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FRIENDS of WARMINSTER MALTINGS

ANOTHER SUMMER OF '76?

There is not a lot of news from the maltings this time, so we have to resort to that subject which the British discuss so eloquently when they have nothing else to say - we will talk about the weather. It's important to us at the maltings, we are working all the time with the ambient temperatures, and extremes of cold or heat, challenge the malting process.

The unseasonably warm spell of sunshine that has just visited us in the last week of February, has not only provided our farmer friends with an early opportunity to plant their spring barley crops (extending the growing season), but has also prompted much comparison with the weather pattern which led to the blistering summer of 1976. The very warm and dry summer of 1975, followed by a dry winter, and then above normal temperatures in February 1976, appear to be all too similar to the last 10 months.



It was hot, and very dry!

Records for 1976 tell us that temperatures that summer exceeded 30°C (81°F) for 16 consecutive days at Heathrow Airport between 23rd June and 8th July, and that to the immediate south and north of Warminster, temperatures peaked at over 35°C (95°F). If this sort of weather was to repeat itself this summer, it would raise two important questions for us:

- 1.) How would it impact on the quality of the barley crop?
- 2.) How would we manage the germination process on the floors as the growth pattern of the barley is accelerated by the warmth?

Traditionally, our maltings would stop work for the summer, and some of our maltsters would have found work on neighbouring farms, helping with the haymaking, followed by the harvest. The others would be deployed at the maltings with maintenance work, painting, and mending sacks.

Luckily, both Chris Garratt (MD) and myself remember 1976 well (I also have my diary!), so we are bracing ourselves. Regardless of any of those searing temperatures, our well water supply already appears threatened. So, we have just reminded ourselves of a great quotation from the late Denis Healey (former deputy leader of the former Labour Party): “Problems, if not to be solved, are to be survived!”

And we will, because one thing I do particularly remember about 1976, everyone, and I mean everyone, was very suntanned, and very happy!

ANOTHER CHALLENGE

We will all be aware of the ability of newspapers, politicians and pressure groups to forecast the apocalypse – nuclear power, acid rain, the ozone layer, mad cow disease, Frankenstein crops, and the millennium bug, to name some examples. Most of these forecasts are based on what is termed as pseudoscience, a selective extraction from scientific papers which exaggerates the conclusion they seek to promote. Newspapers are quick to report the findings, with overblown headlines, without waiting for these conclusions to be proved right or wrong.

There are three of these currently doing the rounds – insect extinction, glyphosate weed killer, and increased flooding. The second of these, glyphosate, has invaded our ‘in box’ at the maltings.

It all started 2 years ago when a report from Germany announced that traces of glyphosate had been detected in seven of the country’s favourite beers. It is now alleged this widely used herbicide has permeated its way into some of the world’s biggest beer brands, including Budweiser, Guinness, Heineken, and Stella Artois, albeit at micro levels well below those already established for human safety. Despite this, the Guardian newspaper was quick to react with the headline “Exposure to weed killing products increases the risk of cancer by 41%”.



Loads of money

A lot of the background to this is, of course, that there are vast sums of money at stake! Opportunistic lawyers are chasing glyphosate in the hope of tobacco style pay-outs, and already one court in America has, controversially, awarded \$289m dollars to the family of a school grounds keeper who died of a very rare cancer, non-Hodgkin lymphoma. The court was persuaded that his death was due to exposure to glyphosate. There are now another 9,300 (similar) cases waiting to be heard!

This is all despite there being studies from across the world, including the US Environment Protection Agency, the European Food Safety Authority, and the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, who have all failed to establish any risk of cancer from glyphosate.

All the same, some of our brewer customers are concerned. Is our barley, and therefore our malt, contaminated with glyphosate? Well, there is no reason why it should be, our contracted farmers do not use glyphosate (have no need to) within the growth cycle of a barley crop. They would only use it to kill weeds *before* they plant the barley.

As a precaution, however, maltsters have begun testing for glyphosate residues in barley, and, so far, when any have been detected, they are a long way below the established Maximum Residue Levels (MRLs). Not only that, these levels appear to reduce after steeping (effectively washing the barley), and reduce even further after kilning.

But, of course, no-one wants to drink a pint of beer with traces of weed killer in it, regardless of how difficult it might be to detect. As 'Country Life' magazine put it "It seems sensible, therefore, to ban glyphosate". But before that happens, it looks like there needs to be a serious conversation between maltsters and farmers, going forward.

VISITORS TO THE MALTINGS

Bookings for Tours of the Maltings this year has got off to a better start than last year, although last year ended up being quite busy enough. What is also encouraging for us, is that we are also being seen as a venue of choice for 'alternative' but related events.

For example, the British Hop Association, Wealden Division chose to hold their AGM at the maltings last December, and the Maltsters Association of Great Britain has booked its next meeting of the Executive Council with us at the beginning of June this year.



**Chris Garratt (*far left*) with the Hop Growers.
British Hop Association, Wealden Division.**

Then, at the beginning of last month, we hosted a private Birthday Party at the maltings. Guests arrived from mid-day onwards, and were split into 2 parties, the early arrivals embarking on a maltings tour first, while the others tucked into the buffet lunch, and then the two groups swapped over. By the time the second party returned to Reception, the fizz was in the glasses, and the cake was waiting to be cut. It all worked out rather well, and we would be happy to consider a similar proposition another day.

But we will draw the line at that - weddings, on the other hand, are not for us.

Robin Appel