

THE COLLECTIBLES OF BENSKINS OF WATFORD

by
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I actually remember seeing Benskins in operation as a child, as along with my brother and sister, my parents took us on shopping trips to Watford. As children we saw it as a large building with flags on the top, just like Selfridges and therefore assumed it must be a department store. On quizzing my father on this and the possibilities of this, he responded by saying it was a brewery. What on earth was a brewery, I thought?

On the surface Benskins advertising items are scarce, or at least seem to be. One answer to this is that a Colonel Briggs was Managing Director from 1910 to 1946, and Chairman until 1951. The company magazine, The Pennant, reported in his obituary that he refused to advertise the company on any scale. This being so, there are still gems around to be seen if not acquired. I will also concentrate on the Watford output and not on the items connected with the relaunch of the brand in the early 1980s.

Of all the Benskins material the most magnificent must be the mirrors. There are at least two still in existence, and both advertise the Cannon Brewery, which means they pre-date the Pennant trade mark which was registered in 1895. The first of these mirrors hangs in the Watford Museum. This is a great local attraction with a very good selection of displays, artefacts and pictures. The Museum is housed in the old Benskin's Brewer's House. It still has some of its original acid etched windows. The mirror itself is unfortunately tucked away on a staircase, away from the area dedicated to brewing. The mirror is large, measuring 54 inches across and 89 inches high. It really is a beauty. It states "BENSKIN and Cos CELEBRATED PALE and STRONG ALES." The mirror also has an illustration of the Cannon trade mark.

The next mirror to be seen hangs in a north London public house, the Holly Bush at Hampstead. This mirror is also a beauty. It copies the style and shape of an oval beer bottle label. That said, it has to be over three feet tall! It states "BENSKIN & Cos WATFORD PALE ALE, OLD and MILD ALES and IMPERIAL STOUT." The inner oval has a cannon illustration to portray the trade mark.

From the mirrors we move on to the framed advertisements. Top of these must come the Benskins Watford Brewery, Brewers, Bottlers, Wine and Spirit Merchants, Mineral Water Manufacturers advert printed by J. Causton and Son. This poster has one of those cracking exaggerated aerial views of the brewery and its environs. An example of the poster can be seen at Watford Museum. There is another one in the meeting room at the Flag and Firkin, adjacent to Watford Junction Station. How long it remains after the changes at Bass and Punch is anyone's guess. I actually came across another in the multi-storey car park serving the bottle collectors' fair at Aylesbury. It was in the process of changing hands, though it was not until I expressed an interest that the deal was done. Up until that point the recipient had been playing very cool. The last two framed posters I know of also hang in the Holly Bush. Both posters depict male characters holding a glass with the word "Benskins" simply printed below. The figure in the first is a jockey in full regalia with the further wording "Take my tip". The other depicts a John Bull character with additional "A good tip". Another example of the second poster survives, and can be seen hanging in the public bar of the Green Dragon at Flaunden in Herts.

In the ceramics field, to my knowledge, the only output during the existence of the company in Watford are a ceramic coaster and a couple of anniversary mugs. The ceramic coaster is by Copeland and dates around 1900. It is circular with "Benskins Watford Brewers, Watford" printed around the edge. It has a scene depicting the interior of an inn with two seated drinkers, one in hunting pinks, and a jolly looking landlord pouring a bottle of beer. What a cracker it is! The other pieces are mugs which were put out in 1967 for the Company centenary. This was somewhat ironic,

as Ind Coope had taken over the business ten years previously. The pint mug is glazed in a greenish blue on a body of Irish porcelain. On one side it has the illustration copied from the coaster with the anniversary details on the other. These were given out to male employees and to tenants in the tied estate. The final piece we are not too sure about, as a friend of mine's brother, who worked for Benskins, says there was a rare half pint version given to female employees and managers in the tied estate. Benskins apparently had a few managed houses. I have never seen the smaller one. There is, though, a pint one in Watford Museum.

Earlier in this article, I mentioned the Pennant Magazine, which was Benskins in-house publication. Those who have seen copies will know it was well produced with articles covering a wide area. It also had plenty of photographs and illustrations. Happily, for anyone interested, Watford Library has, in its reference section, copies spanning from the early 1930s to the late 1950s, with, I'm told, just a few omissions.

Moving onto the more familiar breweriana, Benskins issued at least two drinks trays. The one I've seen was circular and in cream with the wording "Benskins" written across the middle in a handwritten style. I have heard of only one Benskins ashtray. It was described to me by a car boot dealer who later sold me a full bottle of Benskins brown stout. Unfortunately, I missed the ashtray, but he described it as being made of copper, square, and with "Benskins" written or stamped on the rim. Plenty of beer bottle labels survive, though I cannot be too comprehensive about these as there are many collectors out there whose knowledge is far superior to mine. They include Colne Spring Ale, India Pale Ale, Nut Brown Ale, Brown Stout, Light Sparkling Ale, Light Ale and Double Stout. Benskins also issued a 1948 Jubilee and a 1953 Coronation Ale. I believe there are full bottles of the latter two out there in people's collections. A reasonable number of embossed bottles have turned up, as have soda syphons. The syphons I've seen are in aqua glass with a very attractive design. Several different examples of stoneware flagons can be found, some transfer printed. and others with lettering impressed. Pump clips do turn up, but of course, are highly sought after. Ones I've seen are oval in white porcelain, with a red pennant, and either Mild or Bitter. Benskins issued a cast metal bottle opener. It has Benskins on one side of the handle and Watford on the other.

Finally on to beer mats. Benskins issued a single beer mat, though I believe even this didn't happen until two years after the take-over by Ind Coope. The mat is double sided, and says simply on both sides Colne Spring Ale, and is coloured in red and natural.

The last bit of Benskins which survives is to be found on a few public houses, some unfortunately now long closed. The North Star, Harrow on the Hill, Middlesex, now a private house, is adorned with blue and white tiles. The Red Lion, opposite Watford Football Ground, has tiles in a relief design in red and gold. The Railway in Hatch End, Middlesex, has a semi-circular plaque above the door. It has an image in raised relief of trains, with B.W.B. above. The last one I know of is sadly a private house in St.Albans. It is up the hill from the Lower Red Lion and down a right hand-turn. This one is a painted rectangular panel and is therefore quite fugitive. The fading lettering can still be read. It says "Benskins Fine Ales and Stout". There was a fantastic etched window in the door of the Merton Road, Watford, Wine Store, but then that's another story.

BHS FACT FILE

Benskins announced that they are closing the Bishops Stortford Brewery.
All brewing will now concentrated at Watford.

BREWERS' GUARDIAN AUGUST 1916