

A comparison of the brewery industries of the twin towns Watford and Mainz

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When strolling through the centre of either twin town today, you will experience the usual bustle of medium-sized European cities with all their excitement in the vicinity of the typical shopping centres. Small local businesses have tried hard to keep up with the pace of the big players. Many could not follow, and sometimes even whole home-grown industries vanished.

A prime example is the traditional brewery industries in Watford near London and Mainz close to Frankfurt. The keen eye will still discern former brewing sites from its modern appearances, such as offices, condominiums and museums. Committed individuals are helping to preserve the heritage of the city's once dominant industries by offering heritage tours, creating websites and collecting every bit of information and artefacts obtainable. But despite those honourable efforts, genuinely homemade beer has pleased the last palates of the customers decades ago and the summer days of 1958, when 'Mainzer Aktienbier' was served in British pubs, are long gone.

Only two years earlier, Watford and Mainz had established their first interna-

tional town partnership after the war. The overall goal has, ever since, been a lasting reconciliation between the two formerly opposed nations. Furthermore, the cities share several historical similarities. In particular, the nationally renowned figures of the history of printing, Johannes Gutenberg and William Caxton, are directly linked to the two municipalities. While Gutenberg has long since been recognised as the uncontested number one son of Mainz, William Caxton introduced the revolutionary printing technology in the Watford area.

However, much less is known concerning the rise and almost synchronous decline of the twin towns' brewery industries. Their development in the last 200 or so years is marked by several changing factors that radically transformed the brewing landscape and may even serve as a template for what has happened to the beer in Great Britain and Germany since the industrial revolution.

Around 1840, the 30,000 citizens of Mainz could still choose between more than 50 different taverns that served their own brew. This meant one brewery per 600 inhabitants. The output of each sin-

gle brewery was, of course, humble and storage life was short. As soon as the brew tasted somewhat like beer it was decanted in the neighbouring aleroom. It hardly left the premises. Brevity was the fate of most brews since the beginning of beer cultivation in Europe, until the Age of Industrialisation. For inhabitants of the Rhine-Main region, it is often surprising to hear of the historical importance of beer trade in an area otherwise dominated by wine growing (Riesling, etc). The industry that began to evolve out of the medieval tavern breweries changed the traditional landscape forever. Within the remaining decades of the 19th century the number of tavern breweries in Mainz shrank from over 50 to just 14, while during the same period the overall output increased heavily.

The introduction of industrially produced beer in Mainz began in 1857. A visionary group of local businessmen, all tradespeople, sympathised with the thought of becoming independent from the Bavarian beer imports. Ironically, they entrusted a Bavarian master brewer with the assembly and operation of what was to evolve into the biggest plant outside Bavaria. The beer, of course, was a kind of pils, according to the contemporary Bavarian fashion. Shelf life increased and quality was guaranteed. In the production process, however, bottom-fermented beer like pils requires lower temperatures than top-fermented brews. Cooling down posed a major problem for the young brewery. Vast cellar vaults cut into natural bedrock helped to chill the beer in the summer months, but this was hardly an



Figure 1. Mainzer Aktienbrauerei 1859-1983.

ideal means for creating an environment of required 7°C. The refrigerating machine was not successfully introduced until 1876, the only cooling alternative in the transitional period: real ice! Mainz is located next to the Rhine, which, in the winters of the 1860s and 1870s froze to a single icy plane that could even sustain a carousel. Sloped quay walls still show the sections along the river promenade where workers cut out small ice floes and carried them uptown into the vaults. Once inside they lasted and chilled the beer for a full year. In exceptionally warm winters the ice was imported from as far as Norway. This was, of course, the most expensive ice of the era. No wonder the management paid particular attention to the progress of Linde's innovative refrigerating technique.

As a result of Mainz's connection to a fully fledged railway-network in the 1880s the 'Mainzer Aktienbrauerei' were able to increase its output to 300,000 hecto litres in 1908 and deliver to Western Germany and beyond, including Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, France and England. The introduction of the railway, the foundation of the German Empire in 1871 and the continuing industrialisation all added up to the opening of new and more distant markets. The brewery's heydays lasted until the 1930s and would never come again. Despite heavy damage to the site during the bombing of Mainz by the British Royal Air Force in February 1945, reconstruction was still justifiable because of the immensely valuable cellar vaults, which survived the

attacks. However, the division of Germany into the occupied zones deprived the brewery of its hinterland. Mainz was made part of the French zone while Frankfurt belonged to the US zone. The Rhine, being the new border between the two zones, left the 'Mainzer Aktienbrauerei' without their traditional markets right of the Rhine. France took away disputed regions gained by the Germans after 1871 and diminished the market area further. When the zones were abolished a couple of years later, the Binding brewery of Frankfurt already nested itself in all of Hesse and left the Mainz brewery with little space to expand again.

The fatal moment drew to a close in 1969 when a major shareholder sold his stocks to Binding, because he would not get a seat on the management board. That transaction made Binding the principal shareholder and led to plant closure in 1983 due to rationalisation and concentration pressures. Moreover, the site of the brewery, initially erected on the outskirts of the town centre in 1859, was then located in the middle of a premium residential area. Today it is still one of Mainz's top addresses.

Similar reasons led to the closure of the remaining smaller industrial breweries in the town and 1992 marked the end of the very last plant. History, however, sometimes repeats itself in the right moments. In 1989 the first modern-style, thus far the only tavern brewery since the bad old days, has begun brewing in the centre

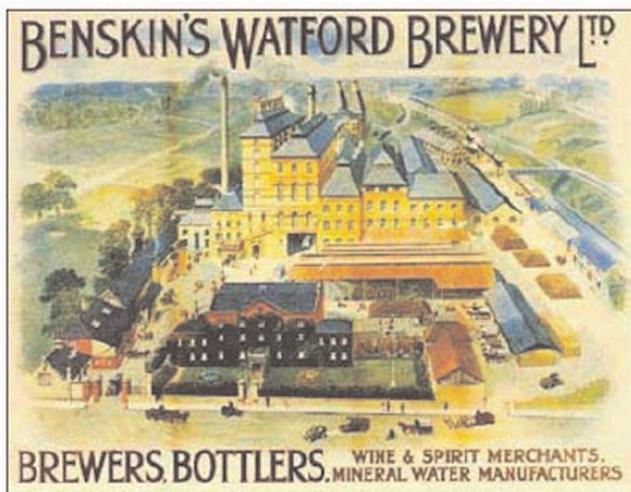


Figure 2. Benskin's 1829-1972.

and welcomes the old Mainzer to indulge in homemade beer as they were served in the days almost forgotten.

While the hinterland of Mainz is still dominated by agriculture with barley being one of its major crops, Watford in Hertfordshire has been a traditional harbour for the amber corn as well. As industrialisation kicked off in the British Isles earlier than anywhere else, it is of little surprise to learn about Watfordian 17th century brewers, who did not only serve their guests, but supplied neighbouring taverns also. One of these breweries, which started as a bakery, flowered out into well known Benskin's.

Before the important role of yeast in the fermentation process was fully understood, the production of good beer was often a matter of pure luck. The bake-

house, a paradise for yeasts, could be a perfect environment for a successful brew. Though, often enough the yeast's uncontrolled presence resulted in unpleasant brown water. No one really understood why bakeries were such a hotspot for brewing, but if the brew was ruined then 'hops and malt were lost'; the corresponding German phrase to 'to flog a dead horse' (*Da ist Hopfen und Malz verloren*). Keeping the origin of that phrase in mind, it is of little surprise to find German bakers and brewers still form the same guild.

In 1835 Watford owned three breweries and eight maltings, the census of Watford then added up to less than 3,000. The new railway between London and Birmingham propelled the latter number drastically (15,500 in 1843), but brew-

eries then were basically no more than five. Watford's early connection to nearby beer-thirsty London, first by road and later by rail and canal, encouraged brewers to grow faster and eliminate rivals more thoroughly than their Mainz counterparts. Benskin's eventually managed to snap up all four competitors between 1898 and 1952, making beer from the region synonymous with the brand.

Then the biggest fish in the Watford pond, Benskin's became attractive to the anglers from neighbouring shores. Ind Coop & Allsopp from Romford in London's East become the first foreign owners in a series of takeovers that finally resulted in the closure of the last Watford brewery in 1972. Today the administration building is the last reminder and houses the city's museum. As with the 'Mainzer Aktienbrauerei', new technology and growing demand after WW II led to concentration processes that ended the existence of many local top dogs. A bitter pill to Benskin's, who once upon a time supplied the taps of the House of Commons. Or as Tony Smith from CAMRA put it referring to periodic reactivation by licence-brewns:

A good pint of Benskin's is a joy. It is very regrettable something that has been so central to Watford's drinking life will be no more. It is part of the town's heritage and, while brewing ceased in Watford in the late 1970s, the beer was still associated with the town.

Industrial brewing in Watford began well ahead of Mainz, but they both ceased

within an eleven year span between 1972 and 1983. It's tempting to assume a general European trend. In fact, the number of breweries in Great Britain had been declining from 305 in 1954 to 81 in 1980 and in Germany from 2,280 in 1956 to roughly 1,500 in 1980. On both sides of the English Channel, growing demand for beer after the war made the big companies become bigger, by means of internal growth and multiple takeovers. Taking a look at the numbers, the concentration process in the British brewing industry since 1954 proceeded much faster, with only every fourth plant surviving until 1980. Germany could half-decently maintain the post-war count. A comparison of the outputs from 1980 however, shows that Germany did not even produce twice as much beer (95 million hectolitres compared to 50 million hectolitres), although by calculation on the basis of plain numbers it should be ten times as much. Traditionally, most breweries in Germany are small family businesses, while the industry in the North is organised more like the British, with less plants producing vast amounts. Therefore, it should be noted that most German breweries were and still are located in Southern Germany, more specifically in Bavaria with the world's most dense network of brewers.

The breweries of Watford and Mainz shared the fate of many a business during those years. The late 60s was also the beginning of the environmental movements and smoking chimneys suddenly became a thorn in the flesh, especially

when popping up in the middle of the cityscape as in the twin towns; their central location was becoming more and more attractive to residential development and onsite expansion in the centre became impossible. All these factors influenced the new out-of-town owners' decision to deal the final blow. The following decades would not have made survival easier, with per capita consumption reaching historic lows in both countries and the traditionally good image of beer steadily shelled with news of underage drinking excesses. Maybe this will prove beneficial to an undiluted nostalgia of the brewing pasts of Watford and Mainz, who are linked by more than signposts at the city entrance naming their twin towns.

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