it seems to be paying off.

I'd like to believe, however, that there is a limit to any consumer's credulity, something which the brand owners should take cognisance of. I once asked Joe Heitz, one of the old school of Napa winemakers, why his wines, so highly regarded, were a fraction of the price of those coming from new producers with no pedigree. "You can cut a man's hair every fortnight," he replied, "but you can only scalp him once." Eventually people (maybe even collectors) will ask the very simple question: is this worth it? When they do, the liquid better stack up.

Could it happen with malt? Look at Cognac. It too went down the luxury route, with ever more expensive bottles. Then the market for which those bottles were intended (the Far East) collapsed. The result was that the Cognac industry went into a tailspin from which it has only just recovered thanks to American hip-hop community – though even they, the epitome of bling, refused to pay the over-inflated prices for top-end brands. In the interim though, many Cognac houses quietly went bust.

The Cognac industry behaved like a perfume house. It was into packaging, image, elitism, luxury. It had racked its prices up so high that when the question was asked: "does this taste justify that price, do I really want it?" the answer was "No." The word which springs to mind is hubris. It's one that the malt whisky industry should be aware of. ■

Mature spirit

by Tom Bruce-Gardyne

“Experience teaches us that most of the riotous and obstreperous conduct of drunks come from the young, fiery spirit which is sold. While men who may over-indulge in old matured whisky become sleepy and stupid, but not in a fighting mood,” declared the creator of White Horse, Sir Peter Mackie. Maybe those against binge drinking should take note, though whether your average hen party would turn all soft and soporific if weaned onto Lagavulin is debatable. Still, Sir Peter and his fellow whisky barons finally got their belief in the need to age whisky for a minimum of three years enshrined in law.

These differences are either blended away to create a consistent brand, or played up by the small army of independent bottlers

That change had a critical effect. At a stroke Scotch could no longer dance to the latest grooves in the marketplace. Instead it became a slave to the much slower rhythms of maturation. This helped protect whisky-making from the bean counters. A soulless accountant could only shake his head in despair at the thought of locking the spirit away in a porous cask for years on end where it would earn no money. Compared to vodka whose mantra states ‘if it’s cold, it’s sold’, the sheer indulgence of whisky-making is downright sinful. Especially when you consider the amount that evaporates into thin air. Apparently the loss from Scotland’s warehouses equates to some 150,000,000 bottles a year. The only consolation is that none of them paid any tax.

Compared to the violent transformation from grain to spirit in the distillery, the time in wood is totally chilled. Seeing racks of sleeping casks in a warehouse it feels as though nothing is happening at all. The changes from one day to the next are far too small to measure, but multiply them by ten years or more and the transformation can be every bit as dramatic as that which happened in the still-house. In fact often more so – with a single malt that has not been heavily peated and aged in an active cask, they say that

maturation may account for two thirds of its character.

Wood ageing is the least controllable part of whisky making. Up to the point the spirit dribbles off the still, every variable in the process has been predetermined from the precise level of peat smoke in the malt to the length of fermentation to the speed of the stills. Suddenly this carefully crafted spirit is tipped into a ragbag collection of second-hand barrels and left to its own devices. One only has to taste single malt in the warehouse to realise how different one cask can be from the next even though both may have been filled with the exact same spirit on the exact

different under the microscope. Add in the external influences within the warehouse – its temperature and humidity and then finally multiply all these factors together and the end result is the sum of infinite possibilities.

You can understand why the whisky industry was slow to grasp the full importance of maturation because it goes against the grain. What distiller would happily admit that their carefully calibrated fine-tuning might have less influence than the random nature of wood ageing. It also subverts the sacred tenet of consistency whereby brands must never vary from one



same day. These differences are either blended away to create a consistent brand, or played up by the small army of independent bottlers who specialise in single cask malts.

Consider for a moment the number of variables involved. First there is the cask’s previous contents – which can be anything from ruby Port to Château d’Yquem, though in practice is 90% ex-Bourbon with the rest Sherry. Then there is the size of the cask and how it has been charred and toasted and whether it is American or European oak. And even more important is how many times it has been used to age Scotch whisky before. A first-fill sherry butt will have far more influence on the finished flavour, than a fourth-hand ex-Bourbon barrel. But even if the casks are of similar provenance and age, the pores in the wooden staves will be subtly

year to the next. While understandable for blends, one wonders if premium malt drinkers could not cope with a bit of variation like wine drinkers long used to different vintages. This was the thinking behind Glenrothes, where specific years are bottled after rigorous cask selection. It has been a big success and deservedly so.

The importance put on maturation is bound to vary from one distiller to another. Diageo with its 27 malt distilleries is bound to emphasise distillery character more than Glenmorangie which owns just three.

Thanks to a raft of cask finishes – a subject we’ll cover in a future issue, they have turned their ubiquitous single malt into a multi-faceted range. The same whisky has been finished in every barrel under the sun save Brent Crude. ■

Pip Hills

Interviewed by Gavin D Smith

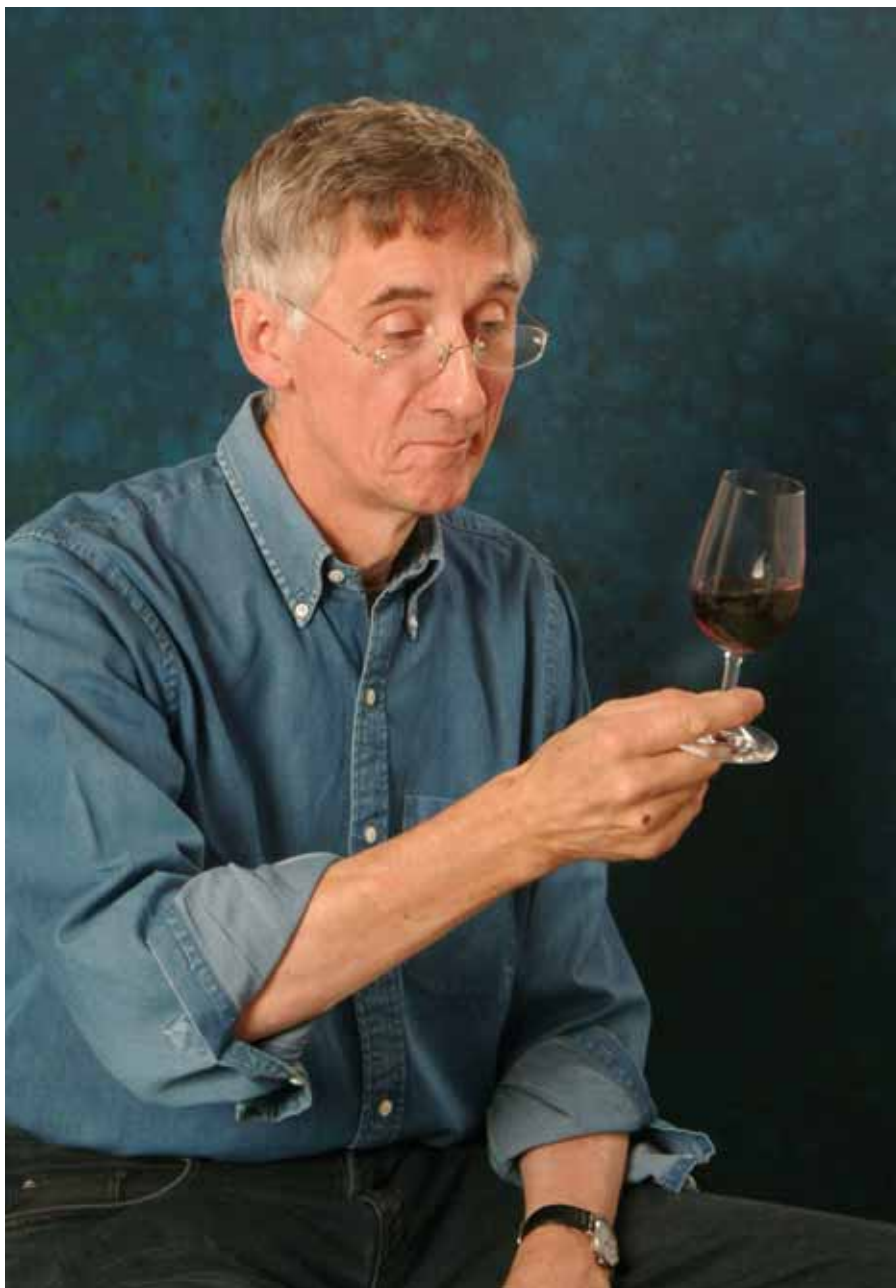
Philip 'Pip' Hills is best known as the founder of the Scotch Malt Whisky Society and as a fearlessly independent and sometimes controversial commentator on the Scotch whisky scene.

Tell me a bit about your background.

I was born in Bo'ness on the Firth of Forth and was brought up in Grangemouth, where my father was a docker. At Edinburgh University I studied medicine and was part of a group of climbers, including hard men like the great Dougal Haston. Then I had a bad fall and as a result reassessed things, and began to study philosophy. I did degrees at Glasgow and Edinburgh, and also studied at Cambridge. I suppose I wanted to be a polymath! I spent five years working for the Civil Service and left to become involved in theatre and film projects, eventually mounting an unsuccessful takeover bid for Scottish Television in 1977. After that, I started an accountancy firm, doing lots of tax work.

So how and when did you first become interested in whisky?

It was in the early 1970s. I used to go up to Alford in Aberdeenshire to visit a friend, and his neighbour, Stan, was a farmer. His one luxury in life was that once a year he'd get into his Land Rover and drive over the Cabrach to Glenfarclas distillery and buy a quarter cask of single malt. It was a first fill Sherry quarter cask, and he'd come over with a lemonade bottle full of this stuff when I was up visiting, and we'd argue about politics, religion and philosophy. Quite simply, I'd never tasted anything like it. It was better than any malts I'd had, and the blends at that time were pretty rough.



Was this where the Scotch Malt Whisky Society had its genesis?

Well, I mentioned it to friends in Edinburgh and suggested we form a syndicate and buy a cask. I got a dozen pals who said they'd take a share, and luckily the distillery had a cask per annum unallocated and they agreed to sell it to us; £2,500, including duty. That must have been 1978. For 25 years I drove a 1937 four-and-a-half litre Lagonda, and I went off in it with a

Appreciating wine rather than whisky...

trailer to collect this cask. The next evening we met up in my lobby and divvied up. Everyone thought it was fabulous whisky. Friends told their friends, and people asked if they could join, and it just all went from there. So next time I came down the road with the trailer and two casks. At that time distillers were steering clear of any unusual casks, even really good ones, because they wanted uniformity. That was their mindset. Finally, we formed a limited company and

spent £50,000 buying the Vaults in Leith. We had a policy of letting people come to us, we didn't advertise, and we never intended to be elite. It was a vehicle for people who really cared about their whisky to get it, and get it at a sensible price. And there was a nationalistic angle to it, too, as we felt huge corporate interests were keeping this amazing liquor from the Scottish people. The commercial classes didn't give a shit about Scotland.

So how did you come to part company with the Society you had created?

We all had equal shares in it, but I should have kept 51%! There were always people wanting to do different things. In fact one chairman before me even wanted to sell blended whisky to make a buck! There came a point in the early '90s when I realised the Society either had to expand or fade away. From '83 to '93 I had access to fabulous whiskies, but by '93 the industry was starting to wake up to the potential of this sort of stuff. The Classic Malts was the first attempt to really copy what we were doing, I suppose. I could see the time was coming when we'd not be able to get top class whiskies. I thought we had to get the capital to buy our own new-make spirit and lay it down. In order to grow we needed to expand overseas, and we went into France, Japan and the USA. But we bit off more than we could chew, and precipitated a cash crisis. By that time there was a dissatisfied faction among the shareholders and I had a lot of enemies who wanted it to become a corporate entity. Its whole appeal was that it wasn't! Eventually I found myself keeping the boring bastards at bay. Finally, the bank pulled the plug on it, and part of the deal was that it wouldn't be run by undesirable folk like me. I left in 1995.

What are your feelings about the Society now that it is owned by Glenmorangie?

I think it's become exactly what I thought it would become. That is part of corporate culture.

Do you feel it's time for another revolution like the one you brought about with the SMWS, or are there lots of alternative independent bottlers out there now to cater for disaffected SMWS members?

The 'revolution' happened at a particular time and there'd be no point in trying to do it again. As for independent bottlers, there are far too many of them! Fabulously good liquor is no longer available and I've seen some very mediocre whisky being sold by independent bottlers at very high prices. I imagine we will eventually see the demise of independent bottlers because the distillers are keeping the good stuff for themselves now.

What are your views on whisky 'finishes'?

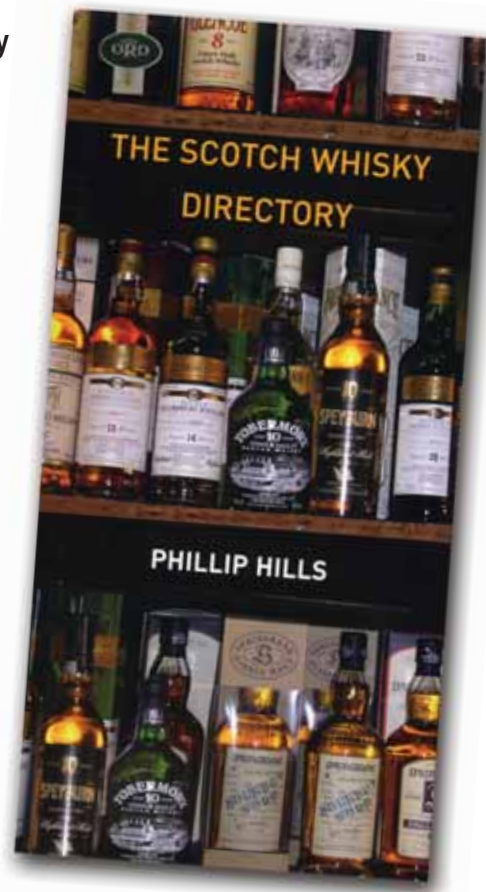
I think finishes are basically legal faking. It all depends on whether it's done scrupulously or not. Glenmorangie really started it because they were worried about the supply of good Bourbon casks 10 to 15 years ago. Glenmorangie's Bill Lumsden has been absolutely scrupulous, he always goes for best practice, but there are lots of so-called 'finished' whiskies out there that are very poor indeed. Lots of people start off with malt that has been matured in worn out casks and are trying to impart flavour into it – then sell it for some completely disproportionate price.

How well do you think the big two or three companies at the head of the Scotch whisky industry serve the consumer?

By and large the likes of Diageo and Chivas do a good job, but no corporation is ethical. It seeks to maximise profit and market share. They are offering good whisky because the public demands good whisky, but I have to say their working practices are very good. But then I can't think of anyone in the whisky industry today who's not committed to high standards. Things have got ever so much better.

You are renowned for your independent and impartial views on the whisky industry. Do you feel that other writers are compromised by their personal involvement with certain companies?

I'm fortunate that I don't have to write for a living. I can take it or leave it. I'm not often asked to write copy or anything like that anyway, because the industry is pretty leery of me. I'm too abrasive and objective for the corporate ethos. But if you have to make a living off the whisky industry you can't afford to offend it. So I totally understand why people pull punches. But that really could be to the whisky industry's detriment. You require critics. You don't get good literature if you don't have good critics. I understand why writers do what they sometimes have to do, and I'm certainly not criticising them for doing it.



You say that you don't have to write for a living. What is your 'day job' now?

I run a management training company with my partner, Maggie, based in the village of St Cyrus, south of Aberdeen on the Scottish east coast. We do a lot of work with the oil industry. I suppose my title is Financial Director.

But you've not forsaken whisky and controversy, have you? Your latest book *The Scotch Whisky Directory* has some controversial entries in it. For example, you describe Jura as "...this pretty inferior malt" and give it just a two star rating. Are you still on the Whyte & Mackay Christmas card list?

Well it's not really any concern of mine what they think about it, though I take no pleasure in disparaging any whiskies and I was sorry to have to say what I said about Jura because I have a great deal of respect for their brand ambassador, Willie Tait. But the fact remains that for many years I've thought that the standard Jura is pretty poor

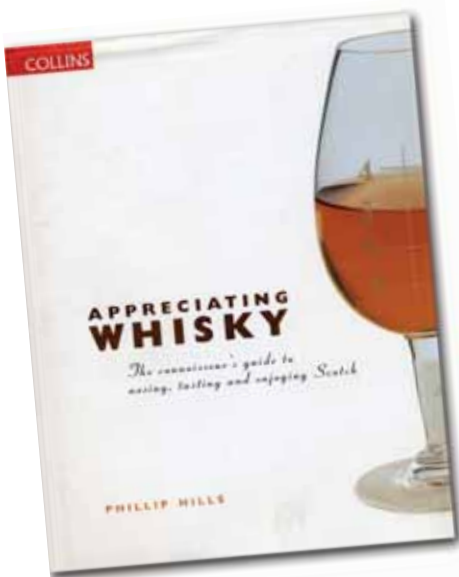
stuff and I presume that Whyte & Mackay's marketing people were seduced by the distillery's unique location and chose to ignore the fact that it wasn't any good, or perhaps they didn't even know.

Just what is the premise behind this book? Can you really justify writing yet another tasting guide with ratings in it?

The whole point about the Directory is that it is objective. It's the first and only scientifically objective book about the flavour of whisky. The flavour profile of each whisky is presented in a simple graphic. Any other tasting book is the author's subjective impression about the whiskies and has a limited vocabulary, commenting in general terms on the whiskies. People who want to spend big bucks on fancy whiskies can take their chance. I wanted a reliable guide for the average buyer.

Part of the reason for writing it was that I was pissed off with the inadequacies of other books about whisky and part of the aim was also to do justice to blended whiskies. I was notorious for saying blended whiskies were crap – and 25 years ago they were – but we've since seen an unremarked revolution in blended whiskies which are infinitely better than ever before. Now the likes of Grouse, Bell's and Isle of Skye are very good whiskies. If you look at the Directory you'll see a lot of the top scoring whiskies are blends.

Overall, did compiling the Directory give you a positive or a negative feeling about the Scotch whisky industry?



Pip gives the impression of being a man who cannot keep still

It confirmed my opinion that the quality of whisky generally available is very high indeed. It is better now by miles than it has ever been, and the Directory allows you to drink good whisky very cheaply if you are objective. Until recently the Co-op was selling 12-year-old Tomatin at £14.99 and it's a lovely whisky. It's a five star whisky in the Directory. You can buy Aberlour, Bowmore, Dalmore, Glenfiddich, Glenmorangie and Macallan for £24/£25 in supermarkets. That's good value. One of the interesting things about the Directory for me was how poorly the Ardbegs performed. They had quite poor profiles. Indeed the 17-year-old Ardbeg was far poorer than the 100 Pipers blend!

With the Directory published, are you currently working on any new books?

Well, I've recently become very interested in vampires and I'm writing a novel that is a modern take on the Dracula legend. A German film company is interested in the rights so I'd better finish the bloody thing!

I'm also writing a book about the Stirling engine, a revolutionary 19th century heat engine invented by Robert Stirling, a young minister in Ayrshire.

If you could wave a magic wand and change just one thing in the whisky industry what would it be?

I'd create an abundant supply of really first class wood – that would transform the industry. Just about everybody makes good whisky now, what makes the difference is the quality of the wood.

Finally, if I was going to buy you a drink right now to thank you for giving this interview, what would it be?

I always try to choose a whisky from a full bottle because if it's been standing in a bottle that's three-quarters empty for a while it will have lost a large part of its character.

A full bottle it is then, Pip. Many thanks. ■

Walrus of whisky

Charles MacLean

"The time has come," the Walrus said, "To talk of many things:
Of shoes – and ships – and sealing-wax – Of cabbages – and kings –
And why the sea is boiling hot – And whether pigs have wings."

At the end of May, with the permission of the tax authorities and under the skilful direction of Jim Cryle, the distillery's hugely experienced former manager, The Glenlivet produced some whisky from a "sma' still" – the kind that might have been used 200 years ago by illicit distillers. The results were very interesting.

The still itself had been discovered in a cupboard at Strathisla distillery; its pot-like base was replaced by Forsyth's of Rothes, copper-smiths to the world, and a condensing worm made from five metres of copper pipe, placed in a wooden tub filled with water. A coal and wood fire was lit beneath. The still was charged with 25 litres of low wines and feints from The Glenlivet itself. This was a bit of a cheat, but if he had done a first distillation, the solids in the wash would have burned onto the base of the still and spoiled the distillate. Jim ran foreshots for about 15 minutes, then collected about five litres of spirit, before feints spoiled the flavour.

Yet the whisky industry maintains that the barley variety used makes no difference to the flavour of the spirit

And the flavour? The spirit was remarkably rich and fruity – strawberry, banana, melon, even perhaps some pineapple (the latter is a key-note in Glenlivet new make) – but it was the texture in the mouth that really impressed me; wonderfully full-bodied and oily. If this was what whisky tasted like in the old days, let's have some more!

Talking of what whisky tasted like in the

old days, I went from Glenlivet to visit the directors of Gordon & Macphail, who bought Benromach Distillery in 1993. It had closed 10 years before and been stripped of its equipment – but this suited the new owners, since it allowed them to re-configure the distillery and install smaller stills. After



five years of painstaking restoration and experimentation, Benromach was opened by the Prince of Wales, in 1998 – exactly 100 years after its foundation.

As part of their experimentation, G&M did a number of trial runs. I tasted spirit made from three different barleys: Chariot, Troon and Golden Promise. The first two were quite similar, but the third was very different – bigger, fruitier, oilier. Yet, as readers of **SWR** will know, the whisky industry maintains that the barley variety used makes no difference to the flavour of the spirit...

The second discovery was even stranger. Having re-built the distillery on a smaller scale and settled their distilling regime without reference to the former regime, G&M were sent some spirit made pre-1983. I tasted both with Iain Urquhart and Ewen Mackintosh, and they are uncannily similar! And yet the only constants between Benromach then and now are: a) the buildings and their location and b) the water source – and neither of these factors are supposed to make any difference to spirit character...

Scotland has been named 'the most powerful country of origin for wines and spirits' in the 'Power 100 Report 2006'. It bases its assertion on an evaluation of 10,000 drinks brands and defines 'most powerful' in terms of the brand's ability to generate value, based on market share, global market reach, growth and price. Scotch accounted for only 13 of the top 100 brands, but was in 3rd place (Johnnie Walker), 10th (Ballantine's), 11th (Chivas Regal), 13th (Dewar's), 16th (J&B), 27th (Grant's) and 32nd place (Famous Grouse). Not surprisingly, Diageo, the world's largest drinks company, was named "world's most powerful brand owner".

Which makes it more ridiculous that Glasgow even considered planning to ban glasses in all its pubs. The proposal was that, from January 2007, your £250 nip of 100 year old Macallan, not to mention your glass of Chateau Pétrus, had to be sipped from a plastic tooth mug. And you would no longer be able to buy wine by the bottle in a pub.

The reason was the high incidence of glass related injuries; face-cutting with a smashed glass, bashing people over the head with a bottle and all the other capers that high-spirited Glaswegians get up to when they've had one too many. Of course, the message this gross over-reaction would have sent to the rest of the world is that 'Glasgow is not safe and Glaswegians are violent maniacs', a fact that has not been missed by Visit Scotland.

Ken Storrie, owner of the famous Pot Still whisky bar, told *The Herald* that he would rather lose his licence than serve fine malt whisky in plastic cups. He was supported by the Scottish Beer and Pub Association, which petitioned the Court of Session for a judicial review.

Finally Councillor Gordon Macdiarmid, Convener of the Glasgow Licensing Board, saw sense, despite apparently campaigning for years to "take the glass out of Glasgow" and make it "the world's first glass-free city". Let's raise a glass in celebration! ■

Letters

Dear Martin,

Given the trail of unpaid invoices, bounced cheques and false promises that litter our past like bungs on a filling store floor, it was uncharacteristically generous of you to write and ask me to comment on your latest 'publishing' venture. And loathe as I am to repay such kindness with harsh words it would seem churlish of me not to reply with honesty. So, Mervin, the first thing I have to say, is why bother? Apart from the feebleness of the contributors and the poverty of the content has it not struck you that you are in a market that is almost as saturated with competitors as staves in a cask?

Take for example my own web cast, Haydock's Half Hour, where I regularly talk to self-important and self regarding figures of no consequence from the world of whisky to bring the latest items of self-promoting trivia to the attention of the six people who regularly 'tune-in'. And talking of self promotion, you must surely be one of the nine people who read John's Blog, where I fearlessly bring you all the very oldest news, gossip and hopelessly misinformed

opinionated polemics about issues on which, frankly my dear, no one really gives a damn. Which reminds me Marvin, have you bought your copy of *Haydock's Ten Commandments of Scotch*, described by me as "quite possibly the best book on Scotch ever written"? You can also catch up with some of the content on my new web pages imaginatively called Haydock's Web Pages, where I regularly post anything that anyone is prepared to pay me to put there (and, for anyone reading this, I should add that in addition to cash, cheques and free branded clothing I'm also very happy to accept the odd whisky-drenched night (or four) in a five star hotel somewhere in Scotland in lieu of payment – which, after all, offers the added bonus of keeping me away from Mrs H).

No Melvin, it's too little, too late. Why, you only have to consider in addition to this the multiplicity of magazines about whisky that have successfully found a niche in the hearts and minds of tens of thousands of whisky drinkers all over the world – well, you know what I mean – to realise that we need another rag as much as we need a

fish-meal finish or another boutique distillery. Talking of which, have I told you of my latest bold and innovative venture in the world of whisky? It's Bonkers Brush Distillery, a wonderful little artisanal centre of traditional whisky-making in the village of Sengarila near Bellshill (if you're interested in seeing it, which I know you will be, I'll send you a drawing my grandson did). Producing only the finest whisky using the finest local water and the finest local ingredients it really is the finest thing to invest in. Perhaps you might like to join a small and unfortunate group of founder investors by sending me all the subscriptions you've received for your Review, in return for which you will get the promise of being able to buy an absurdly overpriced case of indifferent whisky should the day come when we actually build the place and start distilling without managing to blow it up. Yes Marcel, an offer you can't really refuse and so much better for all concerned than pursuing your current doomed course.

Yours aye,
John Haydock

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