

Road, rail and water: the early history of transport at Benskin's brewery

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The articles upon which this piece is based were published in 1948 and 1949.

From the formation of the Company until about 1870 every drop of beer which was delivered, was hauled from the Brewery by horses, and although horse-drawn drays are still used to a small extent, the Company has, since that date, used every possible form of transport - road, rail, sea, and even air - the latter being used for the conveyance of yeast to Belgium.

Since the beginning of the century alone nearly seven hundred horses have passed through our stables, and at one time we were working 130 from various depots. There were:

64 at Watford
45 at Chalk Farm
5 at Leytonstone
5 at New Cross
1 at Beckenham
2 at Southend
2 at Brighton
5 at Wooburn Sands
and 1 at Uxbridge.

All of the outlying depots mentioned here are now closed and all our houses are

served from Watford and Bishop's Stortford.

At the Chalk Farm depot the railway ran alongside the loading stage, and our horses were stabled in the arches underneath the railway. These stables have since been converted into railway lorry repair shops.

In addition temporary depots were set up at holiday times. For instance, during the week prior to a Bank Holiday several railway waggon loads of beer would be dispatched to Luton and one or more teams of horses would be sent over with loaded drays. Having delivered these loads the team would then work from the railway siding until the waggons were cleared. Under this arrangement the draymen were away from the Brewery for several days at a time. A similar system was operated in 1915 to supply our houses at Brighton and Seaford by lorry. The lorry loaded with fifteen barrels of beer, delivered direct to Seaford, and then cleared a railway waggon which had been sent on in advance to Brighton, before returning home.

In those days both men and horses worked for hours that must sound fantas-



Figure 1. 'Port Arthur' - prize-winning horse at the Watford Show in 1904. This horse, which weighed over a ton, was one of our shunters. This unusual looking dray was used for deliveries to private customers. Driver, G. Norris.

tic to the younger employees today. Many a drayman (and some of them are still employed by the Brewery today) left the stables at 4 a.m., returned at midnight, and was back on the job at six o'clock next morning. Drivers delivered six days a week, and were often at work feeding the animals on Sunday. For all these hours the driver of a pair of horses was paid an average of 30/- a week, and single-horse drivers, who were mostly employed serving our private customers, averaged about 2/- a week less.

Only one drayman was employed on each dray, except in Watford, where, owing to the nature of the work, it was

considered necessary to employ one trouncer to every two drays working together. In other cases, where it was considered difficult for one man unaided to deliver to a house, efforts were made to work two drays together to two or more houses in the same district.

Many striking stories of the horses are told. Horses usually worked in single harness or as pairs, and drivers delivering to Bushey Heath or beyond hired a chain-horse from the 'Horse and Chains' at the foot of Clay Hill to assist in hauling the load up, the hill. A fee of 9d. per horse was charged for this service. Probably many of the younger generation have



Figure 2. 'Sapper and Gunner' - a pair of dray horses photographed on their return front Watford Show in 1903. The men in the picture from left to right are: Messrs. Buttle, Joiner, West, H. Watson, Emms (horse-keeper), a visitor, Norman, S. Smith, W. Biggerstaff, and F. Wilson.

never realised the significance of the name of that inn. Heavy loads being hauled over long distances, however, called for teams of three horses. What is probably an all time record for any of the Brewery horses was set up by 'Reminder,' a dark brown mare which at the beginning of this century was the leader of such a team. In one week she led her team on successive days to Berkhamsted, Kingston and New Malden, Kilburn, Luton, Chesham, and Kilburn - a total of 200 miles.

A rather more exciting story is recalled by Charles Howland, one of the retired members of our staff. A drayman was delivering with a pair of horses to 'The Bell' at Harrow Weald (a house demol-

ished in 1893). Whilst the driver was in the house the horses bolted and galloped home, driverless, to Watford. Howland, hearing the animals galloping up the High Street, dashed out of the Brewery and stopped them. As a sequel, Howland was promoted from cellarman to driver and was given charge of this same pair of horses.

Many a tale is told of draymen being brought home fast asleep by their horses.

After the railway siding was built, all shunting on the premises was done by horses until the first tractor was purchased in 1928. It should be borne in mind that a train was loaded daily.



Figure 3. Our Team passing the Royal Box at the Royal Show at York, 1948. In the dray, which is over 70 years old, are W. Crook (horse-keeper), C. Hearn (driver) and J. Hindman. The horses are 'Aristocrat,' 'Brewer,' 'Smith' and 'Colonel.'

Our stables and horses have always been renowned, and probably the best proof of the treatment the horses receive is given by the action of 'Grey Prince,' a gelding, which when his working days were over was pensioned off and put to rest on a farm at Redbourn. After several days he trotted into the yard one morning, having found his way alone from Redbourn. He was allowed to spend the rest of his days 'home.'

The Watford stable has always been responsible for nursing back to health the sick animals from all the depots. When it was necessary to change over a horse from a depot the two horses were ridden

to a point mid-way between Watford and the depot where the horses changed hands. One of the saddles used for these transactions still hangs in our stables.

Horses of all the heavy breeds have worked in our drays and all have been excellent animals, and although our stable is now much smaller than at any time in the history of the Brewery, we still have some of the finest Clydesdale geldings in the country.

Prior to 1870 all deliveries were made by one of three methods: direct from the Brewery by dray; from the Brewery to railway station by dray, thence by train



Figure 4. A single horse dray, from the Chalk Farm Depot delivering in London about 1920. This photograph of 'Billy,' with driver F. Y. Bone, was taken outside the 'Mother Shipton' (Watney Coombe & Reid) in Prince of Wales Road, Kentish Town.

to a depot, for delivery by dray to the houses in the area; or by dray to wharf at Cassio Bridge, thence by canal Paddington for delivery houses in London.

Transportation of beer by barge London was found to be so convenient that in the latter part of the last century consideration was given to the expansion of the canal system in the Watford area. Local history records that in about 1870 when

the rebuilding of the bridge over the river Colne in the lower High Street was under discussion, Mr. Sedgwick (the owner of a local rival brewery) reported to the Local Board (the predecessor of the Urban District and Borough Councils) that:-

It was probable that relief would come from another quarter, as a scheme was being devised by which the Colne from Rickmansworth to Watford would be made into a Branch Canal for the purpose of conveying, amongst other things, beer from Watford to London, by water direct.

This did not mature, as Mr. Sedgwick died, and following the building of the railway extension behind the Brewery, Benskin's installed a siding. The Paddington depot was moved to Chalk Farm and beer was sent direct by rail over this new extension.

This was not the end of our canal traffic however. During the 1914 - 1918 war we developed a large export trade to Belgium, and owing to the congestion on the railways our beers were again sent by canal - this time to the London Docks for shipment across the Channel. The beer was taken to Cassio Bridge by dray as in former days, but now we installed on the wharf a crane powered by a petrol engine, and casks were loaded direct from van to barge. Many thousands of hogsheads and barrels were sent in this way.

Our first mechanical vehicles were two steam lorries purchased in 1905 or 1906.



Figure 5. Lorry No. 3. A 2-ton Commer purchased in 1913 The men are C. Biggerstaff (in front) and F. Wilson.

One was a Coulthard with a vertical boiler, and the other a Yorkshire which had a transverse horizontal boiler with a chimney in its centre. The Coulthard had iron-shod wheels, but the Yorkshire was equipped with solid rubber tyres. These were followed by another steamer - a Sentinel which was still running when the first of our petrol-operated vehicles was put into commission. A fourth steam lorry - a Foden - as transferred to Watford from the Hatfield Brewery when the latter was acquired in 1920, and this vehicle was operated from Watford for several years.

A 5-ton Commer truck, purchased in 1913, was our first petrol lorry, and considerable difficulty was experienced in finding a suitable driver for it. One or two drivers who undertook the task considered it a whole-time job to drive the vehicle and refused to handle the beer.

By the outbreak of the First World War we were operating five Commers. In September, 1914, four of these were requisitioned by the War Department and were driven by our own drivers to Avonmouth Dockyard en route to France. The requisitioning of these vehicles left us so short of transport that for a long period the remaining Commer (No. 5) was making four journeys in every 24 hours-one driver making two journeys by day and another two by night, beer being delivered in the early hours of the morning.

Between May and August, 1915, three Packards and a Selden were bought to replace the four requisitioned lorries, but no further purchases were made during the war. After the cessation of hostilities, however, the fleet expanded rapidly, and between March, 1919, and the end of that year 17 lorries were bought (most of



Figure 6. Tom Doggett in an early Ford.

them being ex-W.D. vehicles) and 12 more during 1920.

Judged by present day standards these early lorries were very crude. The wheels had wooden hubs, spokes and rims surrounded by an iron ring onto which was pressed a solid rubber tyre. In dry weather the wood shrank and the spokes and rims became loose, and to overcome this difficulty they were frequently soaked in water. Water from a hose was often left running over them all night. The vehicles had oil lamps and were chain driven, and chaincases, where fitted, were most often inefficient. The usual method of chain lubrication was a daily application with a broom-head from a bucket of waste oil, and drivers who neglected this simple routine soon found themselves in trouble with stretched or broken chains. The designer gave little thought to the dri-

ver's comfort, and the driver who today complains of a cab window which will not close, would do well to study the accompanying photographs. The first windscreen did not appear in the fleet until the middle of 1922, when a body incorporating this refinement was built by the Watford Motor Company for our lorry No. 38. It was five years later before our first vehicle was delivered from the manufacturers with a glazed cab (No. 51).

Lorry No. 38 also had the distinction of being the first Commer in the fleet to be equipped with a gate-change gearbox. Prior to this they had all been equipped with a pre-selective box; the selector, on a quadrant, being fitted underneath the steering wheel.

It was not until late in 1928 when lorry No. 56 was commissioned that we started to use pneumatic tyres, and it was at about the same time that we bought our first tractor. This tractor - a three-wheeled Miller - replaced the shunting horses and took over most of the internal transport of commodities from one part of the Brewery to another. After 20 years of extremely strenuous work it is still giving excellent service.

Fourteen lorries were requisitioned by the War Department during the early part of the Second World War, and it was in replacing these that Bedford lorries were first introduced into the fleet. All of the early replacements were second-hand vehicles, but unlike the 1914-18 war, new

vehicles began to trickle through after the first two years and we were able to buy nine new lorries between then and the end of hostilities in Europe.

Diesel engines were not introduced into the fleet until the latter end of 1946, when we purchased our first rigid eight-wheeled Scammell - a lorry which carries a load of between fourteen and fifteen tons.

The fleet at Watford is now mainly comprised of Commers and Scammells, and that at Bishop's Stortford of Commers and Bedfords.

Until May, 1934, all our vehicles, with the exception of No. 38, which was employed on deliveries in London, were fitted with

open truck-type bodies. From then until December, 1937, all new vehicles with the exception of two Scammells (Nos. 79 and 80), were fitted with enclosed van-type bodies, and, but for the war with the resulting shortage of material, this type might still have been in use. The war years, during which only the open truck type was available, proved beyond all doubt that this was the most suitable type of vehicle, and efforts are now being made to produce a drop-side truck body which is attractive as well as serviceable.

Motor-cars made their initial appearance at the Brewery early this century. The first was a twin cylinder 10-12 h.p. Mass which was bought second-hand in 1905 or 1906. This was followed in 1907 by a Humber which was not fitted



Figure 7. Part of Benskin's fleet in Watford Fields about 1920.

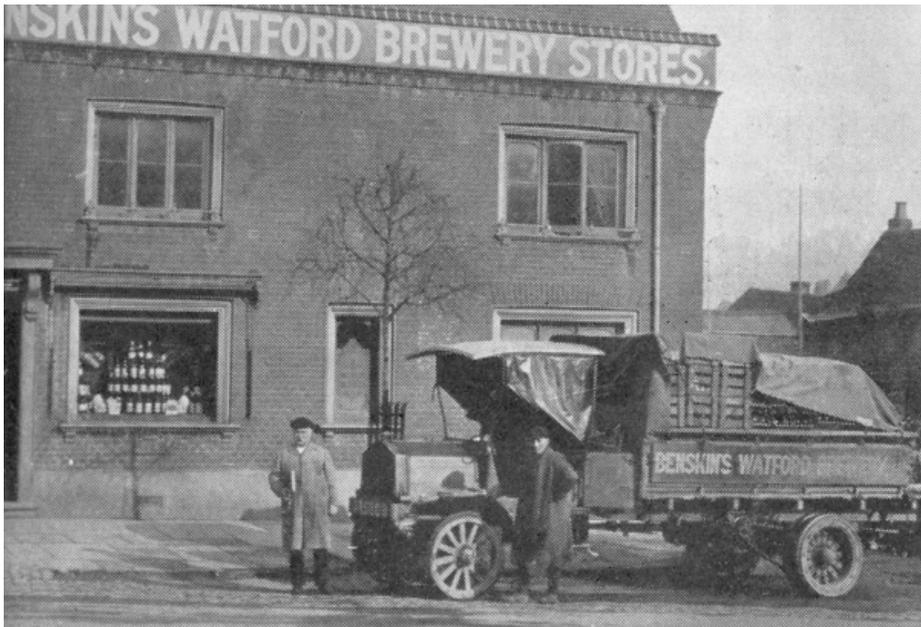


Figure 8. Lorry No. 6 - A Packard outside the Berkhamsted Stores about 1916.

with a magneto, but was supplied instead with two accumulators. When one ran down, the driver connected up to the other and the first was taken off and re-charged. Two 2-seater and two 4-seater Fords were added in 1910, and then, with the exception of a Cadillac which came to us from the Aston Clinton Brewery in 1915, no more cars were purchased until after the war. In 1919 a Siddeley Deasey, a Daimler, and a 2-seater Belsize, the latter from Saffron Walden Brewery, were bought, and since that date a variety of vehicles, including Star, Armstrong Siddeley, Fiat, Morris, Rolls Royce, Rover, Wolseley and Hillman cars have been included in the

fleet. We now use only Humber, Hillman and Morris cars.

The mechanisation of our transport called for an entirely new department. A maintenance department was absolutely essential if these new-fangled contraptions were to be relied upon to deliver the goods and bring the empties back to the Brewery. As one of our old draymen who started work with the Brewery as a horse-driver and later learned to drive a lorry, recently stated when interviewed by the Press:

I've worked at the Brewery for 37 years and naturally I've seen a lot of changes - not the

least among the transport. Lorries are marvellous things and seem to be able to get you anywhere, but as far as getting back is concerned I still think the horse the most reliable thing for getting you home.

A fitter was installed in what is now the private car garage, and as the number of vehicles increased this department expanded. Many an amusing (and amazing) tale is told of nights spent on the road, and of repairs effected with a hammer and nails, pieces of wire and even matchsticks.

In February, 1921, this maintenance department became a separate entity. The Watford Motor Company was created as a subsidiary company. It was

formed as a normal motor repair shop open for outside work, but its primary function was to service Benskin's lorries and cars. Since then it has grown to be one of the leading garages in the town and services many of the fleets in the district. Almost since its inception it has undertaken every kind of work, including welding, turning, machining, and smithery, body-building, painting and cellulosing, routine maintenance and major overhauls. One unusual piece of equipment which is still to be found in the shop is a tyre-press which is hydraulically operated and can exert a pressure of several hundred tons. Though still in regular use, it is seldom used now for the purpose for which it was designed, but in the days of solid tyres a man was kept

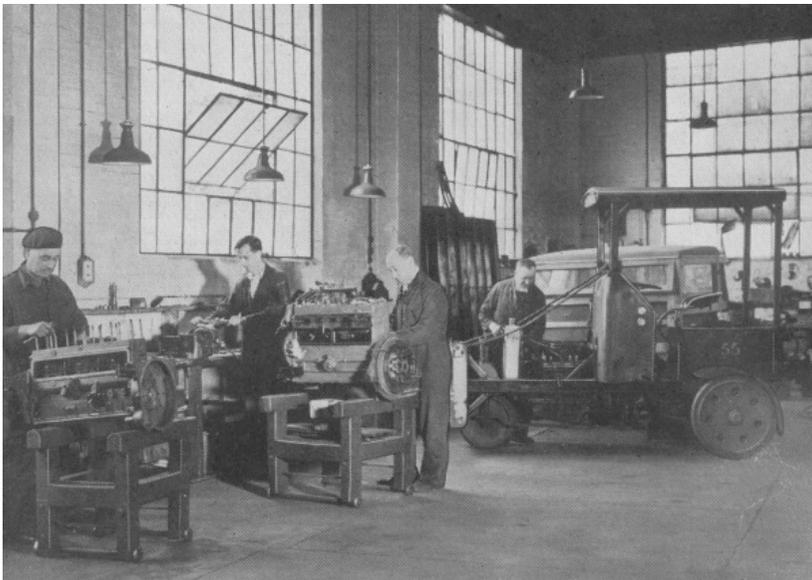


Figure 9. A corner of the repair shop.



Figure 10. The body-building, painting and spraying shops.

fully occupied changing tyres for operators throughout the country.

Routine maintenance, which is the inspection of, and attention to, every part of a vehicle at regular intervals, has been considerably developed during the past few years, and has paid handsome dividends. Every operation, from greasing and oil-changes to major overhauls, is recorded for every vehicle, and successive operations carried out to schedule. As a direct result of this, breakdowns are rare and deliveries are seldom delayed.

The lorries which operate from the Brewery, in addition to delivering to all the houses which are supplied from Watford, also deliver to the depot at Bishop's

Stortford the beer required for the houses in that area. These long distance deliveries are made on the Scammells and 5-ton lorries. The former normally return loaded with empty casks or with Guinness bottled at the Depot, and the 5-tonners with malt from our maltings at Bishop's Stortford.

The Bishop's Stortford Depot has not always been supplied from Watford. It was formerly a brewery owned by Messrs. Wigan & Sons, who traded under the name of Hawkes & Co. It was acquired by us on 11th November, 1898, and until November, 1921, we continued to brew on those premises the whole of the requirements of our houses in the area.

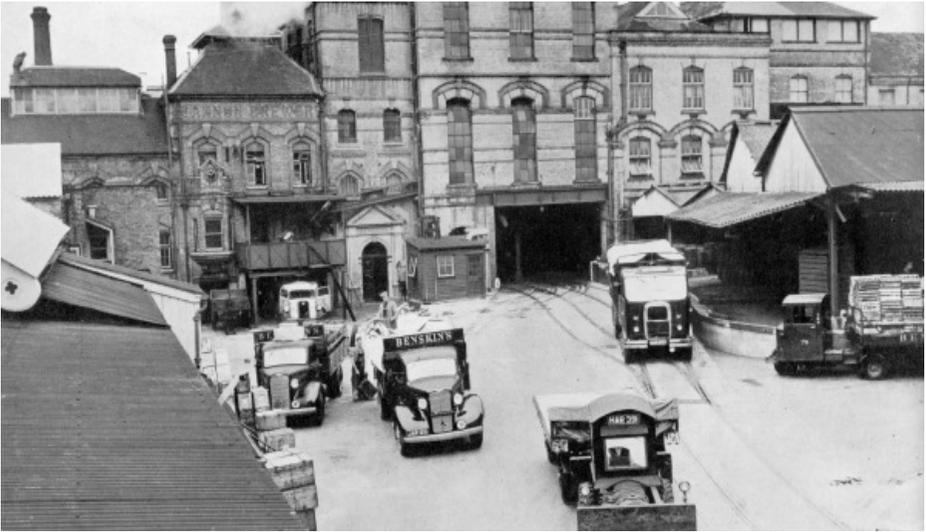


Figure 11. A general view of the Brewery Yard, showing from left to right: A Commer Q3 and a Commer Q4 loading spirits from the Spirit Store, Chaseside Tractor and trailer, Scammell Rigid 8, and Mechanical Horse on the corner of the Returned Cask Stage. Under the clock a trailer is being loaded with spent hops, and grains are being loaded into a contractor's lorry.

In about 1900 we were working from the Depot six light horses for the use of the Private Trade representatives and 29 dray horses. Of these, seven were stabled in the depot yard and the remainder in a yard opposite the main gate on the site where Messrs. Moore's garage now stands.

In those days some of the journeys took as long as nineteen hours by road, as for example the delivery to the Lytton Arms at Knebworth - a house now supplied from Watford. Some of the other more distant houses were supplied by rail. Into this category came the houses at Cambridge, Haverhill, Waltham Cross

and Braintree. We had a store at Braintree and stabled a horse and dray there to deliver to the surrounding houses the beer that was supplied by rail. The store was closed on 30th September, 1936, and since that date these houses have been supplied direct from Bishop's Stortford or Watford by lorry.

In 1915 Bailey's Fox Brewery, also of Bishop's Stortford, was purchased and with it a Napier lorry. This vehicle was transferred to the depot, and continued to operate from there until after the end of the war. It was never given a fleet number, but it was undoubtedly the first motor lorry to operate from the depot. From



Figure 12. On each cab roof lies the rolled tarpaulin which will cover the loads when they are complete and the checker has agreed them. The casks from the cellars are loaded first.

then onwards the horses were gradually replaced by motor vehicles, and on 6th July, 1931, the last delivery by horse-drawn dray was made to the Anchor in the town.

The vehicles now operating from Bishop's Stortford are largely maintained by the fitter who is responsible for the maintenance of the depot machinery. Only for overhauls and major repairs are the vehicles recalled to Watford for attention.

The unceasing improvements in our transport and the system of maintenance which reduces breakdowns to a minimum, together ensure that deliveries arrive punctually and in good condition.

The organisation of the deliveries commences in the Order Department twenty-four hours before the beer is loaded onto the lorries. The order cards are sorted and checked to ensure that a card has been received from every house which is due for a delivery on the day in

question. As each house has a fixed delivery day, any orders which have not arrived are requested by phone or, where this is not possible, a quantity of beer is sent in anticipation of the licensee's requirements. This is not always a satisfactory arrangement and it is in order to render this unnecessary that tenants are asked to submit their orders forty-eight hours in advance of delivery. Invoices and journal sheets are then compiled from the cards and one is checked against the other to obviate mistakes. These journal sheets show in detail the quantities and qualities of both cask and bottled beers for each house being supplied on any one particular day, and also

to which houses each lorry is delivering. The invoices are grouped together into vehicle loads, and his day's work, which is usually two journeys of three or four houses each, is given to each driver each morning.

The brewery was designed in the days of horse-drawn drays, and loading a large fleet of modern vehicles presents something of a problem. In order to avoid congestion in the limited space, groups of lorries are scheduled to report to the loading stages at fifteen-minute intervals from 7.30 a.m. onwards, a rota being operated to ensure that each driver gets his share of late and early mornings.



Figure 13. Gold lettering on gleaming dark green paintwork, a household word, proclaims a cargo worth hundreds of pounds, of which tax represents on average 9d. on 1/1. Loading bottles upon the barrels at the bottling store.



Figure 14. 'Off on his rounds.' A loaded eight-wheel Scammell leaves the Brewery.

At Watford a drayman normally loads his cask beer first. He loads from the information on his invoices, and loads the casks house by house. His load is then checked against the figures on the journal sheets. The lorry is then taken to the bottled-beer stage where bottled beers are similarly loaded and checked, and finally the lorry calls at the Spirit Stores to collect wines and spirits before leaving the Brewery.

At Bishop's Stortford, where all commodities are loaded from one stage, the goods are stacked in lorry-loads on the stage and are checked immediately prior to their being transferred to the respective lorries.

On its return to the Brewery the whole of the load of empties on a lorry is checked.

This check is carried out on the returned-cask stage, where the empty casks are left for washing, inspection, drying and return to the cellars for refilling. The empty bottles are returned to the bottling stores where they too are washed and refilled.

After completion of its day's work the lorry is refuelled before being garaged for the night.

Most of the brewer's commodities (hops, barley, malt, sugar, etc., and the yeast, which is sold to a firm manufacturing a famous yeast product) are handled by the Transport Department at one stage or another, and these duties, combined with the normal beer deliveries, entail an annual running of nearly half a million miles. If our deliveries were still made



Figure 15. Part of the fleet in the Bishop's .Stortford Depot about 1930. Note the solid tyres and open-sided cabs of those days.

entirely by horse-drawn vehicles this work would necessitate setting up numerous depots throughout our area and would, in addition call for many thousands of tons of beer and grain being transported by rail, and for the employment of several hundred horses.

Gone, however, are the days when, after being strapped to his tiny perch high above the flanks of his horses for upwards of twelve hours a day, the driver, muffled in several coats, a cape and a knee-apron, climbed stiffly down to unload his empties in the dimly-lit yard. Now, thanks to the speed and comfort of

the modern vehicles, our drivers may be seen quite early on any winter evening under the pale glow of the newly erected fluorescent lighting, rolling into the cask shed their empties, which are carried on a conveyor belt to the great new washing machine.

This is a contrast over the relatively short period of thirty years. How will our present methods measure up when viewed in retrospect in 1980?

We thank Jim Irving for permission to reproduce his work in *Brewery History*.