

## **Brewery Tour**

### **Introduction**

Until recently Wrexham was a brewing town. Burton-upon-Trent and Warrington may be famous for their ales but none could match the variety provided by the brewers of Wrexham Town.

### **A Little History**

Welsh ale was a different drink to the Saxons' brew - spicier and stronger - but certainly to the English taste as it was taken as payment in kind. In the time of Hywel Dda there were two main types of ale in Wales:

**Bragawd** - the spicy ale flavoured with honey, cinnamon, cloves, ginger and pepper.

**Cwrwrf** - the ordinary ale.

Until hops arrived these two were the nation's top thirst quenchers. Most farms brewed ale and ale houses were home spun affairs in every town. The idea of pubs buying in their own beer is very much a 19<sup>th</sup> & 20<sup>th</sup> Century phenomenon. The last pubs to brew in Wrexham town were the Old Swan on Abbott Street, the Black Lion on Hope Street and the Hop Pole on Yorke Street. Brewing was often done by women, despite Henry VIII's ban on women under 40 brewing or selling ale.

War always brings suffering in its wake but the independence struggle of Owain Glyndŵr led to much suffering in the town. Not bloodshed but an ale shortage. Farming especially harvesting was disrupted so no brewing could be done in the town and Chester imposed a drinks trade embargo on Wrexham. Even when Chester relented as soon as they heard that the forces of Glyndŵr were enjoying a tipple, they re-imposed sanctions.

More recently, George Borrow in his 1854 tour of Wales said the only Welsh Wrexham folk knew was **cwrw da** and not even an **os gwelwch yn dda** to follow. Wales may have been presented as a land of Nonconformists and teetotalers but that was never the case in Wrexham. The Chester to Shrewsbury stagecoaches always suffered inexplicable delays until they discovered the drivers (and may be the passengers too) were accustomed to stopping for a swift half in Wrexham. By the 1860s there were 19 breweries in the town. Brewers held positions of power. Many became mayors. Even the Holy Scripture in St Giles' Church was read from a lectern paid for by the profits of brewing. To cap it all the Town Hall became a bonded warehouse after the officials moved out.

### **Historical Note**

Wrexham's attitude to drink was typical of Britain as a whole. Drunkenness was common long before Lloyd George restricted the licensing hours during the First World War. In fact the licensing hours were a reaction to the four

nations love of drink and not the other way round. Many older people will also remember the local referenda to decide whether the pubs should open on Sunday or not. Like all cultures, Wrexham no less had a complicated attitude to drink. An attitude made more complex by being producers as well as consumers.

## **Why Wrexham?**

The sands and gravels around Wrexham act as a giant filter for water that builds up on the impervious rocks beneath. It is these waters that the brewers used for brewing, not the River Gwenfro.

Wrexham stands above a fault: to its east there is hard water with a high mineral content suitable for brewing beer; to the west softer water with fewer minerals suitable for lager. Another influence on the siting of breweries dates back to medieval times when those parts of the town that had the Abbott as landlord paid lower taxes than those who had the Crown as landlord. The town was still divided into Wrexham Abbott and Wrexham Regis in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and nearly all the breweries were in Wrexham Abbott.

## **Brewers & Boozers Tour**

***The tour will take you round the former brewery sites of Wrexham. Unfortunately few brewery buildings now survive and access inside those that remain is difficult to arrange. However, you will still get a flavour of Wrexham's brewing past by following the directions given in this tour. The brewing industry was vital to the development of Wrexham and by taking an interest you can help ensure this heritage survives.***

**Duration:** The tour takes about an hour.

**Access:** The tour is accessible to wheelchair users, if assisted by a colleague.

**Unfortunately some kerb manoeuvring and avoiding will be required in the Island Green car park. The only steep hill on the tour is Yorke Street.**

*Starting from outside Wrexham County Borough Museum, turn left, walk past the Catholic Cathedral, cross over the pedestrian crossing and turn right into Bradley Road. Continue down till just before the bridge then turn right into Central Road.*

## **Wrexham Lager Brewery**

The brewery finally ceased production in 2000 and the modern brewery buildings are in the process of demolition. The original brewery building will hopefully survive as Wrexham Lager Brewery was the first successful lager brewery in the United Kingdom.

The brewery was the brainchild of German immigrants Ivan Levinstein and Otto Isler. They and their colleagues from Saxony and Bohemia did not think much of the local beers and were sure lager could sell here. Eventually they found the right spot in the west of Wrexham: the waters were similar to those of Pilsen (Pilsen) in the modern day Czech Republic and the lie of the land was ideal for the deep underground cellars needed to mature the lager.

In 1882 work began on building the brewery and the local brewers were fascinated. Decoction mashing, bottom fermenting lager yeast and double fermentation in the tuns were all techniques that got tongues wagging. The Germans brewers saw exports ready for the taking, while the Wrexham Advertiser thought the brewers might find our winters too warm for their lager.

In 1883 the brewing started but the "told you so's" were right - the cellars weren't cold enough to produce the clear golden lager they wanted. More importantly drinkers are conservative - nobody local wanted this new drink, lager, or at least that what the other brewers ensured.

The Lager Brewery faced ruin till Ivan Levinstein met Robert Graesser on the train to Liverpool. Graesser was an industrialist with a chemical works in Acrefair. He had his own mechanical refrigerator and he felt it could cool the brewery's cellars so he joined the company. However, even though they now started winning brewing prizes, the tied pub system ensured that there were few outlets in the town for Wrexham Lager. In 1892 the company went bust.

Graesser was a stubborn fellow and he re-launched the Wrexham Lager Beer Company. He did not worry about the town instead he went for two big markets: the Empire and the Army. Even the soldiers besieged with General Gordon in Khartoum in the Sudan tried to drown their fears with Wrexham Lager before they were hacked to pieces by the forces of the Mahdi in 1898. More peaceful outlets include the growing number transatlantic cruise liners. Wrexham Lager travelled well over water and the firm boomed.

The Wrexham Lager Beer Company produced 4 main lagers: a golden Pilsener, a dark Bavarian lager, a light lager and an unfiltered dark. The latter was particularly popular with local miners as it was a meal in itself. It was usually available from the "brewery tap" on site.

The Graessers ran the brewery until 1949 and apart from some arguments over the direction of the company, it was a successful family business. The only hassle came during the First World War when the German head brewer, Julius Kolb, was interned on the Isle of Man as an undesirable alien. Anti German feeling threatened sales though the loyalty of the Graessers was never in doubt.

Post war, the story of the brewery was a series of ups and downs. Changing tastes and the internationalisation of the brewing trade led to Wrexham Lager

Brewery finally being sidelined. Back in the 1980s Wrexham Lager were still winning awards for their brews but the bottom line is what counts and the brewery closed in 2000. Plans to continue brewing Wrexham Lager on a smaller scale never got off the ground despite strong local support.

*Walk back up Central Road. Please take care crossing Bradley Road. To be safe use the pedestrian crossing at the junction with Regent Street. Walk by the side of the Fire Station and make your way through the Island Green car park. You should pass by the multistorey car park on your left.*

You are now passing through the site of the sidings of Wrexham Central Station. Wrexham Lager was shipped out from here to export markets around the Empire. The Great Western Railway also served Wrexham Lager in its restaurant cars.

*From outside Argos & Wrexham Central Station Continue diagonally across the car parking area till you reach the site of the former Island Green Brewery. Head towards to the right of the old brewery buildings. If you are looking down at the old brewery across a small water course (aka the river Gwenfro), you are in the right spot.*

### **Island Green Brewery**

Founded in 1856 by William & John Jones who came from Caia Farm (now a pub). Their mother was a brewer and she passed on the trade to her son John. Island Green had a 16 quarter brewhouse and 32 quarter maltings. ( 8 bushels of barley equal one quarter which would produce 150 gallons of beer on average)

The Jones brothers ran the brewery until 1905 and were pillars of the local community. Their charitable trust paid for half of the Wrexham & East Denbighshire Memorial Hospital after the First World War (see Historic Tour of Wrexham.) In 1931 Island Green Brewery merged with two local breweries to form Border Breweries. The brewery buildings became little more than a store, said to be haunted by a figure they named John Jones. He was probably none too pleased at the fate of his business. In the 1970s the site closed down and fell into dereliction. The brewery has now been converted into flats.

*Follow the Gwenfro, crossing a small footbridge, make your way along the side of the Island Green complex. Cross Brewery Place looking out on the right for the Mitre Brewery on Pentre Felin.*

The Mitre Brewery was brewing between 1868 - 1916. The brewhouse and its chimney have survived. On your left is the former Old Three Tuns public house. The pub moved here in 1896 after the original Old Three Tuns was knocked down to make way for the Ellesmere – Wrexham Railway.

*Once you have joined the road turn left and head along Brook Street. Look out on your left for the small ruined bonded warehouse. Wrexham had many such warehouses in its brewing heyday. If you have some spare capital, help save some of Wrexham's heritage by buying and preserving this building.*

## **Vicarage Hill**

The Church in its many forms has had an ambivalent relationship with the grape and the grain. One puritan preacher, Walter Craddock, was run out of town for damning drink. While Rev. David Howell of Wrexham went before a House of Lords Select Committee on Sunday Opening and condemned the town's drinkers "Wrexham has gained more notoriety, for being fond of drink, than any other town around." Police said the town had the most drunks in all Wales, with Wrexham almost doubling the national conviction rate for drunkenness. There were more licensed places in Wrexham than your average town and with the Non-Conformist vote to win perhaps more effort was made to make an example of those who had overindulged. One wag said the local beer was made of mashed sheet music and boxing gloves as every night ended with a singsong or a fight. There was perhaps more than a hint of High Victorian hypocrisy here as the Church was the recipient of the brewers' generosity, while a third of Wrexham's mayors in the early years were in the brewing trade.

Attempts were made to wean people off drinking. The British Workman's Public House Co. opened a Cocoa Room on Henblas Street with canteen, library with free newspapers and a piano room. It was probably well intentioned but doomed to failure.

It was not just the Church that was on the drinkers' case: an 1849 Board of Health report stated that 7000 people, 60 pubs, 5 beershops, 4 spirit vaults, 20 off-licenses was just TOO MUCH!!!

*By now you should have reached the junction with traffic lights and pedestrian crossings (where Brook Street, Bridge Street, Town Hill and St Giles Way meet)*

This is the site of the Albion Brewery. The Albion was the first commercial brewery in the town and its entrance was right where the crossroads are with the brewery standing below the Church.

Up Bridge Street were at least three more breweries: Burton's Brewery, the Bridge Street Brewery and the Eagle Brewery. Bridge Street is one of the historic entrances into Wrexham. The Horns Inn that used to be on the corner was a long favoured drinking hole of the drovers and of farmers bringing stock to market. This was one of the medieval ways into the town.

*Cross Town Hill at the pedestrian crossing and then turn right before the public toilets and cross St Giles Way. Continue along on the right hand side of St Giles Way. Enjoy the view of St Giles' Church and then look out for the Cambrian Brewery site on your right. The development site on your right is the former site of a tannery, an important trade in Wrexham until the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century.*

### **Cambrian Brewery**

This interesting site facing St Giles' Church shows just how central brewing was to the fortunes of Wrexham and its people. Joseph Clark of Clark & Orfords started brewing here in 1844. However, the company took off in 1874 under the dynamic William Sissons. He seemed sure of his talents saying that London and Birmingham only wanted Welsh water, not to drink, but in a desperate attempt to make ale as good as those of Wrexham. The brewery closed in 1922.

Recently there were plans afoot to re-launch Wrexham Lager by using the Cambrian Brewery site. However, despite the efforts of several former employees of Wrexham Lager, the plan did not attract the venture capital needed. Sadly, it now seems the Cambrian Brewery will be demolished. It will be a significant loss to the town's heritage.

*Continue along St Giles' Way. Cross over at the pelican crossing by the "Shiney Curves". Continue along the other side of the road till you reach a seating area above an old bridge. Stop here.*

Further on there is a gateway that appears to lead straight into the Gwenfro, probably a relic of the area's industrial past. The Gwenfro Valley here was crammed with foundries, tanneries and breweries.

### **Willow Brewery**

The brewery was the other side of the river from where you are standing. In 1860 Peter Walker bought the brewery from Robert Evans. Walker had learned his trade as a brewer at the Cambrian Brewery back in the 1830s and he was ambitious. He rapidly expanded the Willow Brewery over a 7000 square yard site with 140 foot tower. A sign of the times was that Peter Walker became mayor for two years running 1866-7 and 1867-8 and supplied the town with a ceremonial mace. He also got into a long running rivalry with another brewer, Thomas Rowlands.

In 1882 Peter Walker decided to move his brewing empire to Burton-on-Trent. Some say as he was slighted at not being picked as mayor a third time. More likely it was the better business opportunities in the Staffordshire town. The only link to Wales was a Welsh goat on the weather vane at his Burton brewery as he died soon after at his home in Coed-y-glyn in April 1882. He

left £1000 to help build the National School on Madeira Hill, a sum of money roughly equivalent to £800,000 in today's money.

Walker's Wrexham business closed down in September 1883. The Borough Council bought the site and it became home to the famous Tuttle Street Baths and a host of other activities. Gutted by fire in the 1970s, the site was cleared soon after.

*Retrace your steps along St Giles' Way till you reach the Pelican crossing again. Then turn right and walk along Tuttle Street towards a large brick building to the right of St Giles' Church. This was Soames' Brewery.*

### **Soames' Brewery**

The brewery straddles both sides of Tuttle street. The brewery building being on your left and the old Nag's Head on your right, next to which were more brewery buildings now demolished.

The brewery had an excellent reputation. A 19<sup>th</sup> Century guide to the breweries of Britain commented:

"A visitor who had passed through Wrexham without sampling the home brewed of the Nag's Head would have been regarded as having failed in his principle and most obvious duty, and as a very eccentric person indeed."

The brewery was run by a successful father and son combination, William & Thomas Rowlands between 1834-74. The ambitious Henry Aspinall then bought the brewery which he renamed The Wrexham Brewery Co. He bought land by the church to expand his brewery and got into a big dispute with the town as the locals thought this land off Tuttle Street was a public park. He came down to earth with a bump when declared bankrupt in 1879.

The new buyer was Arthur Soames and he put his 21 year old son, Frederick, in charge as manager. In ten years Frederick had transformed the business, built a 50 quarter brewhouse and the bridled horse logo was getting known well beyond Wrexham. Barnard in his great 1892 tour of British breweries waxes so lyrically about Soames' brewery, you have to think that he might have written about his time in Wrexham after a liquid lunch at his hosts' expense.

In the First World War, the company had a lucky break when one of their requisitioned motorized drays was hit by a shell while on duty on the Western Front. The firm managed to get hold of a picture and it made great patriotic advertising for the rest of the war. Frederick Soames even had a new five storey brewhouse built in 1920.

Frederick's death and the depression led to hard times for the brewery. In 1931 the company merged with Island Green (already passed) and Dorsett Owen of Oswestry. The new company faced an uphill battle to maintain market share especially on a site where expansion was nigh impossible. Their slogans like The Wine of Wales and Order a Border- The Prince of Ales got them through the 1950s and 1960s but by the 1980s Border were a small fish in a very dangerous pond.

In 1984 Marstons and Burtonwood battled for control of Border Breweries. The lovers of real ale favoured Burtonwood but Whitbread who owned 19% of Border and 35% of Marstons backed the latter. Despite, public statements to the contrary, the brewery was closed down six months after the sale in October 1984. Currently the plans for the brewery involve converting it into a complex containing apartments and a ground floor restaurant.

The father of Miles Kington, the newspaper columnist, worked at Border Breweries and Miles has a couple of thought provoking tales about life in the brewing industry. Copyright means they cannot be reproduced so look out for the next real Brewery Tour in Wrexham Museums' Exhibitions & Events Guide or for news on this website.

*At the end of Tuttle Street turn left and walk up Yorke Street. You'll see some more of Wrexham's brewing heritage opposite the Nag's Head Inn. At the top of Yorke Street, turn left into High Street.*

*Walk along High Street. Now the entertainment quarter of Wrexham with the old banks now bars or restaurants. On the right you will see the Golden Lion. This historic pub appears in several old prints of the High Street. Look out for the Royal Oak Inn on the left hand side, once known as the Polish Embassy owing to its popularity in the past with the emigré Polish community.*

*Stay on High Street till you start to go down the hill, then turn right into Abbott Street.*

*Continue along passing another former pub brewery, the Old Swan, on the left. At the end turn right up Vicarage Hill, follow the road round to the right till you reach Regent Street. Go left along Regent Street and you'll be back at the Museum where you started.*

*Wheelchair users may prefer to turn right at the crossroads where Hope Street and Church Street meet High Street. Follow Hope Street round to left and continue along till you reach the Museum.*

***The Museum usually has some brewery heritage material on display. We are also interested in acquiring material related to Wrexham's brewing industry. Please contact the Curator if you can help.***

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