

Cask 2008 Cask Marque

Cask Marque director Paul Nunny was one of the scheme's founders



Phil Mellows takes a look at the origins of Cask Marque, the very successful cask quality scheme now celebrating its 10th year

The mark of quality

IT HAS strong claims to having played a key role in the improvement of cask ale quality over the past decade. And now with more than 5,000 pubs carrying the blue plaque that tells passing beer lovers they can expect a decent pint there, it's just about safe enough to declare Cask Marque a success.

Yet the scheme, now 10 years old, almost founded in its early days. It would have told a too-familiar story of failed industry-wide initiatives. But instead we can celebrate the triumph of dedication, passion and sheer hard work by which the few finally convinced the many.

First among the few were the four who launched the scheme in 1998:

- Paul Nunny, brewer at Adnams, who became

Cask Marque's first employee and is still a director

- Rupert Thompson, brands and brewing director at Oxford brewer Morland, later taken over by Greene King, and until last month chief executive of Refresh UK, where he oversaw the Hobgoblin brewer's integration with Marston's
 - Simon Townsend, marketing director at Marston's, later to merge with Wolverhampton & Dudley Breweries, and now chief operating officer at Enterprise Inns, the country's second largest pub company
 - Simon Jamieson, marketing director at Greene King, now out of the industry.
- It was Nunny who brought the four together. "I'd

been talking to other brewers and while some were growing their share of the cask ale market it was clear that the market as a whole was declining," he says.

Inconsistent quality

The suspicion was that cask ale just wasn't delivering consistent quality in the glass. In the early 1990s, the market had enjoyed healthy growth and it was hard to find a pub that didn't have a hand-pump on the bar.

But as the umbilical cord that tied brewers to pubs was snipped away by the Beer Orders, the influence of brewers on quality at dispense was weakened.

Cask Marque **Cask 2008**

Rupert Thompson, former chief executive, Refresh UK

How do you remember the early days of Cask Marque?

Initially it was quite frustrating, trying to get people to see the importance of quality. We had clear evidence that there was a quality problem and that it was having an effect of sales. But it took years to persuade the industry it had to be addressed.

We said then that the existing industry bodies would never do anything, there were too many interested groups to satisfy, they wouldn't do anything without wide industry support or be able to do much that requires imagination and enthusiasm.

Most didn't take any notice. But a number of regional brewers came on board and then Wetherspoon's – Tim Martin (JD Wetherspoon founder) is a visionary man.

We all did it unpaid at first because every one of us was really committed. It's an indictment of industry bodies, I believe, that it took unpaid volunteers to do it.

What has it achieved?

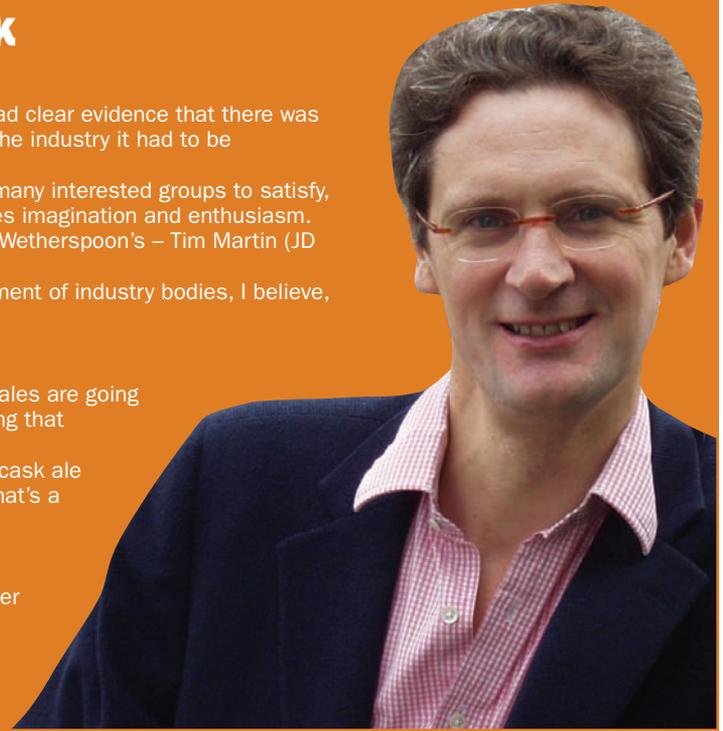
Cask Marque has had a significant part to play in improved quality – just look at the way sales are going now. Cask ale is outperforming the market and that's down to a focus on quality and getting that message across.

I'm encouraged that we have been able to get together and make a difference, that the cask ale sector has provided a focus for people to gather, that it has led to a common approach. That's a tribute to Paul Nunny and his team. They have worked tirelessly.

Where does Cask Marque go now?

I'm very pleased with the way it's going. It's reached 5,000 pubs – a target we set a number of years ago, so 10,000 should be next.

In a very tough trading environment, good quality companies know they have to keep giving consumers a better deal to succeed. I hope the new industry leaders learn from past mistakes, behave like proper retailers should and give Cask Marque their support.



"You can spend money on marketing but if the product isn't right it's money going to waste," says Nunny. So the four stumped up £10,000 each to find out whether their suspicion was true. There was no satisfaction in finding out they were right – two-fifths of pints turned out to be poor quality.

Nunny adds: "The only way we could think of to put that right was to do something to make people strive to achieve recognition for the quality of their beer, so we came up with an awards scheme."

Cask Marque was born and 11 regional brewers took part in a trial of the scheme, each putting forward 100 houses to be tested for accreditation.

"The horrendous thing was that the results were even worse than in the initial survey," explains Nunny. "That proved to us it was a really big issue."

Hitting resistance

Yet at the point when you might imagine that the brewing and pub industries would pull together to tackle an impending crisis and embrace an obvious solution, Cask Marque hit resistance.

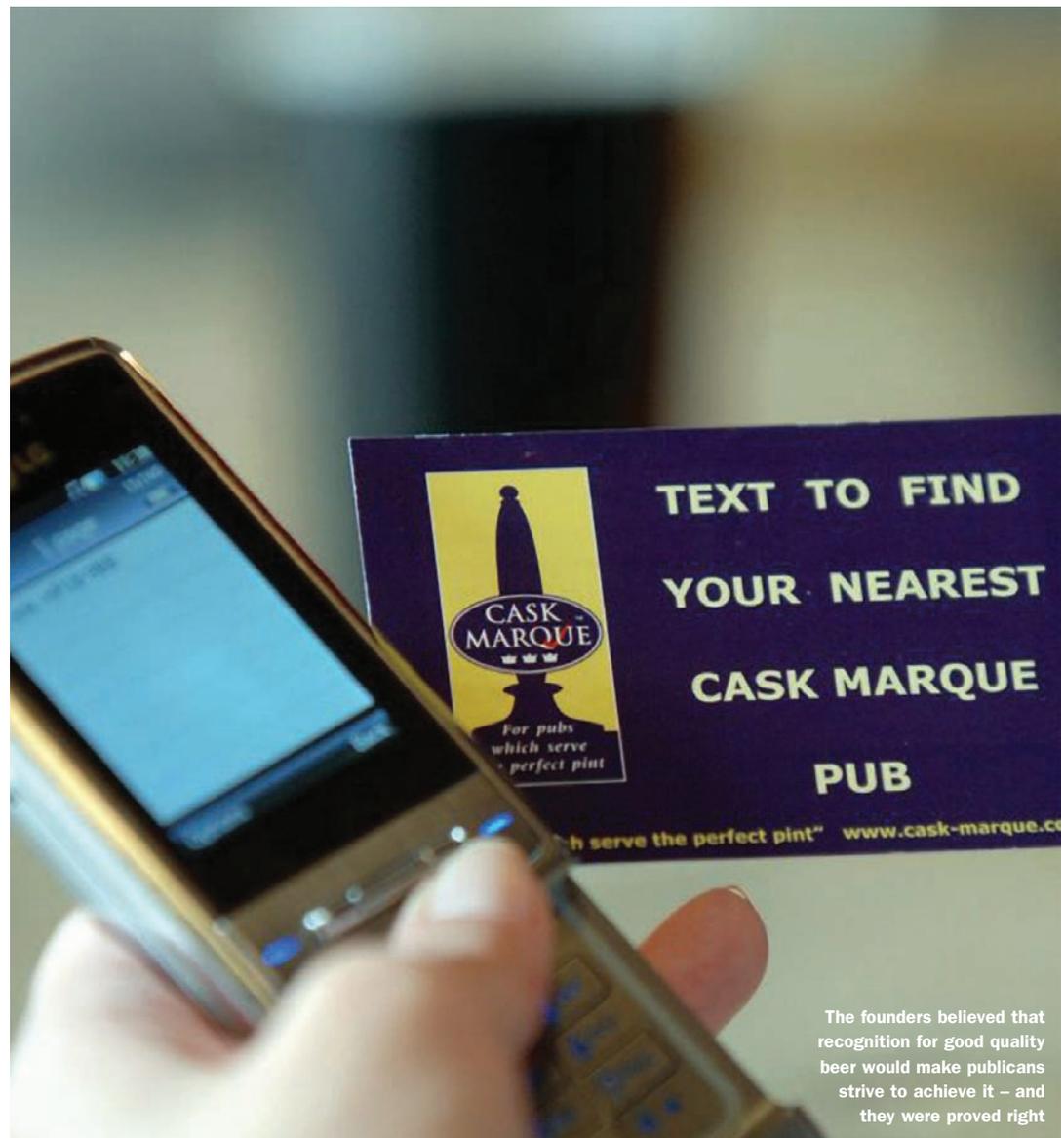
"I think it frightened people," says Nunny. "It was the cost of getting it right. Everyone agreed with the concept but it was difficult to get companies to back the idea. They didn't know whose budget it would come under!"

"We did struggle. There was a particularly bad moment when we were not gaining the momentum we wanted. Some on the Cask Marque board said I should go part-time, two days a week. But I had started this thing in my bedroom and I was pretty passionate about making it work."

Nunny says it took three or four years to convince the industry the scheme was here to stay.

"There were a lot of internal quality schemes but they had no consumer awareness, and that, along with our independence, was what we eventually showed Cask Marque had to offer," he remembers.

Sheer determination by Nunny, and the support of several regional brewers, kept the project alive. Pubs joined steadily, if more slowly than was hoped. And then JD Wetherspoon broke ranks from other managed pubcos to embrace the scheme in 1999.



The founders believed that recognition for good quality beer would make publicans strive to achieve it – and they were proved right

Cask Marque **Cask 2008**

Richard Fuller, Fuller's Brewery

Former chairman of the Cask Marque Trust and still a director

How do you remember the early days of Cask Marque?

I had a phone call after the original steering group meeting between Morland, Adnams, Greene King and Marston's. Immediately it struck me it was a good idea. Cask ale is terribly important to us, and Cask Marque was about getting quality at the point of dispense. Also it was independent.

For any brewer of cask ale the image it has in general is going to help you – the way it's perceived as a quality product. Ten years ago if you walked into any pub with a row of cask ales and you picked one at random the chances were that the beer wouldn't have been as good as it should have been.

We started on a low budget. Cask Marque was slow to take off because all of a sudden people realised there was quite a capital investment required to bring cask ale up to standard, for example with proper cellar cooling. They were going to have to spend money, and it was never going to be done in a year or two.

What has it achieved?

I think we've turned the quality problem around. Cask Marque stands out because it's kept going and it's kept growing. There have been a number of other schemes but they've been about promoting cask ale rather than quality. There are competing interests – but no one has a competing interest when it comes to quality.

Cask Marque is really respected as an organisation, and it's made a big difference. It's a training organisation as well, alongside a number of offshoots designed to improve cask ale quality. It soon became obvious as breweries closed that there was a huge number of pubs left without access to training, and regional brewers did not have the resources to do that. So that's where Cask Marque has been able to come in.

Where does Cask Marque go now?

There's still a lot of work to be done. Among Cask Marque pubs, 87 per cent are hitting all the quality standards – but that compares with only 47 per cent of non-Cask Marqued pubs. The goal is to get them up to the right standards.

So we must continue our training programmes and make sure pubs understand cask ale and what it can do for their business. It's an ongoing process of improvement. People expect quality – we all know what the price of beer is like now, and that makes quality more important than ever.



Simon Townsend, Enterprise Inns

How do you remember the early days of Cask Marque?

Cask ale was at the heart of production for the original four brewers. We each had a vital interest in getting a wider consumer appreciation and, I think more than that, an understanding of cask ale. It had enjoyed a resurgence in the early 1990s. It was widely distributed but the quality was often very poor, so we knew that it was all in danger of falling flat. We did have a quality concern at point of dispense, that it was just not living up to expectations. With cask ale you're only as good as your last pint.

When we did the research we were horrified. It was even worse than we thought. We were really shocked that our concerns had been understated.

So the first thing we had to do was generate a standard that would encourage licensees to look at questions of quality. A lot of it is about nurturing, about technique. Cask is hand-built beer. It requires knowledge, passion and concern. It's hard work. It can fall flat on its arse if it's not properly looked after.

There are many different influences on quality, and at the beginning I think we were trying to do too many things. So we picked on temperature.

There was a lot of positive talk – no one could argue with the idea. But cask ale was only a small part of total beer volumes, and that's an issue to the present day.

It did need evangelising, and I was in the evangelising camp – I still am. It's a challenge to get people to see the value of quality.

What has it achieved?

Cask Marque has raised the profile of quality, it's raised the standard by which quality is measured and raised awareness of the importance of quality. We have a series of simple solutions. The testers who go into the pubs are, in effect, trainers, and that's an important mechanism for lifting quality.

Where does Cask Marque go now?

The focus has to be on what you might call 'consumer accreditation', getting consumers to recognise the value of Cask Marque. The biggest challenge with cask ale is price. It's always woefully under-priced. If it's a hand-built craft product with intense production standards it should be sold at a premium.

But to do that the consumer has to understand why the price is more, and they are not going to come with you on that if the beer is of variable quality.

I don't know how long it took food critic Egon Ronay to get that kind of consumer recognition but that's what we've got to achieve.



Surprisingly, Cask Marque began to diversify. As well as quality accreditation for pubs it was recognised there was a similar need in the supply chain, where a cask beer might follow a convoluted course from brewery to pub, taking it through a number of depots.

JD Wetherspoon and other pub chains, seeing that Cask Marque could provide valuable independent expertise, hired its assessors – a team of 40-odd retired brewers – to carry out cellar audits, and bring the organisation into their own quality initiatives.

Training became an increasingly busy arm of the organisation and, led by national account manager Annabel Smith, it delivers 30 one-day cellar training courses a month.

Consumer awareness might still have a way to go, but there's no doubt it is improving and drinkers can now text their location and get details of their nearest Cask Marqued pubs.

For Nunny the priorities now are expanding its Distributor Charter to ensure publicans can be confident the beer has not only left the brewery in good nick but has also been looked after on the way to the pub, and to extend training to barstaff, "so they can talk knowledgeably and positively about the product they're serving".

Next Easter will also see the revival of Cask Beer Week under Cask Marque's auspices and you



Cask Marque national account manager Annabel Smith at work

have to fancy it to make a success of an event that has previously failed to capture the imagination of pub-goers.

A decade on there is a sense that Cask Marque is still only beginning to achieve its potential as an independent, cross-industry body that can work for pubs and brewers alike. ■