

THE IPA SHIPWRECK AND THE ‘NIGHT OF THE BIG WIND’

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It is one of many abiding myths in the story of IPA: that India Pale Ale became popular in Britain after a ship on its way to India in the 1820s was wrecked in the Irish Sea, and some hogsheads of beer it was carrying out east were salvaged and sold to publicans in Liverpool, after which their customers demanded more supplies of this hoppy new drink. Colin Owen, author of the history of Bass’s brewery, called the tale ‘unsubstantiated’ more than 20 years ago,¹ and others, being unable to find any reports of any such wreck, nor of any indication that IPA was a big seller in the UK until the 1840s, have dismissed it as completely untrue. Except that it turns out casks of IPA *did* go on sale in Liverpool after a wreck off the Lancashire coast involving a ship carrying hogsheads of beer to India - though not in the 1820s - and the true story is a cracker, involving one of the worst storms to have hit the British Isles in centuries, which brought huge destruction and large numbers of deaths from one side of the UK to the other.

The story of the IPA shipwreck first turns up in 1869 in a book called *Burton-on-Trent, its History, its Waters and its Breweries*, by Walter Molyneux, who described how the Burton brewers began brewing beer for export to India from 1823, and wrote:

India appears to have been the exclusive market for the Burton bitter beer up to about the year 1827, when in consequence of the wreck in the Irish Channel of a vessel containing a cargo of about 300 hogsheads, several casks saved were sold in Liverpool for the benefit of the underwriters, and by this means, in a remarkably rapid manner, the fame of the new India ale spread throughout Great Britain.²

Molyneux’s story has been regularly repeated in the past century and a half. But no one has been able to find a wreck that matched up with his story. This turns out to be because he was 12 years out with the date.

The year after Molyneux’s book came out, a different version of the tale appeared in the ‘notes and queries’ section of an obscure publication called *English Mechanic and World of Science*. The account was written by a man who gave himself the name of ‘Meunier’, and it said:

Forty years ago pale ale was very little known in London, except to those engaged in the India trade. The house with which I was connected shipped large quantities, receiving in return consignments of East Indian produce. About 1839, a ship, the *Crusader*, bound for one of our Indian ports, foundered, and the salvage, comprising a large quantity of export bitter ale, was sold for the benefit of the underwriters. An enterprising publican or restaurant keeper in Liverpool purchased a portion of the beer and introduced it to his customers; the novelty pleased, and, I believe, laid the foundation of the home trade now so extensively carried on.³

The two clues - the ship’s name, and the later date - together with the fact that large numbers of newspapers from the time have now been scanned and made available on the web makes it easy to trace the story at last. The *Crusader* was a 584-tonne East Indiaman, or armed merchantman, described as ‘a fine large ship with painted ports [that is, gun-ports] and a full-length figurehead’,⁴ ‘newly coppered’, that is, with new copper sheathing on the hull to prevent attacks by wood-boring molluscs, and ‘a very fast sailer’, under the command of Captain J.G. Wickman.⁵ She had arrived in Liverpool

early in November 1838 after a five-month journey from either Calcutta⁶ or Bombay⁷ (different Liverpool newspapers at the time gave different starting ports) with a cargo including raw cotton, 83 elephants' tusks, coffee, wool, pepper, ginger - and opium,⁸ which did not become illegal in Britain until 1916. She was due to leave for Bombay again on Saturday 15 December, her cargo now being finished cotton goods, silk, beef and pork in casks, cases of glass shades, iron ingots, tin plates, Government dispatches - and India ale in hogsheads, brewed by two different Burton brewers, Bass and Allsopp, the whole lot being insured for £100,000, perhaps £8 million today.

However the *Crusader* did not leave on 15 December, possibly because of adverse winds, which certainly kept increasing numbers of ships in Liverpool from Christmas onwards. Finally, on Sunday 6 January 1839, the wind changed, blowing a south-westerly breeze, and some 60 vessels, including the *Crusader*, left Merseyside for the open sea.⁹ What none of those sailors knew was that a massive, fast-moving depression was coming in across the Atlantic, travelling from the west-south-west at around 40 to 50 knots,¹⁰ and bringing hurricane-force winds that would batter towns and cities from the west coast of Ireland to the east coast of England, uproot millions of trees, smash down thousands of chimneys, sink hundreds of boats and kill several hundred people. In Ireland, where estimates have suggested between 200 and 400 people died, it became known as the Night of the Big Wind. Thousands of houses and cottages were stripped of their roofs from Galway to Armagh. Limerick resembled 'a city on which a park of artillery had played for a fortnight'.¹¹ In Belfast 'not a roof escaped', while Dublin looked, according to one newspaper report, as if it had been sacked by an army, with houses burning or levelled to the ground, and 'the rattling of engines, cries of firemen and labours of the military' presenting 'the very aspect and mimicry of real war'.¹²

The winds seem to have struck the west coast of Britain late on the evening of Sunday 6 January, and did not finally ease up until Tuesday morning. The lowest air pressure measured was about 922.8mb at Sumburgh Head, Shetland around 2pm on the Monday, the third lowest figure ever seen in the British Isles.¹³ The effects of the storm were felt in London, with 'numerous' chimneys blown down in and around Islington and Camden

Town, but were far worse in the North: nowhere from one side of the Pennines to the other seems to have been spared. In Liverpool, thousands spent a sleepless night listening to slates and bricks crashing down into the streets, as even 'the best built houses rocked and shook' to the winds:¹⁴ at least 20 people were killed by falling masonry. In Manchester, where six people died, so many factory chimneys were blown down, it was reckoned between 12,000 and 15,000 workers would be laid off for weeks before the chimneys could be rebuilt and the steam engines that powered the factories restarted. In Bolton, it was said, 'not a house escaped', in Blackburn alone 11 factory chimneys were felled, and in Newcastle upon Tyne 'almost every building suffered, more or less'. In Ayr 'the streets are covered with slates and chimney cans', and in Dumfries 'the noise during the entire night was more deafening than the battle field'. Birmingham and Wolverhampton had scarcely a street where houses had not suffered: much of the roof of Birmingham Town Hall was torn off, with lumps of lead weighing almost half a ton crashing into the street or onto nearby houses. Among the windmills demolished were five at Bridlington: others, such as the water company's windmill in Newcastle, were set on fire by the friction caused when the fierce winds set their sails rotating far faster than their builders had thought possible. In Barnsley the lead roof was lifted off the Methodist chapel and more factory chimneys demolished, while Leeds saw at least eight mill and factory chimneys levelled, and a church lose 24 feet off its spire. One remarkable phenomenon reported by the newspapers after the storm was a covering of what appeared to be seasalt on hedges, trees and houses in districts far inland, such as Huddersfield, more than 50 miles from the coast.¹⁵

At sea the effects of the storm were terrifying and terrible, from the mouth of the Shannon to the mouth of the Humber. Many of the ships that had left Liverpool on the Sunday escaped the rage of the winds: but many others did not. Ships on their way home from ports far away, and close to the end of their journeys, were also caught. Between 30 and 40 vessels were either sunk or run aground in the Mersey area alone. Several went down with all their crews drowned. Those ships that ran onto sandbanks were then battered by the high winds and huge waves, and began to break up. Lifeboats could not get out to rescue the passengers and crews until the storm lessened, and when rescuers did arrive, they



Figure 1. Packet and emigrant ships of the Cheshire coast in the 1839 storm.

found many of those they were seeking to save had died of exposure in the preceding hours, on deck or in the rigging. The *Lockwood*, an emigrant ship bound for New York, which had got as far as Anglesey on the Sunday before being driven back by the storm, had then struck sandbanks and begun to list. Of the 110 passengers and crew, 53 died before they could be taken off by rescuers. One of *Crusader's* fellow East Indiamen, the *Brighton*, returning from Bombay, struck a sandbank in the mouth of the Mersey on the morning of Monday 7 January and started breaking up. Some 14 of her crewmen made a raft and launched it into the mountainous waves to try to reach land. They were never seen again. The captain and his remaining crew had to cling to the rigging until Tuesday morning before they could be saved by the Liverpool lifeboat.¹⁶

What happened to the *Crusader* at sea appears to be unrecorded, but like other ships she was driven back by the violence of the storm, or, having failed to get past

the tempest, tried unsuccessfully to return to the safety of port. On the morning of Tuesday 8 January, nearly two days after she had left Liverpool, and after a "fearful night of wind, hail, thunder and sleet and forked lightning", the *Crusader* was seen just off the coast at Blackpool, more than 25 miles north of the Mersey. She had struck a sandbank that is still, today, named Crusader Bank,¹⁷ and suffered 'much damage'. The ship's crew were firing the *Crusader's* guns to try to attract attention onshore, but soon after, according to the *Blackburn Standard* newspaper, 'two boats put from her, and after crossing the breakers, landed a crew of 26 seamen, when a loud huzza proclaimed their safety'.¹⁸ According to one report, the crew had poured oil on the sea to calm the waves before they launched the boats.¹⁹

While the crew were safe, however, the ship had broken her back. Some of her cargo of silk was salvaged at low water, and more was retrieved by divers.²⁰ But with her hull being almost covered by water at half-tide,²¹ her

cargo began to wash ashore along a 15-mile stretch of coast from the Ribble in the south to the Wyre in the north. 'A great deal' of the cargo, however, was gathered in by customs officers and locked up,²² including 79 hogsheads of ale that had been driven on shore, along with other goods, on 16 January.²³ (There was much cargo from other ships also washed up on the coast, along with dead bodies.) The *Crusader* began properly to break up only on Sunday 17 February, more than five weeks after she had run aground, though she fell to pieces within four days. However, the first sale of cargo saved from the wreck of the *Crusader* had already taken place on Thursday 7 February. It included cotton fabrics, woollen cloth, silk scarves and veils, tin plates - and 'India ale, Bass and Alsop's [sic] brands'.²⁴ Another two sales of goods saved from the wreck of the *Crusader*, including more India ale, took place in Liverpool on 14 March²⁵ and 28 March.²⁶ (There were three more sales of items from the ship, in May, June and July, including broken rigging, chains, pumps and anchors, but no more beer).

The story is true, then, that casks of beer destined for India and rescued from a shipwreck in the Irish Sea did go on sale in Liverpool, though at the end of the 1830s, not the middle of the 1820s. But were these sales of several dozen hogsheads, at least, of India ale brewed by Bass's brewery and Allsopp's brewery in Burton upon Trent the foundation on which was built the popularity of IPA in Britain? Alas, there is still no hard evidence for that part of the story: and what evidence there is suggests even Liverpool knew about IPA before the *Crusader* went aground. Beer brewed for the India market had been available in Liverpool since at least 1825, when the Middlesex brewer Hodgson's of Bow, one of the earliest suppliers of pale ale to the Far East, had an agency in Liverpool for the sale of 'pale bottling ale' to 'merchants and others'.²⁷ The first known use of the expression East India Pale Ale in a British publication actually comes from a Liverpool newspaper, but in 1835,²⁸ four years before the *Crusader* shipwreck, when Hodgson's beer, again, was being offered to 'merchants and private families'. Judging by the surge in adverts for IPA in London newspapers, the real take-off for the beer's popularity appears to be a couple of years after the Great Storm, in 1841. That was certainly the year when Bass finally opened a store in Liverpool for the sale of 'pale India ale', declaring in a notice in *Gore's Liverpool General Advertiser* on 22 April that

For Account of whom it may concern.
On THURSDAY next, the 7th of February, at the Warehouse of Messrs. Fairfield and Shallcross, Liver-street, at Eleven o'clock,
Part of the Cargo saved from the wreck of the Crusader, for Bombay, consisting of
6-4 CAMBRICS,
6-4 JACONETS,
Plain and Printed COTTONS,
COTTON TWIST,
Red and Blue WOOLLEN CLOTH,
COTTON LACE,
Silk SCARFS and VEILS,
TIN PLATES,
IRON,
GLASS,
INDIA ALE—Bass and Alsop's Brands.
For further particulars, apply to Messrs. BOLD and STARKEY, or to C. T. DUNLEVIE, Broker.
Catalogues will be ready for delivery on Tuesday next, the 5th of February, at the Broker's OFFICE, Brunswick-street.

Figure 2. India Ale sale, January 1839.

announced the new store that 'This ale, so long celebrated in India, has now become an article of such great consumption in this country (where it is almost superseding every other sort of malt liquor)', and at the Burton Ale Stores in Ironmonger Lane 'a Stock is kept of an age suitable for immediate consumption'.²⁹ Was this, two years on from the wreck of the *Crusader*, a result of that ship's cargo having gone on sale in Liverpool? The verdict here, I think, has to be 'not proven'.

Why Molyneux got the date of the IPA shipwreck so wrong is a puzzle, when there would have been many alive in 1869 who could still remember the Night of the Big Wind 30 years earlier. But while it is still remembered in Ireland - there are poems, and a novel, written about it - the 1839 storm is pretty much forgotten in Britain, probably because in this island it was only the second-worse storm of the 19th century, beaten in impact by the so-called Royal Charter storm of 1859. This was named for a ship that went down off Anglesey with the loss of 450 lives. Another 350 people also died during that storm, which sank 133 ships.

As a footnote, although large numbers of factories were damaged in the storm, breweries seem to have got off lightly. Newstead and Walker's brewery in Bolton saw 'considerable' damage.³⁰ In Borrisokane, Tipperary, 'the chief part of the Ormond brewery was blown down'.³¹ In Dublin, nine horses belonging to Guinness & Co were killed in their stalls by a falling wall.³² That, however, appears to be it.

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