

in the rafters of their first tin-roofed distillery in Santiago de Cuba. An odd pairing, you might say, but I think it's going to work.

Stephen says that it is a big change going from employee to employer, but he clearly enjoys the job and relishes the challenges ahead. Using the contacts and sales structure he had already established at Cooley, Stephen is shipping his whiskey out to over fifty countries worldwide, and there is hardly an airport shop I've been to that has not got their bottles in the Irish section. Annual production at the moment is set at around 1.3 million litres, which can be increased to suit demand. But quality rather than quantity is the key. Stephen acknowledges that they will hardly be challenging Jameson for market share, and so to produce a premium whiskey is their best strategy at the moment.

As I am leaving, I mention that tomorrow I will be visiting the Teelings' old distillery in Kilbeggan, County Westmeath. Stephen says I should meet a man called 'Padge', who was their distiller at Cooley for a long time, and has stayed on to work at Kilbeggan, so I'll look out for him.

Historically, distilleries have always liked to set up near each other, but here in Dublin two distilleries are actually conjoined. To the rear of Teeling



Distillery, on Mill Street, in an old tannery, is a new distillery to be run by the Irish Distilling Co. This will be called The Liberties Distillery. It is closed up when I pass by. Nothing seems to be going on at the moment, and nobody answers when I knock on the door. The workmen hanging around the street are building something else on the other side of the road, and they know nothing about it either.

Kilbeggan Distillery

Dear Ben
Thank you for your email.
We would be delighted to welcome you to Kilbeggan Distillery on Tuesday 18th July 2017. We would like to offer you one of our Apprentice Tours at either 10am or 11am.
With kindest regards
Denise
Assistant Visitor Centre Manager,
Kilbeggan Distillery



In 1757, a licence to distil was granted to the distillery of Kilbeggan ('church of St Bécán'), which has never been revoked - making this technically the oldest continuously licensed whiskey distillery in Ireland, and, as far as I know it, the world. The history of Kilbeggan is long and eventful. In 1798, a son of Matthias McManus, the owner at the time, was executed for his part in the failed Irish/French rebellion of that year, according to the records. Around half a century later, John Locke bought up the business and soon began marketing Locke's whiskey.

Mr Locke was one of those Victorian employers who looked after his workers. Grazing rights were granted at the back of the distillery, and a generous ration of coal was supplied at the start of the winter to keep them warm, besides the two daily shots of whiskey all year round. Locke seemed to have endeared himself to his employees, because in 1866 a boiler blew up and destroyed part of the distillery. Not having enough ready cash for the repairs, Locke nearly shut the place down for good, but the workers and residents of Kilbeggan had a whip-round and raised the money necessary to keep the distillery going.

It is amazing to think that this small country distillery even played a part in the downfall of the Irish government in the mid 1950s. Certain high-ranking politicians were suspected of trying to sell off the ailing distillery of the time



to dodgy foreign concerns in less than above-board dealings, said to have involved Taoiseach Eamon de Valera himself, whose party lost the election after the scandal. Kilbeggan was eventually mothballed in 1957. It was run as a pig farm for a while, but the local community began to restore the buildings in the 1980s, and opened it up again as a whiskey museum. It was later sold to John Teeling, and he re-started the distillery in 2007. The name Locke is still on the chimney, and the Locke and Kilbeggan brands still exist.

Today Kilbeggan produces around three barrels a week. I am greeted by Rebecca, one of the eleven tour guides employed here during the summer to show tourists how whiskey was made in the past and present. Last year, Kilbeggan had an impressive 67,000 visitors through the doors. Rebecca tells me that after the summer she plans to train as a primary school teacher, so I'd better be on my best behaviour. Having arrived a few minutes late for my 'apprentice tour', I suppose I have already blotted my copy book.

The malting house was across the road where I have parked my Vespa, and linked by an underground tunnel through which the malt was brought over to be milled. The River Brosna runs through the distillery, and in some places the river actually flows through the buildings, offering both production water and, once upon a time, power for the millstones and other machinery.



him waiting for me, so I set off. Eric and his family are there too. Séamus has promised to take the children out kayaking later on, which I think they are looking forward to more than a tramp around some fields that may one day be the site of something to do with what their dad does for a living.



The distillery will be on the north side of the island, which you pass by on the ferry here. It is right on the seashore, and the view from the still house will rival that of any in the world. They have already connected to the local water supply for production purposes and there are some buildings on the site, plus a few rows of plastic-sheeted greenhouses that are currently occupied by fruit and veg.

There is a small cottage at the entrance that they have renovated and set up with a model display of the plans. On the boards is a collection of stories from the island. I think my favourite is the one about the priest who came



being made. As we drove up increasingly narrow lanes, with increasingly tall grass growing down the middle, arriving outside the barn, he said he had told the others that I was a whiskey-interested French surfer without a great command of English; that way they wouldn't think I was an informer. I hardly opened my mouth all evening, besides replying 'oui' or 'non', and was glad none of them spoke much French either.

That night was a revelation to me. I saw how simple it was to make whiskey. The apparatus was all made by hand from stuff you can get at a plumbers' store. The mash was made up of barley, potatoes and sugar. The still was

basically two old oil drums, one perched atop a gas burner, the other filled with a continuous flow of cold water and a coiled copper pipe running through it. The joins were sealed with flour paste so that pressure in the still would not build up. The middle cut was made by studying the 'beading' - the poitín makers would shake a bottle of what came off the still, and, judging by the size of the bubbles around the meniscus, they would know when to start or stop taking the cut. By the end of the evening, the still was dismantled, and its constituent parts spread around the shed to be little more distinguishable from the other bits of plumbing and farming equipment stored in there.



Partaking of the 'mountain dew' himself, John Millington Synge wrote at the beginning of the 1900s in *The Aran Islands*:

One cannot think of these people drinking wine on the summit of this crumbling precipice, but their grey poitín, which brings a shock of joy to the blood, seems predestined to keep sanity in men who live forgotten in these worlds of mist.

There are toned-down, commercial varieties on the shelves nowadays, but the original illicit poitín was traditionally sold and drunk as a fresh spirit of up to 80% ABV. It is still available, by all accounts, usually from a friend of a friend, and remains very much on the non-parliament side of the law.



GIBBONS

PADDY
OLD IRISH WHISKY

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plates inside, four in total, which allow the distiller to produce a multitude of combinations of spirit. Gearoid tells me that what they get is akin to 2.5 times distilled whiskey from this special set-up. He explains how it works as we walk around the stills, but I can't get my head around it. I suppose I'm too distracted by - well, by the numinosity of it all.

Annual production is forecast at about 40,000 litres, which should translate as c.100,000 bottles of whiskey a year, based on the production figures so far and forecasted demand. Batch 1 is there ready for tasting at the bar on the left of the altar, and also at the next pub down the road, run by Lyons' nephew. Illuminating the apse and the transepts either side are the glorious stained-glass windows designed by Deirdre Lyons. The windows show various stages of the whiskey process: mashing, distilling and condensing. The left transept has images of the cooper's art, a reference to the fact that Pearse Lyons is himself descended from generations of coopers who worked in the vicinity.

There is no maturation space here, unless they find a crypt underneath, but warehouse space is ready and waiting somewhere out of town. Getting permission to mature whiskey in the city centre is not easy, and unlikely on a large scale, especially considering the history of devastating fires

