

## Technology: The Can Drive

By [Tim](#) on September 17, 2015 [No Comment](#)

*The UK's packaged beer market is changing. In recent years, breweries that wanted to can had to commit to eye-watering order volumes with major manufacturers or be fortunate enough to be able to invest in their own canning line.*

Most of those in-between were left to look longingly at their US brethren, ably canning their beers with an enviable ease. But as breweries in the UK and Ireland continue to flourish, so have the avenues available to those wanting to can beers and increase their routes to market.

So when Beavertown Brewery's Logan Plant took the major decision to move the majority of the company's beers into cans, it was a key moment in the brewery's journey to date, and arguably one that has gone to great lengths in increasing the visibility of the brand in pubs, bars, and bottle-shops across the land.

With cans now accounting for 95% of Beavertown's small-pack sales, it's no surprise that he lauds it as "one of the best decisions we made as a company".



The ongoing debate surrounding the merits of packaging your beer in can or bottle shows no sign of abating. While a can's ability to protect a beer from light penetration, is unlikely to be argued by even the most ardent advocate of bottling, issues of taste and quality, and which vessel is the superior option to convey these, rages on.

However, a cursory glance towards off licenses and bottle-shops show one thing, an increasing number of breweries are turning to cans as a means to ship their beer.

### **Tipping Point**

UK sales of packaged beer is up and the balance between bottles and cans is tipping. Consumers are embracing canned beer to such an extent that the UK is arguably in the midst of its own 'independent canned beer movement' echoing the trend that hit the US more than a decade ago.

"People are changing, and the way they drink beer is changing. Canned beer is an ethos that an increasing number of breweries, not to mention consumers, are embracing, and it's only going to continue to grow," explains Andy Hughes, director at WeCan Solutions.

The company provides a contract canning service for small / medium volume beverages and, according to Hughes, business has never been busier with breweries wanting to make their forays into canned beer production. But why?

"Cans are innovative, and the ability to can relatively small amounts makes the whole process achievable. We are talking about very small breweries that are conditioning 1,000 litres, and our aim all along was to assist brewers, and allow them to compete and take their product to market," he adds.

Hughes also points out that not only are beer cans easier to transport, but that they also open up different markets for beer, such as sporting events where bottles are prohibited.

"We had a customer in Holland recently who was producing beer to be sold at a cinema. It's only when it came to the packaging phase that it emerged that the cinema wasn't going to allow glass bottles to be sold there. We ended up canning 15,000 cans for the client and it's a simple example of one benefit cans had over glass," says Hughes.

### **Market Flexibility**

Elsewhere, North Cornwall's Harbour Brewing Co and Somerset-based Wild Beer Co have made forays into permanent can production following the installation of new LinCan lines from American Beer Equipment (ABE).

The micro-canning lines were supplied and installed by Vigo, which has been the UK agent for US-based ABE since April of this year. The new LinCan lines feature a twist rinser, 7 head filling station, seamer, rinser, airblower and packing table. To minimise oxygen pickup there is a CO2 purge, a fob pulse and under-lid CO2 jet.

Eddie Lofthouse, co-founder of Harbour Brewing Co, says the foray into canning was a clear business decision.

He adds: “Flexibility of packaging is what the market dictates. Cans are convenient, they don’t break – so they’re ideal for the beach and festivals – and I love the fact that you can stick loads in the fridge! There are cost benefits too – cans are cheaper than bottles and we are able to pass these savings on to our customers.”



Harbour has been running its 30 can per minute canning line for a month at the time of writing, and Lofthouse explains that its sales have increased 30% since the introduction of cans.

“We are in the latter stages of negotiation with a number of multiples, due to our strong brand and as a result of using a canning line which is CE compliant,” he adds.

Vigo has previously supplied Harbour with a CIMEC automatic bottling line in 2013 with Lofthouse citing the supplier as “integral” to the success of the business to date.



“They give us good service, and the knowledge, backup, and support of their staff is excellent. We need to work to capacity and every hour and minute counts. Vigo enable us to do this with minimal down-time. I have no hesitation in recommending Vigo as a wonderful partner,” he says.

### **Right Time**

For Wild Beer Co, the decision to start canning at The Wild Beer Co was clear-cut, with co-director, Andrew Cooper explaining that “cans are of the time and now is the time to be in cans for beer.”

Wild Beer’s automatic CIMEC bottling line was supplied by Vigo last year, and the company’s experience of Vigo was a “key factor” when sourcing canning equipment.

“We chose Vigo for the canning line because we have an excellent existing relationship with them,” co-Director Brett Ellis confirms, “and they offered the right product at the right time – and the right price,” he adds.

Ellis explains: “The cans have met our highest expectations. In the first month of production we are extremely satisfied with the quality of product we are able to produce with the canning line. We are seeing excellent demand for our product in cans, which justifies our decision to move to cans.”

Jon Clatworthy, commercial director at Vigo Ltd, says the company had noticed a growing interest and excitement over canning in the independent brewery sector in the last couple of years.

“Cans for convenience is just half the story. Craft brewers are very keen to do all they can to retain the personalities of their beers and canning is one of the ways of achieving

this. Cans help protect beer from light and oxygen and retain fresh hop flavours,” he says.

WeCan Solutions’ Hughes agrees. “Cans keep the beer better, in my opinion. The pricing is comparable against bottling, and the overall proposition is simply stronger”.

The demand for the company’s mobile canning proposition has led the business to investigate the addition of two newer canning lines that will enable them to handle larger volumes of up to 15,000 cans an hour, which has resulted in interest from larger breweries looking into mobile canning.

“People consume a beer before they open it so ensuring a can looks as good as possible, and one that keeps the beer in excellent condition, is so, so important,” he adds.

### **Digital Innovation**

While companies such as Vigo and WeCan Solutions are enabling breweries to make their forays canned beer through permanent and mobile canning lines, another manufacturer, Tonejet, offers a printing technology that will enables breweries to open up new avenues for their beer can packaging.

Tonejet’s 2-Piece Can & Tube Digital Decorator is designed to meet the needs of short to medium print runs for a range of applications, and beer cans are a key application in this space.

Traditional analogue printing process that have been used for decorating cans, coupled with the economic crossover point of the suppliers, has meant that minimum order quantities of around 100,000 units, as well as testing lead times, have effectively resulted into monumental barriers to entry for smaller breweries requiring printed cans.



The company’s electro-static drop-on-demand digital print system is designed to enable canners and craft brewers to produce short to medium run can jobs with the USPs of high speed production coupled with high quality print, and at a low cost.

Digital can printing's benefits are not restricted to short to medium run economics, rather this is a fact of the technology. What is also attractive is the ability to change the design of the can at ease.

The domestic use of full colour digital inkjet printer in homes or offices enables the user to print a different document or image on each individual sheet. Leveraging the Tonejet technology, the same idea can be applied to cans, which can be ordered small to medium can runs, where the design for each can could be different or even personalised to an individual.

Tonejet's Digital Decorator allows for different images to be printed one after the other without the need to stop the production line, change printing plates, or change printing inks while the high resolution digital imaging process means that high quality photo images can be printed as well as traditional graphics.

The benefit of cans providing an opportunity for brewers to use the full container height and the full 360 degree circumference is well known. It's significantly larger than a label can provide cost effectively, which arguably allows brewers in the UK and Ireland to increase their branding coverage.

### **Return on Investment**

Simon Edwards, VP of sales and marketing at Tonejet says that digital can printing technology is enabling the availability of many more good beers with striking marketing, and branded products to be brought to market, with the potential to unlock yet more growth from beer.

He explains: "We have spoken to a lot of people, currently there are companies bottling that want cans. The feedback from the bottlers and brewers is showing us that there is an interest in cans full-stop.

"There is a great deal of brewers that don't like the look of labels, and what stifles some of these companies is the inability to print digitally, but the problem is that these machines don't come cheap."



According to Edwards, while the return on investment is rapid, the average brewery doesn't have the ability to support a single machine, which is opening up an opportunity with contract canners. He highlights one such business in the US, BevCan.

“With canning, the problem is that people want to can small volumes and if you want these printed then you will need to be putting in large order sizes to the major manufacturers.

With Tonejet technology, the cost is the same if you are printing 10 cans or 40,000 cans. But at the same time, the ability to print major runs is there, too,” he explains.

Edwards concludes: “There's also an opportunity here for major breweries to adopt the technology. If you are running the machine eight hours a day, you will be producing around seven million cans a year.”