



Dennis Coleman explains why his collection of beer labels brings him and other beer aficionados such pleasure

# Labology

## the wonders of beer label collecting



Alcohol has been around since before civilisation. In fact, people loved alcohol so much that they forgot their nomadic ways and decided to settle down just so they could grow the grains necessary to make beer. Just think, if it weren't for alcohol, we'd still be wandering around, pitching tents every night.'

This is the thought-provoking lead to the 'Drink Focus' website. This rather lofty view of the merits of amber tinted fluid would suit the marketers of breweries around the globe, but maybe there is some truth in it. Did beer, often associated with soccer louts, unruly behaviour and vandalism, act as the genesis of the world's great civilisations? Let's take a journey into the mass of highly artistic printed memorabilia generated by this industry.

Some 15 years ago, an elderly man approached my market collectables stall wanting to sell off large tracts of his collectables, amassed over a lifetime. Among the collections for sale was an extensive assemblage of thousands of beer labels, beautifully presented, many with duplicates.

I still have the collection. It has brought countless pleasure, not only to collector buffs but also to serious beer aficionados and international visitors who leaf through the albums.

Conversations about historical events, world travel, pubs, breweries and even countries that no longer exist spring forth.

The wonder of 'Mr Duncan's collection', of which I am simply the life custodian, is that he, unlike many of the current crop of new collectors, was not obliged to let even one drop of that liquid of great social conduit pass his lips. While he did visit some of the breweries, he was not an authority on beer and the labels were not steamed or soaked off bottles. Nowadays, where many breweries would not release any of their new labels to a mere collector, when he began collecting in the 40s and 50s, he would simply write to breweries around the world and be duly sent current labels and others from their archive as well.

In the Duncan collection we see, among labels catalogued as 'Palestine (Israel)', a lager for 'The Australian Army Canteen Services – brewed to Australian standards', exhorting the consumer to 'keep in a dark cool place'. Helen Glenn, a friend who recently worked in Egypt, tells me that the current label for 'Biere Stella' is still the same as my 40-year-old label. 'Jubilee Ale: 1911-61' by the Ceylon Brewery, now Sri Lanka, is another historical marker, as is their 1953 'E II R Coronation Ale'.

Vietnam was still under French rule when Biere Royale was brewed in Cholon, the Chinese district of Saigon. It bears a striking tiger logo and around its skirt, 'Brasseries et Glaciers de L'Indochine'. Some of the labels are marked 'Blonde Export' while others are produced for 'Sud Vietnam' but also sent to Phnom Penh, Hanoi and Can Tho in the Mekong Delta.

Brasserie de Boheme, Hanoi, Tonkin (former North Vietnam), produced Export Zitek while Bier Hommel, with a striking label featuring two red dragons exchanging a glass of beer in comradeship, was also from Tonkin. Some of the labels from Dyer Meakin Breweries in Pradesh, India are stamped 'For Defence Services Only' which perhaps makes them more collectable.



Turning to Africa, a red lion mounts a keg as the logo of Lion Pilsener, 'brewed and bottled in Rhodesia', now Zimbabwe. A black elephant head profile adorns Tanganyika Breweries 'Tusker Lager', another historical anachronism as Tanganyika is now Tanzania and Zambia. In 'South West Africa', a label by a brewery of the same name features a Springbock.

In Europe, Germany features a plethora of labels with romanticised images of beer steins, German countryside and maidens in traditional dress – perhaps not so hip today. Some have the rider 'Made in Germany – U.S. Zone', from the period after the war.

Not surprisingly, with Mr Duncan's Scottish background, an entire album is devoted to the British Isles. Images of Shakespeare, St George and the dragon, fox hunts and rampant lions prevail, with many of them commemorating the coronation

of 1953. A charming design of squirrels gathering nuts is featured on Devonish Groves 'Nut Brown Ale', while the Cameron Group uses a hairy Vulcan at the forge, a much different image of beer associated with masculinity than is depicted today.

India Pale Ale predictably depicts twin elephants. Mackeson's beer uses a lighthouse logo and some of the labels are stamped 'For HM forces only—Klass III', for export to troops in Europe. Others have reverse bottle labels written in Chinese characters, designating their export destinations.

In Scotland, the ill-fated Mary, Queen of Scots, features as does the thistle and tartan, while the red dragon of Wales is prominent on some 'Brains of Cardiff' labels. A massive collection of perhaps the most recognisable of all ales, Guinness, has the ubiquitous Irish harp as its predominant logo. An interesting label bears the message

'Test Stout – with the compliments of Public Attitude Surveys Ltd – Sample, Not for Sale'.

Perhaps to foster the growing interest in beer label collecting, a group of gentlemen associated with Guinness coined the term 'labology' in 1958 and set up the International Society for Label Collectors and Brewery Research in London in 1958

([www.labology.org.uk](http://www.labology.org.uk)). One of their stunts was to release thousands of bottles into the Atlantic containing a parchment of greeting and a tear off slip for reply. Whether there was a reward or not is unclear but one of these original items in a collection would, I imagine, be most sought after.

While pristine labels are most desirable, it is possible to fill bottles with very hot water to begin the process of removal. Soak bottles in warm water with dishwashing powder to break down the adhesives or spray with a spot remover product. Long soaking in cold (but not iced) water in Eskies is effective.

Drying between a blotter, waxed paper with the label glue-side down on the latter and then another piece of blotting paper on top pressed down by a flat weight to prevent wrinkling or curling is one method.

Display should be in acid free albums or glassine envelopes.

Apparently some still drift ashore, so there's a whole new adventure in labology chasing.

Harry Pinkster of the Netherlands is another collector who produced his own label commemorating his 5,000th label from over 100 countries. The label depicts Harry tastefully posed with a beer bottle and surrounded by his albums of labels. He collects labels only from beers he has tasted from around the world, now over 6,100. Numerous breweries have contacted him asking why they have been omitted from his website. When he explains his policy, samples are duly sent – a little different from the Duncan method of procurement!

Pinkster's website [www.pinkgron.nl](http://www.pinkgron.nl) is a wealth of information about breweries, the beers they brew, the strength and many other useful facts. You can download images of the labels and contact other collectors on his guestbook site.

Every Australian capital city has its printed collectables clubs and beer label or coaster collectors. Coasters are perhaps more popular with some because of the greater ease in acquiring free, pristine examples from various venues.

Adelaide's Ray Boerth began soaking off beer labels as a teenager. His travels to breweries in many countries have resulted in a collection of 35,000 coasters. He has an entertaining website, with his amusing account of travelling on the back of a motorbike to breweries around Vietnam a highlight. His collection is overshadowed by an Austrian collector with 160,000 coasters which fill his house.

Anecdotically, the Sonthwark labels to the left are identical to those on pre-stubby large bottles my father would purchase en route to family visits in the mid 1960s.

Interest is sure to develop in this fascinating area and prices set to rise. *Lyle's Printed Collectable Guide* and similar publications are helpful in establishing some idea of prices, which can range from 50 cents to hundreds of dollars. Whether as an investment or hobby, this 'poor' relation to philately is a fascinating area indeed.

