

# Utopian Brewing

Were it not for the unwanted interference of an over-zealous local council, Utopian Brewing as it is now may well never have been founded. In the same way that William Morris, the father of the Arts and Crafts movement and the inspiration for both the name and the ethos behind Utopian Brewing, had a vision for a better society, Richard Archer had a vision for an artisan brewing operation which upheld the values Morris championed. His plan initially was to take on an empty restaurant site adjacent to the riverside pub he was then operating, the William Morris next to an old watermill in Colliers Wood in South London, and turn it into a taproom with a modest brewing facility installed in the pub building. Merton Borough Council had other ideas and planning was denied, but as one door closed another one opened, and Richard subsequently met brewer Jeremy Swainson who was working at Camden Town and was looking for his next opportunity.

As an experienced lager specialist, Jeremy had what was then quite a rare skillset, and Richard knew there was a major opportunity in the craft lager market – the idea for Utopian was born. But far from needing a modest conventional brewery site, to specialise in lager meant finding somewhere for all those tanks, so in 2018 Richard settled on a rural farm site in Devon where Jeremy had the space to practice his craft and the brewery had room to grow. Since then Utopian has been a leading light in the revolution of craft lagers in the UK, a champion for the 100% British ingredients it uses, and has set about educating the UK's beer drinkers that lager is not just about one style. Caroline Nodder, Independent Brewer's Editor, hopped on a Zoom with Richard and Jeremy to find out more...





Brewery Basics



**Name:** Utopian Brewing  
**Founded:** 2017  
 (first brew February 2019)  
**Location:** Nr Cridton, Devon  
**Owners:** Richard Archer and Steve Cox, with around 250 crowdfunding investors  
**Capacity:** 16,000hl (7,000hl with current tank capacity)  
**Brewing team:** 3  
 (2 brewers and 1 technical brewer)  
**Staff:** 9 in total  
**Key beers:**  
 Premium British Lager (4.7% ABV), British Pilsner (4.4% ABV), British Unfiltered Lager (4.7% ABV), Vienna Keller Lager (4.8% ABV) and Dark Lager (5.4% ABV)  
**Current Production(hl) and split (cask, keg, small pack):**  
 1,300hl (2,300hl including contract brewing) Pre-Covid – 90% keg, 10% small pack

**How did you come to launch Utopian and how has the business developed since then?**

**Richard:** “I formed the business with Steve Cox, who has pubs and bars predominantly in London and the South East, and I have worked with Steve on and off in the pub business for 25 years, brewing is not really my background. So that’s where it all started from really, in the pub business. Like most pub operators you always look at the opportunities for vertical integration and it always seemed like a logical progression, it just took us a really long time to get round to it. The catalyst for it was that we had a pub site in Merton, the William Morris, and the lease was about to run out and the pub needed work anyway. So next to the pub was an Italian restaurant site that had been empty for a long time so the plan was to convert the William Morris into the brewery and convert the restaurant into the taproom. But Merton Council didn’t think it was such a good idea so in the end we didn’t end up starting the brewery in Merton, and looking back the space would have been too small, and we would have had to have had another unit somewhere else and be transferring beer between the sites so it wouldn’t have been as good as where we are now. So Steve and I did a crowdfunding round, and we have about 250 investors through that, which is a lot of friends and family and then some other individual investors. I have a lot of family round here so we chose the site in Devon which has a lot of space not only because you need a lot of space for lager but also because we wanted something we could grow into. The plan from the beginning was to have a brewery with scale. Utopian beer, everything is lager, and it was always our intention that our core range was all lager. The plan was always to have a core range of beers that would be

predominantly targeted into the traditional pubs and bars market, not specifically targeted into the craft market. And then a range of specials and collaborations that would keep the brewery fresh and interesting for not just the customers but also for the brewery team. So we could experiment and brew more experimental and less common styles. The intention was to start with keg, the biggest way to get to scale was to go into the on-trade on draught so that was pretty obvious. Then at the same time we had always had a plan to do small pack as well in the business model, and we also do a lot of contract brewing, so we experimented a bit with contract canning and mobile canning but that wasn’t a great experience for us. So we made the decision to add a canning line into the core operation and had that installed in November (2019). So we had the ability to do our own canning and were also doing that for other people as well, notably Yeastie Boys, which meant in March we were in a good position to switch to small pack quite quickly.”

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**What is your brewing ethos?**

**Richard:** “The William Morris is where the name Utopian comes from though. We love William Morris and the whole Arts and Craft movement – they were the forerunners of upcycling and into making work places a great place to work and in his book News from Nowhere he talks about a Utopian society. So the quote on our cans, ‘If others can see it as I have seen it, it may be called a vision rather than a dream’, is actually a quote from that book. We try and take a lot of inspiration for what we do from that, in terms of sustainability and so forth. Quality and consistency sits right at the top for us. Nothing goes out unless it is of a quality we are satisfied with and everything will spend four weeks in tank as a minimum and we never deviate from those standards because we know that drives the quality. Then consistency is really important too, so we are in a world where we are trying to get in to more traditional pubs and bars where you are on a permanent keg line – that is quite important to us – and if you are on a permanent line then people expect the beer to be the same when it comes out of that tap. We talk about sustainability but that should really be part of everyone’s business plan now, but it is something that drives what we do and it is important to us. We made the decision to use 100% British ingredients in all of our core beers. The driver for that was around sustainability and food miles – you don’t need to ship ingredients all around the world.”

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### Why did you decide to focus on lager?

**Richard:** “I am not a brewer, I have never been a brewer, so my experience of beer is having beer in pubs. So the reason for lager, firstly was that it was really hard to find a decent one. We tried in the pubs to get some of the more international brands and imported lagers and we had Krusovice in tank for a while which was tinkered in from the Czech Republic, and we had Spatan which was imported, but we could see there was a space there. In other areas like IPAs it was massively congested so to try and get into that part of the market and really differentiate ourselves would be quite difficult. From a business point of view there were some really good reasons to do lager – 75% of the beer drunk in the UK is lager – and there were not a lot of people doing it. The lager segment had almost been bypassed by the whole craft beer revolution, and there are some technical reasons for that, but the other thing is, and this is where Jeremy’s hire was so important for us and has been so good for us, it is really hard to make great lager – there is just nowhere to hide! We were willing to take those challenges on and that gave us that differentiator.”

**Jeremy:** “I came directly from Camden Town Brewery in London, I worked there for a couple of years and helped them to open their new brewery in Enfield, and before that I had spent four years in Germany. I did a three year brewing apprenticeship at a brewery called Bolten and then my brew masters in Munich at the

Doemens Academy before making the jump into the UK to go and work for Camden. I never really had a set plan to brew lagers long term, it just sort of happened. I was in Germany and came to the UK to brew craft beer and ended up at Camden, a big lager brewery, and when I heard about Richard wanting to open up an all-lager brewery hear I was like ‘Yeah, totally, ok!’”

**Jeremy:** “I would probably sum it up by saying that we aim to brew authentic, accessible European-inspired lagers using 100% British-grown ingredients. And in the brewhouse our ethos is all about process and examining every part of that process to tweak and make minor adjustments that continues to drive the quality of the product and the consistency.”

### What were the main challenges in launching a lager-only brewery?

**Jeremy:** “A lot of the breweries our size use very similar brewhouses, and a lot of them are designed specifically for the main craft brewing market. So there were some challenges initially in working out how to do certain processes. Something like decoction mashing we really wanted to do, and the brewhouse wasn’t set up for that initially so we had to make some tweaks and get a bit creative. Apart from that the raw materials threw up some challenges – the malted barley in this country is typically malted for single infusion mashing, so the British mashing system, so because we were definitely going to use 100% British raw materials there were some challenges in finding malted barley for the process we

were using. That is something we have been working on and improving the whole time over the last couple of years.”

### How have you seen the lager category in the UK evolve in recent years?

**Jeremy:** “I have definitely noticed more smaller breweries are now producing better lagers. There are a lot of craft beer drinkers who enjoyed the IPAs and hazy IPAs now getting turned on to lager which I think can only be good for our segment. Small breweries like Bohem and Braybrooke are trying to do lager right rather than make a lager in an ale brewery. I see a lot of positive change. There are more styles of lager being brewed now than there were before so consumers are more aware a lager isn’t just gold bland and fizzy, it means a lot more. There can be dark lagers, red lagers, hoppy lagers as well as your Foster’s. There are definitely a lot of positive developments within the lager community, although one thing I do think is still an issue is a lot of ale breweries having a token lager, which quite often isn’t even actually brewed with lager yeast. I think that does a disservice to our segment but we just hope through more awareness, and as brewers learn more about lager brewing in this country the beers will improve and customers will have more choice.”

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**Describe your business as it was at the start of 2020 and how it has changed since?**

**Richard:** “We had done pretty well in the South West which I think is quite typical of most start-up breweries – if you have a good local community and get into the local market, and if your product is decent and reasonably priced they will give you a chance. We were very happy with how we’d established in this part of the world and were about where we wanted to be. We underestimated how bad January would be – it is very seasonal here and in Steve’s pubs in London it was Dry January so trade died a death there too. But we were picking up very nicely again and February/March was starting to look quite good. We knew that the next phase for us was spring-boarding off our South West base, particularly into the South East and home counties. Then nightmare city hit. But sometimes when you get these disasters you need to treat them as a bit of an infection point, look at them as a bump in the road you need to adapt to. Try and find opportunities out of it. And you often come out the other side stronger. I think that was certainly true in the first lockdown. The contract brewing was certainly useful to have, so that helped. But we then set about looking at what we needed to do to get our beer out there, and we had a canning line, so we got some cans, bought a labelling machine on eBay for £300 and my kitchen turning into a labelling unit for quite a long time. We sent a load of beer to the beer writers and bloggers who maybe hadn’t tried it before, and that worked great for us, people talked about our beer and we got a lot of chatter on social media which was fantastic. So our online shop worked well, we picked up some retail customers on the back of that, and we were busy. Coming out the other side we were better than when we went in. We got better at contract brewing, and we built small pack business which we hope to hold on to even when the keg business comes back. Then pubs and bars started opening and more people knew about us. By the time we got to September we were probably doing double what we had done in September 2019 which was fantastic. We had expanded the team and that growth was putting a lot of pressure on our tanks capacity so we had to get some more tanks ordered. So once we get through this we are now set up hopefully to grow again.”

**You were one of the big winners in SIBA’s first ever Digital Beer Awards and also at BeerX in March How did you find the process and what did the wins mean to you?**

**Richard:** “The most important thing with awards like that is that they are fantastic recognition for the guys who brew the beer, it is not really about me. It is recognition for Jeremy and his team. I don’t think we ever set out to win competitions, but then you win one and you think ‘maybe we should do some more?’ because it is lovely getting recognition for the



Jeremy Swainson

brewery. I thought the way the digital awards were operated and organised was fantastic, and it was great to do them at that time. Everyone was ready for something that was positive so I was over the moon and delighted for Jeremy and the team. And Beer X, we were up there, and it was special because it was our first ever award and it was for the unfiltered version of our first ever beer.”

**Jeremy:** “In a way we live in a bit of a bubble here, we are on a farm in the middle of Devon and we don’t even have a taproom here at the moment, and we don’t get a huge amount of interaction with the beer community as a whole. So to be recognised nationally for the beers we brew is really refreshing and helps to motivate the team. It is so great to hear that the work the guys are doing in the brewery is not going unnoticed.”



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**How important is sustainability to your business and how have you incorporated sustainable initiatives into your plans?**

**Richard:** “Some things we did in the design phase, and one of the bigger ones was to do with nitrogen. Jeremy was looking at that as he had done something similar before, and we put in a nitrogen generator so that we could

generate our own nitrogen on site which massively reduces our CO2 usage. And it is a really good example of sustainability being a thread that should run through a business, because not only does it reduce the need for CO2 to be moved around in heavy steel cylinders, it also saves us money. To put that equipment in was something like £14K but it will pay for itself in no time. A number of things you can do that help in terms of your carbon footprint and sustainable credentials will also save you money. People shouldn’t be afraid of these things which often make commercial sense as well. We also do some other things which make logical sense – we don’t use any single use plastic in our packaging, our spent grain goes to the local farm, we put a heat exchanger in our brewhouse. And then there are some things we need to do in the next phase – so a big problem for us down here is waste water. We don’t have mains drainage so we have to tanker it away and we have always had a plan for a bio treatment plant to naturally treat our water and put it straight back into the natural water courses. We also have a plan for solar energy with panels on the roof, and it is very windy down here so we would look at wind power too. Another thing we have done more recently was finding somewhere to recycle our malt bags which is pretty rare. We just want to look at everything and make sure if there is something we can do to make us more sustainable then we do it.”

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Richard Archer

**What have you been doing to support your local community during the pandemic?**

**Richard:** “When we went into lockdown Jeremy and the team were really keen as we were doing ok to try and do something and give something back to the community. So we looked at options to do that, and there was a lot of high profile stuff going on then, and we didn’t just want to jump in and be doing the same thing. So we set up a relationship with something called the Devon Community Foundation, which is an aggregator for charitable funding, there are quite a few of them around the country, and they give back to local community projects. They cover everything from local scout groups to disabled transport, and all sorts of people with a variety of needs get support. So with our Rainbock which won the strong beer category at the SIBA Digital Beer Awards we donated £1 for every can sold to fund. That raised around £2,500 and we raised some additional money from cartons we sent out so we raised a reasonable amount for their Coronavirus fund.”

**Do you think the pandemic has changed consumer attitudes to craft beer?**

**Richard:** “I think it has definitely changed consumer attitudes to local. To local producers and provenance. People have talked about that for a long time but I think that lockdown period massively crystallised that and reinforced that, and it has had a positive effect on breweries.”

**What is your view of the proposed changes to SBR? Will they directly affect your business?**

**Richard:** “The industry is fixated with this issue right now, but I am not sure I am 100% behind everyone in how they are looking at it. Duty is a massive issue for our industry and SBR is a really good thing at the moment, we get a great advantage at the smaller end of the

segment which is there for good reasons to grow that segment and help people get started. But SBR aside, and knowing the way brewers and distribution works into the pub sector from the pub side, the most difficult time would be around 4,000hl until 10-15,000hl because as you grow you have to go into wholesale distribution so you lose margin, you are going further afield so people don’t give you the price premium for being local, so all those things are pushing on your margin to a greater extent in my opinion than the change in duty relief. For me, I think there is a massive need to flatten the curve, there has to be a transition from 50% to 100% but to help that business you need the growth curve to be flattened. But at the same time there are people saying to flatten that curve and not affect people below 5,000hl the Government needs to put more into the system and I think that is a really difficult argument to be making at this time. We are looking to grow. And for me, if I had to choose I would take a bit more pain in the 2,500hl to 5,000hl in order to get a better flattening of the curve in the 5,000hl to 15,000hl. If you can get both then fantastic but somewhere there has probably got to be some compromise.”

**What plans do you have for Utopian for 2021?**

**Richard:** “Largely we will be majority on-trade in keg with four or five core beers – we had three this year. We have a lower ABV beer we are really happy with and our Ten Degrees beer we want to have a big push with. We want to fully break out of the South West and then continue with what we learnt though the online shop which was that people like variety, and mixed boxes. So getting a good range through our specials and collaborations is really important to us.”

**Jeremy:** “This year we went from two core beers and maybe two specials in our first year to putting out 10 beers this year, a couple of those being collabs. So we are going in to next year with a really solid range of beers, significantly more so than we were last year

so as far as brewing is concerned 2021 will be about strengthening our relationships with our suppliers. We are one step closer to having malt made to specification for us which is a beer quality decision – it will cost us more money but the vast majority of decisions we make in the brewery are based on quality rather than efficiency or ease or price point. We have also assembled a good team now so next year we need to ensure they are all getting the support they need and are continuing to grow.”

**What are you proudest of during your time at Utopian?**

**Richard:** “Recruiting Jeremy. I think the skillset match to what we needed was fantastic but also the personality match in terms of the ethos across the team as well. Getting someone like that into the team in that critical position, I could not have done better than Jeremy.”

**Jeremy:** “We have got a small team here but the brewing team is fantastic and just seeing how motivated they are when they come into work and how dedicated they are to the beers they are making and how dedicated to making them better, that’s definitely what I am most proud of here.”

**What is your all-time favourite beer?**

**Richard:** “For me, who you are with a where you are as important as the beer you are drinking. I tend to rate that side of the experience more than particularly looking out for specific beers. But one of the best experiences I have had and one of the best beers I have ever drunk was when we went to Brau last year and we went on a study tour to Bamberg and had an A U in the brewery there – when you get the experience with a beer it is hard to beat.”

**Jeremy:** “It switches constantly for me, I never have a favourite beer but I have beers I drink regularly. There is a brewery called Moenchsambach near Bamberg and pretty much anything from them is an incredible experience to drink.”