EARLY BREWERS

STEVE WELLINGTON, HEAD BREWER, THE WHITESHIELD MUSEUM BREWERY, E-MAIL: STEVE.WELLINGTON@MOLSONCOORS.COM

On the following pages, we invite you to take a beer trip back in time; focusing on the old brewing tradition in Burton upon Trent.

Brewing is almost as old as the earliest civilisation, dating back at least 7,000 years. It was first developed by the people of Mesopotamia (now known as Iraq).
The art of brewing is based on a completely natural process which was probably first discovered by chance. A bowl of unfinished barley broth left in the open air for a few days? A hungry passer by? It would not have taken much to put two and two together in terms of the alcoholic 'buzz': The hangover would probably have needed more research!

Judging by the many references to it in the writings of ancient civilisations, beer soon became part of everyday life. Laws on pricing and quality control quickly came into being. A 2-metre stone pillar surviving from 1700 BC is etched with the edicts of Hammarabi, ruler of Babylon, on the subject. There were strict regulations about the sale of beer in public houses. It had to be paid for in grain rather than in silver and the penalty for a publican profiteering by charging high prices for poor beer was death! (Oh to discover that this ancient law had not been repealed!)

Incidentally, do not make the mistake of attributing advertising to the modern day; the first beer advertisement also dates from around this time; written on a small stone tablet, it says 'Drink Ebla – the beer with the heart of a lion'.

THE EARLY DAYS OF BREWING

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the towns and cities of northwest Europe started to develop, with people specialising in different trades. Brewing became a separate industry that was practised outside of monasteries and castles. The brewing industry gained momentum as the cities grew, and by the 16th and 17th centuries, London was served by several large breweries. The very poor state of the roads and the lack of any other means of transport meant that each town would have its own brewery supplying the local community. Not until the Industrial Revolution and the improvement of the transport systems was it possible for breweries to supply wider regional and eventually national markets.

THE EARLY DAYS OF BURTON UPON TRENT

Anyone seeking a scapegoat for a less than perfect demeanour the morning after a heavy night on Burton ale could do no better than blame a Mercian nobleman with the unlikely name of Wulfric Spott. Wulfric, in one of his pious moments, endowed money and land to establish a Benedictine monastery at Burton in AD 1002.

The mathematicians amongst you will have noticed that that year heralded another millennium with plenty of excuses to celebrate 1,000 years of brewing in Burton upon Trent, but more of that later!

Prior to the establishment of the Benedictine monastery, a nun, who was passing Burton on a pilgrimage to Rome, remained in the town, possibly to convert the local pagans to Christianity. Her name was St Modwen and she settled on a small island in the Trent known as Andressy Island. She was credited with miraculous cures, especially of skin and eye disorders, by using waters from the well on the island.

After her death, her shrine attracted many pilgrims. Wulfric's endowment was primarily to protect the shrine and the pilgrims.

Once the Burton Abbey had been completed, monks, being monks, immediately started

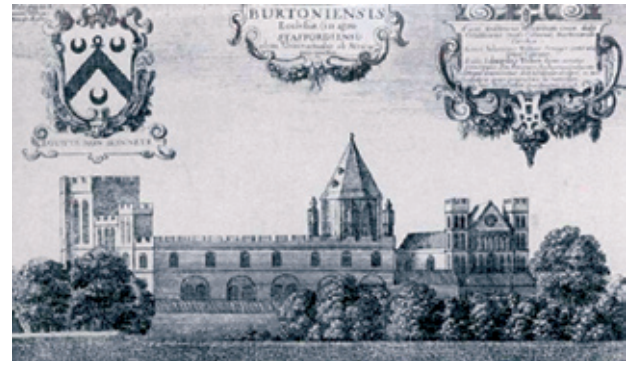
brewing. I have never been entirely clear why this process invariably happens amongst brothers of the cloth, but I am certainly not complaining, as their early activity put Burton on the map as a brewing centre. Certainly the adjective 'merry' and the word 'monk', normally in juxtaposition, gives us a clue, but perhaps a more rational explanation to monastic brewing would have been that the ale supplemented their poor diet, providing extra carbohydrates, minerals and vitamins which helped them withstand the harsh living conditions and enabled them to carry out hard manual work.

They used St Modwen's well on Andressy Island to brew their beer and at once discovered that this well water produced a superior strong beer for which Burton has been famous ever since. So there we have it! Not only was Burton water efficacious in treating ailments of the eyes and skin, it also made exceeding good ale!

(It was not until early in the 20th century when science challenged ignorance that the salts in Burton water were identified. High levels of calcium and magnesium sulphate, perfect for the brewing of bitter ales, would draw many famous brewers to the town.)

Monks did not have a monopoly in brewing since beer was also produced in small quantities by individual households either for domestic consumption or for selling to the local communities. Larger establishments such as manor houses and castles would have their own dedicated breweries to supply the household and any visiting travellers. It is interesting to note that women did the majority of the brewing in non-ecclesiastical locations. Skelton, a poet in the 1600s, described an ale wife, Elinour Rummin, as having a crooked nose, humped back, grey hair and a wrinkled face, but produced a quality beverage in great demand by 'all good ale drinkers'! Whether her occupation or continuous sampling of her wares contributed to her appearance is unclear, but a contemporary drawing of Elinour would seem to indicate that Burton water might have lost its medicinal properties!

In 1540, Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries, Burton Abbey included. Pictures of the mighty monarch would seem to indicate his love of both food and drink, but his quarrel with Rome must have surpassed his love of ale. Burton Abbey itself and the surrounding lands and buildings (including the brewhouse) were given to a local family, the Pagets.



Brewing continued in Burton on a domestic scale, with most brewhouses being attached to inns within the town boundaries. It was the licensed victuallers who kept alive the excellence of Burton beers in the 17th century, 46 of them were recorded in 1604.

In the early 18th century, Burton records begin to make reference to 'common' or commercial brewers, indicating that brewing was on the increase in the town. ➜

Following the Trent Navigation Act of 1712, the way was open for beer and other goods to be exported from Burton, down the river to Hull. This brought a new kind of entrepreneur to Burton – the merchant brewer. Merchant brewers were wealthy men with interests in several trades, one of which was brewing. The opening of the Trent River prompted a new export market for many Burton brewers. From Hull to the Baltic and thence to Russia and the Imperial Court at St Petersburg. Strong stout was a favourite in the Russian Imperial Court and a significant trade began for many years. Some say it was the strong Burton beer that made Catherine great and Rasputin mad!

BASS & BURTON

One businessman attracted to Burton was William Bass, a native of Hinckley in Leicestershire. William and his elder brother John were partners in a carrying business that operated between Manchester and London via Ashbourne, Burton upon Trent and Hinckley. William regularly passed through Burton in the course of his business. In 1755, he took complete control of the business from John and settled down with a new wife in the town of Burton.

The growth of brewing in Burton also meant an increase of trade for the carrying business, and the escalating volumes that William Bass was transporting may have influenced him to enter the expanding brewing business himself. He bought a house and small brewery in Burton and, by 1782, was supplying beer within a ten mile radius of the town and also to innkeepers in London and Manchester, no doubt using his own wagons for delivery.

By modern standards, the brewery was a modest affair probably producing no more than 300-500 barrels per year. As with most brewers of the time, production had to be concentrated between October and April, since hot weather made it difficult to control both malting and fermentation. Beers of this era were very different from modern day products being very dark, strong, sweet and heavily hopped.

A CHANGE OF STYLE

In the early 1800s, although Burton beer kept its good reputation, the total output from the town's breweries did not increase for over 20 years. A great change then came when the Napoleonic Decree of 1806 effectively blockaded the Baltic ports and destroyed the trade with Russia.

Burton brewers started to experiment with different types of ales. By 1823, the brewers had started to produce a new type of beer which was pale, sparkling and bitter. It became known as India Pale Ale or IPA, since it was popular for shipment to India and other hot colonies where the existing strong, sweet and dark beers would have been inappropriate. In fact, IPA could be considered as the lager of its day.
Burton well water was found to be particularly suitable for this new style of beer and, consequently, the Burton brewers were on the verge of a very rapid expansion, although the full impact was to take a few more years. Few people could have predicted that IPA would continue as a style of beer to the present day.

William Worthington established his brewery in Burton upon Trent in 1744 and, by the 1830s, was exporting Worthington's White Shield IPA through the port of Liverpool to Calcutta.

Legend has it that one of the ships bound for Calcutta with a cargo of IPA foundered after leaving Liverpool and sank in shallow waters. Enterprising sailors were able to salvage the cargo and the beer was put on sale in the Liverpool area and became an immediate success, thus changing the drinking habits of the English consumer from dark, strong, syrupy beers to a lighter, more refreshing product. ➜

BEER QUALITY OVER THE YEARS

For centuries, beer was made without any real understanding of the process involved and the quality was judged merely by taste or other empirical methods. In the Middle Ages, the alewife would have sent for the ale conner to check the quality of her brew. She would indicate that the ale was ready for sale by hanging out an ale stick. The conner would take two measures of ale, pour one onto a wooden stool upon which he would sit whilst sampling the other measure in a more conventional fashion. He would be wearing leather trousers, and if they stuck to the stool after a period of half an hour, it would indicate unfermented sugar and weak ale. If, on the other hand, the trousers did not stick, it would indicate that the sugars had been converted to alcohol and the ale was strong. The ale conner then set the price depending on the strength of the ale.

It was Louis Pasteur who forged new links between chemistry and brewing when he published his studies on fermentation. At the same time as Pasteur was researching in France, the Burton breweries had started to employ chemists to analyse the brewing process and the raw materials used.

Allsopps were the first Burton brewery to appoint a chemist, Dr Henry Bottinger, in 1845. Bass and Co were quick to follow and in 1850 they engaged John Matthews followed by the very eminent Cornelius O'Sullivan who was paid the incredible sum of £5,000 per annum, which would be the equivalent today of just under £1 million; such was the importance attached to quality.

All these chemists were pre-eminent in brewing research and, together with Pasteur, can be said to be the fathers of the modern science of biochemistry. Their work on malting, fermentation, yeasts and bacterial infections guaranteed that Burton beers were of a consistently high quality with good keeping properties. Not that their work wasn't viewed with suspicion – their laboratories had whitewashed windows to deter curious eyes.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Burton boasted some 33 brewers. In a town whose population was around 30,000, this was quite extraordinary and reinforced the importance of Burton water for the brewing of fine pale ales.
Success of the Burton Brewers inevitably led to amalgamations and takeovers. In 1926, the mighty Bass, then probably the largest brewer in the world, merged with Worthington & Company. Although under one 'umbrella', both Bass & Worthington exhibited an extraordinary independence from each other and continued to market their own products with very little reference to each other. It was only after the Second World War that a process of product rationalisation took place. Mercifully, Worthington White Shield, one of the original IPAs of the 1830s, was a survivor of this rationalisation and continued to grow in popularity as a bottle conditioned product within the company of Bass Worthington.
The end of the 20th century resulted in huge upheavals in the brewing industry. The Government began to meddle with the structure of the industry and pass draconian laws which would destroy many brewers and the enviable British pub for all time. The laws have since been relaxed, but the damage has been irretrievable.

Most major brewers, including Bass & Worthington, were snapped up by overseas companies who, without the cosy benefit of a tied house system, were able to exploit the 'free trade scenario' which the UK Government at that time was so keen to pursue. Bass & Worthington were taken over by Interbrew of Belgium (now Inbev, the largest brewer in the world) and were eventually forced to divest part of the Bass Group for monopoly reasons, leaving both Worthington and the hugely successful number one lager brand of Carling Black Label to the large and successful American brewer Coors.

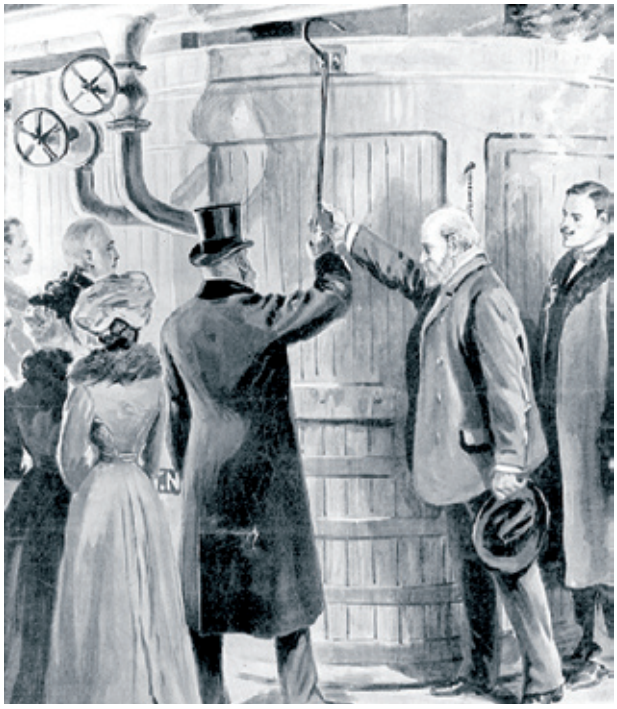
1,000 YEARS OF BREWING

The year 2002 marked 1,000 years of brewing in Burton upon Trent. There were many celebrations in the town throughout

the year, but none more eagerly anticipated than a visit by the Queen and Prince Philip.

During her visit to Burton, she and her husband, The Duke of Edinburgh, initiated two Royal Brews, William Worthington's Strong Queen's Ale and the Dukes Ale, in the tradition of previous members of the Royal Family. They were bottled in traditional pint bottles with cork and wax seal and were laid down to mature for at least 10 years. This brew was also a triple celebration, commemorating the Queen's Golden Jubilee and 1,000 years of brewing in Burton upon Trent, as well as celebrating the acquisition of the company by Coors. This sealed the tradition of Royal Ale brewing previously a Bass & Worthington honour, but now firmly established as a William Worthington initiative.

These Royal brews are well known and are much sought after by collectors. Examples of these Royal Ales include Kings Ale from 1902 when Edward VII initiated the mash at the Bass brewery. In 1929, the Prince of Wales, later Edward VIII, continued the tradition by mashing Prince's Ale. A double celebration was marked in 1977 with Jubilee Strong Ale, commemorating both the Queen's Silver Jubilee and the Bicentenary of Bass. Other commemorative ales are Princess Ale, 1978, brewed when Princess Anne visited Burton and celebration ale, 1982, mashed by Earl Spencer, to mark the birth of Prince William.



Burton upon Trent, in common with many other great brewing centres including Munich, Dortmund, Pilsen, London, Dublin and Copenhagen, still owes its historical reputation to its water. Modern brewing procedures, however, can duplicate the salt content of any water, hence location is no longer so important to the technical brewer, but the history still plays a significant part in the provenance of individual beers. Imagine Egyptian Champagne or Chinese Scotch Whisky, certainly a possibility in our rapidly shrinking world, but if I want a bottle of William Worthington's White Shield, I would make quite sure that it was brewed with water from the Andressy Well in Burton on Trent, founded by that extraordinary nun, St Modwen, and, curiously, many of my marketing colleagues would agree!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

- Steve Wellington is head brewer of the White Shield Brewery in Burton on Trent.
- He is a Fellow of the Institute of Brewers & Distillers and a member of the British Guild of Beer Writers.
- He has worked in the brewing industry for over 40 years mainly for Bass & Worthington and latterly with Molson Coors. He started out life as a doctor, but found the brewing industry more congenial!