

BROTHERS IN ARMS

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FINE meets Simon Berry, the seventh generation of his family to represent the distinguished and historic London wine merchants Berry Bros & Rudd

Known as “clubland” because of the many private clubs in the area, the St James’s district of London is the spiritual home of the English gentleman. He buys his shirts and socks at Turnbull & Asser in Jermyn Street, then strolls round the corner to Truefitt & Hill for his shaving brush and foam. All that promenading means that a new pair of bespoke shoes must be purchased at John Lobb Ltd.

Having lunched at The Carlton Club, where those of a conservative nature can find like-minded company, our English gentleman now turns his thoughts to that evening’s dinner party. The cigars come from James J. Fox, of course. And the wine? Well, since he is on the east side of St James’s Street he may as well wander down to No. 3 at the bottom end of this ancient thoroughfare, where an old family-owned wine merchant in an even older building has become an international brand.

“Her corn, and wine, and oil”

After the fire that destroyed the Palace of Whitehall in 1698, the Royal Court shifted west to St James’s Palace, where it is still formally based, though the Queen resides and entertains at Buckingham Palace. In the seventeenth century, the only major buildings at the southern end of St James’s Street were the palace and another Tudor building that has since been identified as Henry VIII’s tennis court.

In the year of the fire, the Widow Bourne established a grocer’s shop at No. 3 St James’s Street, where the tennis court had been. “We don’t know very much about her”, explains

current Berry Bros & Rudd Chairman Simon Berry, who is the seventh generation of his family to head the company. “We don’t know what her Christian name was, how old she was or anything about Mr Bourne – apart from that he was dead.” The shop did not have a proper business name at that time but there was a coffee mill sign outside, thus it became known as Widow Bourne’s shop “at the sign of the coffee mill”. The sign still hangs outside No. 3.

The Widow’s daughter married William Pickering, who rebuilt No. 3 and the houses behind it in the courtyard subsequently called Pickering Place. The marriage produced two sons, William Junior and John, neither of whom produced an heir. After the death of John in 1754, William invited his distant relative John Clarke to become a partner in the firm. Clarke’s daughter Mary had married an Exeter wine merchant called John Berry. Although only an infant, their son George was designated heir to The Coffee Mill by John Clarke. George began working in London at the age of 16, though it was not until 1810 that No. 3 became “Berry’s” in place of The Coffee Mill. In 1854, his sons George Junior and Henry – the eponymous “Berry Brothers” – succeeded George upon his death.

Rudd complexion

Over 220 years after the Widow Bourne had established The Coffee Mill at No. 3, Berry Brothers acquired a junior partner. Hugh Rudd came from a Norwich family of wine merchants and was recruited for his expert knowledge of German wines. He was “the

Jasper Morris of his day, the country’s leading expert on the most fashionable wines, which at that time were German,” according to Simon. The appointment of Rudd was very timely: in 1921, outstanding wines were made in Germany and Berry Brothers & Rudd was ideally positioned to buy perspicaciously.

The business prospered between the wars and in 1931 a new lease for No. 3 was signed by its then owner Sir Charles Bunbury. He was a descendant of Sir Thomas Hanmer, a renowned Shakespeare editor and former Speaker of the House of Commons, with whom the Widow Bourne had signed her agreement. The war years, though, were difficult for Berry Bros: from 1936 to 1949 four members of the Berry and Rudd families died. Because of the rule laid down by his ancestors that only one member of each branch of the family was allowed to work at Berrys, Anthony Berry was destined not to work in the family firm. But when his elder brother George was killed in North Africa in 1941 he was welcomed into the business and served as chairman from 1965 to 1985.

The company has prospered again in recent years. According to The Sunday Times Rich List 2009, the extravagant City bonuses of 2007 and the consequent brisk trade at BBR pushed the Rudd family’s wealth to over £80 million. In 2008, tougher trading conditions wiped £20 million from the value of the Rudds’ shareholding. John Rudd (and his family) remains the largest individual shareholder at Berry Bros & Rudd. Hugh’s granddaughter Elizabeth is today Deputy Chairman.



Anthony's son Simon Berry started working for the company in 1977 after two years in France with various wine producers, including Moët & Chandon, Maison Michel Chapoutier and Château Mouton Rothschild. In 1987, he became Marketing Director. A board member since 1994, he was made Deputy Chairman in 2002 before becoming Chairman in 2005.

“The feast was done, the red wine circling fast”

Berry's has long had famous clients: the list of names in its books is virtually a socio-political history of England.

The giant scales, used originally to weigh bags of tea and coffee, have hosted many famous patrons over the years. In the Regency era of early nineteenth century England, there was a fashion for men to wear very tight clothes, à la Beau Brummel, the dandy who allegedly insisted on cleaning his Hessian boots in Champagne. There were no bathroom scales in those days, so the man about town had to go to No. 3 to be weighed.

Simon Berry admits that there are better records of people's weights than of what they actually bought, because many records were destroyed during the War: “We've no idea what Byron, Pitt the Younger, Warren Hastings or the Duke of York bought from us but we can tell you what they weighed on a particular date!” The earliest record of a customer's weight dates from 1765.

The poet Lord Byron was obsessed by his weight and went often to No. 3's scales for

an assessment. Shortly before the publication of his poem “Childe Harold's Pilgrimage” in March 1812, Byron had been staying at No. 8 St James's Street, on the site of the current Lobb shoes shop, five doors up from Berry's. Byron's publisher John Murray was nearby in Albemarle Street. Upon publication, as Byron himself put it, “I awoke one morning and found myself famous.”

Napoleon III became friends with the first George Berry when they found themselves together in the company of special constables at about the time of the threat of Chartist Riots in 1848. Napoleon used to hide in the cellars at No. 3: “I'm not sure how effective it was as a hiding place,” ponders Simon, “because he used to give interviews to the London Evening Standard in the cellars. It's not exactly high espionage but he became part of the folklore of the company.”

“His goblets brimm'd with every costly wine”

Berry's is unsure whether it sold wine to George III but it did sell to the Prince Regent and George III's other sons, “so we say that we have been selling wine to the Royal Family since the reign of George III”, insists Simon. Queen Victoria bought wine from Berrys and had a large cellar, filled mainly with Hock, whose shortened name she created, being unable to pronounce “Hochheimer”.

Berry's claim to being the UK's or even the world's oldest wine merchant “depends on what mood we're in. If we say we're the

oldest wine merchants in the world that would exclude wine estates. There are some German estates that have been around since the 12th century”, Simon explains.

Chalié Richards claims to be the UK's oldest wine merchant, with records that show them to be selling wine in 1700. But descendants of the founding family are no longer involved there, whereas BBR – uniquely – has been a family business based in one building for over 300 years. “I don't know of a wine merchant that was founded in 1698 that is still going”, maintains Simon, “but in 1698 we didn't sell wine, or at least there is no record of it. The Berrys in Exeter, however, were selling wine at that time. It wasn't a terribly respectable trade in those days, though.”

“Her cutty sark, o' Paisley harn”

“Thank God it was there,” says Simon of his company's Cutty Sark whisky brand, which was created by his grandfather Francis. “It kept us independent. For a long time it was 90 per cent of the turnover and 105 per cent of the profit”, he admits. “Being a wine merchant in those days was deeply unprofitable. It stopped us having to look overseas for more wine business. It was so profitable that we didn't have to sell much wine.”

The brand was established in time for the end of Prohibition and Berry's was able to reap the benefits. The Cutty Sark brand became enormously lucrative and by the 1970s it was the largest selling whisky – the

largest selling spirit, indeed – in the USA. Its name, broad Scots for “short shirt”, is taken from Robert Burns’s poem “Tam O’Shanter”: “Her cutty sark, o’ Paisley harn,” The Scottish artist James McBeay designed the label.

Berry’s other major brand is The King’s Ginger Liqueur, which Simon Berry calls “central heating for adults! It does warm you up. It’s a good drink with a good story behind it.” In 1906, King Edward VII was advised by his doctor to prevent colds by drinking a “warming cordial” after being out in his new “horseless carriage”, or car. So Berrys created a ginger-based drink for him, which was repackaged in 2009: “We’re going to take it out to the world! It’s very good served on ice. Cyril Ray used to pour it over vanilla ice cream. And it’s perfect for those long Scandinavian nights.”

This very English liqueur is actually made in Holland at Bols; the ginger comes from Papua New Guinea. Simon arrived in Amsterdam expecting to find tanks everywhere but instead saw one man breaking eggs and pouring the yolks into a huge bowl. “Where’s the production director?” he asked. “That is the production director,” he was told.

Terminal velocity

The expansion of the wine part of the business came about because of an admission that the company could not rely solely on the profits of Cutty Sark. The opening of the concession store at Heathrow’s Terminal 3 in 1994 led to a realisation that the Berry’s brand was actually “more than just an old wine merchant at the bottom of St James’s Street”, as Simon puts it.

Berrys and the British Airports Authority thought that they would be selling wine mostly to UK residents flying out of the airport who would be buying gifts for business meetings and so on. But it turned out that most of the revenue was from non-UK residents buying wines that were unobtainable or less expensive than in their home country. In the early days of the Heathrow store, Scandinavians were the best customers. A survey by Scandinavian Airlines (SAS) revealed that Scandinavians preferred to fly with them rather than British Airways because they were able to purchase wine at Terminal 3.

Simon Berry is still a member of the Swedish Chamber of Commerce and a Scandinavian shop was considered but eventually ruled out because of the state monopolies that control the sale of alcohol across Scandinavia. “If it was a simple world, we’d be there by now,” rues Simon, “but it’s

not a simple world and certainly not where alcohol is concerned. People want to tax it or make it illegal.”

The Heathrow store was closed in May 2006 and the Dublin shop in April 2009, both victims of expensive running costs. Berry’s toyed with the idea of a US store for years and Simon has “not crossed it out completely.” Hong Kong, however, is less legislated than Scandinavia, so a store was established there in 2003, with a second retail outlet opened in March 2010.

A Berry Bros presence has also been established in Tokyo. This is not a retail outlet as such but “how a wine merchant should start. You need an office and a dining room,” insists Simon. Finding a suitable retail address in Tokyo can be difficult and costly: “It’s no good just landing from London and assuming that the world will flock to us. Relationships in Japan have to be built up over a very long time. It’s all about trust and forging the



relationship effectively. You can’t rush it. But one of the great things about Japan is that if you are selling wine to the older generation, the younger generation will come through. They think, ‘if it was good enough for my father and grandfather, then it is good enough for me.’ It is nonsense to worry about an ageing client base in Japan.” Education is “incredibly important” in Japan, reckons Simon, but “they don’t understand dusty old bottles with great provenance at all.”

Basingstoke boys

The “heritage” of BBR is an important factor in its ongoing success, though nowadays its HQ is actually in unglamorous Basingstoke rather than regal St James’s: “You need the buying team there because that is where the wine is stored. And if the buying team is there, you need the sales team there. Part of the business is the resale of our customers’ wines, which are stored there. You can’t be scattered in too many places.”

Simon’s cousin Christopher Berry Green established the Basingstoke warehouse in 1968. Prior to that there were eight cellars scattered across London. Berry Green decided that it would be more efficient to have a proper warehouse facility where wines could be looked after properly and stored on behalf of customers, “so we built a warehouse on another roundabout in Basingstoke.”

In February 2009, Simon Berry briefly became a TV star when the BBC4 documentary *The Firm* was broadcast as one of three programmes on the wine trade. It presented a snapshot of Berry Bros & Rudd, set against the backdrop of the then emerging financial crisis (the film was made in January-April 2008).

Most of the film showed Simon Staples and Jasper Morris – Berry’s Bordeaux and Burgundy buyers respectively – at work and play, though sometimes it was hard to tell the difference between office hours and after hours. Berry’s continues to be a major player in the global fine wine trade: Staples’ purchasing budget for the 2007 Bordeaux campaign was £60 million; in any given vintage he is the world’s largest individual buyer of Bordeaux.

Back to the future

No. 3 is like a country manor house transplanted into the city. It is filled with old furniture, old photographs and even old telephones. All in all, it is a very civilised place in which to work or buy wine. But the gentlemanly, antique veneer is slightly misleading. In many ways, Berry Bros & Rudd remains a most traditional merchant. But a closer look reveals a company that is at the cutting edge of wine retail today.

Berry’s was one of the first wine merchants to embrace the Internet and launched its site in 1994. “We really believe in it,” asserts Simon, “it’s actually a very old fashioned way of selling wine because it provides information, which is what the wine trade is all about. It’s more than just a bottle on a shelf. One of the best things people can ever say to me is, ‘I waste so much time on your site.’ It presents the old-fashioned way of being a wine merchant in the most fabulous way.”

The printed list used to have to fit into the chairman’s waistcoat pocket. “What seems impossible now might be possible in the future,” ponders Simon. “If somebody had said to me 20 years ago that we would have a way of updating a list as often as you like, it won’t appear on paper at all and you can order from it, I would have thought they were mad.” ♦