

Kia ora, gday and welcome to the History of Aotearoa New Zealand. Episode 94 – Speight’s: Good on Ya Mate. This podcast is supported by our amazing Patrons. If you want to support HANZ go to patreon.com/historyaotearoa. Last time, Speight’s was struggling against the newest threat to their dominance of the lower South Island. Dominion Breweries had bought a number of hotels and pubs to secure a foothold in the area and had even set up their own brewery in Timaru. So far the Speight’s management had been rather reactive and somewhat passive to this challenge but today we will see them take back the reigns and to do that, they needed a change at the highest level.

On the last day of 1981 managing director Jack Langford retired. Appointed as his successor was Steve Mason, who at the age of 30 was the youngest manager in Speight’s history. Up until this point he had been with the Hotels Division of Lion in Auckland and had previous experience as a hotel manager, so he knew the industry well. Unlike Langford, Mason was very hands on with the job and handled it with a youthful vigour. He visited every beer outlet in Otago and Southland and if any of them had a complaint he would do his utmost to get them sorted out. He was constantly analysing sales data and if there was a drop from a particular brand or a particular outlet, he was on the case asking why that had happened and what they could do to bring those numbers back up. He held staff meetings to get a gauge on how things were tracking, suggestions on what could be improved and how those could be implemented. All in all, Mason was probably exactly the kinda guy Speight’s needed right now to combat the behemoth that was DB.

One of the suggestions made at these meetings was to have a weekly newsletter of what was going on. This was seen as a great idea and the first edition of ‘Ours’ came out in November 1982. The original editor left a few months later and the mantle was taken up by a laboratory staff member since 1960, Don Gordon, who would later become Speight’s archivist. A much less popular measure was that of the closure of the bar in the pump room. This bar had a bit of character and was well regarded among the staff since various items and memorabilia had adorned it over the years, such as a plaque that read ‘Chisel-Chin’s Corner’ on the spot where a distinctive faced employee, Bill Manson, would often be seen leaning. It was also a matter of convenience as that bar was located in the middle of the building so everyone on that side of Rattray could easily get to it, but now they would likely have to go all the way across to the other side of the street. On the day the bar was officially closed, a bagpiper playing a lament headed a procession of mournful employees through the underground tunnel to their new bar. Two songs were even composed in honour of the old bar, one titled ‘The Bar with No Beer’ by Eddie Bray. The end of the song went ‘But there’s nothing so lonesome, morbid or drear/Than to work in Speight’s Brewery with no bar and no beer!’ Bray also had the honour of naming the new bar ‘The Bunghole’.

Something I briefly mentioned a few episodes ago was that the name of the brewery itself wasn’t called Speight’s. When the founding trio set up the brewery, the building was called the City Brewery, with James Speight & Co. being the name of the company that owned it. After the NZB merger in 1923 the brewery was technically known as the Dunedin Branch of New Zealand Breweries Ltd. which of course now was changed to the Dunedin Branch of Lion Breweries Ltd. Mason, with his good eye for such things, quickly realised that a lot of Speights’ appeal and marketing potential lay in its strong branding. Of course, most people probably called it the Speight’s Brewery anyway but that was, at best, a nickname at this point and in fact Lion had been actively trying to suppress Speights’ unique identity that was much beloved by locals, to bring it more in line with the national corporate structure. Mason wasn’t having any of it though and he managed to convince the higher ups at Lion to change the name, officially, to the Speight’s Brewery. In conjunction with this, to really drive that feeling of a local institution that Dunedinites could be proud of, Mason introduced proper, formally arranged tours of the brewery that would occur twice

a week. This was also designed to show that Speight's was more than just a factory that churned out beer, that brewing was actually a complicated and interesting process, one that had been occurring continuously for over a century on a historic site. Naturally this took months of planning with the visitor's reception being built, where it still sits in the area of the Roaring Meg from the Centennial celebrations. It also meant adding signs along the tour route to explain what happens at each stage of brewing as well as various other bits and bobs to help explain not only the brewing but also Speight's long and storied history. Tours were officially opened by the Mayor of Dunedin in June 1983 and garnered a fair amount of media attention. Just like the centennial, the media took a particular interest in the cooperage trade and Speight's only cooper at the time was widely interviewed along with a number of Speight's oldies such as RCB Greenslade, Doug Cocks, former head brewer, Noel Davenport, former head of sales and Jack Langford, former general manager. There was also an advertising campaign that Speight's made in Dunedin that centered around the idea of "My Kind of Beer in My Kind of Town" again trying to drive home that Speight's was a local cultural fixture to be proud of.

Around the same time that this was happening, current head brewer Crawford Brown was working on something that could very well have been a world first. Working with a local electronics engineer, they developed a device to measure the volume of liquid in a tank using sonar. An ultrasonic pulse would be emitted from a device at the bottom of the tank and go up until it hit the surface of the liquid, in this case beer. When it hit the surface, the pulse would come back to the device at the bottom which would read how long it took between emitting the pulse and when it returned which would tell the device how full the tank was. The longer it took for a pulse to return, the more beer was in the tank since it would have to travel further to reach the surface. The device would then output this information on an LED display which read from 0-100, 0 meaning empty and 100 meaning full. This was installed in the first coldstore tank in late 1983 and was expanded to other tanks soon after. The LED displays were all put in the same spot so the operators could see all the levels of the coldstores at the same time without having to walk to each one. The invention was so fantastic that it was recognised by the Institute of Brewing and Brown went to Hobart, Australia in 1986 to present a paper on the topic.

In October 1983 Speight's had two very important visitors come down, the two top blokes of Lion Breweries. Douglas Myers, the managing director and Ross Sayers, the general manager. Sayers had only been the job for a few months but was there to announce something rather big, a new company structure whereby each brewery would be its own entity and be managed locally rather than from the head office. In other words, all the breweries under Lion would have a lot more autonomy in how they ran themselves, their sales strategies, marketing, beers they brewed and so on. This was a great win for Speight's and Mason in particular, whose push for more emphasis on a local identity was credited as being a major reason for Lion's board making the change.

A month later the Speight's brewery was turned into a film set and the most rugged chaps in the building were used as actors for a Lion ad that would be shown in cinemas. It showed the workers as 1930s brewers, stoking the furnaces, putting casks together, wheeling sacks around and that sorta thing. After their hard yakka they all hopped in decade appropriate cars to head to the pub and have a pint. The premier in Dunedin had a fair amount of fan fair with the brewery staff turning up in formal dress. This involved them trying some Lion Brown in new bottles as well as a bunch of slides on the beer before watching the ad. They also showed a bunch of bloopers from the filming as well. Geoff Williamson, the guy well known for his silly Olympics and other antics, presented the Brown Oscars for the best acting and other such honours for a bit of a laugh. A bit later in the year, there was another, much more quiet party as Mrs Ethel Dransfield celebrated her 100th birthday in

Auckland. She was originally from Dunedin and was the daughter of Charles Greenslade, one of the original founders of Speight's and in fact she outlived her nephew, RCB Greenslade who died on the 27th December 1983. He was 75. A few days after that saw the arrival of the words 'Pride of the South' on the Speight's label, where they have since remained, and in fact so did the first appearance of the Gold Medal Ale logo in the form we know it today.

Early the next year, in 1984 another big change that is now rather synonymous with Speight's saw it's beginning. Speight's decided that they would sell beer in cans, the canning itself to take place in Christchurch. The design of the can was quickly mocked up, the predominantly orange label on a dark blue background and after a few tests just to make sure that the beer wouldn't taste like shit when it was in a can, the new way to drink Speight's was launched in March, two months after decision was made so the whole thing was a very quick turnaround. March also saw a reorganisation of the sales team and how their responsibilities were shared which resulted in Speight's first female sales representative, Trish Willocks.

Later that year in May, the Lion board held a meeting at Speight's, the first time the board had been down there since the centennial eight years earlier. This was meant to be the beginning of a new approach for Lion Breweries in that they would 'meet the people'. To do that they would personally go to the breweries, visit local pubs, hotels and other outlets and generally try to get a personal feel for the lay of the land. The idea was to make sure that from brewery to shop front, everyone felt like they were being heard and their needs met. Douglas Myers even said in a newspaper interview that Speight's was "the example for the rest of the country" so it was clear that this whole individuality and local branding thing was something that they were thoroughly embracing.

Although having more autonomy was definitely a good thing for Speight's, it came with greater responsibility for the sales and profit of the brewery, particularly for Mason. Sales had been increasing but they weren't currently where they wanted them to be so Mason got the staff together and split them into teams to come up with and implement cost saving measures. Some of the changes that came out of this were improved electricity controllers to more efficiently use power, introduction of phase refrigeration, washing and filling bottles on alternate days, upgrading various equipment to make them more efficient, the boilers being converted to burn overexploited orange roughly oil, closing of a cold store, a paperwork systems audit, purchasing of a small computer and the cease of brewing of Steinlager, among many other changes. The first of these changes to be implemented was washing and filling of bottles on alternate days. This meant that on any given day much less steam was required to perform pasteurising and washing, which saved power and as such, money. This also meant there was less packing going on each day as well and after some negotiation with the union, five employees took voluntary redundancy.

It was at this time in late 1984 that Ted Barringer's time at Lion came to an end. He had been the longest serving member on the Lion board at the time and his leaving meant that for the first time since the merger, the Lion board didn't have a Dunedin representative. Naturally he vacated his office, the one they forced Greenslade to move out of after it was specially built for him, and chief engineer Ian Carter moved in.

Up until this point, the beer destined for being canned was sent to Christchurch via a tanker on the road but in October 1984 it started to be sent by rail in a 22,000L tank. Something fun that they did was paint the tanker to look like a giant Speight's can, which I thought was pretty cool! It was put on trucks and entered as a float in some festivals and even won a national award. Not long after this, tours had gotten so popular that it was decided that they should be run daily rather than the twice

weekly as they had been. One of the office staff, Sheila Wall, was given the position of fulltime tour guide and tour promotor.

The two years of major autonomy that Speight's had enjoyed though was pulled back slightly in 1985 when the Lion Breweries Brewery Division was split into three areas based on geography. The name is a bit silly but it this was because Lion had their fingers in more pies than just the beer at this point, such as wine and spirits. So, Auckland and Hamilton became the northern region, Wellington, Palmerston North and Hastings became the central region and Dunedin and Christchurch became the southern region. This also saw the reinstatement of the South Island manager position which was given to Lion's Australian export manager, Bill Leigh. Unlike his predecessor, Leigh made his base of operations in Christchurch. Thankfully Speight's still retained a fair amount of autonomy in terms of its marketing and branding, which was still going strong with a new radio jingle called 'We've got the Pride of the South' being rolled out in July 1985 to promote local sports teams. It was also in this month where the production manager, Kerry McCashin was moved to Christchurch. Well regarded in the brewery, particularly among the sports lads in the Bunghole, he had been integral in overseeing the last few years of change at Speight's. His replacement was current head brewer Crawford Brown.

August 1985 saw new boilers being introduced into the brewery and these ones were heavily automated, meaning that the two guys who operated them were no longer needed. They were given the option of either being offered new positions as fitters or be given a redundancy package. The Stationary Engine Driver's Union, of which the two workers belonged, didn't like this at all which resulted in a strike, Speight's first proper one depending on how you look at it. This was a bit of a problem for Speight's, well actually a pretty large problem as it meant that until the new boilers were fully installed, there was no steam coming from the current boilers that the two blokes operated and with no steam that meant they couldn't wash or fill the bottles effectively halting all production. This gradually became worse and worse until on the tenth day of the strike the boilermen returned to work, otherwise the whole brewery was going to be deep in it, but that didn't mean the issue was resolved and strikes took place in Auckland and Christchurch breweries in solidarity. By mid-October one of the employees took the voluntary redundancy with the other being kept on in a different role. As part of the agreement Speight's also agreed to pay the union dues of the employee who left, effectively paying them for a worker that didn't exist, leaving everyone happy and resolving matter. The new boilers were actually quite good though in that they were a lot more efficient than the older ones, which by now were 46 years old, saving Speight's about \$25k a year, or \$75k in today's money.

A new innovation in keg technology had also arrived at the brewery. Kegs called Kwiktaps, with a K W rather than a Q U, were coming into use. These were 50 litre kegs that could have hoses attached and detached much more easily than they had done previously. A room in the bottling plant was set up to fill these kegs specifically, outfitted with a flash pasteuriser, keg washer and a filler with the plant becoming operational in November 1985. Up until now draught beer that filled the kegs hadn't been pasteurised and what was found was that pasteurised beer put into kegs now kept much better than when it hadn't been pasteurised. This meant that since the reduction in strength 40 years ago, Speight's would finally be able to send beer to the North Island and not long after Speight's became available in a few pubs in Auckland and Wellington.

A few months later the cask yard on Dowling Street at the back of the brewery, right next to where James Speight's home had been over a century ago, was closed down with some ceremony. This was part of a wider plan to remove all operations from that part of the property since part of it hadn't

ever been used and the other parts that had either weren't needed or could be moved to other spots. That land and the buildings still on it were sold in 1991.

Once again Lion Breweries went through a restructure and renaming in December 1985. The company was split into three separate companies, The Hotels Division became 'Hancock & Co', the Wines & Spirits Division became 'New Zealand Wines & Spirits' and the Brewing Division, which included Speight's took on the old name of 'New Zealand Breweries'. These three companies were all subsidiaries of the parent company now called the Lion Corporation. This didn't change things too much in terms of day-to-day operations but presumably this allowed each group to act more independently while still all being linked. As far as I am aware, this structure is still in place today though the Lion Corporation is now called Lion Nathan and is itself owned by the Japanese Company Kirin Holdings, who own a number of alcohol companies, among other businesses, across the world.

After about a year in the job, in June 1986, Bill Leigh resigned as South Island manager and taking up his mantle was Speight's manager Steve Mason. Mason's four-year stint at Speight's had seen the company go from strength to strength and it is highly likely that without him the brewery wouldn't exist today. He was the kind of manager that Speight's needed right at the time they needed it and clearly his talents had been recognised being promoted through the ranks. Taking his seat in the brewery manager's office was Ian MacKechnie. Originally an accountant, he had joined Speight's 20 years prior and had become admin manager before his ascension to the Speight's throne.

In July 1986 another small milestone was reached, Speight's first female brewer. Tricia Todd had been working in the laboratory as a technician from 1976 to '82 before heading to Auckland to work as a chemist at the Auckland brewery. She eventually made her way back to Dunedin becoming the lab supervisor at another famous Dunedin industrial building, the Greggs Coffee factory, at which point she was asked to come back to Speight's to be a trainee brewer. Another interesting addition to the Speight's team in 1987 was All Black Dean Kenny. He would later go on to be a chiropractor.

1987 saw a slight change to the labels on the bottles of Speight's, the characteristic Gold Medal Ale logo being backed onto a dark blue background, previously this had only been used for the aluminium cans. However, the time of bottling on the Speight's site was coming to an end. The government had recently been deregulating the beer industry meaning that more beer could be imported for overseas, in particular from Australia who could pack product for cheaper since their economy was bigger. This meant that not only did the newly reestablished NZB have to contend with their rival DB but also overseas brews being imported and sold for cheaper. As such, NZB had to make some hard decisions. The brewery in Palmerston North had already been closed by this point and in September 1987 it was announced that the Waikato Brewery would follow. Soon after they decided to close the Wellington brewery and the bottling plant at Seaview too. Although the brewery at Speight's wasn't in jeopardy of total closure, it was announced that the bottling plant would cease production. This was pretty disheartening as they had spent millions of dollars to build it from the ashes of the fire in 1940 as well as being Hugh Speight's big dream for the brewery. Speight's were given nine months' notice to allow for the closing of the plant and a plan to be made for those who would lose their jobs. In the end some were transferred to other jobs within NZB in Auckland or Christchurch, others found jobs with different companies in Dunedin and the rest either went overseas for various reasons or retired. Thankfully there didn't need to be any compulsory redundancies so it sounds like the staff were at least somewhat looked after. Among the leavers was Speight's longest serving member at the time, Norrie Lewis, who had been with them for 43 years and was also Speight's last cooper. On the last day the bottling plant was operating a special brew was made. This was a special German beer that apparently would hold up to a purity law in Germany meaning that no sugar could be used. The recipe was thought up by plant manager Crawford Brown

and was the last beer to be bottled in the plant in its 17 years and seven months run. Just because Speight's wasn't doing the bottling didn't mean that the job no longer needed to be done though. The brewery was still making beer and you can't sell that in mason jars. So now Speight's beer would be transported to Christchurch to be bottled and packed there.

The same time that the bottling house closed also saw continuous fermentation cease to be used. It had fallen out of favour over the last few years and instead Speight's switched to batch fermentation. More change came with Ian MacKechnie being transferred to Christchurch in February 1989 with Crawford Brown taking his place as brewery manager. Although this was a sad time for everyone, especially those who lost their jobs, a new era in Speight's advertising was about to begin, one that would see their profile grow even larger. The Southern Man, who you can see a depiction of in statue form at the Dunedin Airport.

The next couple of years went by fairly quietly with a few more retirements and changes in staff until in 1991 Carisbrook got a major redevelopment. Carisbrook was the local stadium in Dunedin used to host cricket and rugby matches. Originally built in 1883 it was in need of some love, in particular flood lights that would allow it to cater for both day and night games. Speight's had been contributing to community projects, and in particular sporting related projects, pretty much since its inception so this was a natural fit, making the largest donation to Carisbrook's redevelopment to the tune of \$250,000, or about half a mil today. In fact, two years before this Speight's had begun sponsoring Otago rugby in general with the major team sporting uniforms emblazoned with the words 'Speight's Rugby'. Speight's still sponsors the Otago Rugby Union team the Highlanders today. The donation to Carisbrook though gave them the opportunity to do a bit of advertising that was much grander. The money itself was used to pay for the seating in one of the stands which were coloured in such a way to spell the word's Speight's if seen from a distance. The stand also had a variety of corporate boxes above it, one of which was held by Speight's for their use. The physical donation of the money was also turned into a big spectacle, with the cheque being tied to the leg of soon to be All Black Arran Pene who jumped out of a plane and parachuted in Carisbrook for the handover. After this it was recognised that sports sponsorship had become a large part of the marketing strategy for Speight's and so the position of sales manager for sports was created to specifically oversee this. Carisbrook would later be sold by the Dunedin City Council in 2012 as it was replaced by the Forsyth Barr Stadium that is used today.

In November 1991 Speight's achieved a well-earned certification where the equipment and systems were accredited by the International Standards Organisation, proving that their procedures were so robust that they always output the same excellent quality product every time they did a brew. At the same time the fleet of tankers Speight's used to transport beer were being upgraded. Or rather they were being replaced with brand new refrigerated beer units, or RBUs. Each one had signwriting on the side to fit the Southern Man ad campaign and bring him all over the South Island. This was expanded in February 1992 as legislation came through that allowed alcohol to be advertised on radio and TV so the Southern Man was taken from a static image to an actual bloke with a deep gruff voice, the ads even winning some awards during their run. These ads showed a bunch of blokes in central Otago riding horses, hunting, fishing or hanging out a backcountry pub having a cold Speight's at the end of a long day. They featured gruff men who spoke in deep voices and somewhat objectified women, they personified the stereotypical southern bloke and were quite the smash hit. I'll put a link to a couple of them in the shownotes if you want to give them a look!

The next month Speight's held an open day of the brewery, in part to help promote their new beer, Extra Gold, but also for every visitor that came they donated a gold coin to a good cause, the Yellow Eyed Penguin Trust who still to this day help to look after one of New Zealand's most endangered

native species. The open day included not just tours of the brewery but stalls, musical entertainment in the warehouse and, of course, free bevvies. In the end over 3,000 people came meaning about \$6,000 in today money was donated to the YEPT.

At this time there was also a fairly major upgrade being made to the fridge system. Up until this point, brine and water were kept cold in insulated tanks by ammonia circulating in iron coils around them. However, these coils had been active for some time and were a bit munted so they very much needed replacing. So, they were taken out and replaced with ammonia heat exchangers which worked in a similar way to the paraflows we talked about ages ago. You know, the things that work like fish gills. This was a much more effective way of chilling the brine and was the first of its kind in New Zealand.

By now Speight's had another All Black amongst their staff, Greg Cooper, who was part of the national team in 1986 and again in 1992. In fact, he is one of the highest points scorers in New Zealand rugby history. His job at the brewery was well chosen as he was one of the sports club sales reps whose job it was to manage the relationship with the clubs that Speight's sponsored. The leader of the reps, Peter Kean, had in fact recently changed position to that of sales manager specifically for the South Island licensing trusts. These entities didn't have a great relationship with NZB ever since DB had joined up with them to establish their Timaru brewery in 1976. Things had been gradually changing though with NZB reps being placed in Invercargill, Gore and Oamaru to try and bring the trusts on side. The establishing of a role specifically to look after them was a major turning point in their relationship as it allowed Speight's to get a larger market share with the trusts and they in turn got better communication from their local brewery.

Towards the end of 1992 tank filler Kevin Bryson also moved up in the world. He was previously the Speight's rep for one of the major unions and as such was quite prominent in trade union affairs. For this he was selected national president of the Liquor Food Alliance Union. In 1993 members of this union trialled a slight variation on the 40-hour work week. Instead of doing 8hrs 5 days a week they did 10hrs 4 days a week and got Friday off, which was a success at the time. I wasn't able to find out if whether this continued or whether it is still the case at the brewery today.

Speight's Extra was a recently added beer to the brewery's range and unfortunately it had not sold very well, part of the reason possibly being that a pale beer didn't fit the rugged, macho image of the Southern Man. The beer itself was based off the Steinlager recipe so it was renamed to Steinlager Blue and made part of that range, which saw it take off. Instead, Speight's introduced Old Dark and Strong Ale brands which were a bit more in keeping with the Southern Man vibe.

You may remember way back in the beginning of this series I would frequently bring up how Speight's would enter beer competitions and win them, which was partly what led to the three stars on the Gold Medal Ale. You may have also noticed that I haven't mentioned any competitions in a really long time and that's because Speight's hadn't actually entered any since winning gold in 1897 nearly 100 years ago. In 1993 they decided to change that and entered a keg of their flagship beer into the Open Draught Ale section of the Australian Beer Awards, in which they placed first. The old girl still had it!

Much like this medal win had brought Speight's back to their roots, so did another change closer to home. Wilson Distillers was set up on the same site as the old Well Park Brewery across town, so named for the original owner, James Wilson. In fact, they were also using part of the Speight's building as a bond store to mature whiskey which if you recall, was also kinda how Speight's got their start, out of Well Park's bond store on the present site of the 1940 brewery. At this point in

time, Speight's was at an interesting point in their history. They had changed quite a lot over the years but in a lot of areas they had reverted to the way Speight's was brewed back in James, Charles and William's day, albeit with some fancier technology to help them along. The brewery was using coal boilers to batch ferment draught beer which was shipped in kegs to help ensure it would last the long journey. And probably most amazingly of all, it is all still on the exact same site that the original trio bought way back in 1876. And that is the story of Speight's up until the early 1990s.

There is obviously a lot more that Speight's has done since then, such as the upgrade in response to the 2011 Christchurch earthquake, but the cut off for HANZ is the turn of the millennium so here is a good a point to end our tale. This has been a huge amount of work almost exactly one year in the making so I really hope you have enjoyed listening and learning as it was a heap of fun to make. I would like to give special thanks to the patrons who provided the funding to allow me to purchase all the books I needed to pull this all together. One of those books I mentioned was by Speights' own archivist, the late Donald Gordon. His book formed the core of the research for this series and his book is still sought after to this day as the preeminent source for the history of the brewery. I'd also like to give a special shout out to Andrew Winter, who let me pick his brains for when he did some archaeological work on the brewery in the mid-2010s and Sarah Gallagher, from the Scarfie Flats episode, who put me in touch with him.

Although our story with Speight's is finished, a lot of the topics we covered are subjects we will return to. Women's suffrage will be getting its own series later down the line but there is a lot we skipped over with the prohibition movement, the Greymouth Beer Boycott and the six o'clock swill. These episodes are pretty much ready and rearing to go so that is what we will talk about next. It will be a bit of revision of what we have already covered but with a lot more interesting detail that I had to skip over. After that we will return to the pre-European Māori period for the last three topics before Aotearoa changes forever.

If you want to send me feedback, ask a question, suggest a topic or just have a chinwag you can find my email and social media on historyaotearoa.com. You can also find helpful resources there like transcripts, sources and translations for some of the Te Reo Māori we have used. You can help support HANZ through Patreon, buying merch or giving us a review, it means a lot and helps spread the story of Aotearoa New Zealand. As always, haere tū atu, hoki tū mai. Good on ya mate.