

The Society's special system for numbering its distilleries is unique in the whisky world – but why was it invented? **Jim Byers** investigates

# Magic. Numbers

**D**uring the Second World War, British codebreakers spent months decrypting German military communications hidden in ciphers produced by the Enigma machine.

The Enigma codes were bewilderingly complex, but the intelligence information that was gained when they were finally broken proved vital in changing the course of the war and, ultimately, the course of history.

Luckily, thanks to subtle clues in our Tasting Notes, members don't need to go to such lengths to crack the Society's unique distillery coding system – nor is there likely to be quite such a dramatic outcome!

But our method of numbering rather than naming distilleries is very much an integral part of the

Society experience. Replacing the distillery name with a number encourages members to look beyond any preconceptions they may have about a particular distillery or region – for example, that only malts from

Islay are peaty. Shaking off the shackles of conventional whisky wisdom in this way allows you to explore the curious nature of single cask, single malt whisky – a world where the characteristics of the individual cask take precedence over knowing the distillery it is from.

But why was the cask numbering system

invented? Who better to ask than the man who invented it – Pip Hills.

Pip, who founded the Society, says that he came up with the idea in 1982, the year before the Society was formed. He recalls that setting up the Society was a “battle” in the early days with various obstacles to overcome, particularly resistance and legal threats from the established whisky industry.

“When I first had the idea [to buy single casks direct from distilleries and bottle cask strength non-chillfiltered whisky], I approached some people in the industry and they all said no one would buy it,” he says. “They told me ‘You can't sell whisky at full strength and non-chillfiltered – there is no market for it.’”

Undeterred, Pip forged ahead with his plans – and

## CASK CODES

The first number is the distillery code. The second is the number of casks the Society has bottled from that distillery

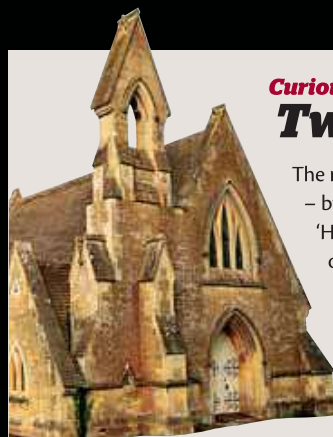
Cask No. 121.35

## Simple yet complex

We chose Cask No. 121.35 to illustrate the Society's numbering system because its name, ‘Simple yet complex’, captures the spirit of the numbering system. The Tasting Panel described this whisky as “astonishingly mature” for its age (7). They were also captivated by its “surprisingly mellow” nose and hints of Christmas cake.



If you can find it, you'll be astonished! Contact your local branch to see if there are any bottles of 121.35 in stock



Curious casks

## Twice as nice

The number 26.57 has been used twice – by accident. The first time was for ‘Hay fever in a church hall’, a 24 year old which was bottled in August 2008 (in the ‘classic’ Society bottle).

The second was for ‘An absolute cracker’, a 25 year old bottled in October 2008 (in one of the first new ‘anniversary’ bottles).

## FANTASTIC FONT

The award-winning font used to display the numbers for this article is called *Neo Deco*. It was created by designer Alex Trochut, whose typographic clients include *The Guardian* newspaper, *British Airways* and *The Rolling Stones*.

then encountered another problem. "As the names of all whiskies are registered trademarks, I was advised that, if we put the name of the whisky or distillery on our bottles, we would be open to legal action for infringement of trademark. Not only that, it would generally put people's backs up in the industry and they wouldn't sell their whisky to us."

And so the Society's coding system was born. "I decided to make a virtue out of a necessity and created the numbering system," says Pip. "We chose not to use the name of the distillery and used an identifying numeral which, through clues in the Tasting Notes and information in our newsletter, could be connected to the whisky."

The first Society bottle, released in September 1983, was from Glenfarclas – it was given the number 1.1 – the first bottling from the

first distillery. (It was 9 years old, 54%ABV and was sold for £13.45!)

Since then, the Society has bottled casks from 127 distilleries (plus seven grain distilleries which use the 'G' prefix in the distillery code), with new releases from a 128th distillery due soon. By 1 October, the Society will have bottled around 3,597 single casks since 1983.

Pip adds: "When we introduced the idea of having an unusual name for each bottle, once again, people in the industry said 'Don't be daft, you can't do that!' But, together with the idea of bottling single cask, single malts and using the numbering system, it was completely

revolutionary at the time. And people liked the idea – they enjoyed having privileged access to casks and also the arcane information we provided."

The distillery coding system has remained one of the most significant aspects of the Society's identity – one which Andrew Derbidge, Director & Cellarmaster, NSW manager, of the Australian branch of the Society is particularly fond of.

"Being a structural engineer, perhaps I'm more numerically minded than others," he says. "So, given that, and my role with the Society here in Australia, I'm far more likely to fondly remember the merits and joys of 27.81, than to recall the traits of 'Old school desks and hibiscus!'" 🍷

### Distilleries Popular place

- Islay whiskies are always popular and distillery 3 accounts for the most casks bottled and released to date at 168. (Look out for 3.168 on the UK Outturn for October).
- Our 127 distilleries aren't all Scotch (but they are all malt), as the distillery numbers include Japanese (four) and Irish (three) distilleries.



### Calling all collectors Rare as hen's teeth

- In some instances, we have only bottled one or two casks from a distillery – for example, number 32 (only one cask)
- Collectors should look out for old style 'classic' bottles with special gold labels to celebrate the 100th cask release from a distillery.

