

‘A GLASS OF SOMETHING VERY TREBLE EXTRA’:
COMING-OF-AGE ALE, A LONG-FORGOTTEN BRITISH BEER STYLE

MARTYN CORNELL

In April 1862, *The Field* magazine carried a long and angry complaint about the new licence the Chancellor of the Exchequer, William Gladstone, was imposing on all home brewers who lived in a house with an annual rental value of more than £20, or a farm with a rent of more than £150.

The practice of home-brewing obtains and flourishes not only in most noblemens and country gentlemens houses, but among the greater part of the farmers throughout the country ... to enumerate the houses where good home-brewed is to be found would be to give a list of all the great mansions of the country, [*The Field* said, adding that] no better ale is drawn anywhere than that which is brewed and generously dispensed at Knowsley [Hall, home of the Stanley family, Earls of Derby]. Memory still lingers at the recollection of a glass of something very treble extra which was brewed when Lord Stanley was born, and tapped when he came of age.¹

The ale *The Field* eulogised must indeed have been memorable, for Lord Stanley had celebrated his 21st birthday all of 15 years earlier, in July 1847. But his ‘coming-of-age’ beer, which had slumbered in the cellars at Knowsley Hall from the year of his birth until it was finally tapped when he entered adulthood, was part of a tradition then more than a century old, of beers being laid down when the son and heir was born, to be drunk at his coming-of-age party. It was a tradition that would last through until the 20th century but which, despite being mentioned by two famous Victorian novelists, has been completely forgotten.

In 1873, Lady Blanche Noel, daughter of the Earl of Gainsborough, wrote about the 21st birthday celebra-

tions of her eldest brother Charles, Viscount Campden, two years earlier at the family home, Exton Hall, Rutland:

The universal custom in England of brewing a large quantity of the very best ale the year an heir is born and keeping it untouched until the day he becomes of age, when the cask is broached and distributed in prudently moderate quantities to the guests and tenants, is of very ancient origin and is most religiously adhered to.²

On the day of Lord Campden’s birthday,

Directly after breakfast we went up to the old hall to see the gigantic cask of twenty one years old ale opened and, as in duty bound, to taste the ale to Charles’s health ... The cavernous cellar in which stand the mysterious casks, the ivy-grown ruin overhead, the brawny men opening the family treasures and serving as rustic cup bearers to the guests, all made a thorough old-time picture.

Later in the day Lord Campden and his family shared the birthday dinner with 500 guests, the menu including a baron of beef weighing between 30 and 40 stone (560lb) and a whole roasted buck. There were also 21 joints of roast beef, 15 of pressed beef, 17 galantines of veal, 24 game pies, 14 large hams, 28 tongues, 15 turkeys, 8 boars heads, 15 rounds of beef, 10 legs and 14 shoulders of mutton, 72 roast fowls, 54 pheasants, 62 partridges, 20 plum puddings and so on, making a total of 1,000 dishes, plus a 120lb birthday cake.

The making of such extreme-aged cask beer was not, in fact, of ‘very ancient origin’, albeit the tradition

certainly went back to Georgian times. The earliest mention of ‘coming-of-age beer’ seems to be from just 120 years earlier than Lord Campden’s 21st birthday, from a newspaper report of the magnificent party given on Monday 13 May 1751 at Wentworth Woodhouse in South Yorkshire for the 21st birthday party of the 2nd Marquess of Rockingham (later twice Prime Minister). The *Derby Mercury* reported³ that there were ‘upwards of 10,000 Guests in the whole’, of whom 3,000 were entertained in the house itself. They consumed 110 dishes of roast beef, 70 pies, 55 dishes of mutton, 48 hams, 55 dishes of lamb, 70 dishes of veal, 40 dishes of chicken and 104 dishes of fish, washed down with 13 hogsheads of ale, 20 hogsheads of strong beer, eight hogsheads of punch and four hogsheads of wine. The strong beer, the Mercury said ‘was most of it brewed in the Year 1730’, that is, when the marquis was born.

The fact that the 21-year-old drink was called ‘beer’ is significant, because the 18th century was still a time when ‘beer’ was the name given to a highly hopped malt liquor, while ‘ale’ was reserved for a drink that might not be completely hop-free, as it once was, but would certainly contain less hops than a beer.⁴ It seems to have taken a couple of centuries after the introduction of hopped beer into Britain in the 1400s before brewers realised they could brew beers that would last years, not just months. In 1577 the Essex clergyman William Harrison wrote about the strong March beer, made at the end of the brewing season by the English nobility on their country estates. This March-brewed beer, he said was drunk when it was ‘commonly of a year old’ and sometimes ‘of two years tunning or more’, though ‘this is not general’.⁵ Just over 125 years later, the envelope had been pushed out rather more: in 1703 the anonymous *Guide to Gentlemen and Farmers for Brewing the Finest Malt Liquors* declared that ‘many country gentlemen’ ‘talk of, and magnify their stale Beer of 5, 10 or more years old’ (‘stale’, here, meaning mature, of course, and not ‘off’).

It seems likely that the length of time extremely strong beers remained drinkable rose slowly as brewers on country estates grew more experienced in their making and handling, so that by 1730, when Thomas Watson-Wentworth, then Baron Malton, had a son, Charles, he - or whoever brewed his ale and beer - felt confident enough to lay down more than a thousand gallons of strong beer well-hopped enough to last for more than

two decades. Sadly for Thomas, who had been made Marquess of Rockingham in 1746, he was not around to enjoy it, for he died in 1750, leaving his new title to be inherited by his son. Charles, incidentally, was Thomas’s second son: his eldest son William had died aged 11 in 1739.

A book published in 1876, *Round About Bradford*, by William Cudworth, claimed that ‘there were persons living thirty years ago [ie 1846] who could remember the glorious doings’ when ‘John Tempest the young squire’ of Tong Hall, on the outskirts of the town came of age, which would have been in September 1771:

how oxen were roasted whole; how the ale brewed on the day he was born [that is, in 1750] was brought out in hogsheads and broached on the lawn; and how the whole festivities were wound up by a foot race of Amazons for a new holland smock which was gallantly won by Peg Mitchell.⁶

(John was the oldest son of the third son of Sir George Tempest, second baronet,⁷ and the heir presumptive to the baronetcy when he was born, though he was replaced three years later when his father’s eldest brother, Henry, finally had a son.)

The next known occasion featuring coming-of-age beer, was again in Yorkshire, on Tuesday 15 November 1785, when the 21st birthday of John Dawnay, Viscount Downe, was celebrated at Cowick Hall, the family seat near Snaith, in the East Riding. Dawnay himself was away from home, but his mother provided ‘upwards of 500’ people with ‘a large fat Ox, several sheep’, calves, hams, turkeys, geese, game ‘and every other article’, while ‘the strong Beer was 21 years old [that is, brewed in 1763], extremely good’.⁸

The earliest eye-witness (or tongue-witness) account of extreme-aged cask ale comes from the actor-manager John Bernard, who wrote in 1830 about a visit he made around 1793/94 to Mount Edgcumbe House, close by Plymouth Sound, home of the Earl of Mount Edgcumbe, in what is now Cornwall but was then Devon. The earl pressed Bernard and his companions

to taste the family ale, for which Mount Edgecombe [sic] enjoyed some celebrity. It had been brewed on the birth day of Lord Valletort [the earl’s eldest son, born September 13 1764], and was not broached till he came of age [ie in 1785]:

it was more mild than the eulogised liquor of Boniface, but equally potent. Jefferson, incautiously smacking his lips after emptying his glass, induced his Lordship to fill it again, and this being a precedent not to be overruled in regard to ourselves, we all found it a difficult matter to pursue our path to the tavern with that due preservation of the perpendicular which people usually maintain before dinner.⁹

Bernard and his friends were thus drinking ale that was at least 29 years old, and had been first tapped at least eight years earlier. The tradition was kept up at Mount Edgcumbe House for at least three more generations: when the great-grandson of Bernard's Viscount Valletort came of age in August 1886, the *Hampshire Advertiser* recorded that

At the dinner to the tenantry, ale was drunk which was brewed in October twenty-one years ago [in 1865], in celebration of Lord Valletort's birth. This ale had been kept in a two-hundred-gallon cask, and refreshed every seven years with new hops.¹⁰

Adding fresh hops every seven years was, presumably, a trick the staff at Mount Edgcumbe House had learnt to keep super-aged ale in form. Another was topping up the cask of ale, on the solera system. An article written in 1899 said:

It is a common thing in England to make a large brew of beer when the heir to an estate is born. This is stored in casks, the loss by evaporation being supplied from time to time by adding fresh beer. When the heir reaches his majority, the beer is dispensed to the guests at the coming-of-age rejoicings.¹¹

From the start of the 19th century, references to coming-of-age ale being drunk begin to crop up, if not regularly, at least often enough to show that such brews were not unusual. When an eldest son was born to the Earl of Berkeley in December 1786, for example, a cask containing four hogsheads of special brew was filled at the family seat, Berkeley Castle, Gloucestershire, and tapped 21 years later, in 1807, at a celebration in the Great Hall at the castle attended by the Duke of Clarence (later William IV) among others. It also featured a 21-gun salute fired from the castle walls, 5,000 coloured lamps and, if the ale was not enough, 'two immense bowls of Punch, each containing twenty gallons'.¹²

Similarly when a son and heir, the magnificently monikered Richard Plantagenet Temple Nugent Brydges Chandos Grenville, Viscount Temple, was born to the Marquess of Buckingham at Stowe House in February 1797, vast casks in the cellars were again filled with ale in anticipation of his coming of age 21 years later. The antiquarian Thomas Frognall Dibdin, who saw the 'monstrous' casks in 1815 or 1816, two years or so before they were broached at a celebration attended by 'a great concourse of the first nobility', described them as 'a regiment of barrels only exceeded in grenadier height by those which I saw at Heidelberg in 1818'.¹³

The minor gentry were also laying down ales intended for super-ageing. When Sir John Davie, of Creedy House, near Crediton, Devon, was 21 in March 1819,

three fat oxen and 15 shilling loaves were distributed to the poor. All the tenantry were hospitably entertained at the mansion and hogsheads of ale born on the birth-day of the Baronet were tapped, for the first time, in honour of the day.¹⁴

At Belvoir Castle (pronounced 'beever') in Leicestershire, home of the Manners family, Dukes of Rutland, on January 4 1799 several hundred 'persons of the first rank', including the Prince of Wales, were entertained with a dinner and ball to celebrate the young Duke's coming of age, with 'the whole inhabitants of 10 neighbouring parishes' invited along for their own entertainments, making, according to one estimate, 10,000 other guests in the castle grounds. The whole affair was estimated to cost £10,000 (perhaps £10 million today), including £500 on lighting. Among the attractions - for the nobility, at least - were 60 pineapples at two guineas each (more than £150 today), while for the tenantry there was 'roast beef, porter and strong beer, brewed at the birth of this young nobleman',¹⁵ that is, in 1778.

Under Belvoir castle were two ale cellars and the 'small beer cellar'. In the first half of the 19th century they were stuffed with casks: the smaller ale cellar, under the north terrace held getting on for 6,000 gallons in a dozen or so vessels each containing about 500 gallons. The larger cellar contained 28 casks, the biggest of which, named after Robert de Toden, the Norman knight who was made Lord of Belvoir after William the

Conqueror's invasion in 1066, held 1,300 gallons, 36 barrels. Inside this cask, 13 people were supposed to have dined. It bore a label, in the 1830s, with the date May 16 1815, the date of birth of the then Marquis of Granby, third but oldest surviving son of the Duke who came of age in 1799 (and great-grandson of the marquis who gave his name to so many pubs), and the day the cask was filled.

It was tapped on the marquis's coming of age in 1836, when the Duke of Rutland, 37 years after his own great celebration, put on such an enormous party for his son that 'not a labourer or wayfaring man within seven miles of the castle went to bed sober that night'.¹⁶ Even so, visitors to the castle were still being offered a wine-glass of the marquis's coming-of-age ale in 1837, a year later, when they were shown around the cellars, though Thomas Frognall Dibdin, who was clearly a ticker of ancient aristocratic ales, recorded after trying some that 'the strength and the flavour of this barley broth were, to my palate, either decomposed or passed away'.¹⁷

In September 1841 the 'magnificent mansion' of Wynnstay, near Wrexham in North Wales, saw four days of celebration to mark the coming-of-age of Sir Watkin Williams-Wynn, the sixth baronet. On the last day, 500 people, including Sir Watkin's uncles the Duke of Northumberland and the Earl of Powis, sat down to dine in a 7,500-square-foot pavilion, 20 feet high, erected in the garden. The menu included rounds and sirloins of beef, shoulders and legs of lamb, haunches of venison, roast and boiled chickens, grouse, partridges, jugged hare, veal, hams, salmon, carp, tench, lobster salad, tongues, jellies, blancmanges and pastries, 'unlimited' wines including claret, hock, champagne and port - and 'probably the greatest treat', according to the local newspaper, the *Shropshire Conservative*, 'an abundant supply of rare old ale, brewed at the birth of the present Sir Watkin Wynn', that is, 21 years earlier, in 1820, 'when 200 bushels of malt were brewed to fill the noble barrel out of which the company were supplied with their invigorating potatoes'.¹⁸

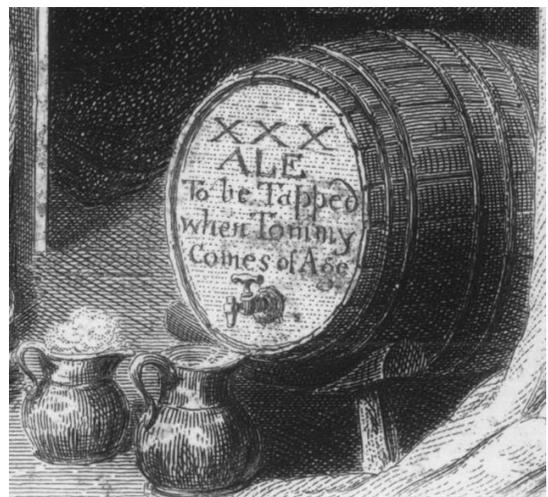
Sir Watkin, and his cellarer, Mr W. Martin, who had been at Wynnstay for nearly half a century (and who had presumably been the brewer in 1820), drank the first jug of 21-year-old ale between them,¹⁹ and were evidently quickly joined by the Duke and Earl: 'Those highest in rank in the company appeared to enjoy the noble liquor

with the utmost relish,' according to the *Shropshire Conservative*. Sir Watkin's extreme-aged ale, even at a (Shropshire) conservative estimate of 16 bushels to the barrel, giving an enormous 1230 original gravity, would have totalling a dozen or so barrels, enough (and more than enough) for seven pints a head for all those guests.

It was not just rural areas that enjoyed coming-of-age beer. At the 21st birthday of the Hon Augustus Henry Venables-Vernon, son of the fifth Baron Vernon, owner of the coal mines at Poynton in Cheshire, in January 1850, 1,500 miners employed by Lord Vernon sat down in Poynton School to a dinner of beef from two 'immense' oxen and 'liberal potions of prime old stingo ale, brewed in 1829, at the birth of the present heir of Poynton'.²⁰

Nor was it necessary (although it helped) to be heir to a title to enjoy extreme-aged ale at your 21st birthday party. The coming-of-age of Lieutenant Philip Bennet of the Royal Horseguards - the 11th Philip Bennet in succession, and son of the local MP - at Rougham Hall, near Bury St Edmonds in Suffolk in December 1858 saw a dinner for 50 and a ball for 300 of the local 'nobility and gentry', while

Connoisseurs in malt liquor had an opportunity of tasting some extraordinary ale, brewed at the birth of the young heir, the strength of which, according to general report, rivalled that of the wonderful beverage whose appalling potency in



causing the premature demise of Mr Topsawyer, as related by the ‘friendly waiter’, excited so much alarm in the breast of poor little David Copperfield.²¹

Sometimes, it appears, it was a servant who nudged the father into brewing. During the coming-of-age celebrations of Charles Mainwaring, son and heir of another MP, Townshend Mainwaring of Galltfaenan in Denbighshire, North Wales, in July 1866, Mr Mainwaring senior announced that ‘a good old servant’ had come to him at the birth of his son in 1845 and said that

if the child was spared he would one day come of age, and they had better brew a barrel of ale for the occasion. That ale was brewed, and had that day been tapped, and he hoped they would taste it.²²

Records of coming-of-age ales from the South East of England appear to be rare though in August 1872 the 21st birthday celebrations of Lord Clifton, eldest son of the Earl of Darnley, at Cobham Hall, near Rochester, Kent, saw what was called ‘the usual large vat of ale, brewed at the birth of the heir to the earldom ... tapped, and the health of his lordship heartily drunk’. Cobham Hall had several large oast houses in the grounds, and it seems certain Lord Clifton’s 21-year-old ale would have contained Kentish hops.²³

Not all ale laid down at a birth was drunk at the coming-of-age party. Sir Henry Monson de la Poer Beresford-Peirse and his bride the Lady Adelaide returned from their continental wedding tour early in 1874 to their home, Bedale Hall, North Yorkshire, and in June a grand festival was held to mark Sir Henry’s formal installation as landlord of the Bedale Estates. At the dinner were two casks that had been filled with 100 gallons of ‘prime ale’ when Sir Henry was born in September 1850, and which had remained in the cellars at Bedale Hall since then. The *York Herald* remarked that ‘the mouldy appearance of the exterior’ of the casks ‘sufficed to show their antiquity, and to connoisseurs the quality of the nut-brown ale within, which was afterwards handed round the table, and enjoyed in all its pungency’.²⁴

One of the unique elements of extreme-aged cask ale is that it was a style that could not have developed in a commercial environment. Storing ale or beer on a large scale was developed by porter brewers in the mid-18th century, and even the biggest casks at Belvoir Castle or

Stowe House were dwarfed by the vast vats used by the London porter brewers, such as Barclay Perkins, where the largest stood 40 feet tall, and measured 40 feet across at the widest part, giving a capacity of 3,300 barrels.²⁵ But those vats were used to age maturing porter for only a year or two. Aged ale was occasionally found for sale: the *Times* in November 1859, for example, carried an advertisement from a man in Clapham addressed to ‘brewers and others’ for

about 65 barrels of three-year-old ale, perfectly sound and in brilliant condition. Has been moved three times in the past three months and each time has gone perfectly bright of its own according in a few days.

The price was only 23 shillings a barrel, however, less even than fresh table ale.

On the other hand, in February 1863 the *Bristol Mercury* carried an ad for ‘a vat of 200 barrels of very superior old ale, vatted in 1857, to be sold at 48s per barrel, for cash’. Assuming this was brewed in October 1857 it was then five years and three months old. West Country drinkers were famous for their preference for old ale: a writer in 1890 declared that ‘In the West of England and in Belgium this fashion of drinking old ale has not yet died out’.²⁶ One of the few other commercial aged ales I have been able to find mention of was from York, where, at a clearance sale at the Old Bird-In-Hand Hotel, Bootham in October 1878, the departing landlord sold his complete brewing plant, horses, carriages, poultry, pigeons, and ‘One Puncheon of Fine 7 years old STRONG ALE, in splendid condition’²⁷ - a puncheon, in beer brewing, was a cask with a capacity of 72 gallons, equal to two barrels.

All of these, however, even the oldest, were beardless youths compared to the ancient keeping ales made by the gentry and aristocracy in anticipation of their sons’ coming-of-age celebrations. No commercial brewer could afford to keep an ale maturing for two decades. A nobleman such as the Duke of Portland, however, had the wealth to pay for the raw materials, the huge cellars in which to store a long-life ale undisturbed, the confidence to undertake a venture that would not pay off for more than two decades, and a substantial brewing operation in existence, to supply his household staff and estate workers with what was still a necessity, daily beer and ale.

Sometimes a hundred sat down to dine in the servants hall at the Duke's home, Welbeck Abbey, near Worksop, North Nottinghamshire in the 1850s, and they were supplied with drink by a beer barrel on wheels that ran up and down the table.²⁸ In 1879, servants at Trentham Hall, Staffordshire, home of the Dukes of Sutherland, were allowed four pints a day for men and two for women.²⁹ That implies the Welbeck Abbey brewery, assuming the servants there received the same allowance, was producing perhaps seven barrels a week, as a minimum. It would not be hard to switch that production for one week into making a super-strong ale for laying down, as happened at Welbeck in 1802, when the fourth Duke of Portlands second son, Lord George Bentinck, was born. One of many enormous casks in the Welbeck Abbey cellars was filled with ale, and Lord George's name and date of birth painted on it, ready for the contents to be given away to the duke's workers and tenants when Lord George came of age. (Though in this case, it appears, Lord George's ale was never given away, and remained in the cellars even after his death in 1848.)

There was, of course, a massive element of showing off involved in the production of such super-aged ales, and in the whole roast-ox, dinner-for-500 theatricals of an aristocratic coming-of-age, as well as a sense that this was part of the idea of *noblesse oblige*, the rich man in his castle's obligation to give the poor man at his gate a jolly good party occasionally. A coming-of-age celebration, complete with 21-year-old ale, features in George Eliot's novel *Adam Bede*, written in 1859 but set in 1799. It is July, and everyone in the locality, farmers, farm workers and their families, has been invited to the celebrations for the 21st birthday of the 'young Squire', Captain Arthur Donnithorne, at Donnithorne Chase, and the men are particularly keen:

... it is a time of leisure on the farm, that pause between hay and corn-harvest, and so the farmers and labourers in Hayslope and Broxton thought the captain did well to come of age just then, when they could give their undivided minds to the flavour of the great cask of ale which had been brewed the autumn after the heir was born, and was to be tapped on his twenty-first birthday.³⁰

What was that flavour? A report in 1857 on 'Tapping the barrel of Lincoln Ale', which took place at the Duke of Newcastle's home, Cumber Park, not far from Welbeck

Abbey at the celebrations for the coming-of-age of his eldest son the Earl of Lincoln (celebrations delayed two years because of the Crimean War, the Duke having said that he 'could not entertain the thought of festivities when England was at war and our brave countrymen were fighting for her honour'³¹), said the ale brewed when the earl was born had been 'placed in a butt and ceremoniously deposited in the cellars' at Clumber, then 'carefully attended to; and being now twenty-three years old, it resembles wine'.³²

Elizabeth Gaskell also wrote about extreme-aged ale in her novel *Wives and Daughters*, written in 1864-5 but again set several decades earlier, in the early 1830s, and gave an idea of its effects. Squire Hamley has broached a cask of ale laid down at least 21 years earlier, at the birth of his first-born son, Osborne, and invites the local physician, Mr Gibson, to try it, in honour of his second-born son, Roger, who has been chosen to lead a prestigious scientific expedition to Africa:

You must have a glass full. It's old ale, such as we dont brew now-a-days. Its as old as Osborne. We brewed it that autumn and we called it the young Squire's ale. I thought to have tapped it on his marriage but I don't know when that will come to pass, so weve tapped it now in Roger's honour. The old Squire had evidently been enjoying the young Squires ale to the verge of prudence. It was indeed, as he said, as strong as brandy, and Mr Gibson had to sip it very carefully as he ate his cold roast beef.³³

Extreme-aged ale was certainly very strong: in 1897, during a hearing by the Home Office committee on beer materials, the conversation turned to aged ales, and the committee chairman, Sidney Herbert, the Earl of Pembroke, who was then 54, began reminiscing:

Of course, as we are all aware, the old custom was to have so many casks of beer brewed when the eldest son was born and it was not opened till he came of age ... that beer was of a very intoxicating nature by the time it was used. Of course, it was made very strong: you can concentrate it ... I am not sure that the 21-years-old ale was a very wholesome drink when the 21 years was passed. It was extremely intoxicating?

Witness [Andrew Mansell, a farmer and barley-grower from Shifnall in Shropshire]: But, of course, you would take it accordingly. You would drink such ale in champagne glasses; you would not drink it like beer.³⁴

The earl's comment that 'we are all aware' of 'the old custom' suggests that within his living memory, at least, coming-of-age ale was common among the landed classes.

Lord Pembroke was also remembering a time when home brewing was still common, too. In 1870 there were more than 100,000 householders, large and small, paying the private brewing licence, meaning around one in a hundred homes brewed its own beer.³⁵ However, in 1880, William Gladstone, then serving as both Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer, introduced the 'Free Mash Tun' Licensing Act, which removed all tax on malt, but brought in a tax on the private brewer's actual output for the first time: if the house they lived in was worth more than £15 a year, they had to pay full duty on all the beer they brewed.

That meant great families like the Noels, the Wynns and the Manners now had to pay tax up front if they wanted to lay down several hundred gallons of sledgehammer brew for the new-born heir's coming-of-age celebrations in a couple of decades' time. Not surprisingly, the practice of making extreme-aged ale seems to have gone into sharp decline (as did private brewing itself: by 1895 the number of licensed home brewers had fallen more than 80% from the 1870 figure, to just over 17,000).

At Belvoir Castle, the Marquis of Granby whose coming-of-age had been celebrated with 21-year-old ale in 1836 became Duke of Rutland in 1857, and died unmarried in March 1888. He was succeeded as duke by his brother John. Just over a year later, in July 1889, the *Daily Telegraph* was reporting that the 24-hogshead 'Robert de Todení' and two other huge beer barrels, the 'Marquis of Granby' and the 'Lord John', with capacities of 13 hogsheads (702 gallons) and eight hogsheads respectively, 'which have so long been the pride of the spacious cellar' at Belvoir Castle, had been 'removed from their traditional crypts', and 'at the present time poor Robert de Todení is lying on its side near the stables of the Castle like a huge vessel stranded'.³⁶

The *Telegraph* wailed that

the number of county families who continue to brew their own beer and to dispense it gratuitously to their tenants and farm-labourers is every year visibly diminishing. When so

little is got out of the land as is the case nowadays, the landowner scarcely thinks it worthwhile to regale his poorer neighbours with eleemosynary [free] beer; and although in a few districts there might be some fine old English gentlemen who continue to follow the pleasant practice of tapping on the coming of age of the heir the hogshead of humming ale which was brewed in the year when he was born, the custom has grown to one much more honoured in the breach than the observance.

There *were* still extreme-aged brews being tapped. In January 1885 the coming-of-age of the Honourable Gustavus Hamilton Russell, eldest son of Viscount Boyne of Brancepeth Castle in County Durham, was celebrated with an ox-roast and a dinner for 350 families. The contents of a 600-gallon cask of ale made in 1864, when young Gustavus was born, were distributed 'gratuitously to all comers' with the beef, while the band of the Northumberland Hussars played 'sweet music'.³⁷ Charles Francis Kynaston Mainwaring of Oteley Park, Ellesmere, welcoming some 1,500 to 2,000 locals to his 21st birthday celebrations in December 1892, invited them to taste his 21-year-old ale before they dined, 'and many kind wishes for his future passed from mouth to mouth'.³⁸

Not everybody brewed their own: at the celebrations when Charles Grey, Viscount Howick, only son of Earl Grey, was 21 in December 1900, for the post-dinner toast to the Queen at Howick House in Northumberland 'there was provided Cambridge ale, brewed in the year 1874, and brought from College by Earl Grey when he completed his university career'. That would have been 26-year-old ale from Trinity College, where Grey studied history and law.³⁹

At Highclere Castle in Hampshire, the seat of the Earl of Caernarvon (and the place where Downton Abbey was filmed) in 1899 a 500-gallon cask, made from well-seasoned oak grown on the Highclere estate, was commissioned from Sam Walter, a Newbury cooper. The finished cask, banded with massive brass hoops, bore a brass coronet and an inscription plate that said:

May Highclere Flourish. This cask of ale, containing 500 gallons, was brewed in commemoration of Lord Porchester, born November 7th, 1898. Albert Streatfield, butler, Highclere Castle 1898.⁴⁰

The ale itself was brewed in March 1899: March and October were the traditional months for brewing strong ale.

However, the First World War 15 years later, and the massive rises in taxes on beer in Britain that conflict brought in, seems to have finally knocked on the head the extreme-aged ‘young heirs 21st birthday’ ale. The last two such brews I have been able to find records for were both made just before the war. Late in 1910 or early in 1911 a special ale was brewed at Wentworth Woodhouse, near Rotherham in Yorkshire, home of the Earl Fitzwilliam, for the birth of his eldest son Peter Wentworth-Fitzwilliam, Viscount Milton. That ale was tapped at Lord Milton’s 21st birthday celebrations on 31 December 1931, and drunk by guests who included more than 5,000 workmen, ‘a large number of whom were coalminers employed by Lord Fitzwilliam’.⁴¹

Less than four years after Lord Milton’s birth, in May 1914, a son and heir was born to the Earl of Macclesfield. To mark the arrival of the new Viscount Parker, casks of strong ale were laid down in the cellars below the level of the moat at the family home, Shirburn Castle, in Oxfordshire, to be drunk when he came of age.⁴² At the celebrations, on Monday 6 May 1935, tenants and employees of Lord Macclesfield from the villages of Shirburn and Stoke Talmage were entertained at supper. If - and surely they did - they drank to Lord Parker’s health in his 21-year-old ale, I wonder how many were aware they were among the last enjoyers of a vanishing tradition.

References

1. Reprinted in *The Belfast News-Letter*, Thursday, 17 April 1862
2. Anon (1873) ‘English Domestic Festivities by an English Catholic’, *Catholic World*. Vol. 17, No. 10, August. p.632.
3. *Derby Mercury*. Monday 17 May 1751
4. See, eg, Ellis, W. (1736) *The London and Country Brewer*. London: Messrs Fox. Chp. VII, p.37.
5. Harrison, W. (1968) *The Description of England*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. p.130.
6. Cudworth, W. (1876) *Round about Bradford: A Series of Sketches (descriptive and Semi-historical) of Forty-two Places Within Six Miles of Bradford*. Bradford: T. Brear. p.511.
7. Burke, J. (1833) *A genealogical and heraldic history of the commoners of Great Britain and Ireland enjoying Territorial Possession or Great Rank*. London: Colburn. Vol. 1, p.291.
8. *Derby Mercury*. Thursday 17 November 1785.
9. Bernard, J. (1830) *Retrospections of the Stage*, Vol. 2. London: H. Colburn and R. Bentley. p.284.
10. *Hampshire Advertiser*. Saturday 14 August 1886, p.2.
11. Inkersley, A. (1898-9) ‘National Beverages’, *Self Culture*. Vol. 8 September-February. p.316.
12. Costley-White, H. (1961) *Mary Cole, Countess of Berkeley: a biography*. London: George G Harrap & Co. p.113.
13. Frognall Dibdin, T. (1836) *Reminiscences of a Literary Life*. Vol. 2. London: J. Major. p.610.
14. *The New Times*. London, Monday 15 March 1819 p.2.
15. *Caledonian Mercury*. Edinburgh, Monday 7 January 1799, p.3.
16. Frognall Dibdin, T. (1838) *A Bibliographical, Antiquarian and picturesque Tour in the Northern Countries of England and in Scotland*. London: Self published. p.64.
17. *ibid*.
18. Reprinted in *The Times*. 14 September 1841. p.6.
19. *Bye-gones, relating to Wales and the Border Counties*, 1874-5, Oswestry, p.296.
20. *Derby Mercury*. Thursday, 30 January 1850 and *Manchester Times*. Saturday, 2 February 1850.
21. *The Bury and Norwich Post and Suffolk Herald*. Tuesday, 21 December 1858.
22. *Wrexham Advertiser*. Saturday, 14 July 1866, p.6.
23. *The Standard*. London, Saturday, 24 August 1872, p.3.
24. *York Herald*. Saturday, 27 June 1874. p.11.
25. *The Builder*. Vol. XXXXVI, London, 1879. p.304.
26. *Journal of the Society of Arts*. Vol. 38, 24 October 1890. p.999.
27. *York Herald*. Tuesday, 15 October 1878. p.1.
28. *The Innkeeper and Traveller*. London: Houlston and Wright, April 1861. p.185.
29. Sambrook, P. (1996) *Country House Brewing in England 1500-1900*. London: The Hambledon Press. p.233.
30. Eliot, G. (1867) *Adam Bede*. Edinburgh and London: Blackwood and Sons. pp.214-5.
31. *Sheffield & Rotherham Independent*. Saturday, 27 January 1855. p.6.
32. *Illustrated Times*. 7 February 1857. p.94.
33. Gaskell, E. (1866) *Wives and Daughters, an every-day story*. London: Smith, Elder. Vol. 2. p.34.
34. *Minutes of Evidence Taken Before the Departmental Committee on Beer Materials*. London: HMSO, 1899. p.65.
35. Prys Williams, G. and Thompson Brake, G. (1980) *Drink in Great Britain, 1900 to 1979*. London: Edsall. p.208.

36. Reprinted in the *Leicester Chronicle and Leicester Mercury*. Saturday 27 July 1889. p.3.

37. *Northern Echo*. Darlington, Monday 12 January 1885.

38. *Wrexham Advertiser and North Wales News*. 24 December 1892. p.6.

39. *Newcastle Weekly Courant*. Saturday, 22 December 1900

40. *Hampshire Advertiser*. Wednesday, 1 March 1899. p.3.

41. *The Times*. Friday, 1 January 1932. p.13.

42. *Daily Mirror*. 9 May 1935. p.11.