

Mystery of the name 6X

Brian Yorston

Ever since I joined Wadworth, it has been difficult to determine the origins of the name 6X. I have asked a number of people but the answers have been rather vague. Many theories have been put forward, such as a popular tale of a lazy cooper who could not be bothered to label the casks XXXX, so he used a '6' then a 'X'. The fact is that no one today who was directly involved is alive, and as I have discovered, little is directly documented.

The former Wadworth MD, John Cairns Bartholomew, now aged 90, so he is perhaps the nearest person to the answer. I recently asked him the reason why the beer was called 6X. His answer involved a harvest ale and the strength of the beer, but the exact reason was still unclear. That is understandable, as would have been only three years of age at the time of its conception. He only really became involved with the company after his Second World War service, over 20 years after the first brew of 6X.

What is certain and documented, in a leather bound book in my office, is that the first brew of a beer called 6X occurred on Monday 10 December, 1923. Some 87 years ago.

I have therefore tried to look further in to the brewing records to see what was happening at that time in order to work out how 6X could have been named. What has become evident is that the genesis of 6X today originates from events that occurred during and between the two world wars.

So what is my evidence of this? Pre 1914 Wadworth brewed a beer called XXXX. Indeed, this was a common name of a strong brew brewed in most breweries. The term X came from the fact that the monks who were brewers of beer during the Middle Ages marked the casks in a particular way. The more Xs on the cask the stronger the beer, so the term X, XX, XXX and XXXX were easy to understand for a population, which was at that time largely illiterate.

Beer strength is measured using OG or Original Gravity. That is the concentration of sugar in 1 litre of liquid at the beginning of fermentation after which most of the sugar is turned to alcohol, by the action of yeast. For example a 1041° beer, as 6X is today, will have 41 grams of sugar in every litre. Generally, but not exactly so, 1010° units of OG is about 1% alcohol by volume (abv). Hence 6X is sold at



Brian Yorston's office at Wadworth showing the leather bound brewing records.

5	21	6X	11	45	4	23
		WVW				
6	22	WVW	11	45	4	23
7	23	IDS	5	27	12	
		DS				
10	24	6X	11	45	4	23
		X				
13	25	IPA	10½	42	3½	1½
		PA				
20	26	6X	11	45	4	23
		W				
21	27	IDS	5	27	12	
		DS				

Detail of a brewing record dated December 1923 showing the first entry for 6X.

1923

December

Date	Quality	Weight	Temp	Notes
1	64	0	48	23 2 2
2	64	0	48	23 2 2
3	64	0	48	23 2 2
4	64	0	48	23 2 2
5	64	0	48	23 2 2
6	64	0	48	23 2 2
7	64	0	48	23 2 2
8	64	0	48	23 2 2
9	64	0	48	23 2 2
10	64	0	48	23 2 2
11	64	0	48	23 2 2
12	64	0	48	23 2 2
13	64	0	48	23 2 2
14	64	0	48	23 2 2
15	64	0	48	23 2 2
16	64	0	48	23 2 2
17	64	0	48	23 2 2
18	64	0	48	23 2 2
19	64	0	48	23 2 2
20	64	0	48	23 2 2
21	64	0	48	23 2 2
22	64	0	48	23 2 2
23	64	0	48	23 2 2
24	64	0	48	23 2 2
25	64	0	48	23 2 2
26	64	0	48	23 2 2
27	64	0	48	23 2 2
28	64	0	48	23 2 2
29	64	0	48	23 2 2
30	64	0	48	23 2 2
31	64	0	48	23 2 2

Full page record of December 1923 showing first brew of 6X at the top dated 5th.

4.3% abv. This is a rough and ready figure but it allows easy conversion from OG to abv. To cloud the issue further, when I made reference to the old brewing recipes, the brewers used the term 'brewer's lbs (pounds?)' rather than the modern term OG. For the purposes of this article I will use the modern OG term as it is easier to relate to abv.

The records show that the strength of XXXX was about 1060° from the earliest records in 1900 up to 11 May 1916 when it was reduced to about 1055, only to go back up to 1060° in December 1916. I can only speculate that this minor reduction in strength may have been due to a shortage of malting barley from the 1915 harvest.

The return to the former strength of XXXX was short lived as in March 1917 the OG of XXXX was reduced suddenly to 1048°. We know this to be true as the brewers of the time made a note of the event in red ink in the brewer's records, stating;

For the year ending March 31st 1917 we were restricted to 15% of the standard barrels less that the year ending March 31st 1916.

In April 1917 the following remark was added;

Output April to June 1917 to be still 1/3 rd of 1915 standard barrels.

The records show from that date the OG of XXXX varied from 1038° to 1050° but

then it settled to about 1044°. So the strength of XXXX was reduced by 25% from about 6% abv to 4.5%.

The Wadworth brewers were responding to the 1916 legislation which restricted the breweries to 85% of the 1916 output. In April 1917, the law was changed again and was enforced to 30% of 1915 production figures. The standard barrel was at 1055°, this was a figure used by Customs and Excise to determine the duty liability.

This law was introduced as a response to the war and was one of many pieces of legislation imposed upon the brewing industry. It was intended to reduce the need for imports. Surprisingly, UK brewers at that time used a good proportion of foreign grown barley. I have seen records relating to Californian barley in some of the recipes. Wadworth were using foreign barley up to March 1917 then this stopped until 1919 and they only used English barley during the war years as far as I can tell. This is a possible indication of the scarcity of barley due to U boat activity in the Atlantic.

The other important factor in the reduction in beer strength, was that it was thought that drunkenness was hurting the war effort. It should be noted that Lloyd George was very much a believer in the temperance movement. He was quoted in Bangor in February 1915:

Drink is doing more damage in the war than all the German submarines put together. ...

We are fighting Germany, Austria, and the Drink, and as far as I can see, the greatest of these three deadly foes is Drink.

His views and subsequent actions would have major consequences of the brewing industry not only in the reduction of beer strengths but in the licensing hours of pubs right in to the 21st century.

Paradoxically, the changes in the law resulted in allowing Wadworth to brew more beer as illustrated in the table below. This was because they were able to brew more beer, but at a lesser strength.

Year	Barrels brewed	15% of 1916	30% of 1915
1914	23,949		
1915	20,194		
1916	15,068		
1917	14,913	12,901	14,135
1918	19,086		

Further evidence was found in one of my filing cabinets. A faded, ragged typewritten document signed by George J Johnson (of Brussels) is dated May 1917. It is a piece of a missing manuscript on the brewing of temperance beers. The document talks about the need to put in a new plant not always found in ale breweries to brew light ales and stouts but then he says he appreciates that this plant could not be available due to the war. It talks about temperance beers out-living the war and it states

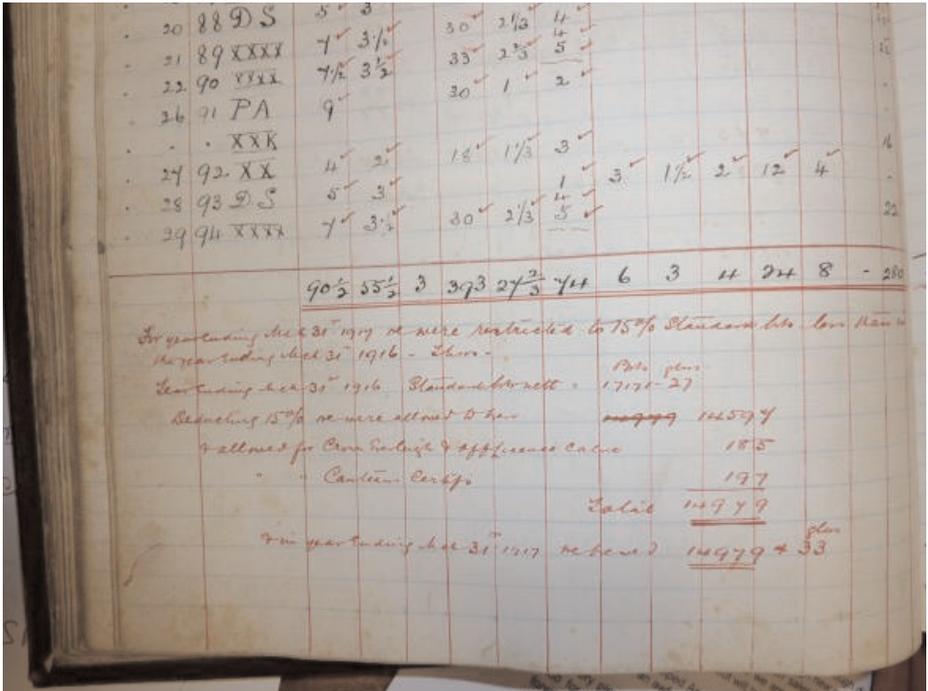
I would like to point out the principles involved in the production of the light gravity ales and stouts that have become common since the war on account of the restrictions on output based upon the diminishing weight of materials available for brewing.

This document further confirms what was going on at Wadworth at that time and the need to reduce the strength of the beers. It should be noted we also have a set of brewing recipes from the Burford Brewery, which Wadworth bought in 1969. Reference to these shows a reduction in strength in their beers albeit a few months later than Wadworth. Ex-Burford Brewery employee Fred West who is now Wadworth Sales Director was able to show me these records which he keeps in his office. Out of interest, the Burford brewery brewed a XXXXX (note five Xs) in 1917 and the strength of this beer was 1068° or 7%.

Back to Wadworth, the XXXX beer kept its OG at 1044° until October 1918. Note that this was quite close to the armistice date. After that date the OG of XXXX rose to 1048° then to about 1050° in 1919, and finally to 1055° in January 1921.

What became evident after the armistice is that two different strengths of XXXX existed from the brewing records. There was a 1040° beer and one much stronger at 1055. I have not been able to discover why this is so.

It could be speculated that it could be a bottled version of XXXX versus a draught



Entry in a brewing record at Wadworth dated March 1917 showing war time restrictions in brewing capacity.

version or it could be the harvest ale as remembered by John Cairns Bartholomew. This later point could have been right as the records show that the weaker XXXX was brewed in greater quantities during the summer months.

So in late 1923 the brewers at Wadworth, faced with the fact they had two versions of XXXX, simply changed the name of the stronger version to 6X to reflect the strength of the beer at that time.

All the records since its conception have

always called the beer 6X and never XXXXXX (unlike Burford's XXXXX) so it could have been a very early way of branding the beer. Again this is speculation on my part.

So what of the influence of the Second World War on 6X? Records show that 6X and XXXX existed together at their 1923 strengths up to April 1941. But then again the same pattern of gravity reduction occurred due to Government intervention to cope with shortages of raw material due to the war. This resulted in the reduc-

tion in OG of 6X to about 1050° in the spring of 1940 then to 1043° in the summer of 1941.

There was a resurgence in it's OG to 1048° in 1942 but from 24 May 1943 the OG of 6X ended up at 1041°. It has been this strength ever since and as far as I can tell the same basic recipe.

What become of XXXX? The last brew was seen on 29 December 1947 and its strength at its demise was 1028° or 3% abv, half of what it was before the First World War.

Although nothing can be proved without doubt, I can be pretty certain that my investigations have revealed that the 6X we know today was named in 1923, and it was born from the beer called XXXX, probably to reflect its original strength of approximately 6%.

Events of the summer of 1941 led to a reduction in strength and for 66 years it has been brewed at 4.3%. Despite its super strength label, the mellow 6X we drink today has been shaped by the history of our country.