

RIDING ON THE CREST OF A WAVE



Man with a plan: Dorking Brewery owner Neel Singh

The multi award-winning Dorking Brewery has grown exponentially since its launch in 2008. Owner and Royal Navy Reserve Neel Singh talks to Microbrew about his hopes and ambitions for the brewery

In the heart of the Surrey countryside a microbrewery revolution is starting to take shape. Since taking over Dorking Brewery three years ago, Neel Singh has increased production almost tenfold from 1,500 hectolitres (hl) in 2016 to between 9,000-15,000hl today, and quadrupled turnover to £280,000.

And after investing £360,000 of his own money in new equipment and personnel, and the recent move into a new state-of-the-art site at Aldhurst Farm, he has now set his sights on UK and overseas expansion. But how did it all begin?

Rewind 11 years and the brewery was launched by a group of friends, Rob Dixon, Graham Henderson and Mark Simmonds, who all played rugby together. They found a site and bought a 10-barrel kit and started brewing out of a converted railway shed in an industrial estate in Station Road, Dorking. Three years ago, having taken the brewery as far as they could, according to Singh, they decided to sell up.

Working in a high-pressure job as channel manager for Philips Consumer Electronics, in 2015, Singh, who had served for 10 years as a Royal Navy Reserve, was asked to go on another tour of duty, this time on board HMS Bulwark helping with the migrant crisis in the Mediterranean. He saw it as the perfect opportunity to quit the day job and go it alone.

“When the Royal Navy came calling I turned around to my boss and said: ‘I’m not coming back because if I don’t take this chance now and do my own thing then I’ll never do it,’” he said. “When I returned from my tour I looked at several industries including vending machines and catering, but the microbrewery business was the one that really stood out.”

What appealed to Singh most about brewing was the purity of the product made using the basic ingredients of grain, hops and water. Reflecting this ethos, Dorking Brewery has just been certified 100% vegan friendly, while its bottled beer is unfiltered and unfinned, meaning it’s more natural.

In line with Singh’s concern about the planet’s sustainability, Dorking Brewery is now a fully-fledged carbon negative business, sourcing as much product as possible from the UK (98% of its grain comes from Norfolk) and paying into a rainforest fund to offset the emissions from its vans and brew kit.

Singh also does his bit for the community, giving more than five percent of the brewery’s Defaulters IFA proceeds to the Royal Navy and Royal Marines Charity – a cause close to Singh’s heart – as well as supporting members of Blind Veterans UK. “Our ethos is that we want to make the best product that we can, but in doing so we also want to support the local community and environment.”

Evidence that the Surrey brewing scene is alive and well is reflected in the local



Operations hub: Inside the brewery

“Such is our providence that I can trace the grain we use back to the very farmer’s field in Norfolk where it was first grown. I find that amazing just knowing how pure the whole process is ”

Neel Singh

brewers, who Singh said are only too willing to lend him some grain or yeast if he runs out or to drop off some casks if the need arises; a favour that he is more than happy to repay.

So what does a typical day at Dorking Brewery involve?

It’s never boring to say the least because no two days are the same, according to Singh. The 38-year-old from Leatherhead is always up at 6am and at the brewery by 6.30am to start on the paperwork before getting stuck into whatever needs doing whether it’s dealing with suppliers, brewing, going on deliveries or meeting customers.

At the cutting edge of innovation, Dorking Brewery produces a four-strong core beer

range: Pacific Gold (3.8% ABV), Pilcrow Pale (4% ABV), DBI (4.2% ABV) and Red India (5% ABV) as well as some specials. Ninety five percent of the beer is done in cask format, while the rest is kegs and cans, and a bottling line has just been installed. As the name suggests, Dorking Brewery has a healthy local market, but it actually distributes two thirds of its product outside the county, as well as exporting as far afield as Slovenia. Most of its business is on trade, stocked in Young’s, JD Wetherspoon, Stonegate and several independent pub chains, but it is also found in micropubs and beer shops across Surrey including Cobbetts in Dorking and Four Hops in Reigate.



Top tipples: The beer range

“ There are a lot of good microbreweries out there, but what really sets us apart is our scale and the volume we can produce. What also makes us unique is that we don't have a brewing background, which gives us the edge when it comes to thinking outside of the box for new and interesting concepts ”

“Our Surrey business is not as big as perhaps you may think,” said Singh. “In fact, we do a lot of trade outside of the county, distributing up and down the UK.”

The next step, said Singh, is to move into retail by buying a bar or pub. “That’s the logical evolution for us,” he said. “If there was a great pub in Manchester city centre, for example, or a micropub with character on the Cornish coast, then maybe we would snap it up.”

The biggest move though, however, has already happened with the relocation to Capel. “The old brewery was no longer fit for purpose. It was an old train engine shed with the wrong type of flooring and we were working at maximum capacity, and what’s more our lease was up. We also wanted to be as close to Dorking as possible, but there are not many 3,000-square foot premises for rent that met that criteria, so we had to look a little further afield.”

Having scoured the local area for suitable new locations including Beare Green and Horsham, Singh happened upon the site at Capel after the farm’s owner John Dale popped in one day for some spent grain to use as animal feed and mentioned he had a building available.

After getting planning permission and investing in the biggest brewing kit he could afford, Singh fitted out the 30-barrel brewery complete with a tap room and whirlpool shop and assembled a seven-strong workforce to run it. The brewery held its first open day in March 2017 to mark the official opening, with plans to open the taproom to the public every Saturday from March through to December.

Singh has also been actively promoting the brewery on Twitter and Facebook.

Now fully installed at the new premises, the sky is the limit, said Singh. "The independent beer segment represents 10% of the overall UK beer market so there's huge opportunity for growth. We need to tap into that by showing our credentials and establishing our brand as a first-class brewery."

However, Singh believes that the one barrier to growth is the race to the bottom on price by breweries trying to shift volume. As a result, he expects further consolidation and closures with bigger players increasing market share.

"That's no good for either the consumer or the breweries, because at the end of the day it means poor product. At Dorking Brewery, we pride ourselves on delivering the best quality product possible, but for that you need to pay a bit more."

Singh demands the highest level of professionalism with his two full-time brewers Institute of Brewing and Distilling qualified, staff required to wear uniform at all times and the vans are always spotless. He has also invested in a £20,000 state-of-the-art brewery management software system to track inventory and deliveries using tablets.

"I'm realistic about the investment I have made. It was always going to be four to five years of hard graft, but we are on track."

On current trends, Singh believes that drinkers are more adventurous than they were five years ago, and the younger generation wants to enjoy their beer rather than drinking to excess.

"They no longer want to down six pints on a Friday night; they want to appreciate what they are drinking. There's also been a big shift towards quality food and beer



Rural setting: The site at Aldhurst Farm

from which you can trace the provenance of where it comes from and how it's made."

And Singh's future goal for himself and the business?

"To be working part-time on a personal level," he said. "But in the meanwhile, I would like to think that we'll continue to build a successful name for ourselves."

Considering what we have achieved in the space of two years, there's huge potential. This has been our busiest period yet and long may that continue."



Hands on!