



## Zouch Alors

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In terms of roads to the wonderful word that is Whisky, everyone has their own road to Damascus, that moment when you realise that where you previously couldn't see what all the fuss was about, was actually something really quite special. The road that starts you out on your voyage of discovery of all that is Whisky. For Geoff Utting of La Zouch Cellars the road in question was the A81 just north of Glasgow. The bottle in question was Glengoyne 17. At the time Geoff and his wife Lynne were working as Steward and Stewardess behind the bar at Willesley Park Golf Club and just decided to put their natural hospitality skills to better use and open a small restaurant in Ashby-de-la-Zouch

This I'm sure was what first threw me when I visited La Zouch Cellars for the first time. As Whisky shops go. The one thing it doesn't look like at all, is a Whisky shop. The restaurant is still very much an important part of the business for Geoff and Lynne. Indeed it wasn't until they'd been running the restaurant for 12 years in 1994 that they branched out into the retail sales of wines and spirits. At the time the country was suffering at the hand of John Major's government and they needed to diversify, to expand and grow the business. That's when the A81 and that bottle of Glengoyne 17 resurfaced. Geoff and Lynne decided that wherever possible they would fly the flag for 'UK PLC' in the restaurant and the shop. Whisky, Scotch Whisky would be the cornerstone of the development of the business.

But as wine and Whisky sales grew, they outgrew the small area on the ground floor available for retail sales. Geoff and Lynne had a problem, that the building is 300 years old and grade 2 listed, so they didn't have the option of just taking a sledge hammer to it and starting again. So rather than a shop, they have a Whisky showroom. It's upstairs above the restaurant, as a showroom it feels different to a shop, more like a sitting room.

That word showroom is a really good one. There are no nice neat shelves, with rows of bottles all faced up like Grenadiers. No branded displays installed by someone from marketing. Rather than comfy chairs and sofas, there are bottles. Everywhere. Not in a messy heap where you can't find what you, instead it's more like a library or second hand

book shop, it's warm and cosy rather than intimidating and severe. A decade and a half ago there were less than 125 whiskies on the list. Now it's over 1000. Not that they sell everything, far from it. There are of course the house favourites, Glengoyne, naturally, with Speyside offerings very much to the fore, with a good range of offerings from Benromach, Glenrothes, Balvenie and Glenfiddich. Naturally there are a few independent bottling too. Not too many, just a few interesting bits and pieces. That accounts for the tastes of Geoff and Lynne, but it doesn't account for all the other bottles on display. To understand how the rest of the range got there, you need to understand Geoff and how he and Lynne go about things.

It's easy to see that Geoff and Lynne don't do things like many others who make their living out of Whisky. The Whisky world can be described as a microcosm of society itself. Within this world there are some who are so keen to persuade you of the merits of this or that dram, that it borders on the downright scary. Geoff is not one of those. When customers talk to Geoff about Whisky, they are not treated a sermon, if they did then there would only be Speyside classics sold in Leicestershire. Buying Whisky from Geoff and Lynne is more akin to having a consultation with an obliging doctor, who wants you to have the Whisky that you want. So as the range has grown and developed, it has been developed by what customers want rather than what brand owners are selling. Now the range comprises not just Wine and Whisky, but also a full range of fortified wines and spirits. From some rather fine Vintage Port to good Vodka, Armagnac and a range of Reidel Glasses.

This in turn has led to regular tutored tastings from which several groups such as The Ashby Whisky Tasting and Appreciation Society have been formed meeting on a regular basis throughout the year. This year things go one better with the organisation of the 1st Ashby Whisky festival on October 15<sup>th</sup>. The festival will be held in the upstairs showroom, so it will be an a whole lot smaller than Whisky Live. Due to the obvious pressure on space admission will be by ticket only.

Ashby-de-la-Zouch may not be famous for much except for a rather weird name and a factory that makes Hula Hoops, but if you need a bottle of Whisky and aren't sure which, then a consultation at La Zouch Cellars would be a very good place to start.