

IRON PIER BREWERY

It was Christmas Eve, 2017, when the tap was turned on the first beer brew; Iron Pier Brewery was born. Eight years on, the business has become a showcase for Gravesham and advocates for all things local.

Building community was the founding philosophy from the outset for Iron Pier. Co-founders James Hayward, chief brewer, and Charlie Venner explain that it allowed the business to grow to 22 employees and, quite literally, saved it from collapse.

Like many small enterprises, it was passion, not business, that brought Charlie and James together. James, a former water systems engineer, was homebrewing before opening Caveman, a small, financially unsustainable brewpub. He met Charlie while selling beer to another Gravesend institution, The Compass Ale House, which Charlie co-founded with John Warden, while both were still working part-time for the NHS.

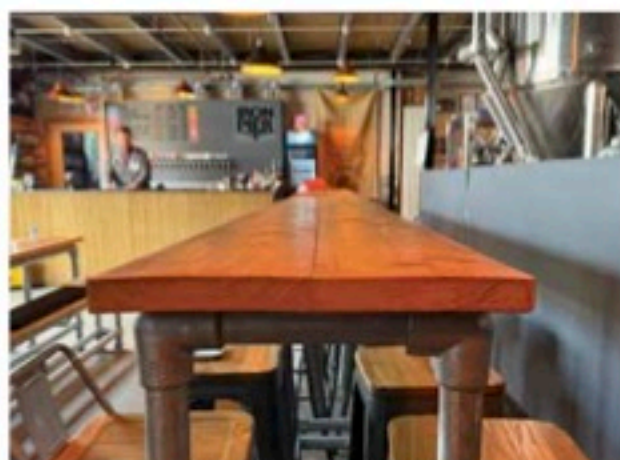
HOMETOWN

Growing up in North Kent, Charlie and James had deep ties to Gravesend, from nights out to rowing club membership. Determined to open in the town, a Northfleet industrial unit, surrounded by chimney pots, matched their vision for a community-rooted taproom. "Beer is the centrepiece to a social occasion, not the reason for it."

Gravesend artist Duncan Grant walked in on opening day in January 2018 and soon began organising exhibitions. The relationship blossomed. Duncan's art is now core to the branding.



James Hayward



PANDEMIC SAVIOUR

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic closed every hospitality business. Heads in hands: "two years' work gone, we're finished," was the initial reaction. Supplier contracts, agreed three years in advance, still had to be paid.

Natalie McCarthy joined at this point. The team decided to sell directly to residents. Although Tesco and Co-op were nearby, the community queued – long and patiently – to support their local brewery. For all three, the memory remains difficult to articulate without pauses. "It was very humbling," Charlie says. "It is what saved Iron Pier."



GROWTH

"It has been very organic," Charlie continued. "Word of mouth, people appreciate what we do." The taproom is designed for returning customers with brewing reflecting James's traditional background. "I am a heritage brewer," he says. "Subtle styles, not something shouting or dominating." Brewing, like cooking, blends chemistry and biology.

Iron Pier sources locally, where possible, using Kentish hops such as Goldings, and German hops for lagers; the focus is on pure hop character.

ECONOMICS

Adapting during these turbulent times is hard. Rising utility costs are pushing up prices across the supply chain. Pubs are struggling, and



Joe Groves

customers have less to spend. "We brew it and the margins are still tight," James reflects.

Natalie notes shifting habits since the pandemic. "One Wednesday the taproom is packed, the next it's one man and a dog." The unpredictability makes stocking and staffing decisions difficult.

SUSTAINABILITY AND INNOVATION

Brewing is resource-heavy; particularly water. When renewing the lease, they hope to gain permission to install solar panels and are researching heat recovery and water treatment, drawing on James's early career expertise.

Robots are unlikely, but the £25,000 canning machine was a valuable investment. Digital tools to reduce repetitive tasks are also a priority.



"Hoping AI can streamline admin," says Charlie, then quickly adds, "But hospitality will always be human."

FUTURE

Slow, steady growth is the plan. "If we can open one place a year, little hubs, that would be success."

"Their Board Room venture on Folkestone Harbour Arm is going well, combining coastal views with Iron Pier's community feel."

Summer 2025 will see them pop up in the former Fourth Portal. The new site will broaden Iron Pier's presence in Gravesend and continue the live events and art that have been revitalising the Thames riverside.

From left: Natalie McCarthy, James Hayward, and Charlie Venner



THE BOARD ROOM

"In our ongoing mission to Reinvent the English Seaside Experience, we're proud to invite you to The Board Room – Kent's most beautiful competitive socialising venue and Folkestone Harbour's largest ever. Developed in collaboration with Iron Pier Brewery, it's a taproom with something special: breathtaking views and fun, innovative ways to come together."

NAME AND LOGO ORIGINS

The name Iron Pier comes from the Gravesend Town Pier, designed by William Tierney Clark in 1834. It is the world's oldest surviving cast-iron pier and is a Grade II listed building. In the 19th century, it served as a key embarkation point for passenger steamers to and from London.

The Iron Pier logo is based on Tierney Clark's original engineering drawings. He also designed Hammersmith Bridge in London and the Széchenyi Chain Bridge across the Danube in Budapest.



William Tierney Clark FRS FRAS (1783–1852) was an English civil engineer and one of the earliest designers of suspension bridges. (Wikipedia)

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