



**THE EVOLUTION OF THE DRINKS CAN:  
CHANGING THE CONSUMER'S CAN**

**A WHITE PAPER**

“Innovation distinguishes between a leader and a follower”

- Steve Jobs, 1955 - 2011

We all know that Steve Jobs was an innovator, always striving to invoke excellence in his products and society. Society is constantly evolving. If we look back to where we were only 80 years ago, it's not hard to recognise the changes. No world wide web, no mobile phones and certainly no man on the moon. We as people and the world we live in have evolved over the years. We are growing in knowledge, in curiosity and in efficiency. We are building upon existing inventions and making them more relevant and practical for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As people and society have changed through the years, so too has the beverage can. Dating back to the 1930s and the first drinks can, this paper will explore the origins of the drinks can and how it has developed and changed to meet with a society constantly evolving.

### **1930s**

Let's set the scene: 1930s saw the beginning of intercontinental flights as well as the start of air mail - the world suddenly became a lot smaller. A great idea or invention across the seas could make its way over to the UK quicker. But what did this mean for drinks cans?

The reality is that cans have been around since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when Napoleon offered a prize for the best method of preserving food for his armies. From then, the can evolved over the years, but the beverage can itself was not developed until 1930. Made from tin plate, it was due to technology changes that this invention became possible. British producers introduced beverage cans shaped like bottles that were constructed from three pieces of metal and featured a cone-shaped top.

Originally developed in America in anticipation of the end of Prohibition, canned beer was introduced to the UK in 1935. Globalisation and the ease of travel made this development possible.

### **1960s**

If the 1940s and 1950s saw war, upheaval and then the big rebuild, the 1960s, debatably, was the decade of change in big ideas and society's values. Martin Luther King Jr. gave his famous, "I have a dream" speech, the Vietnam War was in full swing and construction of the Berlin Wall began. Society was in a state of confusion.

Society's previous views began to relax and with that came the relaxation of licensing laws, which meant that more and more supermarkets started to sell alcohol. Cans were the most suitable form of packaging for this type of outlet as they were light, required minimal shelf space and did not break.

In 1963, Ernie Frazee, an American, of the Dayton Reliable Tool Company, working with Alcoa, invented the aluminium easy-open end, although this was not introduced to the UK until the 1970s. This development had a dramatic effect on the growth of sales of cans as containers for beer and carbonated soft drinks, since it brought a new level of convenience to the consumer. Until that time, beverage cans relied upon a separate triangular steel opener to puncture holes in one end.

In 1964, the two-piece draw and wall ironed (DWI) can was developed in the United States. This was an important step forward, since it used less metal than the traditional three-piece can.

The 1960s also saw the rise of the motorcar. Big changes took place in the automotive industry and more and more people and families owned cars. This meant that days out were also becoming more popular. Road trips, day trips and picnics were on the rise and cans were the most suitable way to transport beverages while out and about.

### **1970s**

The Winter of Discontent saw commercial users of electricity limited to three specified consecutive days' consumption each week and prohibited from working longer hours on those days. Inflation was rampant. The late 1970s also saw Margaret Thatcher rise to power. If the sixties were a time of change, the seventies were a continuation of this and for trying to find solutions.

The 1970s saw the demise of the returnable system, a deposit structure for take home beer and soft drinks, which had been primarily sold in bottles. This system largely disappeared in the 1970s due to a rise in family incomes, resulting in people being less incentivised by small deposits as well as wide scale recognition of the convenience of one way packs to both consumers and retailers.

Social attitudes had changed, but so had supermarkets. There were more variety of products and therefore, less space on shelves. Beverage cans were right for the time and place, as they could be stacked and displayed easily and in different ways. The large surface area for printing designs was perfect for on shelf display. The result – escalated growth in the use of drinks cans.

The 1970s also saw multipacks become increasingly in vogue, specifically in beer. Consumers were offered greater convenience with the rise of the multipack and unit purchases saw an increase.

The two-piece DWI cans were launched in Britain in 1970. Ring-pull ends, developed in the 1960s, became readily available in the 1970s, meaning the drinks can became much easier for consumers to open.

### **1980s**

Margaret Thatcher continued to dominate the political landscape and was given the nickname, “The Iron Lady”, The Berlin Wall fell and communism all but collapsed.

The early eighties also saw a recession in the UK and worldwide, as well as continually increased unemployment rates. The need for improved -- manufacturing efficiencies led to lightweighting and the continual innovation of the can. By 1981, two-piece cans led the UK market. The two-piece cans used less metal and, therefore, were much more efficient to produce. Another innovation for the can industry came with the development of the retained ring pull-end in 1989.

It was in the 1980s that headbands, legwarmers and fitness crazes swept the nation. Health was at the forefront of people's minds. The can industry was looking to innovate the can to fit in with consumers' lifestyles. With this in mind, in 1986, new equipment for on-line nitrogen injections made it possible to put still drinks into beverage cans, fitting in with consumer lifestyles and healthier approaches. Gone were the days when all canned drinks were fizzy or alcoholic.

The 1980s was a decade of contrasts. What began as an extremely difficult period economically, ended with a boom in business and economic growth. In the late eighties, the marketplace became much more competitive. There was a greater amount of diverse goods on shelves. Again, wanting to innovate, the can industry introduced a reduced diameter end to save material, known now as the "206" diameter, for carbonated soft drinks in 1987 and then for beer in 1988. By introducing material savings and lightweighting the drinks can, the industry was able to offer consumers a more cost-effective pack format.

### **1990s**

So, where were we in 1990? The IRA agreed to a truce, President Bill Clinton was trying to negotiate peace in the Middle East and Nelson Mandela made history by being elected President of South Africa.

In terms of consumerism, there was an ever-growing range of products on the shelves - cans had to stand out more than ever. As a result, printing techniques began to improve and develop. In 1997, coloured ends were introduced to coordinate with can body decoration. The same year also saw the introduction of shaped cans, which meant that cans could come in many different sizes and formats. In 1999, undertab printing allowed symbols and texts to be printed under the tab, allowing for competitions to be introduced via drinks cans. All of these innovations meant far more excitement and variation available in drinks cans.

### **2000s**

September 11<sup>th</sup> occurred and the War on Terrorism officially began, Barack Obama became the first African American President in the United States and Gordon Brown succeeded Tony Blair as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.

A change in social patterns became evident in the "naughties". People were going to the pub less than in earlier years. This was partly due to the smoking ban which came into effect in 2007, but also due to the fact that drinking at home became more cost effective than ever before, due to reduced pricing on alcohol in the supermarkets. With the late licensing laws in 2005, more people spent time at home drinking in the early evenings, before going to the pub, resulting in the rise in the sales of multipacks of beer.

The "naughties" gave way to continual improvements in manufacturing and technology, enabling cans to be used for still and sparkling wine as well as iced coffee. The resealable can was also developed, offering consumers greater convenience and an easier way to drink on the go. The bottle can was also developed, providing consumers with a resealable option, which was light, durable and 100% recyclable.

Unique printing techniques were also developed. For example, Undertab printing allowed for symbols and texts to be printed under the tab. Other techniques included the development of thermo sensitive and ultraviolet inks that react to light and temperature; meaning cans could now glow in the dark and stand out in bars and nightclubs.

When the recession hit in 2008, consumers needed cost effective and convenient solutions more than ever. As a result, in-store promotions were at an all time high as were price wars between supermarkets.

As Steve Jobs said, innovation is what distinguishes the leaders from followers. The can industry has continually looked to innovate its products, and provide brewers, soft drinks manufacturers and consumers alike with a cost effective and convenient pack format. Today, 9.5 billion drinks cans are sold in the UK per year, an achievement resulting from each decade bringing with it more opportunities for the beverage can and, therefore, more options for the consumer. The coming decades will continue to see cans evolve to fit with ever-changing consumer, filler, manufacturers and society needs.