

The never-ending journey

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Illustration by Sophie Alsopp

Cask ale growth is to be celebrated, writes Pete Brown, yet there's still much to be done

Remember Zeno's paradoxes?

Of course you do. Zeno of Elea, obviously with too much time on his hands and perhaps too much access to psychotropic drugs than was wise, proved conclusively that motion does not exist. One way he did this was to posit that if you're moving towards a destination, before you can cover the full distance, you must cover half the distance. Before you can cover half the distance, you must cover a quarter of the distance. Get into the swing of it, and before you know what's happened you have an infinite number of distances you must cover. Constantly slicing the distance ever thinner, you can never reach it.

It's nonsense of course because, unless we're travelling on a British train, we do eventually reach our destinations. Obviously, the paradox can be solved by Archimedes' Quadrature of the Parabola, or by viewing space-time as a continuum rather than two separate elements. Everyone knows that.

Everyone, that is, except the British cask ale market. In the much-celebrated revival of Britain's national drink, Zeno's paradox is alive and well. As cask ale's performance improves and moves ever closer to year-on-year volume growth, the gap between 'growth' and 'not-growth' grows ever smaller, without ever disappearing.

When I wrote the first *Cask Report* in 2007, our job was to convince a sceptical world that, far from being in terminal decline as everyone thought, cask ale was doing no worse than the beer market as a whole. The following year we were able to show it was outperforming other beer styles, and by last year we proved it was the star performer of the UK beer market, a proven value-add for pubs facing difficult times.

We never actually said that cask ale was booming though – it was, by this

point, still in fractional decline. But such was its strength versus the rest of a moribund market that people started to quote us as saying it was in healthy volume growth. We didn't mind. I was sure that, by the time we launched this year's report, it would be.

Zeno would rub his hands with glee at what we've actually ended up reporting.

There is net value growth. The best volume figures for a generation. The number of drinkers has increased for the fourth year running. Distribution is up by four per cent, with an extra 3,000 British pubs stocking it. Over 60 new breweries have set up in business. Share of the total UK beer market is at its highest for over a decade.

In the foreword to this year's report, Brooklyn Brewery's Garret Oliver credits British cask ale for inspiring a global revolution in craft brewing, and reveals how his first encounter with it changed his life. And social trends point to this resurgence being due to a long term shift in British attitudes and behaviour rather than some freakish blip.

By some distance, it's the best news we've ever had the pleasure of reporting.

But we still, even now, cannot boast volume growth. Every brewer I speak to grins widely as they tell me about booming sales. Boarded up pubs reopening as craft beer shrines transform without exception into bustling community hubs. Everywhere you look, you see evidence of the cask beer revival.

Good news, bad news

But overall market volume is static year-on-year. For every piece of good news we're reporting, something else is happening to prevent net growth.

If there are more pubs stocking it, how can it not grow? Because net throughput per pub has declined by

five per cent, a finding in line with the rest of the beer market.

If more people are drinking it, how can it not grow? Because when probed further about their drinking habits, the vast majority of cask ale drinkers admit that it's an occasional treat.

It's vital that we spread the good news about cask. In difficult economic times, it's essential we demonstrate how cask ale can help keep British pubs open, boosting their footfall and turnover.

But I worry that the flag-waving has proved a little too seductive, that brewers and publicans could be forgiven for thinking, "Job done, we've cracked it!" The tone at conferences and festivals is congratulatory. By spreading the news of cask ale's revival, we might be lulling people into complacency.

This is a warning, too, for craft brewers in, say, Germany or Belgium. The beer geek world is buzzing with excitement about the fantastic boutique beers coming out of Italy this year, but I spoke recently to a major global brewer with significant interests in Italy who was completely unaware that any craft brewing scene existed. Even the United States, with its confident craft beer scene, remains a stagnant beer market overall, and is still known to most drinkers around the world as the home of the beery equivalents of Coke and McDonalds, and little else.

And now I sound like a prophet of doom.

I don't want to spoil the party. I think this is the best time to be brewing and drinking beer there's been in my lifetime at least. Brewers and retailers of good beer are making money, and working around the beer world, helping spread the good news about it, makes my life an absolute pleasure.

All I'm saying is that making craft beer relevant, making it stick in a broader context, is a task that, just like Zeno's journey, never really finishes.