EARLY MEMORIES OF LIFE AT BENSKINS OF WATFORD 1948 to 1953

by
John Perry

As a 16-year-old, I entered into the world of Benskins the brewers in Watford, now alas long gone. It seems strange to recall such a large undertaking, as it was then, should have been bought out just to eliminate a rival, which is precisely what took place.

I had worked for just under two years before starting my career in the world of brewing. We left school in those days at the tender age of 14. Somehow I cannot envisage today's children doing the same.

My first job was a label boy. As the beer was bottled, it was my job to see each bottle had a label. The machine was all hand fed with pints or quarts, the stoppers were all put in by hand and the label over the top of the stopper was called a slip.

There was a large board, which was pasted up, and the labels or slips were laid out into the paste and then either applied over the top as a slip or put onto the bottle as a label.

This seemed like quite a lark at the start but the machine was relentless and it was hard to make up if you got behind.

As one's proficiency grew, then there were other jobs on the machine to be learned. The bottles came from the bottle-washing plant and had to be put on to a spout on the machine, which then rotated to fill. As the filled bottle came round, it was taken by hand and put on to a large wheel, the bottles laid back to present the body to the label and slip boys.

Then, filled bottles were packed into crates; one dozen for pints and quarts in fours. As you can see, we were all "handraulic". Being young, we were always up to something, like seeing how far you would dare to let the labels get behind before making up for lost time. The beers we bottled were India Pale Ale, Stout, Brown Ale, Light Ale, Jubilee Ale, Colne Spring Ale, Cider from Gayners, of Attleborough, Guinness on licence delivered by tanker, from Park Royal in London, and then bottled.

Sometimes we had to work on the automatic machines. These were for filling half pints and were a bit "sissy" for us big strong lads. These half pints were packed into crates of two dozen, the metal tops being called Crowns.

We all wore clogs, with the wooden soles and the metal cleats underneath. We used to find an old pair of Wellingtons and cut the soles off, then put the Wellington tops on to our legs and lastly put on the clogs. Then, with a long apron, we could work in the wet all day.

Believe it or not, there are still no hairs on the back of my calves to this day, as an effect of wearing Wellingtons continually.

The reason for the clogs was to stop us getting cut on all the broken glass underfoot. By the way, broken glass is called cullet in the brewing trade. Ours was taken away to be recycled.

We saw the introduction of the first lagers into the system; one was called Castle, or Tuborg; then came Carlsberg. What a difference they made to the brewing industry in this country. The ladies, apparently, do not like the smell of beer but lager is acceptable.

Then I got a job in despatch. This was the floor where all the filled bottles were stored. As the inspectors called out their requirements, we sent the crates down a chute to the loading stage to be loaded onto the waiting lorries.

We were continually trying to wheel higher and higher stacks of crates, so there were some spectacular crashes at times as we tried to go faster than each other but boys will be boys, I suppose.

Christmas was a busy time with all the reserves of bottles and crates coming out of store in the old brewery buildings by the river Colne in Lower High Street. It was Healey's brewery at one time, I believe. It had an old fire engine, which was hand pumped, and this must be in a museum now.

While across the river from these storage buildings was the maltings, below these was the storage for the famed Colne Spring Ale. This stayed in the barrels for some months, and, as the old brewery was changed into a maltings, the cellars were still beneath the malting floors - an ideal place for storage of Colne Spring.

One thing I found really strange was the fact there is no water in a brewery. Its called liquor. I suppose that is so no one can say they watered down the beer. The barrel sheds took up the whole of the central yard. There were hundreds of barrels stacked up inside. The barrels were Russian oak, the Cooperage was always busy, and during my last year at Benskins the last cooper was given his articles having completed his apprenticeship. For this he was put in a barrel and covered in the most unimaginable filth and then paraded around the premises - another old custom gone forever.

As the barrels came back from the customers, they were unloaded, and then a man had a lance with a gaslight on the end which enabled him to see if there was any pieces of the bung left inside. He sniffed to see if the barrel was sweet - hence his title Sniffer - and the pieces left inside he deftly removed with a sharp spike.

The barrel sheds were a place where many of the inmates of Leavesden Asylum worked. They walked to work all the way from Leavesden to the brewery and then home again afterwards. Sometimes as we walked through the sheds, a face would appear and the action of shooting would take place with a finger as the gun.

They all worked very hard though and needed to be stopped at Beaver time. This was the beer ration, two pints for all, except the Maltsters who got four pints. Most people drew their ration in two separate one pint tin containers like a soldier's water bottle.

There was a canteen, where the first few hours every day were spent making rolls for the hungry workers. These were picked up by one of the youngsters - a label boy was a good person to send.

Beneath the canteen was the bonded stores, there they bottled spirits. These came in very large barrels called pipes and butts. I am told the spirit came in at 100 proof and was then cut with distilled water, to the 70 or so whisky is sold at today - yes, I know I said water but it was distilled and so not the same.

At any time there would be grain lorries from James and Sons in the yard. These picked up the spent grains that once had been malt, to be used in cattle feed, when the used malt is first kibbled - that is to squash it slightly, so when it is boiled the malt is all used up.

That lovely smell that is brewing will not be smelled again in Watford. Some disliked it but I thought it was a nice smell and on cold days the steam would rise to quite a height over the brew house.

The thing I found fascinating was the yeast, which started in the brew as a small batch in a tiny vessel but ended up being what looked like tons of the stuff, which went to Marmite. Every so often, they would start again with a small amount and end up with loads of it.

Each brew had to have a small amount taken to the brewer's office, where they could keep an eye on each batch, checking for colour, etc. They were in charge overall. The head brewer was Mr Batkin. There were other brewers, such as Mr Norton and Mr Kilkenny, who was the son of the managing director.

There was a coppersmith, who had busy time, as all the vessels in the brewery were copper-lined. When I go these days to a distillery, all the copper reminds me of the brewery - the fermenting vessels were wood with a copper lining.

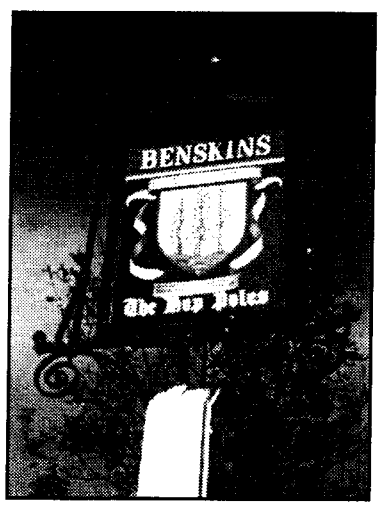
When the men stacked the barrels, they put their heads together to make a stable platform to lift the weights safely, and yes it really works. At odd times we tried it, it seems to make large weights quite effortless - hence putting your heads together, I suppose.

Can you see them with legs splayed with caps locked together, the barrel swung with one easy movement up on to the stack? This was only with the smaller ones, I might add.

On my trips on the lorries at odd times, it was interesting to see just where Ben-skins had public houses, such as Much Hadham and Christmas Pie. Just two of the strange places that we ended up while delivering the supplies to the pubs.

Out in the country some of the pubs did not even have cellars. The barrels were put up behind the counter on to a ladder like device, and the beer was drawn straight from them. This was even advertised outside, with the addition to the pub sign of the words "straight from the wood".

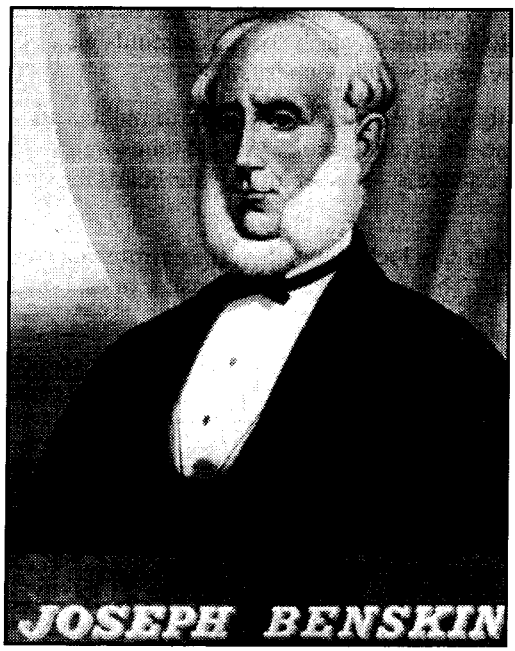
One of the pubs was called The Case is Altered but just what it meant, I never discovered. Most were names of animals or kings and queens, arms or heads. Most had lovely signs, the pictures being real works of art, all refurbished at Watford in the Builders Yard, then repainted by Millers in King Street, a local sign-writing firm.



The Hop Poles,
Great Hallingbury, Essex

Then my call for National Service came up and brewery service stopped for two years, before I returned to resume employment in the bottling stores. My job had been filled. There was, however, a vacancy in the filter room.

Beer is filtered as it is bottled. It is also carbonated by the process of adding carbon dioxide to make the beer sparkle in the glass. The carbon dioxide came in frozen blocks. These were put into a cylinder with a hot water jacket on the outside.



As the hot water melted - the cardice, as it was called - the pressure rose in the cylinder and then was put into the beer. The traditionalists do not like gassy beer, nor did they then.

The filters had to be made from paper pulp, which was washed and reused. There were large washing machine-like containers for this purpose. The old filters were shredded by hand and then put into the machine and steam heated; large paddles reduced the contents to pulpy water.

After thoroughly washing the pulp, it was put into a mould and water pressure squeezed all the water out to make a new filter. About 40 of these went into a tall filter body. When in use, the beer went in one end cloudy and out of the other clear.

Modernity reared its head in the shape of rotary filters from Denmark. These spun at an incredible speed, like a spin drier, however the plates inside the filter got really mucky so we had to take them apart and clean them.

This time there were about 100 plates to be cleaned each time. So much for progress!

In the early 1950s, in my 20s, I was employed as a maltster in a two-man malting situated in Three Tuns Yard. This was just across the road from where the Watford Museum now stands. The reason for my writing this is, because of my young age at that time, I must be the last of the maltsters alive that worked for Benskins.

There were just two men in our malthouse. There was a larger maltings, however, situated at the riverside, down by the Colne. This had six men but worked on the same practice as our smaller maltings. There was what was called an automatic malthouse, in which the growing grain was turned in large drums by electricity and not by hand, as was the case in the other two maltings.

The maltings started when barley was put into a large brick-built vessel, called a steep, then soaked by a revolving arm, called a sparge. After two days, it was shovelled out to stay in a heap until heat was generated, and then it was spread out on the floor to start growing. The rate of growth was controlled by the action of turning to maintain steady growth. The grains looked like spiders, with their roots getting longer. While this was going on, another piece was steeped at the other end of the maltings to provide continuity with a new piece every two days.

In the final days of growing, this was controlled just by the thickness of the grain on the floor and by ploughing with an implement with steel blades, which was pulled through the grains to aerate it as needed.

The other method was to turn each piece, as each load was called, with a wooden fork. This was used to literally throw the grain into the air, and so cool it down. Sometimes, if the weather was cool, the piece stayed fairly thick all the time.

There were six pieces on the go at one time. The floors were arranged to be each side of a central kiln, for this is where the grain was eventually going to end up. There was a hoist worked by a pulling on a rope to engage a clutch. It was loaded by a large basket on wheels, called a skip or skep. These were repaired by a basket-maker in Chapman's Yard, opposite Benskins main gates, which had Weston's Fish and Chip Shop on one side and a small post office on the other.

The kiln was on two floors, with the spare heat from the lower kiln floor used to get the grains partially dry before being loaded on to the lower floor by means of traps. These were just like manholes. The whole object of the malthouse was to keep a continuous supply of malt for the brewery.

The temperature, when unloading the kiln, could be as high as 160 o F. The shovels had to be wood to prevent damage to the grain. Also, they would have given a nasty burn if they had been metal. The top kiln was the least easy to handle because of the steam, just like being in a bad fog, which came from the top kiln to bottom kiln every two days.

The floors of the kiln were like a heavy metal gauze, or netting, that was narrow enough to stop the grains from falling through but the heat coming up was enough to curl the eyebrows at times. On our feet we wore rope-soled shoes, like sailors. I think it was to stop us crushing the grain.

The fuel used was best Welsh anthracite. This came by rail into Benskin's yard, and was unloaded into a lorry and delivered into the malthouse. The barley came from Norfolk and Essex; each sack weighed two hundredweight as barley, but only one and a half-hundredweight as malt.

We worked from 5.30am until we finished with a breakfast break at 8.30am. The season only lasted until the weather got too hot, so the season was nine months long.

In the summer, we were employed in the brewery, or wherever needed, which was only five days – the malting season being seven days a week.

Usually, we were the first to enter the yard, and the heavy horses would kick the door or the floor as we got near to their stables, which were near to our place of work. The horses were shires, used to deliver beer in the town and to appear in the local shows, especially the Watford carnival.

The malthouse fires were obviously alight for the whole of the nine months that we worked. This needed visits during the evening to stoke the fires or turn a piece if it was getting too hot, or drain a steep ready to shovel the grain out the morning after.

We carried on through Christmas and Easter. On Christmas Day, we had done a day's work before most people were up. Once started, the process carried on. The malting floors were unheated; the only thing that we could do was to close the shutters if it got cold – in very warm weather the grain needed constant attention. So, sometimes, an evening visit turned into a long exercise, with a lot of work.

After malting, the centre of each grain turns into a crystal-like structure. This is the malt that gives beer its strength. There are various colours that are required by the brewery for different beers. This is produced in the length of time the grain is fired and, of course, the temperature.

In one of the other maltings by the River Colne, some of the grain used to be burnt in a large drum, like a massive coffee roaster. This was for making stout, a Guinness-like beer. The word caramelised was used but it looked and smelt burnt to me.

When malted, the grain was put into large bins until required; then we would put it into sacks. We would then load it on to a flat-trailer for collection by the Scammel mechanical horse, a three-wheeled tractor.

Because of the heat involved in our work in the maltings, we got a ration of beer called Beaver. Our ration was a half-gallon each, or four pints a day. As I did not drink, there was a certain attraction to come and visit the malthouse to see Charlie and John – especially John.

Charlie Medlar was a maltster from Norfolk. He transferred to Watford from Mitchell's and Butler. Having no background in the malting industry I think I drove him mad. But we survived together for a few years, until I moved on. He certainly was a funny bloke, and people used to come just to hear him say, "blast my heart". All this work made one pretty fit. In today's work-out society, we would not need to visit the gym. After all, we each moved several tons of grain a day – we were called the fresh air fiends because of our open necked shirts, even in winter.

We had several cats which, as you can imagine, were encouraged to make a home – one of the bins for storing malt seemed to be their favourite place. There was never a problem with vermin, so they were doing their job satisfactorily.

In the same yard were the maintenance sections of carpenters and bricklayers. The pub signs were repaired there, some of which were very well painted by Millers the sign-writers in King Street, after repair and undercoating.

The company cars were garaged across from the maltings. The Managing Director of Benskins, a Mr Kilkenny, had a lovely Armstrong Siddely and a Humber Super Snipe, while next door was the tack room, with all the very large collars for the shires, and the associated leather and brass work. This had hundreds of rosettes around the walls. The horses must have won most of them. There was every colour you could imagine. The horsemen seemed to have acres of leather to clean, not to mention the brass, or were they grooms?

So there was our yard, with the Three Tuns public house on one side. On the other was a shop for what I can only call high-class second-hand clothing. The owner was called Wiltshire, I believe. We got our newspapers from the shop of Reg French, just a step or two from our place of work, next to the second-hand clothing shop.

When I left, Benskins owned 1,200 pubs and clubs. They also owned nearly every corner property in the town that was vacant. The also produced one of the strongest ales brewed in the British Isles. I refer, of course, to Colne Spring Ale.

Alas, it's all gone. I never thought I would see the demise of such a flourishing industry in my lifetime.

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