

~ THE WOODCOCK & MR. JAS. THORNYCROFT ~

In 1967, a section of the River Derwent, in County Durham, was stopped by a dam and the land stretching three miles above it was flooded. There were only six buildings submerged in the project: a deserted farm along with its byre, dairy and granary, an equally derelict chapel of the Wesleyan persuasion, and a low shaw or sheep-shelter. Each had been built of local stone, an obligingly splittable shale that also makes up the walls that typify the area to modern tourists.

In the great scheme of things, six buildings seems no great loss; excepting that the farm had also formerly been a tiny pub called "The Woodcock," and was famous up and down dale for its old-fashioned beer. It was never sold nor served except in the little kitchen-cum-parlour at the farm. Not a soul sat there either whose name wasn't familiar to James; every one of the customers lived or worked within five miles. It amounted to no more than thirty people in total. But those thirty people sat and drank ale one night or another every week and supplemented the farm income sufficiently to make the brewing worthwhile. So struck by the quality of the beer were those regulars that for a generation after its demise, the passing of the little pub in the dale was lamented.

The beer didn't even have a name. Quizzed on the great ale in later years, 81-year-old Martin Mass said he remembered the taste perfectly but doesn't remember it having a name.

"It was just beer, man," he said, as if to ask its name was an affront to its brewer.

"Old ale," he told the reporter from the Newcastle Evening Chronicle in 1992 after a good deal of coaxing. "Old-fashioned ale. You didn't need more than two pints, you didn't want more. Two was very sufficient. You can't get it anywhere these days." Martin was the last of the Woodcock regulars and he went to his reward just weeks after the interview.

The reporter — a friend of mine since childhood — never managed to put together enough information to string a story line together and his notes sat in his desk until he retired last year. Knowing that I have a somewhat keen interest in beer making, he passed along his notes to me and I have since complimented them with an extraordinary find that makes this work possible. On a hunch, I contacted an elderly lady by the name of Parsons who lives in the village of Edmundbyers; hard across the reservoir from where the Woodcock would have stood. Mrs. Parsons had placed an obituary in the local paper announcing the passing of her sister Peggy Mason ... *nee Thornycroft* it said in the obituary) and I wondered if they were related. Well, they were. Old James was uncle to the two sisters, though neither had ever met him. What Mrs. Parsons did have though, was a little book she had found among her father's things when he had died in 1956. And the little book contains a collection of esoteric notes on cow-keeping, cheese manufacture, stone wall repair and on beer making, including, I believe, the original recipe for the farmhouse old-fashioned ale beloved of those 30 long dead devotees of the Woodcock.

In his flowing hand, in a red-hue that looks more like elderberry juice than ink, James has recorded a good deal of brewing lore that will allow the resurrection of not just one, but several fine old ales and barley wines, although nowhere does it mention them by those names. Nor do they have a cute 'brand' name like Thornycroft's Sparkling Ale, nor even stylistic denominations such as Bitter or Mild. Like so many of his generation, James took for granted that whomever used his notes (if indeed they were ever intended for any other than himself) would be versed in the craft and perfectly familiar with standard quantities, mashing temperatures, cellarmanship, gyling and such. If you are not, fear not, for that information has been fleshed out and modernised.

Thou oft has made my friends my foes
And often made me pawn my clothes;
But since thou art so nigh my nose,
Come up, my friend, and down he goes,
For 'tis O, good old ale, thou art my darling
And my job both night and morning.

from Fine Old Ales & Barley Wine