

# The RARE BEER CLUB

## OLDE SUFFOLK

During his long and illustrious career, Beer Hunter Michael Jackson wrote in great detail about the ales of his homeland, produced by the historic breweries of the U.K. and consumed in "locals" by loyal fans. Michael's own local was the cozy and friendly Andover Arms on Aldensley Rd. in the London neighborhood of Hammersmith - be sure to enjoy a pint there and raise a glass to Michael if you are ever in the area.

One of the classic specialty styles that Michael genuinely appreciated, and worried about its possible endangerment, was Old Ale, which was actually associated with West Flanders in Belgium and the dark, complex, fruity, almost wine-like qualities of Rodenbach. Olde Suffolk was first featured some 8 years ago in his original Real Beer Tour Club as the quintessential surviving example of the style. Still a world classic today, it deserves no less than the words he wrote back then to describe it.



**O**lde Suffolk is one of Britain's most unusual ales, and a winter classic. It is England's last example of an ale made by the blending of old and young beers. The "old" component is aged in wooden tuns, and is the only beer in Britain still to employ that method. The technique of aging and blending, to achieve an equilibrium of malty sweetness and acidity was typical in the late 1700s and 1800s, but gradually vanished in the 1900s. Latterly, it was used in the production of strongish "stock" ales.

The two brews from which Olde Suffolk is blended are not sold as products in their own right, though many British drinkers would love to taste them. I have sampled both, in the cellars of the brewery. One is known in the brewery as

### Tasting note:

Oaky, winey, chocolatey, sweet-and-sour, with notes of passion fruit.

### Food Pairing:

This beer has been served at dinners of the local brewers' guild with pickled herrings. I like it with blue cheese, especially English Stilton. In the area where it is made, it is used by a local baker in his Christmas puddings.

BPA which is said to stand for Best Pale Ale, though the beer has quite a One is known in the brewery as BPA - which is said to stand for Best Pale Ale, though the beer has quite a full colour by today's standards. BPA is a mildtasting malty ale of 4.0 per cent alcohol by weight, 5.0 by volume. The other ale is known as 5x (from the days before widespread literacy, when crosses or other symbols were carved or branded on to wooden casks to indicate ascending strength). The 5x has 9.6 by weight; often packed with flavour) this entitles the beer to be known as Strong Suffolk. There are yet stronger English Old Ales, but few more complex in flavour. The region of production is about an hour from London, still in the south of England, but in an area of rural flatlands that bulge to the east, their coastline often eroded by the sea. This countryside, known as East Anglia, embraces several counties: the rural parts of Essex; Suffolk and Norfolk; Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire. East Anglia is England's biggest growing region for malting barley. The brewery is in the oddly-named town of Bury St Edmunds, in Suffolk. Edmund was the king of a nation called Anglia (from which the word "England" originates). He was murdered by Viking raiders in AD 870, and was buried at the site of what became a powerful abbey. When Henry VIII consolidated his power by "dissolving" the abbeys in the 1500s,



*"British beer is an acquired taste, but so are oysters, steak tartar, or marron glace. Before British beer can be enjoyed, experience is required, but the same could be said for sex. In both cases, mistakes are inevitably made, but the triumphs make the disasters worthwhile."*

Michael Jackson

[www.beerhunter.com/documents/19133-000646.html](http://www.beerhunter.com/documents/19133-000646.html)

the monks of St Edmunds hid in tunnels that probably gave rise to the present brewery cellars. The brewery is next door to the home of the last abbot. The brewery dates from at least the 1700s. It was acquired by a brewer named Greene, with a partner, some time after 1799. It subsequently became known as Greene King. In more recent times, sons of the family have included a famously liberal governor of the BBC, and the novelist Graham Greene, who put in a mash on his 80th birthday. Despite its traditions, Greene King is a dynamic and ambitious enterprise. A decade or so ago, it was regarded as a small brewery. Today, it is, by British standards, at the very least middle-sized.

# BURY ST. EDMUND, SUFFOLK, UK

**B**ury St. Edmunds is the county town of West Suffolk. It is the only cathedral town in the county and has a population of around 33,000. Bury St. Edmunds is 15 miles from the horse racing town of Newmarket and 27 miles from the University City of Cambridge. Its motto, "Shrine of a King, Cradle of the Law" sums up its history, its traditions and its outlook. A Saxon settlement known as Beodricsworth already existed on the site of what was to become Bury St. Edmunds, when in A.D. 630, Sigebert, King of the East Angles, endowed a monastery there. Toward the end of the eighth century King Offa of Mercia ruled East Anglia. When his only son took to the religious life, he was obliged to look elsewhere for a possible successor. He did not wish the new peace of his kingdom to be destroyed by faction at his death. During his travels in Europe, Offa met Prince Edmund at the court of his cousin Alkmund, King of Saxony. Struck by the youth's noble nature and Christian piety he chose him as his successor before proceeding on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. In 855, worn out by his travels, Offa died, assured that his choice for the succession was a sound one. When the young Saxon landed at Hunstanton later that year crowds of his new subjects lined the way to see him. On Christmas Day, A.D. 856, Edmund was crowned, being then fifteen years old. He had studied his royal duties under Bishop Humbert of Elmham and for the next ten years strove to establish the rule of Christian law in his kingdom, setting a great example to his people by his own wise, orderly and virtuous life. The treachery of a banished



offender, guilty of murder, brought the Danes down upon the shores of East Anglia. Berne, a hunter, set adrift at sea as a punishment for his crime, was washed up on the shores of Denmark. There he told rulers that King Edmund had had their father Lothroc put to death, though it was this particular murder of which he himself had been guilty. The marauding Danes, primed by the treacherous Berne, landed in the north and, when spring came, descended upon East Anglia, burning, destroying and killing. The saintly king, now twenty-five and in the heyday of young manhood, hoped that if he gave himself up to the marauders they would spare his people. Accordingly he and Bishop Humbert surrendered themselves to the enemy. Finding that they wished to force him to abjure his religion, Edmund refused. Thereupon he suffered the same martyrdom as St. Sebastian, for he was tied to a tree and shot through and through with arrows. This occurred at Hoxne, where the brave king died protesting to the end his Christian faith. Most of his subjects had been

hiding in the woods to save themselves from the fierce Danes, and many of them witnessed the awful scene. Finally the enemy warriors struck off King Edmund's head and tossed it into the deep woodland. Then they killed the faithful Bishop Humbert. After some days, when the Danes had gone, the people sought the bodies of the victims and were distressed because they could not find the head of Edmund. But, in the end, it was found through the baying of an old grey wolf who seemed to be guarding it. Eventually the place where the martyred king was buried was adorned with offerings and became a shrine, much visited. Then a stately Abbey was founded to honour his memory and became a great place of pilgrimage, known as Bury St. Edmunds, famous throughout Europe. In 1214 it is known that Magnates from East Anglia and the Eastern Midlands assembled in Bury St Edmunds in the Abbey Church to pledge agreement to accept the 'Charter of Liberties.' This, now known as 'The Magna Carta,' was a charter conceded by King John to a group of barons to agree on peace. Ten years later there was a Revised Version, this charter being issued in the name of his son King Henry III. Both versions hold a clause with the following passage: "No free man shall be taken (i.e. arrested) or imprisoned or diseased or outlawed or in anyway destroyed, nor will we move against him nor send (our agents) against him, except by the lawful judgement of his peers or by the law of the land." (1215, clause 39 .1225 clause 29. Magna Carta.)

Source: Edited from various internet sites including [bury.finder.co.uk](http://bury.finder.co.uk).

Michael Jackson, the world's leading beer critic according to the *Wall Street Journal*—and author of numerous best-selling books on the subject—was the original founder of this unique club, which is also extremely popular with wine lovers.

Members receive surprisingly sophisticated beers that are often aged in oak, or fermented like Champagne, and delivered in 750 ml cork-finished bottles. These are beers that are intended to be

*The*  
**RARE BEER CLUB**

paired with fine foods, and accorded the same respect as great wine. Obviously not for every beer drinker, they are extremely complex with a depth of character that is unheard of in the traditional beer-

drinking world. The selections for this club come from all over the globe with the emphasis on the countries that make the world's most amazing beers. Members are provided with monthly tasting notes on each beer, and an overview of recommended food pairings.

A standard membership consists of six 750 ml. bottles per month (or six 500 ml. bottles) at a cost of \$75 per month (plus shipping and local tax).

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# THE PERFECT PINT FOR A CHILLY NIGHT

*Michael Jackson explores the cellars of Suffolk in search of the secrets that make winter ales a seasonal special*

**W**hile more predictable drinkers were swishing their beaujolais nouveau, I was assessing the new season's winter ale. Almost all brewing nations have beers made either mainly or exclusively for this time of year and Britain has at least 75, from Young's Winter Warmer (London) to Plympton Cockle-Roaster (Devon) to the less cosy-sounding Skull-Splitter (Orkney). Most have been released in the last week or so, and many are available only on draught in their own corners of the country. This year I decided to begin the season with one from the heart of the beer-growing region.

The new season's barley of East Anglia has now been turned into malt and is ready to be spiced with the hop crop of Kent, Hereford and Worcester. To taste the result I headed for East Anglia, to Bury St. Edmunds, where the railway station stands next to a malting and there are two more in the town, one as part of the Greene King brewery.

It is the richness of the malt, rather than the floweriness of the hop, that characterises winter ales. These things are meant to be sustaining rather than refreshing.

Greene King's entrant, called simply Winter Ale, is beautifully malty with an almost chocolate richness. It is smooth but not cloying and, like most winter brews, it has a warming belt of alcohol (just under 6 per cent by volume).

It is unusual that it is made by blending. One ingredient is St. Edmund (6.3 per cent), the paler, drier strong ale that Graham Greene ceremonially brewed when, on his eightieth birthday, he visited the family firm. This literary brew is available "straight" as a bottled beer.

The other two ingredients are beers that the brewery effectively keeps a secret: it simply does not sell them as beers in their own right, though both are delicious. To find these beers in their unblended form, it is necessary to visit the brewer and be led through cellars and tunnels that were probably first excavated as monks' hiding places

during the Reformation (the brewery is next door to the home of the last abbot).

In the interests of a greater understanding and appreciation of Winter Ale, I went exploring. One of the "secret" beers, known within the brewery as BPA (Best Pale Ale), would be interesting enough in its own right. It is a strongish (about 5 per cent), mild-tasting malty ale, and not really pale at all. The other "secret beer", an extra-strong (12 per cent) brew known simply as 5x, is a classic.

Apart from its appearance disguised within the Winter Ale, the 5x has another role for which it is groomed long and hard.

Most British styles of ale mature for perhaps a week -- or, at the most, two -- in the brewery's cellar. Any beer with Old in its name should spend a little longer. Old ale is a style, originally brewed at the end of the winter and laid down like a provision. Old and winter ales are overlapping traditions. Before refrigeration, wild yeasts made brewing impossible in summer. The last of the "provision" or "stock" ales would then be drained when winter returned or blended into the new season's beers.

The 5x stays in maturation for more than a year and usually for longer. The current batch has been five years in maturation. Between one and three years of this period is spent in wood. I know of no other beer made this way in Britain. The use of wood for maturation has long been abandoned by most of the world's brewers, and the eccentric 5x lives in its own mansard-roofed cellar and attic, well away from the rest of Greene King's beers.

The beer is matured in two ceiling-high wooden tuns of Victorian vintage. They are kept in shape by a master cooper who still works for Greene King (the brewery has long ceased to use wooden casks, and the cooper spends most of his time in the company's wine and spirit department).

The tuns are topped with what looks like sand and gravel but is, so I was told, Suffolk marl (soil consisting of clay and lime). Occasionally a brewery worker climbs a wooden staircase and a

ladder to reach the top of the tuns and rake the marl. This mysterious material is meant to filter out any wild yeasts or other microflora in the air.

The head brewer, Alistair Heeley, is openly superstitious about the wild organisms that can lead astray a fermented product. Like an actor refusing to say "Macbeth", Mr. Heeley declines, within the walls of the brewery, to utter the name of one especially haunting example.

Despite this, he recognises that all beer was once made in this apparently perilous way and prefers to enjoy living dangerously with what he terms "the flora and fauna" in the 5x tuns.

The beer undoubtedly develops idiosyncrasies while it is in the wood. In its aroma it perhaps has hints of the "horse blanket" or straw-like character found in some old ales, and a dash of apple. In its palate is a depth of fruitiness, a cake-like quality and hints of iron worthy of a Cheval Blanc.

If your palate enjoys a challenge, look out for 5x in its second role. It is blended with the BPA to make a highly distinctive, year-round bottled ale called Strong Suffolk (6 per cent) that can be found outside East Anglia in specialist beer shops at a little under £1 a bottle, which is not bad for the beer world's answer to a Cheval Blanc. (It even has a horse on the label -- a Suffolk Punch.)

Strong Suffolk is a brew of such complexity as to be extraordinarily versatile. At dinners of the Brewers' Guild it has been served with East Anglian pickled herrings (a similar beer made in Belgium is typically served with shrimps); I like it with Stilton cheese, and AJ Cole, a bakery in Saffron Walden, puts it in Christmas puddings.

There's a dilemma; if I have my Christmas pudding with Strong Suffolk, that means depositing the usual Old Peculiar from the plum duff.

I suppose I could always leave a bottle of Yorkshire's famous Old Ale as a winter warmer for Santa when he calls.

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