

Peter Mathias's *The Brewing Industry in England, 1700-1830* fifty years on

Richard Wilson

The publication of Peter Mathias's *The Brewing Industry in England, 1700-1830* (Cambridge, 1959) half a century ago was a milestone in the writing of brewing history. Before 1959 the food and, above all, the drink industries had been neglected by historians. Mining, metallurgy and textiles had each been the subject of serious study whereas the literature of drink had hitherto been concentrated upon its social dimensions. Temperance was worthy of study, the production of beer and spirits was not. It was Peter Mathias's survey, 'massive and masterly' in the words of Donald Coleman, which changed these perceptions amongst historians.

In his preface he lamented that there were few case studies on which to build his study. In any case these were of the thinnest in-house variety especially vague on their pre-1830 origins. In fact this was of no great moment for it meant that Professor Mathias had to quarry extensively the superb manuscript sources that survived in the great London breweries. He also, in the six years spent on his task, scoured the eighteenth and early nineteenth century pamphlet literature on the industry, par-

liamentary papers, and the extensive excise records recording brewing output. The result gave *The English Brewing History, 1700-1830* immediate classic status in the early study of business history along with Charles Wilson's history of Unilever and Leslie Pressnell's history of country banking. It revealed the sheer scale and importance of the brewing industry in English life whether viewed from its universal production and consumption or its major contribution to English agriculture through the source of its raw materials, barley, malt and hops.

At the history's core is an account of the dozen big breweries which increasingly dominated the beer trade in London in the eighteenth century. Famously, their pre-eminence was based upon porter which quickly became the staple metropolitan tipple from its introduction in the 1720s. Mathias delineates the technical and economic aspects of porter production and traces in great detail the rapid and untypical progress of the leading porter breweries. Calverts were brewing 50,000 barrels a year by 1750, Whitbreads 200,000 by the mid-1790s, Barclays 300,000 in 1815.

It is an extraordinary story. Foremost in the introduction of thermometers, hydrometers and steam power after the 1780's which transformed large scale brewing, they also demonstrated outstanding financial and commercial skills. Moreover, the London brewers were a remarkably close knit group. The long sections on the organisation, structure and finance of the industry are enlivened with details of the personalities of the leading London brewers and their aspiring chief clerks, Whitbreads, Thrales and Perkins for example, their competitiveness and search for publicity in erecting bigger and bigger storage vats and the close relationship of the prominent Quaker group of brewers-cum-bankers, Trumans, Barclays and Gurneys.

All the reviewers of the book agreed that the study was monumental in its scale and breadth, and that it was unlikely to be superseded. They were also in unison that it concentrated almost entirely on the brewing of porter in London which was quite untypical of the scale of common brewing in the provinces of Georgian England. In Norwich, a leading regional brewing centre, Pattesons, the largest firm, produced 20,000 barrels in 1800. Its four chief competitors each struggled to brew 8,000. Of course, Professor Mathias's bias is natural enough. The archives of the great London breweries are quite exceptional, indeed, as he admitted, almost overwhelming in themselves. Moreover, *The English Brewing Industry, 1700-1830*

advanced the study of the brewing industry in two notable directions. First, the long chapter on the excise system, revealing the malt, beer and hop duty statistics, permitted the author to speculate about the size of the London brewing industry in relation to common and licensed victualler brewing in the provinces and the scale of home and institutional brewing in the period. Secondly, the last section of the book provides an unrivalled survey of the malt and hop industries and the intricacies of the relationship of the London brewers with the malt and hop markets. Nor are the provinces entirely neglected. Given the perennial problems of transporting beer any distance, the London porter brewers had a surprisingly large trade with the provinces such was the fame of their beer. Briefly, their trade with Ireland in the 1790s reached large scale proportions. This discussion allowed Mathias to introduce the fascinating if untypical export trade of Benjamin Wilson's brewery, the forerunner of Allsopps in Burton upon Trent, with the Baltic around the turn of the eighteenth century.

To have added comprehensive chapters on common brewing, home and institutional brewing (there is a section on government contracts and naval brewing) throughout England would have meant a detailed reading of the provincial press and archival research (the records of breweries outside London nowhere match those of the porter brewers). The result, had it been undertaken, would have torpedoed an already long book.

As a history of the London porter brewing industry to 1830 Peter Mathias's account is remarkable especially in that it was the first book of a scholar barely thirty. It was published when those great firms, even if for almost a century they had no longer towered above the biggest Burton breweries, Guinness and the leading producers in the provinces, survived, and yet were on the eve of total transformation after 1960. Brewing historians must lament that he never wrote a second volume to trace the fate of the London breweries in the 130 years after 1830. An account of Whitbreads, the market leaders, the

incredible saga of Meuxes, and the difficulties they all faced in the years before the First World War would have made a rewarding and instructive sequel. Certainly, *The English Brewing History, 1700-1830* transformed the approach and attitudes of historians to the brewing industry. Not only did it stress its importance in everyday consumption but also in its scale and the depth of its archival research it set new standards of how the serious study of the industry should be approached in the future. For half a century it has remained the key text in English brewing history.