

# Alfred Barnard is unwell

as told to Jon Allen

## Budget whisky

This time I had wanted to tell you all about my first experience in an aeroplane, but I have had to defer that pleasure. [*A 'near miss' for us all. Ed.*]

A brash advertisement in my daily newspaper telling me I could fly to Glasgow for 2p caught my eye. Even allowing that 2 pence is over 4 old pennies, it is a veritable bargain. However, once I had added on taking a portmanteau, physically 'checking in', actually taking off and landing, taxes, fees, charges, surcharges, tithes, insurances, paying in the only way possible, 2 pennies had somehow turned into 9,576 - way beyond my immediate means.

To discover this took forty minutes of my time on the worldwide interweb.

Apparently the endeavour is known as a 'budget airline'.

So February found me grounded in London town. Therefore I went along once again to Whisky Live. In the hall, an extraordinary coincidence presented itself. At the Glenmorangie stand a charmless visitor from Ireland was kicking up quite a rumpus. I intervened using all my usual gravitas, 'Alfred Barnard. How may I be of service?' and offered my hand.

Now, in the whisky world this announcement normally causes people to stop in their tracks. (Why, at last year's event it successfully broke up an unseemly and completely unexpected bout of fisticuffs between Miss Martine Nouet and Mr Ronald Cox.) But this man ignored me completely.

A liver - it rhymes with skiver - standing next to me whispered 'That's Bryan Ryan of BryanAir airways.'

'What serendipity!' I said, tapped Mr Ryan on the shoulder and blurted out: 'Could you please tell me how an aeroplane could possibly take off or land without the use of an aerodrome's runway? Adding it on to the fare is akin to selling an automobile and charging extra for using the road.'

'I love the way you think. Who are you?' I presented my card and was inwardly pleased when the liver shouted out that I was 'a whisky legend'.

'Are you a lover of single malts?' I asked Mr Ryan.

'There's money in it - I love it', he answered disingenuously.

'So will you be serving fine malts on your

flights?' I asked. After staring at me as if I'd escaped from Bedlam, he said, 'I'm diversifying into something we Irish do better than anybody. Bars!'

Perhaps, I thought, he is redeemable. 'Ah yes indeed, I must say my experience of...'

He interrupted brutally, 'Forget all that welcoming nonsense. We're talking new thrusting shamrock economy - with as much sham as we can charge for. No blarney. No craic. No beggorah. Hey! Hold it right there.' Uninvited, he put his hand on my arm. 'I've got the name: Besod'em!' He noticed my puzzlement. 'A play on words. Sod'em and Beggorah... it kinda sums up the whole company.'

'What's the time?' he asked snapping his fingers at me. Removing my trusty hunter from my waistcoat pocket, I said, '25 minutes past six o'clock'.

'Perfect! Instant heritage.' He raised his arms high in front of himself and, as if framing a sign above a shopfront, bellowed, 'THE BESOD'EM BAR. FOUNDED 1825'.

He became ever more enthused, 'We'll plaster the windows with posters saying 'SINGLE MALT from 1p'. Or should that be 'DOUBLE single MALT from 2p'? Which will confuse people more?'

'I've a question,' I retorted. 'How the deuce can you sell malts for a penny? Apart from the whisky you'll have the cost of glasses...'

'Charge extra! Hey! I've just had a great idea. Remember when Zorba over at QueasyJet went into car rental and used to slap on a surcharge for bringing the car back dirty? Genius! We'll charge people for dirtying the glasses.'

'You'll have to pay barstaff - and train them.'

'No way, Freddie! Punters serve themselves - and we'll charge them for the privilege'

'How on earth...?!'

'Call it training or something. And don't forget, we'll add more for use of the building. Then there's the floor tax. And the door surcharge. And - this is the bit I love - it'll all be the bloody property owner's and the government's fault that you end up paying £12.95 a dram. Plus duty.'

'Why not introduce backdated charges for every year a whisky's been maturing?' I

asked sarcastically.

'Brilliant! I want you on board: whisky consultant. What'ya got? Sell yourself.'

Against my better judgement, but in need of funds, I found myself drawn in. 'One whisky to avoid purveying', I said unwisely attempting to show I have, in today's argot, my finger on the zeitgeist, 'is Blackwood's famous non-existent Shetland whisky!'

'It doesn't exist? So I don't have to serve customers anything at all? And they'll pay?'

'Well... it's not quite like that...' I really struggled to explain what has been happening without it sounding totally ridiculous. But I was eventually forced to admit that, as far as I knew, no-one had actually received anything in return for their investment in a whisky distillery which hasn't yet been built. He did a little jig of pleasure. 'Non-existent whisky? Love it. How do I get in touch?'

I felt they deserved each other so read him the contact details I had in my address book for the mythical distillery and wished him luck.

'Can't remember that - write it down,' he said.

I looked at him over my spectacles. 'That would be extra,' I said as I turned on my heel.

'Hey Freddie, we'll make a business leader of you yet,' he called after me.

With a heavy heart I joined some livers questioning Mr Kenneth Gray, the sage of Oban. Soon my spirits were soaring higher than any of Mr Ryan's fleet. I had returned to a world I recognised and in which I felt at home. Some 30 minutes later, as Kenneth was still sharing his knowledge with more engrossed livers, Mr Ryan barged up, pointed at the group and hissed at me. 'See that? That's Value-Added After-Sales Service. They should charge for it.'

Some old friends from the industry were missing from WL this year. Apparently, the costs - particularly for essential 'extras' - were too rich for their blood. I took refuge in my dram. On the nose, I got a sense of history, passion, decency and a great deal of charm; a powerful antidote to the whiff of greed. ■