

## BENSKINS WATFORD BREWERY 1867-1967

by  
**C.J.M. Bradbury.**

**W**hen the famous Liberal Prime Minister Mr. Gladstone fell from power in 1874 he observed that he had been borne down “in a torrent of gin and beer”. Some of this beer must have been brewed in Watford by Joseph Benskin, who purchased Dyson’s Brewery in Lower High Street in 1867.

As a 13-year-old boy, Joseph had run away from the village of Seagrave in Leicestershire where his father was Vicar, and made his way, without money or friends, to London. He became apprenticed to an apothecary and later the owner of the Castle and Falcon Hotel in the City. After some years of hard work plus considerable business acumen, he was prosperous enough to purchase the “Limmers”, said to be the first hotel, as we understand the term, in London.

In about 1865 Joseph retired to Turnham Green, but came to Watford two years later, attracted by its beautiful surroundings and healthy air.

Showing considerable foresight, Joseph Benskin, a great lover of horses, soon realised that the London and Birmingham Railway would turn Watford into a dormitory area for London, and also increase its industrial potential. He therefore set about developing his private and tied trade in London and Watford. In the years prior to his death in 1877 he was assisted by his son John Pusey Benskin. Joseph, his eldest, took no part in the business, while his third son, Thomas, trained in London as an architect. John unfortunately suffered from ill-health and early blindness, so that on old Joseph’s death the control of the brewery passed to his widow, John, and the managing brewer, Walter Green, who married Maria Benskin, old Joseph’s daughter. It is interesting to note that at this time the three main Watford breweries, Healey’s, Sedgewick’s and Benskins, were all controlled by women.

Agencies were opened in towns as far afield as Eastbourne, Southend, Brighton and Aldershot, while the London Stores at Chalk Farm and Camden Town supplied by rail from Watford, brought the famous Watford Ales to an ever increasing number of customers in London and the Home Counties, including the refreshment rooms of the House of Commons and the majority of West End theatres. In due course, the export market was also entered, so that by 1890 the weekly output from the Cannon Brewery had increased more than twelve-fold.

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Thomas Benskin was well-known in Watford with his square beard, frock coat and silk hat. At first he came down from London daily by train, then lived in the Brewery House, and finally at Glenthorn, from where he could be seen daily driving in his coach down Clay Hill.

The Pennant, the Benskin trade mark, was suggested by Mrs. Briggs, daughter of Thomas Benskin, and wife of a former chairman of the company. She shared her father's enthusiasm for yachting, and got the idea from an enamel brooch of a Thames burgee, which he had given to her.

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