

BENSKINS OF WATFORD

By
Martyn Cornell

The brewery that Joseph Benskin bought in 1867 was a comparatively at small affair, even for the time. It had a total of 42 pubs and beer houses attached - but there were several in Hertfordshire three or even four times larger in the 1860s.

However, Benskin's brewery in Watford High Street eventually grew to be by far the largest in the county, swallowing more than two-dozen other breweries on the way, and becoming in the process the only regional brewer Hertfordshire ever produced.

John Dyson III died in June 1867, at his home in the High Street. The brewery with its 31 freehold and copyhold pubs and beer houses, and 11 leasehold ones, were put up for auction in London in November that year. The property also included two malt houses, and eight acres of land in Watford - the brewery was producing 9,000 barrels a year.

After what the Watford Observer described as "spirited" bidding, the whole concern was bought for £34,000 by a retired hotel keeper - Joseph Benskin. It was a shrewd investment. Within a short time under its new owner production at the brewery was up from 170 barrels a week to 250, and within two years the premises had to be rebuilt and enlarged.

At first Benskin was in partnership with W.G. Bradley, but in 1870 they dissolved their partnership, and Joseph Benskin carried on alone. He died in October 1877 at the age of 67, allegedly one of the last gentlemen to still wear leather wellington boots on all occasions. The business continued under Joseph's wife, Maria, although she was nearly 60, which meant that at the time all three of Watford's major breweries were being run by women.

Maria Benskin had her second son, John Pusey Benskin, to help her, along with her son-in-law Walter Green, the Head Brewer. In 1881, the brewery employed a total of 34 men, according to the census. Mrs Benskin retired in 1884 and her third son, Thomas, an architect, joined the company. The following year John Benskin had to retire through ill-health, and Walter Green also left. Thomas Benskin took into partnership James Albert Panton, a brewer from Dorset who, it is said, had been among the first in the trade to study scientific brewing under Professor Graham at Birkbeck College, University of London.

BUSINESS ANNOUNCEMENTS.

B E N S K I N & C O
B R E W E R S ,
W A T F O R D

PRICE LIST.

W A T F O R D P A L E A L E .

	Bar. 36 Gal.	Kil. 18 Ga	Pirk. 9 Gal.
No. 1—INDIA PALE ALE	54/-	27/-	14/-
No. 2—GUINEA ALE	42/-	21/-	10/6
No. 3—PALE ALE	38/-	18	9/6

W A T F O R D M I L D A L E .

No. 4—X X X X ALE	72/-	36/-	18/-
No. 5—X X X ALE	54/-	27/-	14/-
No. 6—X X ALE	36/-	18/-	9/6

S T O U T .

No. 7—DOUBLE STOUT	54/-	27/-	14/-
No. 8—SINGLE STOUT	42/-	21/-	10/6
No. 9—PORTER	36/-	18/-	9/6

AGENTS:—

MESSRS. CHAPMAN & ATKINS,
ST. NEOTS.

From the Hunts County News, 1st October 1887.



The garden of the Old Brewery House with the famous cedar tree. Mrs Joseph Benskin, Mr & Mrs Walter Green and Mr Joseph Clemson Benskin, c.1890. Photo: BHS Archive

The two men succeeded in tripling output at the Cannon Brewery in just four years to 1889, and by 1891, when more extensions were started, the brewery was producing 3,000 barrels of beer each week. Benskin's beers were on sale at many West End theatres, and even in the House of Commons bar! Two train loads of beer left the company's sidings every day for their depot in London.

In 1892, Thomas Benskin made a bid to enter politics, when he stood as Conservative candidate for South West Bethnal Green at that year's General Election. He lost the election, and apparently at the same time suffered a stroke which left him paralysed for a while. Thomas never really recovered from this blow to his health but he was still one of the three directors when Benskins was turned into a limited company in 1894.

By now the Cannon Brewery had 56 tied houses. The trademark the new company used was, not surprisingly, a cannon. But there was already a Cannon Brewery Company, with the same trademark, based in London. So in 1895, Benskins registered another mark - two hands, one protruding out of a jacket arm, the other out of a shirt sleeve, holding between them a beer bottle with a "S" on the label.

Just a couple of months later, however, the company had another go, registering as a trademark a waving pennant. The inspiration is said to have come from Doris Benskin, Thomas's daughter. Benskins could only use the mark for ordinary beer and stout, as the Imperial Lager Brewery of Tottenham was already using a pennant for selling lager. But it proved a good luck charm for Benskins, and the pennant is associated with the company to this day.

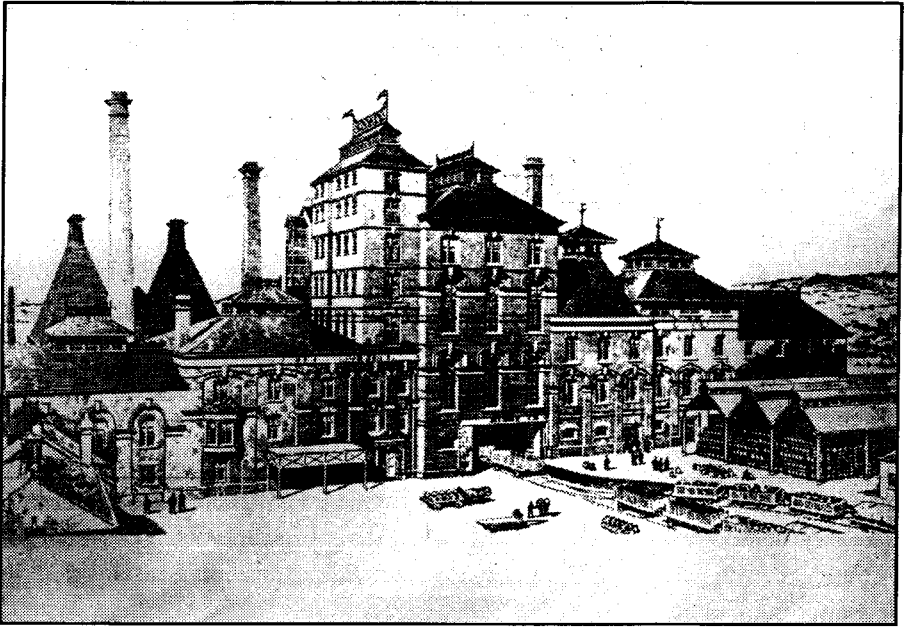
In December 1896, a tender of £7,150 was accepted from builders Henry Martin of Northampton for building a 150-quarter extension to the Cannon Brewery, designed by George Adlam of Bristol. It took until 1901 to complete - but Benskins were already starting the biggest and most rapid expansion ever undertaken by any Hertfordshire brewer.

The first acquisition was John Edward Groome's Kings Langley brewery and 32 tied houses, in October 1897, for £32,000. Exactly a month later Benskins bought the Kingsbury Brewery, St Albans (formerly Bingham Cox's) with 52 more pubs. At the end of January, Healey's King Street Brewery, Watford, was added to the list, together with 15 tied houses.

To finance all this, the old Benskins limited company was dissolved, and a new one set up early in 1898. Meanwhile, another couple of take-overs were made, Richard Ashdown's St George and Dragon Brewery in Leighton Buzzard, with nine tied houses, and the pubs belonging to F.W. Down's Woburn Sands beer agency. Thus, by March 1898, when omnibus conveyances were drawn up, Benskin's total holdings came to 215 pubs and beer houses in all, 180 freehold, two copyhold and 33 leasehold. The Cannon Brewery even had one pub in Brighton, the Good Intent.

Then, in August 1898 Benskins bought Hawkes & Co. of Bishops Stortford, and 156 more pubs and beer houses, from its owners, the Wigan family. The price was £263,000, and it gave Benskins a big presence in Essex with over 90 pubs, 12 pubs in Cambridgeshire and one each in Suffolk and Deptford, Kent.

Thomas Benskin, who was still suffering from the effects of his stroke in 1892, died at his home off Grosvenor Square, London in March 1903, aged 51. At the time of his death, though, he was Chairman not only of Benskins but also of Stretton's Derby Brewery and the Dortmund German Brewery.



The Watford Brewery circa 1900.

Thomas's place on the Benskins board was taken by his son, Eric Seagrave Benskin, who was then 24. Under Thomas, the Cannon Brewery tied house estate had risen to nine times the size it had been when Joseph Benskin bought the concern back in 1867. Tragically Eric never got the chance to show what he could do. Two years after joining the board he died aged just 26, in June 1905, of heart disease.

The family link was renewed in 1908 when Captain William Briggs, the husband of Doris Benskin, joined the Benskin's directors. That same year company Chairman, James Panton, revealed that the Benskins tied house estate now numbered 400 pubs.

Captain Briggs - later Colonel Briggs - was made joint Managing Director of Benskins in 1910, and sole MD in 1914. The previous year, in June 1913, Benskins bought the long-troubled Locke & Smith's brewery in Berkhamstead and its 40 surviving pubs, the price being £37,600. Locke & Smith had been leasing the pubs of James Batchelar's former Dagnall Brewery from Fuller Smith & Turner, who had bought the brewery in 1897. In December 1913, Benskins bought five of these pubs for the bargain price of only £3,200.

During the Great War, Benskins developed a large export trade to Belgium, shipping its beer by canal to the London docks, presumably for the British Army. Two small takeovers were made in 1915 - Bailey Brother's Fox Brewery in Bishops Stortford, with one off licence, and Walter Harris Pullen's brewery at Aston Clinton, Bucks, also with one tied house.

A much bigger deal was struck in January 1920, when Benskins acquired Pryor Reid's brewery in Hatfield. The price of £195,000 included 105 pubs. Of those, 11 were formerly part of Pryor Reid's subsidiary Glovers of Harpenden. Then in October 1923, Benskins took over their neighbours in Watford High Street, M.A. Sedgewick & Co. whose brewery controlled some 90 pubs. The Watford Observer said the purchase brought Benskin's own estate up to approximately 700 pubs, adding that the purchase price was "very heavy, but not divulged".

The growth of the Benskins empire continued with the purchase of Roberts & Wilson's brewery in Ivinghoe, with more than 20 pubs, in 1927. Two years later they acquired another much larger Buckinghamshire brewer, WA G. Weller of Amersham, with 140-odd pubs. But that was the last acquisition Benskins were to make for more than 20 years.

In the Second World War Government regulations restricting the strength of beer forced Benskins to stop brewing their famous strong bottled beer, Colne Spring Ale. It had been well-regarded by connoisseurs since the 19th century, a naturally conditioned in the bottle beer with an original gravity of a powerful 1093o. It was conditioned for at least a year before it went on sale, and its restorative powers were legendary - sick drayhorses were given a pint a day.

Colonel Briggs retired as managing director in October 1946, aged 75, though he stayed on as chairman of Benskins until his death in August 1951. His obituary in the company magazine, the Pennant, said that he had refused to advertise the brewery "except in a very small way", and he had cut out all advertising except the Benskins name on the sides of their pubs and drays.

In the summer of 1951, Benskins made its last takeover, of the tiny Wells Watford Brewery in St Albans Road, with a handful of tied houses. About the same time Colne Spring Ale was revived, though no longer matured in the bottle but pasteurised like most other bottled beers.

By the mid -1950s, Benskins had 636 pubs and hotels, and 16 off-licences. But there were bigger fish about looking to expand and on 6th February 1957 rumours started of a take-over bid for the Watford company. The next day the identity of the bidder was revealed - Ind Coope & Allsopp of Romford and Burton. On 13th March the bid was officially accepted and Benskins became part of (what was then) the biggest brewing concern in Britain, with over 4,000 pubs.

The Watford brewery kept on brewing, though as the 1960s wore on the Benskins name slowly began to vanish from the pubs. Eventually Benskins Bitter was replaced by Ind Coope Superdraught in about 1970, and the brewery was finally closed with the minimum of fuss in 1972. It was demolished seven years later.



Ironically, the very next year Ind Coope revived the Benskins name, along with the names of several other big companies they had taken over, for subsidiaries of the main company. A "Benskins Bitter" - brewed to the old recipe, but in Romford - appeared in Hertfordshire Ind Coope pubs, and the old red and gold Benskins colour scheme was brought back for pubs and drays, together with the pennant trade mark.

Meanwhile the old brewer's house in Watford High Street had also received a new lease of life. Watford Council turned it into the town museum - in large part dedicated to the brewing history of the district.

This article first appeared in Journal No. 51 November 1987.
