

DEVON WHITE ALE

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In recent years the growth of microbreweries has led to the revival of many long defunct beer styles. One legendary Devon brew has yet to be resurrected, however, which, given its long-standing popularity, seems something of a missed opportunity.

The history of Devon white ale is shrouded in mystery and confusion. One thing is clear, however: it was not the same as Dutch witbier or German weissbier, which are brewed with wheat. Devon white ale, in fact, seems to bear no relation to any other known beer style. It has frequently been claimed that it was confined to the South Hams, yet in the mid-nineteenth century it was brewed in 25 Plymouth inns and 15 Plymouth beerhouses.¹

Another bone of contention is the so-called secret ingredient essential for brewing this elusive liquor. Some sources state categorically that the recipe was known only to the members of one family and handed down from generation to generation; others imply it was common knowledge. And as to where it was first brewed, although Dodbrooke (now part of Kingsbridge) is the name that most frequently crops up, Dartmouth, Plymouth and even Germany have also been suggested.

The first, albeit rather dubious, reference to white ale comes in Andrew Boorde's *Dyetary of Health*, published in 1542. Boorde is chiefly remembered today for his intemperate attack on the use of hops in beer. He was rude about other things as well, including Cornwall, which he described as

a pore and very barren cuntrye of al maner thing, except tyn and fyssh. There meate, and theyr bread, and dryncke, is marde and spylt for lacke of good ordring and dressynge ...

There ale is starke nought, lokinge whyte and thycke, as pyggges had wraستهled in it.²

Although he added that Cornish ale 'wyll make one to kacke, also to spew', he gave no details about how it was brewed, which suggests this may have been simply a conventional unhopped ale marred by careless preparation.³ And, as this is the only time that Cornwall features in the story of white ale, we will move swiftly on to 1736 and the first unequivocal reference to it.⁴

This comes in William Ellis's *London & Country Brewer*, a compendious tome in which we are told that 'the Plymouth people ... are so attach'd to their white thick ale, that many have undone themselves by drinking it'.⁵ Unlike Boorde, Ellis gives details of how this seductive tippie was brewed:

Their white ale is a clear wort made from pale malt, and fermented with what they call ripening, which is a composition, they say, of the flower of malt, yeast, and whites of eggs, a nostrum made and sold only by two or three in those parts, but the wort is brewed and the ale vended by many of the publicans, which is drank while it is fermenting in earthen steens, in such a thick manner as resembles butter'd ale, and sold for two-pence half-penny the full quart. It is often prescribed by physicians to be drank by wet-nurses for the encrease of their milk, and also as a prevalent medicine for the colick and gravel.⁶

Two years later, in the third volume of *The London & Country Brewer*, Ellis returned to the subject of white ale,

in order to set forth its excellency, and pave a way for its general reception in the world. To this end I write with an

eager pen, by the inducement of the best qualities belonging to a publick liquor, viz. pleasure and health. About sixty years ago (as far as I can learn) this drink was first invented at or near the town of Plymouth ... This liquor is brewed from pale malt, after the best method known in the western parts of this county; and as it is drank at Plymouth, in particular by the best of that town, the alewives whose province this commonly falls under to manage from the beginning to the end, are most of them as curious in their brewing it, as the dairy-woman in making her butter; for as it is a white ale, it is soon sullied by dirt, and as easily preserved in its frothy head ... And, though the wort is brewed by the hostess, the fermentation is brought on by the purchase of what they call ripening, or a composition (as some say) of the flower of malt mixed with the whites of eggs. But as this is a nostrum known but to a few, it is only guessing at the matter; for about thirty years ago, as I am informed, there was only two or three masters of the secret, who sold it out as we sell yeast, at so much for a certain quantity; and that every time a new brewing of this sort of ale happened: A great ball or lump of it was generally sufficient to work four or five steens of wort, and convert it from a very clear body into a thick fermenting one, near the colour and consistence of butter'd ale, and then it was only fit to be used; for if it was let alone to be fine or stale, it was rejected as not worthy of buying and drinking. Yet some out of curiosity have kept it in bottles, rack'd it off clear, and made of it flip and other compositions very good. Now this white ale being fermented into such a gross body, becomes a sort of chyle ready prepared for digestion in the stomach, and yet so liquid as to pass the several secretory ducts of the animal system soon enough to give room for new supplies of this pleasant tippie, even at one common sitting in a publick house: For though this drink is not so thin and clear as the brown sorts, yet by its new, lubricious slippery parts, it is soon discharged out of the stomach; and notwithstanding such evacuations, it leaves a very nutritious quality behind it in the body, that brings it under a just reputation for preventing and recovering those who are not too far gone in consumptions; and therefore would be of extraordinary service to labouring people. In short, this famous liquor is of such a salubrious nature, as renders it a most agreeable drink both to the sedentary and active person; which plainly shows the transcendent quality peculiar to this white ale, beyond all other malt liquors whatsoever. For who dare, nay who can make so free with any new beer or ale, while it is under fermentation, as with this, and that by reason of the poisonous quality of the yeast, and the fulsome, nauseating, unwholesome nature, that such working drinks are endowed with; whereas this invites one to drink it as fast as any of the

common brown or pale ales, and at the same time administers to the body such medical assistance, that no other malt drink, wine, nor any potable liquor now in use, as I know of, comes up to it, not only for the aforesaid intention, but it is likewise usually prescribed by physicians as a remedy in the cholick and gravel by its lubricating, diuretick nature ... Its strength also is so great, that though it is drank while working, it is as intoxicating as the common ales or beers; for by the time a man has drank a quart or two to his share, he will find it enough to go off with; and if anyone thinks fit to make it stronger (as is often done) it is only adding half a pint of sherry with a little loaf-sugar and nutmeg, and then it will not only be strong, but very pleasant; and sometimes entertaining to a fault; insomuch, that several have been enticed by its luscious, stimulating taste and cordial quality, to a degree of extravagance, by their too frequent expence of money and time in the enjoyment of this delicate improv'd ale.⁷

Given such a ringing endorsement, it is surprising that white ale did not catch on elsewhere. Perhaps this had something to do with the availability of that all-important secret ingredient, although strangely enough this was not mentioned by the next writer to sing its praises. This was the anonymous author of *Every Man His Own Brewer*, an early home-brew manual published in 1768:

This drink is prepared from pale, slack dried malt of the lowest quality, and without the use of any hop, or other alkaline preservative, as being for spending immediately after fermentation, which is brought about without yeast, in the following manner:

When the extract is drawn off into the wort tun, a paste is prepared from wheat flour, bean flour or malt flour, it matters not which, except as to body; either of these flours are made into a paste with white of eggs, and being thrown into the wort sets it a fermenting, whence arises a fine white froth, which no sooner falls than the liquor becomes drinkable, tho' not fine, nor is usually permitted so to be, as it then turns stale, but is for the present extreme brisk and agreeable.

This is not cleansed into casks as other ales, nor is a wort tun, as above mentioned, commonly employed; but as great neatness is requisite, it is most usually let down from the mash into glazed jars called steens, and worked in, and drawn from them for use.⁸

Charles Vancouver, the progenitor of the myth that white ale could only be found in the South Hams, was

in no doubt about the importance of ripening, however, which he called grout. In 1808, he wrote that

the brewing of a liquor called white ale is almost exclusively confined to the neighbourhood of Kingsbridge: its preparation, as far as could be learnt by the surveyor, is 20 gallons of malt mashed with the same quantity of boiling water; after standing the usual time, the wort is drawn off, when six eggs, four pounds of flour, a quarter of a pound of salt, and a quart of grout are beat up together, and mixed with this quantity of wort, which, after standing twelve hours, is put into a cask, and is ready for use the following day. This beverage possesses a very intoxicating quality, and is much admired by those who *drink not to quench thirst only*. A mystery hangs over the ingredient called grout, and the secret is said to be confined to one family in the district only. No difficulty however could arise in ascertaining its component parts, by submitting a certain portion of it to the test of a chemical examination. That this liquor is of considerable antiquity is plain, from the terrier of the advowson of Dodbrooke, and which expressly calls for the tithe of white ale. The present worthy incumbent commutes this claim, for half a guinea annually from every house in the parish where this ancient beverage is retailed.⁹

Dodbrooke was also cited as the birthplace of white ale in White's 1850 *Directory* of Devon, which added that 'it is said to have been introduced by a German regimental surgeon, some centuries back, at Dodbrooke'.¹⁰ This German connection is intriguing, but, as this seems to be the sole reference to it, it may be as much of a red herring as Vancouver's claim that white beer was only brewed in the South Hams.

In 1856, a correspondent in the *Exeter & Plymouth Gazette* gave further details of Dodbrooke's claim to be the place where white ale was first brewed:

Dodbrooke is certainly known as the first place where white ale was brewed. I think this is borne out by the fact that a tithe ... is paid by all innkeepers who brew this ale. It has been gradually raised from tenpence until it has reached the present sum of a guinea. It is also further proved by some old papers still preserved in the parish church of Kingsbridge, from which Dodbrooke is only separated by a small stream of water which runs below the pavement, bearing the date of 1528 ... in which mention is made of this ale ... What I consider the strongest proof of the claim of Dodbrooke to the invention of white ale is that a family, who have resided here

and in Kingsbridge in a direct line of descent for years before 1528 to the present date, are the only persons who possess the receipt for making the mixture which produces white ale, and this receipt is or has been preserved by the family as an inviolable secret. This mixture, which is known by the name of grout, is, at a particular stage of the brewing, put into, and mixed with, the wort, and as soon as the process is finished the result is white ale, a truly delicious beverage. All innkeepers are obliged, previous to brewing, to send to the representatives of this family for the necessary quantity of the mixture, without which no ale could be made.¹¹

Not everyone was convinced by the claims surrounding this so-called secret ingredient. In 1828, for example, Samuel Gray published a recipe for white ale in *The Operative Chemist*:

Pale ale wort 25 gall, hops 2 handfuls, yeast 3lb, grouts 6 or 8lb. When the fermentation is at its height, bottle in strong stone half pints, well corked and wired; it effervesces when opened. The grouts here mentioned are made by infusing 6 or 8lb of malt in a gallon and a half of water, covering it warm by the fire side, stirring it often: when in full fermentation it is to be boiled down to a thick paste.

This is a singular instance of a supposed secret which has been published upwards of a hundred and fifty years. The natives of Kingsbury [sic], in Devonshire, pretend that they alone can make white ale, and there is one family that pretends to the exclusive possession for the secret of making grouts. Now the method of making grouts, and from it white ale, was published in Bauhin's *Historia Plantarum*, being then the common English ale.¹²

In 1850, a more detailed recipe appeared in *The Publican, Innkeeper & Brewer's Guide*:

Mash one sack of pale malt or pale and amber malts with sufficient liquor at 170 degrees to draw off 30 gallons. Stand two hours and a half; set tap and turn over as much liquor at 180 degrees for second mash as will draw off 30 gallons more. While the second mash is standing, lade or pump the first wort into the copper; add half a pound of hops and increase the heat gradually while the second wort is running off, which add to it. Boil the wort very slowly for 20 minutes or half an hour. When it begins to get cloudy, or to break, which may be seen by dipping out a little in a basin, it is then boiled enough, for this must not be boiled so long as for beer. Run it off into the coolers with the hops, and cool down as speedily

as possible to about 80 degrees in winter and about 60 in summer, and pitch the tun or square. While it is running into the square, mix a portion of the wort with 24 pounds of fine wheaten flour and 24 fresh eggs into a thin smooth batter, and then put it into the whole with one pound of salt, and set to work with one pound of ripening ... Cover it well up. In ten hours a fermentation will be visible all around the sides of the tun or square, which will increase until it forms a thick head over the whole surface, about as thick as a penny piece. It will then break into little white heads which will fall back, at which point it should be cleaned by passing it through a fine wire sieve into twelve or fourteen-gallon casks with the heads out. Put them in a place where there is no draught, that the liquor may not chill, and let it be well covered, that it may continue fermenting for eight or ten hours longer, when it will be fit to drink. A thin brown head will then be formed on the top, which should remain undisturbed, to keep the ale fresh under it. Should this head begin to break away, and fall through the liquor, it may be skimmed off, or it will be drawn off with the ale and spoil its appearance.¹³

All of which seems straightforward, apart from that reference to ripening. This was, you will not be surprised to learn, that secret ingredient, although the author of the *Guide* seems unsure about just how secret it was. He starts by telling us that the recipe has been 'held by one or two families for many years, no one else in the neighbourhoods where the ale is drank but these knowing how to prepare it'. He then explains that 'the ripening, sold at Plymouth, for causing the fermentation, is a mixture of malt, hops and wort, which is quite sour, and without any appearance of fermentation, and is evidently a preparation in which a natural state of fermentation has occurred.' He goes on to say, however, that, if ripening is not available, some of the first wort, mixed with malt and hops, or the first mash, should be 'close corked' for three or four days in a warm place. This will, he claims, produce 'the same result ... without having recourse to the ripening'.¹⁴

More light was shed on the mystery of the secret recipe for grout or ripening in a paper presented to the Devonshire Association at Kingsbridge in 1877 by a local historian called Paul Q. Karkeek:

By what means grout in the South Hams became a secret I cannot explain: doubtless someone devoted attention to it, and so was enabled to produce a ferment that could be relied on; and consequently was in a position to leave the method a

secret for his children. This secret came into the Randall family with a Miss Grace Stentford, who married the grandfather of the present generation of Randalls, about the year 1770. At one time its manufacture produced a very good income, but the railroads, and other destroyers of old-fashioned ways and doings, introduced the clear ale and beer of today; and it has not been made by the Kingsbridge Randalls for some years. It is still sold by a person of the same name, living in Plymouth; but others have set up claims to possess the secret, and have produced a ripening or grout which has answered all the purposes of the original.¹⁵

Mr Karkeek was determined to get to the bottom of the mystery, however, and obtained a sample from John Randall, the 'white ale ripening maker' at 38½ Old Town Street, Plymouth, alluded to above. He sent it to an analytical chemist in Yorkshire, who prepared the following report:

The sample had a peculiar odour and very acid reaction, and contained ground malt and hops, plainly visible to the naked eye. As it is composed of a very complicated organic mixture, it is next to impossible to make a proximate analysis of its constituents chemically; and, as such is the case, I had to depend on microscopical examination ... The fine deposit, when separated from the malt and hops, and which I may term the yeast, is made up of yeast cells (*torulae*) and wheat starch granules, in about equal proportions. In treating it with iodine, this was plainly proved without the microscope, and under its power, much albuminous matter, small scales of hops, etc, were very easily distinguished.

The great peculiarity in the grout was the shape and size of the yeast cells, which are quite different to any that I have ever seen, being smaller in diameter and more ovoid than either German or any other English yeast. It is not so much the ingredients mixed with it, as the peculiarity in the yeast itself, which makes it different to other yeast; and you may rely on it that this is the whole secret. It was also greatly contaminated ... and is not calculated to produce a sound-keeping ale; in fact, any brewer's chemist would condemn its use in the brewery, and, as you remark that the grout ale only keeps one month in the winter and a few days only in summer, this plainly carries out what I say. Yeast so contaminated will produce lactic acid, in preference to alcohol; moreover, it is a well-known fact, that the lactic fermentation is more quick in its action than alcoholic. Besides the above, I discovered ... that common cane-sugar was present. We may then consider that grout consists of - first, yeast (*torulae*)

cells, having a very uncommon appearance, and contaminated greatly by bacteria, vibrios, penicillium glaucum, and the putrefactive ferment preponderating; second, wheat starch or flour; third, albuminous matter in large quantity, probably eggs; fourth, chloride of sodium; fifth, common cane-sugar; sixth, ground malt and hops.

As I before remarked, there is nothing very peculiar in grout, excepting the torulae cells. Bakers from time immemorial have, in out-of-the-way places, been used to make their own ferment, and the products agree very much with your grout. At best it is a very poor mess, and not to be compared with German yeast, neither do I consider that it is a proper or safe thing to administer, especially in the summer; and I think it very probable that if you can trace it back where it has been largely consumed in ale, sickness would be far above the average in that locality ... The grout fermentation is what we should consider very quick, and I attribute its quick action not particularly to any constituent of the yeast, or to the peculiarity of the torulae cells itself, but to the action of lactic organisms, with which the yeast is greatly contaminated ... If it were considered desirable to imitate grout ale, I have not the least doubt it could be done with ordinary yeast; but with this difference, that in all probability it would be an immense improvement.¹⁶

None of which would have come as welcome news to the white ale brewers, or indeed to their customers, especially as Mr Karkeek was not only a noted local historian, but also medical officer for Torquay. Given his influence, it may be no coincidence that it was around this time that white ale started to disappear, so rapidly, in fact, that less than 20 years later it had virtually died out.

He did, however, give details of recipes passed on to him by two white ale brewers, which provide a vivid insight into the brewing process. The first explained that

the ale is always prepared in small quantities, and three bushels of malt to be used at one time is found a suitable quantity. From these three bushels from 30 to 36 gallons of worts are taken, just as the brewer wishes to give a more or less fair quality. About the same quantities or 'lengths' of worts are then taken as for sixpenny ordinary or common beer; but instead of using one pound of hops to the worts for each bushel of malt mashed, only about two ounces are used for white ale, and the hops are boiled with the worts in the copper in the usual way. After the worts are cooled down in

the cooler they are run into a tun to ferment, and at the time of turning, 14 lbs of wheaten flour, a number of eggs at discretion, and the ferment called grout (half a pint) are added. Ordinary white ale can be used four days from the brewing, and will keep a month in winter, but not more than a week in summer, and the good or bad quality of the grout appears to very much affect the keeping properties of the liquor. Hundreds of hogsheads are drawn on the third day of brewing, but the fourth day is usually the first of perfection. Many successful brewings occupy a period as follows - the quality of the grout again appearing to materially regulate the time after it has been added: Mash on Mondays at seven; brewing over and worts cooled down by six pm., when the grout, flour, and eggs are added. On Tuesday morning, about eight, the ale can be turned into small open wooden vessels, called ale cans, and at any time in the following day (Wednesday) the ale can be sent into consumption in any vessel and used. The fermentation still goes on in the ale cans.¹⁷

The second brewer described the process as follows:

The water for the first mash (170 degrees) being put into the mash tun, I put into it two bushels of malt - the mash-stick would then stand without holding. Cover the mash tun with sacks to keep in the steam; remain three hours; draw off, measuring the liquor that you may know what quantity of boiling water is required - I made about thirty gallons - for the second mash, allowing for reduction in steam, etc. Cover this as before, and stand two hours; put the whole into the copper, boiling gently two hours; put 1lb. of hops in at the same time, that all may boil together; then draw off through a strainer into the cooler. When cooled down to 100 degrees, put in one quart of grout, and stir it well; then take 15lbs. of best flour, and strew it evenly over the liquor; of course this is in a cask, being transferred from the cooler, which I had omitted to mention; the mash tun will do after the grains are removed; cover up well with sacks, it must be kept warm. The following day lift up the sacks gently; don't allow a rush of cold air to chill it. If you find it bubbling too much - experience must guide you - withdraw some of the sacks. The next day it will be fit to draw off, and put into jars. We do not always put eggs, but it improves it very much, and we sometimes call attention to the number of shells lying about the courtlage as a proof. It is generally understood, but as yours would be for your own consumption, a dozen well beat up with a little of the liquor, and put in at the same time as the grout, would do it a deal of good.¹⁸

Despite the mystery - real or imagined - surrounding the use of ripening, it is clear that white ale differed fundamentally from anything we would recognise as ale today, due to the use of eggs and the imperative for it to be drunk within a few days. It was this - linked almost certainly with health concerns - that led to its demise. By the late nineteenth century, home-brew pubs were dying out as breweries bought them up and supplied them with their own beer. White ale did not lend itself to production on an industrial scale; the logistics of brewing, distributing and selling it within a limited timeframe would have been intractable. White ale had to be brewed in - or very close to - the places where it was going to be drunk; as home-brew houses disappeared, it was inevitable that white ale would disappear as well.

That said, it took a long time to die out, although it nearly succumbed in 1855 when new legislation was introduced. In October 1855, the *Sherborne Mercury* reported that

one of the favourite liquors with many persons in the south and west of Devon is white ale. The brewing of this liquor is now prohibited, as it contains other ingredients besides malt and hops. At this the brewers and drinkers of white ale are much displeased. The makers of the grout or ripening will be great losers by the prohibition, as its composition is known but to a few, who obtained a good profit thereby.¹⁹

Faced with the loss of their livelihood, white ale brewers organised a petition. This forced a change of heart, and just over a fortnight later the *Exeter & Plymouth Gazette* published a letter from the Board of Trade, acknowledging 'the receipt of an application from brewers of white ale in Devonport and other parts of Devonshire' and informing them 'that it is not the board's intention to interfere with the process as at present practised'.²⁰

White ale brewing was an important business in Plymouth at the time. Of the 122 inns listed in the 1852

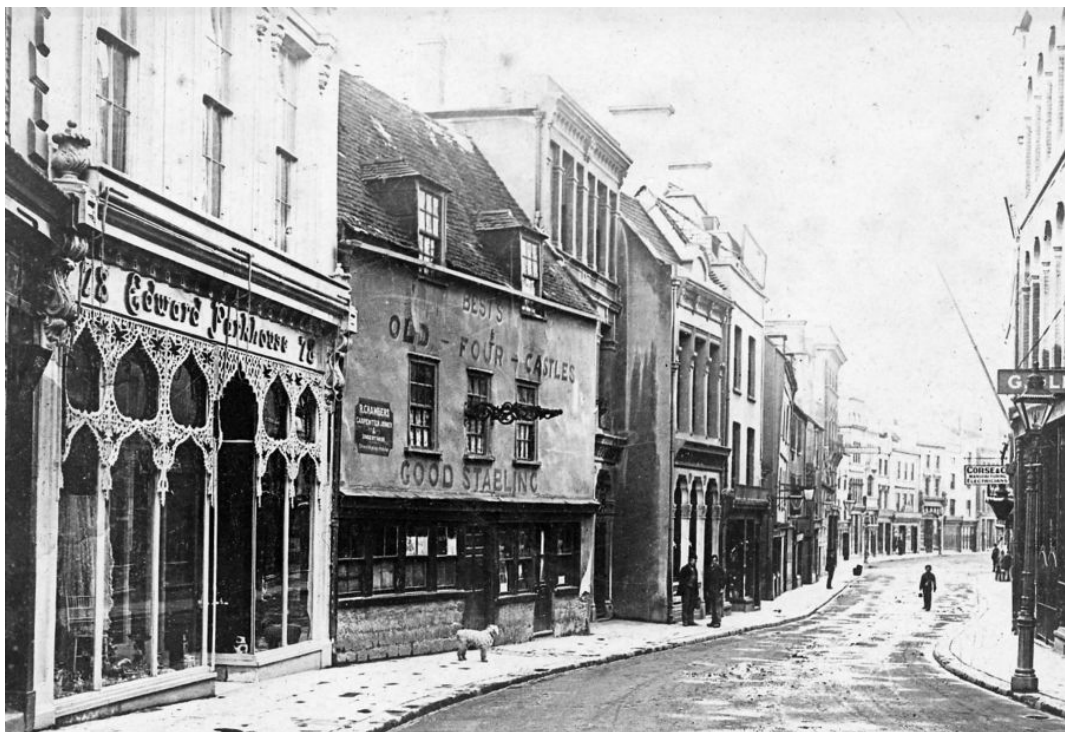


Figure 1. The Old Four Castles on Old Town Street, Plymouth, where 'bowls of hot punch ... mulled from the white ale for which this locality is famed' stood 'steaming on the table of every guest room in the inn' on Christmas Eve 1847. This photograph was taken in 1894, the year before the Old Four Castles was closed and demolished.

Directory for Plymouth, Stonehouse, Devonport, Stoke & Moricetown, 25 brewed white ale, while of the 126 beerhouses, 15 were also white-ale brewers. White ale was brewed at some of the best inns in town, such as the Old Four Castles in Old Town Street. One visitor described arriving there on Christmas Eve 1847 to find 'bowls of hot punch, or egg flip mulled from the white ale for which this locality is famed ... steaming on the table of every guest room in the inn'.²¹

By the time of the 1895 Directory, however, only two white-ale brewers were left in Plymouth - William Rawlings at 1 Well Street and James Mitchell at 103 Exeter Street. When James Mitchell died in 1930, an obituary recorded that, 'as the last brewer of the famous white ale in South Devon [he] was well known in the licensing trade. After being in business for 36 years he retired in 1922'.²²

Although we are fortunate in having a record of the extent of white-ale brewing in Plymouth in the mid-nineteenth century, there are no similar records for the South Hams or for Tavistock, where it was also popular. The following selection of newspaper reports from across the area, however, will give some idea of how deeply white-ale drinking was woven into the fabric of everyday life:

Kingsbridge, March 1837: An inquest was held here on Monday, touching the death of Richard Wildman, who died in consequence of falling into a lime kiln, when in a state of intoxication. The deceased was a dealer and hawker of earthenware, and had been drinking white ale on the night of the 7th instant, with a companion called Lakey, until both became inebriated; it being late, instead of returning to their lodgings, they reeled to Mr Steer's lime kilns, where both of them fell in; the kiln was 16 feet deep. Mr Steer, hearing a noise, left his bed and got them out of the kiln but Wildman was so much injured that he died on Saturday last. Verdict: Died by falling into a lime kiln when in a state of intoxication.²³

Kingsbridge, Prize Ploughing & Spade Husbandry Match, March 1848: This match (or rather an apology for one) came off on Wednesday last. The attendance was meagre in the extreme, four ploughs only were set to work, and the company altogether consisted of about 150 to 200 persons - a dozen of them only being yeomen or tradesmen. The dinner took place at the Golden Lion Inn; thirteen only sat down,

and though a few tradesmen joined in the evening, there was great difficulty in keeping the steam up. No prizes were awarded, but the ploughmen and boys had a good dinner of beef and pudding with white ale to wash it down.²⁴

Dartmouth [from a report of a smuggling trial], February 1851: William Blight, landlord of the Ship in Dock Inn, Dartmouth, deposed that in December last he took an empty hamper from the Commercial Inn to Mr Nichols, and which he took back to the same inn filled. He could not say what were its contents, but he believed one of the parcels contained loaf sugar. The defendant rewarded him with a pint of white ale.²⁵

East Allington, August 1853: The hay has been saved in a very bad condition in this neighbourhood. The harvest here is likely to be very late; the crops have been materially injured by the heavy rain, consequently they will now be below average. A new game has been got up in this village by the lovers of white ale, called the Ted-dle-ey-wirk, which is likely to prove beneficial to the landlord.²⁶

Loddiswell: Died April 2nd 1856 at Loddiswell, Miss Betty Taylor, aged 89 years. She was landlady of the Church House Inn [destroyed by fire in 1878], upwards of 50 years, and was celebrated for keeping good white ale, so much so, that for the last 20 years strangers frequently visited Loddiswell to have a pint of Aunt Betsy's white ale.²⁷

Salcombe, November 1858: The Fifth of November was duly regarded here on Friday last in rather an amphibious manner. A 'guy' having been prepared and a bonfire lighted, the figure was taken off in a boat to the middle of the harbour, where it was placed on planks and ignited. The night was dark, and the burning effigy produced a brilliant effect, to the delight of some 300 persons who assembled to witness it. The funds for these celebrities [sic] are collected by public subscription. One of the items in the expenditure is for 'cakes and white ale', which latter is of an entirely local character, being unknown beyond twelve miles in this place and Kingsbridge. The said ale, the old people say, was formerly brewed as a medicine; it is now the general drink of the district.²⁸

Kingsbridge, April 1870: On Monday Joseph Welcome was charged ... with brawling in the church on Sunday morning. The defendant pleaded ignorance of the affair altogether. He had taken a little too much white ale, and therefore was unconscious of what was laid to his charge. As the case was not pressed the magistrates fined him in the mitigated penalty of £1 including costs.²⁹



Figure 2. East Allington, where 'a new game ... called the Ted-dle-ey-wirk' was 'got up ... by the lovers of white ale' in 1853. On this Edwardian postcard view, the Fortescue Arms - still open today - can be seen on the left.

Dartmouth, May 1872: A visitor in an interesting article published in a Kidderminster paper records his impression, from which the following is an extract: 'On the cliff, at the mouth of the river, which is remarkably narrow, is what remains of Dartmouth Castle, a building from whence many a stirring scene has been viewed ... Looking up at the weather-worn tower of the old castle, where I expected to see the lady looking out for the return of him who would never see her more, I beheld the word 'Refreshments'! It was painted in great flaring yellow letters on an immense signboard that seemed to smother and overpower the grey time-honoured pile. Sick at heart, and dreading lest a closer examination should reveal the inevitable illuminated card, whereon a frisky clown is knocking out the eye of a clerical-looking gentleman with the cork from a bottle of 'Bang-up Pop', I fled. My companion followed me and arriving at an inn earnestly entreated me to try a glass of white ale; or, as he poetically and playfully put it, 'to drown my sorrow in the flowing bowl'. I had never before had an opportunity of tasting the celebrated white ale of Dartmouth, and I shall survive my grief if a second opportunity does not occur. It is a thick, light mixture, and looks, but doesn't taste, like egg-flip; and I was informed

by the landlord that the manufacture of the article with which it is fermented is a profound secret. It is to be hoped that the present member of the family who possesses it will die without committing the recipe to paper. The ale is drawn from an open, deep tub, and will only keep a few days; a rapid draught is therefore necessary, and, in reply to a question as to whether he obtained this, mine host said he sold three times as much of it as of the ordinary ale. A chemist's shop next door would, I should imagine, be a good speculation.³⁰

Tavistock, January 1875: Two inhabitants of Tavistock, better known than valued, have this week passed away for ever. 'Barnicott's Ghost' will never more shuffle through our streets, stick in hand, in clothes 'a world too wide' for his shrunk form, and mutely appealing by his poverty-stricken aspect to the compassion of the charitable. Often have we seen him, made almost mad by tormenting fiends in the shape of boys, brandishing his faithful staff, and attempting, uttering much strong language the while, to bring it swiftly on the backs of his tormentors, who, however, generally eluded his vengeful pursuit, and turned with fresh jibes on the pursuer. Wretched as the poor fellow's life was, he only very recently surrendered

the freedom of the streets, with all its sorrows, for the confinement of the workhouse, with its comparative comforts. What a cheerless, melancholy thing life must have been to him! And no less pitiable was the life of that other well-known inhabitant named 'Mad Martin'. Nature had not been kindly to him in the bestowment of her gifts; certainly she did not give him the charm of personal beauty. Perhaps his most conspicuous characteristic, after his face, was his ceaseless thirst, and his deepest sorrow that the supply of white ale was limited. Life for him presented only two objects worth striving for - ale and tobacco. What to him, and to such as him, was all our boasted civilization, our arts, our letters, our churches, and our chapels - nay, the very idea of religion itself? To this poor creature getting drunk was the highest form of enjoyment, the one thing needful, without which life was but a dreary blank. Verily, the lives of such men as these should make us reconsider some of our smug conclusions, and force us to think that there are still a few moral problems beyond the range of our philosophy.³¹

Blackawton, May 1878: Henry Hambling of Blackawton was charged by PC Toms with keeping open the Dartmouth Inn

during prohibited hours on the 27th ult. The officer stated that he saw several men in the house on the night named at a quarter to eleven, and also saw a pint of white ale carried to a man named Cole, who paid 2½d for it. Mr W Davies, who appeared for defendant, said his client was now ill in bed, and was unwell on the day in question. Mrs Hambling locked the bar at ten, told the servant to clear the house and went upstairs to her husband. This being the third conviction against Hambling, he was fined £3 and 15s costs.³²

East Prawle, December 1885: On Saturday afternoon an inquest was held at the Providence Inn, East Prawle, by Mr Sidney Hacker, District Coroner, on the body of Joseph Partridge, 73 years of age, who met with his death in somewhat peculiar circumstances on Wednesday. It appeared from the evidence that the deceased, who resided at East Portsmouth, went to Chivelstone and recorded his vote on Wednesday. He afterwards went to the inn, and remained two or three hours, but the only drink he took was two half-pints of white ale. On leaving the inn he was met by two boys, who called him an Old Tory, but deceased declared they were mistaken, as he had voted for Mildmay. A few yards from the



Figure 3. The last recorded instance of white ale being drunk in the South Hams was in December 1885 at the Providence Inn in East Prawle. It was far from being a joyous occasion, however, for the unfortunate imbiber fell down and died shortly after leaving the pub. The Providence seen here early last century, closed in 2008 and is now a private house.

point where the boys met him the deceased fell down, his head resting in a pool of water which was collected at the side of the road. Deceased was afterwards found quite dead ... The jury, after considering the evidence, returned a verdict of accidental death.³³

That report from East Prawle is the last reference I have discovered to white ale being sold outside Plymouth. When white-ale brewing finally died out is, like so much connected with this elusive beverage, a mystery. Occasional references to it continued to crop up long after its demise, however, in books on Devon and in local newspapers. Some of them perpetuated old myths, others came up with new ones. None were as bizarre, though, as those which featured in an exchange of letters in - of all places - *The Times*, as Britain braced itself for the Second World War. In April 1939, H.E. Vickery, the editor of a magazine called *Bottling* from Guildford, wrote that

white ale ... was discovered by chance about the middle of the eighteenth century. A farmer who lived near Loddiswell had a sick cow, and he called in the local farrier to prescribe for her. The farrier gave her a drink which contained, among other ingredients, malt and flour. Some of this drink was left over and it began to ferment. A curious person tasted it, found it good, and after a few experiments white ale was produced. It was brewed from malt and hops, wheaten flour and eggs, and then a curious ferment called grout was added.³⁴

This prompted a reply from E. Kerry Cox, Senior Ale Conner of the City of London:

I have always understood that the beverage was an ancient one and subject to tithe for many years. As with so many home-made beverages, however, the manufacturing processes seem to have become much simpler in course of time. Fifty years ago it was still being brewed, but only of ordinary ale with eggs and flour mixed, although it was even then so nutritious that Devon labourers regarded it as 'meat, drink and cloth combined'. Earlier, as Mr HE Vickery's letter suggests, more trouble was taken with the concoction, malt, hops, flour, spices, and a mysterious compound known as grout or ripening being used.³⁵

At which J.I. Mosley from Shaldon weighed in, declaring that

white ale is a thing of the past. A few years ago I made inquiries in the Kingsbridge district and found that it had been

made at one of the inns at Marlborough [Malborough]. There is a local tradition that its thickness and colour were due to a mysterious ingredient called grout, which was really pigeon's dung. I was told that the last manufacturer, who died without passing on the secret, did indeed keep a number of pigeons.³⁶

You can almost imagine the roar of laughter that greeted Mr Mosley's anonymous informant, when he told his cronies what he had said to the snooper from Shaldon who had come asking a lot of damn-fool questions. They would have been even more delighted had they known the story would one day appear in *The Times*.

Strangely enough, no one from Devon could be bothered to refute the story about the pigeons. That was left to Sir Garrard Tyrwhitt-Drake of Cobtree Manor in Maidstone:

When I was a pupil at Messrs Fox's Brewery at Farnborough, Kent, in 1900 the firm was celebrated for its white ale. This beer was brewed the same as any other beer, but from the very palest coloured malt and sugar, it was the colour of pale straw, but tasted just like any other ale of similar strength. There certainly was no question of grout or pigeons connected with it!³⁷

And there, sadly, with reference to a white ale that bore no relation to the white ale of Devon, this Beachcomber-like exchange of letters came to an end.

Over a century after white ale finally died out, given the advances in brewing technology and the growth of microbreweries, a revival would seem well overdue. It is a pity that something that was so much a part of Devon's heritage for well over 200 years, and had such passionate adherents, should have disappeared so totally. With the current level of interest in heritage beers and rare beer styles, there seems no reason why a home-brew pub serving Devon white ale, either in Plymouth or the South Hams - and subject to the quality controls so conspicuously absent when Mr Karkeek carried out his investigations - should not be a magnet for beer-lovers from across the world. Penpont Brewery over the border in Launceston have already stolen a march on brewers in Devon by brewing a traditional - and reportedly very palatable - white ale in 2011, and home-brewers as far afield as Portland in Oregon, have blogged their success in coming up with something akin to this most recondite of tipples.

So the gauntlet is down. I surely cannot be alone in wanting to try this most tantalising of lost beers. It was the most popular drink in the South Hams for generations, as well as the staple tippie of many drinkers in Plymouth. If nothing else, we owe it to them to give it a go and see what all the fuss was about.

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