



## > A VISIT TO THE HOP BACK BREWERY

CAMRA's investment pays off handsomely with this amazing brewery >

Have you ever wished that you owned part of a brewery; well a good few years ago I joined the CAMRA Investment Club to fulfil that desire. By using the Club you invest in a range of real ale breweries a bit like a unit trust. Of course a lot of breweries are small private companies and the Club can only invest in publicly quoted companies of which it has invested in 15. The Club has been investing in breweries since 1989. They have approx. 4,000 members and at the end of March 2012 the fund value stood at approximately £10.9 million.

Well one of the perks of being a member is that the Club organises brewery trips and on the 11th of May I caught a train to Salisbury to meet the group who were going to visit the Hop Back Brewery where the Club now owns approximately 10% of the shares.

We were met by the Owner and MD of Hop Back – John Gilbert – which is where the initials for GFB come from. (Gilberts Fine Beer)

The brewery was started in 1986 at the back of the Wyndham Arms in Salisbury which John had bought freehold, wise fellow. With lots of CAMRA beer festivals awards in his pocket John purchased a second pub in 1991 in Southampton. With the success of these pubs Hop Back beers started to be sold direct to wholesalers, free houses and tied houses as guest beers. This in turn caused the requirement to move the brewing out of the Wyndham Arms to an industrial unit in Downton, approx. 6 miles South of Salisbury. Brewing started there in 1992 and in August of that year Summer Lighting won "Best Strong Beer" at CAMRA's Great British Beer Festival at Olympia and the rest is history as they say.

Hop Back now have 10 pubs with approx. one third of production being drunk there. Our nearest is the Hopleaf in Reading, 163-165 Southampton St.

Well back to the brewery which now occupies all 5 units in the block and houses two brew plants (20 & 50 barrel). They are direct fired gas boilers and look dangerous as the flames lick the bottom of the boiler. It all looks a bit chaotic as the plant has grown over the years, which is probably why they do not do brewery tours – we had a special! The two boilers give

flexibility in the amount they can brew, so the day after our visit they were brewing 70 barrels of Summer Lighting. John said they can do two 70 barrel brews in a day during the Summer months when there is a high demand for Summer Lighting. 1.5 tons of pale malt is required to produce 50 barrels of Summer Lighting with the hops going in 50% at boil and 50% late hop, after the boiler is turned off. To cope with this level of brewing they have 2 x 130 plus 2 x 80 and several 40 barrel fermenters. After fermenting the beer they condition the beer in the same fermenter as it saves moving it. Finally the beer is racked and they have one hell of a stack of casks of Hop Back (see photo). The free beer on offer was Summer Lighting, Crop Circle & GFB, all great as you would expect.

