

# Contending liquors: how ale and beer remained separate drinks for hundreds of years longer than generally accepted

Martyn Cornell

Alone among the Germanic languages, English has two words for fermented malt liquor: 'ale', from the supposed root word *\*alub-*, the same as modern Swedish *öl* and Danish and Norwegian *øl*; and 'beer', from Old High German *bior*, which gave the modern Dutch and German *bier*.<sup>1</sup> The reason is that when German (and later Dutch) brewers began using hops to flavour and preserve their malt liquors, they kept their old name, *bier*, for the drink, despite its new taste; and when immigrant continental brewers first began brewing the hopped drink in England in the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, *bier* retained its German/Dutch name in its new home - slightly respelled for English orthography - to distinguish it from the unhopped English ale.<sup>2</sup> Eventually, after not more than a couple of hundred years, ale, too, began to be brewed with hops, and ultimately 'ale' and 'beer' became effectively synonyms. But although the consensus among historians has been that the merging in meaning of the two words was complete within three centuries of hopped beer arriving in England, in fact the evidence shows that ale and beer were still regarded as different drinks among brewers and drinkers in Britain right through the 19<sup>th</sup>

century and beyond, and the original ale/beer split still influences styles of fermented malt liquor in Britain today.

The historical consensus was summed up by the historian WH Chaloner, who wrote in 1960, reviewing Peter Mathias's great book *The brewing industry in England, 1700-1830*:

By the end of the seventeenth century the terms 'ale' (originally a sweetish, unhopped malt liquor) and the newer 'beer' (a bitter, hopped malt liquor) had come to describe more or less identical products following the victory of the latter drink.<sup>3</sup>

Chaloner's conclusion seems to have been based on writers such as Gervase Markham, who wrote in *The English Huswife* in 1615:

The generall use is by no means to put any hops into ale, making that the difference betwixt it and beere, that the one hath hops the other none; but the wiser huswives do find an error in that opinion, and say the utter want of hops is the reason why ale lasteth so little a time, but either dyeth or soureth, and therefore they will to every barrell of the best ale allow halfe a pound of good hops.<sup>4</sup>

But while the practice of putting hops in ale was clearly taking place in Jacobean England, blurring the line between the two malt liquors, even a century later ale and beer were still distinct drinks. Daniel Defoe, writing in his *Tour through the Eastern Counties of England*, published in 1722, about the great hop fair at Stourbridge, on the banks of the Cam just outside Cambridge, said:

As to the north of England, they formerly used but few hops there, their drink being chiefly pale smooth ale, which required no hops, and consequently they planted no hops in all that part of England, north of the Trent; nor did I ever see one acre of hop ground planted beyond Trent in my observation; but as for some years past, they not only brew great quantities of beer in the north, but also use hops in the brewing their ale much more than they did before; so they all come south of Trent to buy their hops; and here being vast quantities brought, it is a great part of their back carriage into Yorkshire and Northamptonshire, Derbyshire, Lancashire, and all those counties; nay, of late since the Union, even to Scotland itself.<sup>5</sup>

The first edition of the *London and Country Brewer*, by the Hertfordshire farmer William Ellis, succinctly summed up the difference between ale and beer in the 1730s in terms of their recipes, and the quantities of hops used in each:

For strong brown ale brewed in any of the winter months and boiled an hour, one pound is but barely sufficient for a hogshead, if it be tapped in three weeks or a month. If for pale

ale brewed at that time, and for that age, one pound and a quarter of hops; but if these ales are brewed in any of the summer months there should be more hops allowed. For October or March brown beer, a hogshead made from eleven bushels of malt boiled an hour and a quarter, to be kept nine months, three pounds and a half ought to be boiled in such drink at the least. For October or March pale beer, a hogshead made from fourteen bushels, boiled an hour and a quarter and kept twelve months, six pounds ought to be allowed to a hogshead of such drink and more if the hops are shifted in two bags, and less time given the wort to boil.<sup>6</sup>

Going on Ellis's figures, early 18<sup>th</sup> century ale contained up to 60% more hops than Gervaise Markham's 'huswives' used in ale brewing a century earlier, but still only around a quarter as much hops as the beer. This, Ellis said, was because 'Ale ... to preserve in its mild Aley Taste, will not admit of any great Quantity of Hops'.<sup>7</sup>

'Obadiah Poundage,' the aged brewery worker who wrote a letter to the *London Chronicle* in 1760 about the tax on 'malt liquors' (the general term used for ale and beer as a class in the 18<sup>th</sup> century), is usually mined for the light he threw on the history of porter. But he is also very revealing on the continuing difference between ale and beer. Poundage said that in Queen Anne's reign, about 1710, the increase in taxes on malt (caused by the expense of the War of the Spanish Succession) caused brewers to look to make a drink with less malt and more hops:

Thus the drinking of beer became encouraged in preference to ale ... but the people not easily weaned from their heavy sweet drink, in general drank ale mixed with beer.<sup>8</sup>

This ale seems to have been brown ale (and the beer brown beer), for Poundage says that it was the gentry,

now residing in London more than they had done in former times [who] introduced the pale ale, and the pale small beer they were habituated to in the country; and either engaged some of their friends, or the London brewers to make for them these kinds of drinks. [The pale ale] was sold by the victualler at 4d per quart and under the name of two-penny. [It was the need to counter the success of this pale ale that] excited the brown beer trade to produce, if possible, a better sort of commodity, in their way, than heretofore had been made, [an effort that] succeeded beyond expectation

with the development of what became known as porter, because of its popularity with London's many street porters. But while the 'brown beer trade' developed into the porter brewers, the ale brewers continued to find a market.

The *Complete Dictionary of Arts and Science* of 1773 defined the word 'ale' as 'a fermented liquor obtained from an infusion of malt and differing only from beer in having a less proportion of hops' (a definition stolen word-for-word by the *Encyclopedia Britannica* nine years later). It added:

There are various sorts of ale known in England, particularly pale and brown; the former is brewed from malt slightly dried, and is esteemed more viscid than the latter, which is made from malt more highly dried or roasted.

Of beer the *Complete Dictionary* said:

It is chiefly distinguished from ale by the quantity of hops, which is greater in beer, and thereby renders the liquor bitterer and fitter to keep ... That beer is reckoned to be the best which is clear, a pale colour, of a pungent and agreeable taste, that sparkles upon being poured into a glass, and is neither too old or too new.<sup>9</sup>

Consumers, incidentally, continued to mix their malt liquors: ale and beer together was called in English 'mixt-beer,' according to the *Vollständiges Wörterbuch der englischen Sprache für die Deutschen*, an English-German dictionary published in 1794, which said that 'mixt-beer' was '... eine Vermischung von ungehopften und gehopften Bieren, wohen das Ale vorschmeckt,' that is, 'a mixture of unhopped and hopped beers, in which the taste of the ale predominates.' 'Ale' the *Wörterbuch* translated as 'susses, ungehopftes Bier,' sweet, unhopped beer.<sup>10</sup> Even in early Victorian times a popular mixture was half-and-half, ale and porter together in the same pot.

As the extract from the *London and Country Brewer* makes clear, ale could be brown or pale in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but it looks as if, gradually, the expectation

grew that ale would generally be a light colour. A book called *Scenes of British Wealth, in Produce, Manufactures, and Commerce*, by Isaac Taylor, published in 1825, claimed:

We may say ... that ale differs from beer in having fewer hops, which, giving less bitterness, leaves more of the soft smooth sweetness of the malt. It is usual, too, to brew it with pale malt, so that it is not so brown as beer.<sup>11</sup>

Ale was certainly sweeter than beer in the 1820s, according to Andrew Ure's *Dictionary of Chemistry* of 1821:

Beside the various qualities of malt liquors of a similar kind, there are certain leading features by which they are distinguished and classed under different names, and to produce which different modes of management must be pursued. The principal distinctions are into beer, properly so called; ale; table or small beer; and porter, which is commonly termed beer in London. Beer is a strong, fine and thin liquor; the greater part of the mucilage having been separated by boiling the wort longer than for ale and carrying the fermentation farther, so as to convert the saccharine matter into alcohol. Ale is of a more sirupy consistence, and sweeter taste; more of the mucilage being retained in it, and the fermentation not having been carried so far as to decompose all the sugar.<sup>12</sup>

Ure also quoted figures showing ale was stronger than porter, at about 7 or 8% alcohol by volume, against 5½% abv for

so for porter: to quote Michael Donovan, writing in Dr Dionysius Lardner's *Cabinet of Useful Arts* from 1830: 'Ale is of a lighter colour; it is stronger, sweeter and is less hopped than porter'.<sup>13</sup>

An article in the *Farmer's Magazine* in 1837 confirmed this 'ale is lighter in colour' differentiation:

Ale and beer are in Great Britain obtained by fermentation from the malt of barley, but they differ each other in several particulars. Ale is light-coloured brisk and sweetish, while beer is dark-coloured bitter and much less brisk. What is called porter in England is a species of beer, and the term 'porter' at present signifies what was formerly called strong beer. The original difference between ale and beer was owing to the malt from which they were prepared. Ale malt was dried at a very low heat, and consequently was of a pale colour, while beer or porter malt was dried at a higher temperature and had thereby acquired a brown colour.<sup>14</sup>

However, a new class of pale ale had appeared, and it contained plenty of hops. Here is an extract from *The Engineer's and Mechanic's Encyclopædia* by Luke Hebert, published in 1836:

In England two distinct sorts of beer are known, called ale, and porter, or beer, and of each sort there are numerous varieties. Although the difference in the flavour of ale and of porter is sufficiently marked, it is difficult to say in what way it is produced: that it is not altogether owing to pale malt being used for brewing ale, as some assert, is clear

from the fact that in many parts of the country, ale is brewed from brown malt: neither is it owing to a larger quantity of hops being used in making porter, for the pale ale which is exported in large quantities from this country to India contains a larger proportion of hops than the porter exported to the same place; neither will a difference in the proportions of the malt to the water account for it, since some ales are stronger and others weaker than porter.<sup>15</sup>

According to Jonathan Pereira, writing in 1843, in fact,

The Pale Ale prepared for the Indian market, and therefore commonly called the Indian Pale Ale ... contains double the usual quantity of hops.<sup>16</sup>

Ale no longer universally meant unhopped or low-hop malt liquor.

The development of a well-hopped light-coloured malt liquor that went by the name pale ale was an important step in the merging of meaning for ale and beer. By the 1850s, 'pale ale' and 'bitter beer' were true synonyms (though, puzzlingly, mild ale evidently continued to be pale). But another step was the disappearance of ale and beer brewing as operations conducted by different sets of firms. The separation of ale brewers and beer brewers dates from the first arrival of hopped beer in England, and in London many brewers carried on being either ale specialists or beer specialists, even when ale started to contain hops. The popularity of porter had meant that the biggest beer, or

porter brewers had grown vastly larger than the biggest ale brewers. Even as late as the second decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the ale brewers and the porter, or beer brewers of London were carefully distinguished in tables such as the one printed in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1813 showing the output of the 12 leading London porter brewers, and the eight principal ale brewers.<sup>17</sup> This may be because the excise authorities, when calculating rebates on the malt tax, evidently measured the output of the porter brewers in the beer barrel, of 36 gallons, and the ale brewers' output in the ale barrel, of 32 gallons, sizes laid down in an Act of Parliament dating back to Henry VIII.

From the 1820s onwards, ale - sweet London ale, sold unaged, or mild, not the well-hopped variety exported to India - finally began to grow in popularity relative to porter. In 1833, a brewer from Nine Elms, South London, Mr Farren, told a House of Commons select committee investigating the effects of the Beer House Act, introduced three years, that there had been a 'revolution' in the trade generally, and that Barclay and Perkins, and the other great porter brewers, seeing porter consumption drop and ale consumption rise in its stead, 'have gone into the ale trade; nearly all the new trade is composed of mild ale'.<sup>18</sup> From this time, as the porter beer brewers began brewing mild ale to make up for falling sales of their previous pride and joy, the categorisation of London's biggest malt liquor makers into either porter brewers or ale brewers rapidly seems to disappear.

Ale and beer continued to be differentiated, however, with the divider now colour rather than hop usage. *The Cyclopaedia of Practical Receipts and Collateral Information in the Arts* declared in 1880:

The numerous varieties of malt liquor met with in commerce may be resolved into two great classes, ale and porter. Ale of all kinds is brewed chiefly from pale malt and is generally of a light amber colour ... Porter differs from ale chiefly in its being artificially coloured by the use of roasted malt.<sup>19</sup>

When the first fascicle of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, covering A-Ant, came out in 1884, it agreed with this definition, saying under 'Ale':

at present 'beer' is in the trade the generic name for all malt liquors, 'ale' being specifically applied to the paler coloured kinds, the malt for which has not been roasted or burnt; but the popular application of the two words varies in different localities.

This was a definition that was out of date within a couple of decades, however, when, around 1902, Thomas Wells Thorpe invented a new form of brown ale at Mann, Crossman and Paulin's brewery in the East End of London, containing roasted malt. Ten years later, in 1912, Alfred Chaston Chapman, president of the Institute of Brewing and therefore a man who must have had a firm grasp of industry usage, still saw a difference between the two words, however: while

they were 'very largely synonymous', he said, beer was 'used comprehensively to include all classes of malt liquor, whilst the word ale is applied to all beers other than stout and porter'.<sup>20</sup>

Ale, as a word, was already, to some, archaic. HW Fowler, in his *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, first published in 1926, claimed that using 'ale' instead of 'beer' was a 'genteelism'.<sup>21</sup> But an echo of 'ale' meaning a relatively unhopped brew lived on in London. If you went into the public bar of a pub in working-class areas of the capital up until at least the early 1950s and asked for 'ale', what you would get would be a pint of mild, relatively sweet, relatively low in hops, reflecting mild's descent from the low-hopped malt liquors brewed by the London ale brewers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and sold 'mild', that is, unaged.<sup>22</sup>

Although reflections of the original difference between ale and beer could (and can) still be found in names such as mild ale and old ale, both types of malt liquor with roots in the less hoppy ales of the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, by the time of the foundation of the Campaign for Real Ale (as the Campaign for the Revitalisation of Ale) in 1971, 'ale' was on its way to meaning 'British-style beer' generally. By 1993, Michael Jackson could declare:

In modern usage, ale indicates a brew that has a warm fermentation, traditionally with strains of yeast that rise to the top of the vessel. These 'top-fermenting' yeasts distinguish ales from lagers ...<sup>23</sup>

Beer was now the generic term, encompassing ale as a distinct sub-family alongside lager.

All the same, it is clear that Chaloner was wrong to think that 'beer' had achieved a victory over 'ale' by the start of the 1700s; and in fact 'ale' survived as a distinct and identifiable (and important) thread in British brewing for a considerable time after that, as a clear descendant, albeit containing some hops, of the unhopped malt brews of the 14<sup>th</sup> century and before. It is vital to remember, when studying texts of the past, that ale and beer were NOT synonyms, even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and brewers meant two different drinks when they talked about ale and beer. Only for a brief period in their long history - say very roughly 1920 to 1980 - in fact could 'ale' and 'beer' be regarded as 'more or less identical products', in Britain at least. Today, since the rise of the craft brewing scene in the United States, the majority of beer drinkers in the English-speaking world will agree with Jackson that 'beer' is the umbrella and 'ale' merely a sub-division of 'beer.'

## References

1. *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*. (1966) Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.24 & 85.
2. Monckton, H.A. (1966) *A History of Ale and Beer*. London: Bodley Head, p.67.
3. Chaloner, W.H. (1960) 'Peter Mathias, The Brewing Industry in England, 1700 - 1830'. *The Agricultural History Review*. Vol. 8, Part II, p.116.
4. Best, M.R. (ed.) (1986) *The English Housewife, Gervase Markham*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, p.288.
5. Defoe, D. (1724) *A tour thro' the whole island of Great Britain: divided into circuits or Journies*. London, p.127.
6. Ellis, W. (1736) *The London and Country Brewer*, by 'A Person Formerly Concerned in a Common Brewhouse at London.' 2nd ed. London, p.73.
7. *ibid.* p.37.
8. *London Chronicle*. 1 November 1760, pp.436-437
9. Crocker, T.H., Williams, T. and Clark, S. (1764) *The Complete Dictionary of Arts and Sciences in which the Whole Circle of Human Learning is Explained*. London, (no page numbers).
10. Ebers, J. (1794) *Vollständiges Wörterbuch der Englischen Sprache für die Deutschen*. Breitkopf.
11. Taylor, I. (1825) *Scenes of British Wealth, in Produce, Manufactures, and Commerce: for the amusement and instruction of little tarry-at-home travellers*. London: J. Harris, p.172.
12. Ure, A. (1824) *A Dictionary of Chemistry on the Basis of Mr Nicholson's*. 2nd ed. London, p.219.
13. Donovan, M. (1830) *The Cabinet of Useful Arts conducted by the Rev Dionysius Lardner: Domestic Economy Vol 1, Brewing Wine Making, Distilling*. London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, p.202.
14. *Farmer's Magazine*. (1837) Vol. VII, No. 4 October, p.374.
15. Hebert, L. (1835) *The Engineer's and*

*Mechanic's Encyclopædia*. London: Thomas Kelly, p.163.

16. Pereira, J. (1843) *A treatise on food and diet*. New York: Brown, Green and Longmans, p.200.

17. *Edinburgh Annual Register*. July 16 1813, p.lxxiv.

18. *The Companion to the Newspaper and Journal of Facts in Politics, Statistics and Public Economy*. London: Charles Knight, No. 10, October 1833, p.154.

19. Cooley, A.J. (1880) *Cyclopaedia of practical receipts and collateral information in the*

*arts, manufactures, professions, and trades*. London: J. & A. Churchill, p.354.

20. Chaston Chapman, A. (1912) *Brewing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.3.

21. Fowler, H.W. (1926) *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.15.

22. Berkley, T. (1955) *We Keep a Pub*. London: Hutchinson, p.71.

23. Jackson, M. (1993) *Michael Jackson's Beer Companion*. London: Mitchell Beazley, p.66.