

CAMRA'S

101

BEER

DAYS OUT



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CAMRA
BOOKS

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Introducing the South East

Like the lacing down a just-drunk pint glass of fine ale, beer has left its mark across South East England. Brewing is part of the region's rich history.

In Faversham in Kent there is evidence of brewing as long ago as the 12th century. The town is still home to the country's oldest brewing company Shepherd Neame. In addition, much of the county is dominated by the growing and use of hops, a plant first brought to this country at the beginning of the 15th century by traders from Flanders. Shunned, snubbed and even made illegal by some towns it took a hundred years for the antiseptic and aromatic qualities of hops to be widely accepted. English ale had changed for ever: the hop became a key ingredient of beer.

Over time, of course, the hop industry has changed. It was once a massive force in the area, employing thousands of people, particularly at harvest time, but changing tastes and the end of Britain's pre-eminence as a manufacturing nation saw a massive decline in beer production. The country's workforce was no longer ending each working day with pints of sweet beer, their refreshing liquid bread. Hop gardens closed, but today many have new uses as museums and leisure parks and are a celebration of brewing heritage and the vibrant communities the industry supported. And, it is an inspiration to learn that today's generation of hop growers are not living in the past, but are looking for new varieties to satisfy the demand for flavoursome, distinctive ales.

In the pretty Hampshire town of Ringwood there is a brewery which was once at the forefront of a real ale



Radcliffe Camera, Oxford

revolution. Founded in the late 1970s it was a precursor for today's boom in microbreweries. If the handful of owners of breweries such as Ringwood had not campaigned so effectively for tax breaks for smaller producers, most of the new generation of innovative microbrewers would not be in business.

Be it a day at the races at Ascot, bonfire night in Lewes, Sussex, sitting next to members of the Sealed Knot society in Oxfordshire or even watching a tense game of marbles under the flight path of a plane from Gatwick airport, the South East also exemplifies the role pubs and beer play in our evolving communities and culture. We should celebrate and enjoy it.



Shepherd Neame beer and food evening



Shepherd Neame – a story brewing for more than 300 years

Faversham has a fine town square, a creek leading to the sea and the largest number of listed medieval buildings in the country – there are more than 50 of them. It is famous in history for making gunpowder, bricks and beer. The first indications of brewing in Faversham date back to 1147, when the town's (now long-gone) great abbey was founded. Such was the abundance of barley and water many brewhouses set up in the area. Tradition has it that Shepherd Neame dates back to 1698, perhaps having moved to its current spot from

another site in the town, making it Britain's oldest brewer. It is unclear when the family-owned company first used the name Shepherd Neame: the first recorded appearance of the name is in an advertisement, which appears in the *Kentish Gazette* in 1865, but while the Shepherds are no longer with us, the Neames are still involved with the company. It is this story and others that are told in the [Shepherd Neame](#) visitor centre, which is inside a beautifully restored medieval hall house.

The tour of the brewery takes about 2 hours and leads people behind the scenes of the working brewer. It is proving to be very popular as more than 25,000 people go on the tour annually. Visitors get to see the age-old traditional mash tuns and taste the water used for brewing that comes from the brewery's own well. There is malted barley to be crunched and aromatic Kentish hops for rubbing and smelling. A magnificent stained glass window in the brewery shows traditional scenes associated with beer making such as hop picking in Kent. The tour also includes the vaults, once used as a large wine and spirit store. It now features an impressive collection of brewery delivery vehicles, including an old Thorneycroft dray, old pub signs, hop picking equipment and an old cooper's workshop. The tour ends with a tasting of the company's famed hoppy beers. As well as guided tours and tastings there are themed beer and food evenings, murder mysteries, ale samplers' suppers, father's day lunches and even Halloween ghost tours.

Over the first weekend of September the town hosts a Hop Festival, which takes place in the streets outside the brewery. Faversham is also famed for its annual Classic Car Show, held each May. Petrolheads can enjoy a weekend of vintage bus displays and rides, hundreds of classic cars and motorcycles, and even a 1960s steam train.

Visitor information:**Shepherd Neame**

17 Court Street, Faversham, Kent,
ME13 7AX
01795 542016
www.shepherdneame.co.uk
Tours of the brewery and tickets for
events must be booked in advance

Getting there and away: Faversham
rail station is 10 minutes' walk from
Shepherd Neame brewery.



A Kentish tradition – the Faversham Hop Festival

Something else Faversham is famous for is its raucous **Hop Festival**, held on the first weekend of September, which spills

out over the town's streets and pubs. The whole town seemingly plays host to this traditional celebration, centred on the medieval town square and surrounding streets. The two-day festival is a vibrant gala in honour of beer and its natural roots, of the hop harvest and of the heyday of hop picking, when thousands of Londoners came down to the Kentish hop gardens every September for a so-called country holiday with pay. Life in London must have been pretty tough if people found picking hops a holiday! Many families returned to the same farms, generation after generation, to be joined by every available local worker to form the largest seasonal agricultural workforce this country has ever seen.

The festival provides a link between one of the natural raw materials that makes beer and the pubs where people drink it. Street corners and pavements become theatres for dance groups and musicians. Vendors sell bines of hops and many people wear garlands of hop cones. Pub gardens become rock gardens and crowds move from pub to pub to hear their favourite bands or look



Colourful parade at the Faversham Hop Festival