

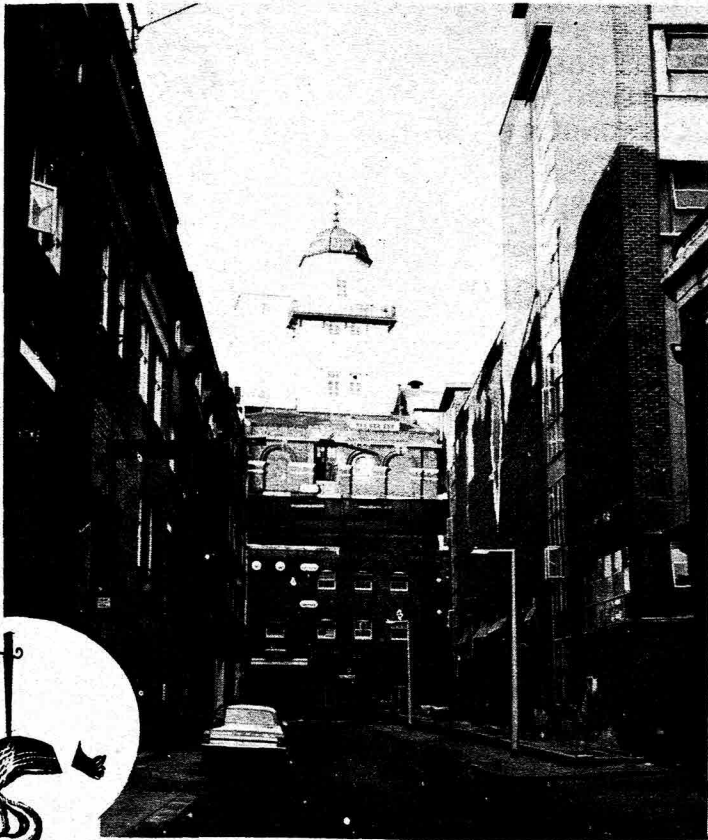
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THE LONDON DRINKER

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Produced by the London branches of the Campaign for Real Ale Ltd



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LONDON DRINKER

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Towards a drinkers charter

by LAURIE BISHOP

THERE SEEMS to be a tendency for the media to highlight the plight of the brewer and the publican in the current depressed economic climate. Brewers complain of the high cost of borrowing and the increased difficulty of obtaining raw materials at a reasonable price. Publicans blame the exorbitant prices charged by the brewers and also the reduced volume of drink being bought by the drinking public.

I have noticed that both these sets of people have managed to complain most vociferously about their financial plights but that they have succeeded in ignoring the person at the end of the chain: the drinker. CAMRA has always purported to be the only organisation in this country set up to speak for the beer drinker and this is what I would like to do over the prices being charged by pubs.

The brewers do not seem to be doing too badly. Despite the recession, their profits continue to increase (and most sections of industry are happy to make any sort of profit at the moment, not to mention a bigger one than last year!) and the exceptions can be easily explained away. The bigger breweries tend to make small profits because they are less efficient, some being worse than others. The smaller breweries, particularly those in areas of high competition (notably the Midlands and Greater Manchester) are in general doing quite nicely.

The licensees are also managing to make a living quite well at the moment. No-one is denying the extra strain that many licensees must be under now. But this is true of the vast majority of the population of the country and there is no reason to suggest that licensees should be in any way exempt from restrictions placed upon the rest of society. The

root cause of the problem lies in the policies of the present government. This is not to say that those policies are necessarily wrong, but that it is patently obvious that they are having a stated effect.

Reasons for the relative inefficiency of big brewers have been stated many times before but the obvious ones are the folly of transporting vast amounts of water (beer is 96% water) about the country (eg. Charrington IPA from Birmingham, Whitbread Tusker from Faversham, Courage Directors from Bristol soon, Ind Coope Burton Ale from Luton), the current dislike of remote monolithic firms and, most obvious of all, the recurring strikes. There is a free house near where I work which sold Courage Directors for some time. Recently, the landlord got fed up with Courage's inability to supply beer on time and stopped taking it, substituting Brakspear's Special instead. Increased turnover due to this popular beer selling well has enabled the landlord to install another handpump to add still further to his range of beers.

There are many other examples up and down the country. The shame is that it is only the free trade that can do this. The tied-trade licensee cannot switch to another brewery's products with such abandon. CAMRA has suggested that this should be made easier and indeed the last Labour government seemed at one stage to be quite keen on the idea. Unfortunately, the Conservatives won the General Election.

Young's relatively (for them) poor financial results have been partly attributed by their Chairman to the greed of certain tenants who charged over the odds for beer,

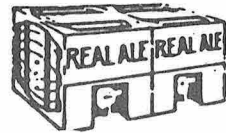
thus reducing turnover and profit to the brewery. This may well be the case and it is heartening to see a brewery complaining about high pub prices, even if they are primarily concerned about their own profits.

At least they realise that the two are related. Unfortunately, Young's line is not followed by other breweries. There is a Courage pub near where I work (Sorry, Courage, but you really do do some very silly and anti-social things at times) where I overheard the guvnr saying that he would have to put the price of beer up again because he needed more money to pay his petrol bills. This landlord seems to buy a new Volvo every year. Whilst this sad episode is not directly Courage's responsibility it does show the attitude of at least one of their tenants.

Drinkers can expect no support from government legislation at the moment as the attitude seems to be that competition will stabilise prices. Everyone of course knows that is not the case. It is none of

my business to say it but the government has a vested interest in keeping the price of alcohol high as it means it gets more revenue from VAT and Excise duty. What is needed in this country is greater control over the brewers. There is no excuse for a system where brewers are allowed to get away with murder and milk the drinker of his money. Now people may well say that the worker does not have to work for so long to earn the price of a pint as he did thirty years ago. But beer is much weaker than it was thirty years ago. Brewers have reduced the variety of beers available to the drinker and spent millions of pounds pushing keg beers and weak imitation lagers. The only way the drinker can combat this is by making his presence felt in whatever responsible way he chooses. As CAMRA purports to represent the beer drinker (and this is where I came in) that would seem to be a good place to start. Other ways are by complaining to your local, to the Breweries, to the Brewer's Society and to government, local and national. Certainly 'London Drinker' would be interested in your comments.

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