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Food and Drink Wales Industry Board: update from James Wright (December 2024)

An update from board member James Wright.

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James has more than 25 years' experience in the beer, wine and spirits industry. He is an experienced director of Business Development and Strategy. He has a demonstrated history of working in the drinks industry across various territories.

He has been instrumental in the development of international brands. They include Red Bull, Corona Extra, Tsingtao Beer, Lambs Rum, Whitley Neill Gin, Crabbies Alcoholic Ginger Beer and now Wrexham Lager.

James has worked both in the UK and internationally developing high levels of expertise in sales, marketing and manufacturing. He has proven ability in the management of established businesses, mergers and acquisitions, and new start-ups.

In 2017, James spotted an opportunity to establish the first whisky distillery in North Wales. This resulted in the creation of Aber Falls Distillery. He developed a business strategy resulting in an award-winning brands portfolio across all UK channels. Also expansion into international markets.

More recently he has taken on the role of expanding the Wrexham Lager Beer Co as CEO. This is a role that has seen incredible developments in his first 12 months in charge. Most notably the acquisition of the business by Rob McElhenney and Ryan Reynolds. They have become co-owners alongside the Roberts family.

Mark Roberts approached James over 12 months ago. His request was to bring his expertise to turn a well-loved regional brewer into the globally enjoyed brand it once was. Wrexham Lager was once enjoyed as far afield as Australia, India and Africa, was available in Harrods in London. It was the only lager served on the White Star Line's Titanic.

James started by aligning the business on an aspirational shared vision. This was to once again introduce great tasting Wrexham Lager to the far flung corners of the world.

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He set about developing a refreshed brand identity that was:

- contemporary
- would stand out for modern beer drinking audiences
- translate well across international markets

A new sales team was brought in with specialties across the on and off trade, domestic and international markets. That team have quickly increased the business' direct sales to the on trade, as well as through wholesalers.

All the major grocers now sell the products throughout Wales. Convenience and wholesale is increasing from Scotland down through the UK. The brand is very much beginning to own its backyard with presence growing across England.

But on top of that some major international successes have been realised.

For the first time in its history Wrexham Lager is now available in the US. In a deal that was being secured before the celebrity co-owners became a reality, James' sales team in North America has negotiated US expansion through an exclusive with Total Wine & More — the US's largest independent retailer of alcohol. The deal will see The Wrexham Lager Beer Co feature in 276 stores across 29 states.

The brand has also transported to the opposite side of the globe. It is back in Australia, more than 130 years since it was first recorded by New South Wales paper The Armidale Express in 1884. It has secured a national listing through the Endeavour Group's leading alcohol retailer Dan Murphy's. This gives the brand a presence in 270 stores across the country.

This quick momentum to expansion in multiple international markets has involved finding partners to brew under licence, the securing of new distributors, as well as marketing specialists to promote not just Wrexham Lager but 'Brand Wrexham' – something that has become a pivotal part of the deal with Rob and

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Ryan.

The Wrexham Lager Beer Co now sits under Red Dragon Ventures,. This will also oversee the investments and interests of the co-owners in Wrexham AFC. This new alignment will see the two organisations work closely to develop brand Wrexham's opportunities domestically and internationally to create more prosperity for the home town.

What next for the Wrexham Lager Beer Co?

Wrexham Lager will start to be sold throughout Canada from Q1 2025. APAC, Iberia and South America the next targets for international expansion.

There is also a big focus on a new brewery site in Wrexham in order to meet production requirements and future demand. This will create major impact for the local economy with the creation of more jobs and tourism.

The business has received a welcome boost through the investment from the new co-owners. There is strong belief the business can quickly become a self-sustaining model in each market given sales-projections from its retail partners.

Ultimately, the business is already achieving its vision of ensuring people from around the world enjoy Wrexham Lager.

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