

GEORGE WILLIAMSON, 19TH CENTURY CHESHIRE BREWER

CHESTER GUTTRIDGE

This is the story of country brewing in Cheshire from 1870 to 1911, first at a public house in Bridge Trafford, then at Mollington Brewery, compiled almost entirely from two surviving sales ledgers, a rent book and other family papers. The ledgers record the sale of Williamson ales to seven public houses (and briefly to an eighth), 32 farmers and numerous private individuals, in all over 450 accounts. Both my grandfather, George, and his father, also George, were publicans and brewers. The ledgers cover the last six years of George senior's career, then the whole brewing life of son George. Public houses were the Williamsons most important customers by far and highlight the significance of the tied house to the brewing trade, even in those times.

Many public houses brewed their own beers and ales in the 19th century, as did the Williamsons during their tenure of the Nag's Head at Bridge Trafford in the years prior to the move to Mollington and earlier when George senior was licensee at the Red Lion at Bickerton, Cheshire. The move to Mollington by George junior was little more than a change of site, many of his customers retaining their allegiance.

The 19th century saw the brewing industry evolving from widespread domestic and in house tavern brewing to town and city industrial production, typified by the Northgate Brewery in Chester and Soames in Wrexham. In the early part of the century, low alcohol ale was a safe alternative to well or river water, the quality and safety of the two latter being unreliable. Additionally, ale production was encouraged by governments hoping to discourage the consumption of gin.

The analysis of George's sales data, which this article reports, shows how various changing circumstances

affected a relatively small but successful specialist Cheshire country brewer. The income from brewing and minor property investment supported a family of four children and left sufficient savings to provide for a comfortable retirement.

George senior was born in c. 1812 of farming stock. His son also George, Rebecca Williamson's fifth child, was born in December 1853. George senior appears in William's 1840 Chester Directory as a beer house keeper in Milton Street, Chester. He appears again in the William's Directories of 1846 and 1850, where he is described as a Milton Street beer brewer and seller. The 1841 and 1851 censuses list George living, first as a brewer in Milton Street with his family and then as a publican at the White Swan, 8 Milton Street, Chester, again with his family.

In his second will of 1 February 1876, written 12 days before his death, George senior bequeathed two public houses to his son, George - the White Lion in Milton Street and the Queen's Head at Sarn Bridge, near Thrapwood. Both feature below.

The first sales ledger

The earlier ledger to survive records what was clearly ongoing business, opening with a sale on 1 January 1870. It is a grubby 12½ by 5¼ inches book of 184 pages (92 leaves) belonging to George Williamson senior and dating from the midterm of his Nag's Head tenancy at Bridge Trafford. Entries are written in an elegant copy book script, nearly always referring to customers, even his daughter, by their title, Mr or Mrs, Revd, and their location. They are indexed chronologi-

cally, rather than alphabetically, making analysis tedious. Each entry records date, number of barrels or half barrels sold, the monetary value and the identification numbers of the barrels supplied. Upon receiving payment, the money item was scored through as were the barrel numbers after their return. The whole shows the extensive off-premises business the Williamsons conducted and how far he or his employees travelled to make deliveries from Bridge Trafford.

George seemingly supplied his customers on credit. Annually, in December, he listed those who owed him money, again crossing through the sum due when it was paid. All classes of customer benefited and there is nothing to suggest that he charged interest. The most money outstanding was £277 6s. 11d. (29% of turnover), owed by 65 customers in December 1877; the least £22 19s 6d. (6% of turnover), owed by 13 individuals in 1898. During the later years, George ran a tighter regime and was seldom owed more than £50 at the December tally.

From November 1873, entries are written by a different hand, again in an elegant script, but with fewer flourishes, suggesting that son George had taken over responsibility for brewing from his ageing father who was to die in 1876. The last entry in the first ledger was logged in December 1876. Ale for the Nag's Head, the home tavern, is entered as 'for our cellars' or 'put in the bar' and records its monetary value.

George sold three types of ale: sixpenny, later described as ale; eightpenny, which became 'best' and harvest ale, which was the cheapest. Although the latter may have been produced primarily for farmers, it was widely purchased by private customers and occasionally by one public house.

The second ledger

The second ledger is an impressive sexto or 6° folio (old terminology), cloth bound book with a leather spine and gold lettering, measuring 13 by 9 inches and weighing 2.3 kg. It contains 525 pages, 283 of which are filled, almost every line, and is indexed alphabetically, making analysis much easier than with the earlier book. It covers the period from January 1877, after George senior's death, to 1911 when George junior retired. When 29 years old in 1882, the latter married a local farmer's

daughter, shortly before moving his brewing operation to Mollington where he and his wife set up home.

The Mollington Brewery

In May 1882, George established his brewing business at Mollington, at the corner between Parkgate Road and Overwood Lane, in property rented from the Feilden family's Mollington Estate,¹ for which he paid £50 p.a. initially, then £40 from 1887, including for some 11 acres of pasture. George paid the rates and an annual tithing of about £1 p.a. but was compensated for repair work or improvements he carried out. It was no longer operating as a brewery when I visited the property in the late 1940s with my mother. The buildings were arranged in a rectangle open to the south, with an eight-room, three storey house at the closed north end where the family lived and a row of single storey, brick and tiled working buildings down either side. The whole was demolished in the 1960s and the site is now occupied by a private house.

According to Peter Dyer,² the brewery was started in 1866 by Henry Knight from Backford. He was followed by Edwin Parkes, first in partnership with Henry Capper Woolrich until 1876 when Woolrich left, then on his own until declared bankrupt in 1881.³ Parkes' brewing equipment, animals and furniture, were auctioned on 12 January 1882.⁴ The brewing gear included a '2-horse steam engine by Lanceley, of Chester, boiler, large copper pan, large quantity of beer hhd. (sic), barrels, kilns and firks'. George already owned the brewing equipment at The Nag's Head and probably took most of it to Mollington although he may have bought some of Parkes' to supplement or replace his own.

Annual value of sales

Table 1 covers the 35 years of George Williamson's brewing career, dating from his father's death in February 1876, including the six years he was licensee and brewer at the Nag's Head, Bridge Trafford. Year to year value of sales (turnover) was remarkably variable. The best years were those at the Nag's Head, where £668 was recorded in 1876, followed by a decline to the nadir (£165) in 1896, a four-fold drop. The decline in the period 1879 - 87 began with the loss of the Red Lion

| Date | Farmers and Private | Red Lion | Queen's Head | Nag's Head | White Lion | Total | Pubs % of total |
|--------|---------------------|----------------|---------------------|----------------------|------------------|--------|-----------------|
| 1876 | 245 | 102 | 176 | 104 | 41 | 668 | 63 |
| 1877 | 185 | 49 | 154 | 116 | 152 | 656 | 71 |
| 1878 | 248 | *28 | 116 | 95 | 146 | 633 | 61 |
| 1879 | 195 | | 112 | 105 | *25 | 437 | 55 |
| 1880 a | 171 | | 89 | 114 | 61 | 435 | 61 |
| 1881 | 229 | | 55 | 110 | 29 | 423 | 46 |
| 1882 | 189 | | 60 | 127 | 28 | 404 | 53 |
| 1883 | 217 | | 61 | 67 | | 345 | 37 |
| 1884 | 244 | | 31 b | 91 | | 366 | 33 |
| 1885 | 204 | | 47 | *18 c | | 269 | 24 |
| 1886 | 139 | | 51 | Sportmans' Arms | | 190 | 27 |
| 1887 | 200 | | 35 | *48 | Travellers' Rest | 283 | 29 |
| 1888 | 120 | | 84 | 82 | 62 | 348 | 66 |
| 1889 | 167 | | 124 | 0 | 49 | 340 | 51 |
| 1890 | 117 | | 123 | *37 | 59 | 336 | 65 |
| 1891 | 74 | | 135 | | *13 | 222 | 67 |
| 1892 | 100 | | 127 | | | 227 | 56 |
| 1893 | 41 | | 158 | | | 199 | 79 |
| 1894 | 48 | | 128 | | | 176 | 73 |
| 1895 | 38 | | 127 | | | 175 | 77 |
| 1896 | 19 | | 156 | | | 175 | 89 |
| 1897 | 57 | | 179 | Pool House | | 236 | 76 |
| 1898 | 44 | | 191 | 129 | | 364 | 88 |
| 1899 | 117 | | 180 | 74 | | 371 | 68 |
| 1900 | 57 | | 182 | 101 | | 340 | 82 |
| 1901 | 82 | | 185 | 128 | | 395 | 82 |
| 1902 | 78 | | 184 | 109 | | 371 | 78 |
| 1903 | 76 | | 170 | 109 | | 355 | 79 |
| 1904 | 31 | | 168 | 46 | | 245 | 87 |
| 1905 | 42 | | 193 | 76 | | 311 | 86 |
| 1906 | 27 | | 151 | 105 | | 283 | 90 |
| 1907 | 35 | | 160 | 103 | | 298 | 88 |
| 1908 | 24 | | 159 | 132 | | 315 | 93 |
| 1909 | 35 | | 168 | 122 | | 325 | 89 |
| 1910 | 34 | | 109 | 118 | | 261 | 87 |
| 1911* | 28 | | *16 | 132 | | 176 | 84 |
| Totals | 3,957 d | 179 | 4,544 | 2,598 | 665 | 11,953 | |
| " | Nag's Head 947 | White Lion 482 | Sportmans' Arms 167 | Traveller's Rest 183 | Pool House 1,484 | | |
| " | Sales to pubs 67.8% | | | | | | |

Table 1. Annual value of ale sales to public houses, farmers and private customers (£s). * Part year.

a. George Williamson moved from the Nag's Head to Mollington in 1882.

b. Thomas Fox died in 1884 and John Hassall took over the tenancy

c. William Darlington left the Nag's Head in 1885 and moved to the Sportsmans' Arms, Whitby in 1887.

d. Less than 20% of which was bought by farmers.

account (before the move to Mollington), followed by the beginning of the sharp decline in sales at the Queen's Head, followed by the loss of the White Lion account, then, later, that of the Nag's Head. The move to Mollington in 1882 seemed to not have been seriously disruptive. Recovery at the Queen's Head awaited the arrival of an effective new tenant in 1888 - see below.

Over the 35 years George recorded selling ale to the total value of £11,953. Public houses bought £7,986 worth or 67.8% of the total, all but £179 worth of which was bought by public houses that belonged to him or were rented by him or his father or operated by his son-in-law. The total equates to an average turnover of £6 7s. 7d per week. He left no information - or none has survived - on costs related to brewing and no balance sheets so profits cannot even be estimated.

Sales were probably affected by the prolonged depression in the 1880s and early 90s, chiefly brought on by the importation of cereals from the increasingly productive prairies of N. America. Dairy counties, such as Cheshire, were less effected initially than the cereal growing areas of eastern England, but were eventually damaged by the general malaise and specifically by increasing imports of bacon, dairy products (except milk), and meat from Europe, Argentina and Australia. Later, towards the end of the 19th and into the 20th century, there was more money about and working people were better off.

What is clear from the table is the overwhelming importance of public houses to the Williamsons, specially the Queen's Head. In one year it alone accounted for 90% of sales. Williamson ownership or control guaranteed sales to five of the inns and a sixth, not owned, was managed by George's brother-in-law. Nevertheless ale quality had to be maintained or drinkers would go elsewhere. There were no inns in Mollington, so George probably sold ale at the brewery door for cash without record, perhaps ladling it into customers' containers as was milk even into the 20th century - a job for his daughters, perhaps.

Table 2. Sale of ale to the Queen's Head, Sarn

Note. The table includes the years 1870 to 1875, when George senior operated the Nag's Head brewery. Eightpenny (best) ale was withdrawn in 1895.

| Year | No. of Half Barrels | | Total value £ | Tenant & Licensee |
|----------|---------------------|------------|------------------|---------------------------------|
| | Sixpenny | Eightpenny | | |
| 1870 | 92 | 10 | 105 | Fox |
| 1871 | 115 | 13 | 152 | " |
| 1872 | 93 | 11 | 125 | " |
| 1873 | 91 | 14 | 127 | " |
| 1874 | 103 | 15 | 142 | " |
| 1875 | 130 | 16 | 175 | " |
| 1876 | 128 | 18 | 176 | " |
| 1877 | 109 | 18 | 154 | " |
| 1878 | 82 | 14 | 116 | " |
| 1879 | 81 | 12 | 112 | " |
| 1880 | 65 | 9 | 89 | " |
| 1881 | 48 | 8 | 55 | " |
| 1882 | 53 | 9 | 60 | " |
| 1883 | 46 | 3 | 61 | " |
| 1884 | 71 | 9 | 31 | Hassall from Nov. |
| 1885 | 37 | 2 | 47 | " |
| 1886 | 44 | 4 | 51 | " |
| 1887 | 32 | 0 | 35 | " |
| 1888 | 71 | 7 | 84 | Hulme from Sept. |
| 1889 | 104 | 11 | 124 | " |
| 1890 | 106 | 8 | 123 | " |
| 1891 | 122 | 5 | 135 | " |
| 1892 | 105 | 12 | 127 | " |
| 1893 | 146 | 3 | 158 | " |
| 1894 | 103 | 14 | 128 | " |
| 1895 | 121 | | 127 | " |
| 1896 | 149 | | 156 | " |
| 1897 | 171 | | 179 | " |
| 1898 | 182 | | 191 | " |
| 1899 | 172 | | 180 | " |
| 1900 | 172 | | 182 | " |
| 1901 | 177 | | 185 | " |
| 1902 | 176 | | 184 | " |
| 1903 | 162 | | 170 | " |
| 1904 | 160 | | 168 | " |
| 1905 | 184 | | 193 | " |
| 1906 | 144 | | 151 | " |
| 1907 | 144 | | 160 | " |
| 1908 | 152 | | 159 | Beddington from Oct. |
| 1909 | 160 | | 168 | " |
| 1910 | 104 | | 109 | " |
| 1911 | 16 | | | For which Bebbington never paid |
| Total | £4,707 | 245 | £5,354 | |
| Av. p.a. | £114.8 | 9.8 | £130.6 | |

Ale sales to the various inns, farmers and private customers are described below, followed by short sections on pricing and production.

The Queen's Head, Sarn Bridge, near Thrapwood

The Queen's Head now lies just within the Cheshire border with Flintshire although in times past it was otherwise. How or when the inn came into the Williamsons' ownership is unknown. The original three story building, with small rooms, low ceilings and steep steps into the cellar, still stands, although extended in the second decade of the 20th century. The external 'slipway' into the cellar still exists. For a history of the Queen's Head see Realf.⁵

George and his father before him (or their draymen) delivered ale by horse-drawn dray every three or four weeks, first from Bridge Trafford and then from Mollington, from 1870 and almost certainly before, until 1911, journeys of some 20 miles each way. They probably travelled along the turnpike from Chester via Farndon and Thrapwood, now the B5130. In the 41 years of recorded sales, the Queen's Head bought ale from the Williamsons to the total value of £5,354, or £130.6 per year (Table 2).

Thomas Fox, the first of four tenants during the period, was landlord when the first sale was entered in the ledger on 21 January 1870, at the time when George senior was running the Nag's Head brewery. Fox and later Walter Hulme purchased commercial quantities in most months amounting to some nine or ten half barrels of sixpenny ale per month supplemented by small quantities of eightpenny, when it was available. George ceased producing the dearer brew in 1894. A half barrel contained 144 pints, indicating an average daily consumption of some 40 pints or more. Sales were all the year round although generally more in summer than in winter, but with much variation.

Fox served the Williamsons well, buying between £105 and £176 worth of ale per year from 1870 to 1879; thereafter purchases fell away, probably due to Fox's old age or ill health. After four faltering years, he died and John Hassall took over the tenancy in 1884, but failed to revive the business. He was followed by Walter Hulme in 1888 who quickly built up sales in a tenancy that lasted 20 consistently successful years.

Finally, in 1908, the tenancy passed to the troublesome and ultimately failing Edwin Bebbington. After three years he left owing rent of £11 17s. 6d. George had earlier demanded a deposit, which covered the penultimate half yearly rent of £14. After some deductions, including £2 for 'licence compensation for two years', George was left with a total loss of £54 7s.6d., most of which was for ale. It was the worst bad debt in all of the 41 years of trading, father and son.

Although external influences must have affected sales, e.g. the success of local tavern competitors, the importance of the licensee is clear. Thomas Fox had been successful for many years, until elderly and perhaps unwell. Customers were unimpressed with Hassall. Sales collapsed and he lasted only four years. Walter Hulme quickly revived custom, perhaps aided by the gradual recovery from the long economic depression of the 1880s, a drop in ale prices and local population changes. The 19th century saw a slow improvement in living standards of lesser folk. The Queen's Head, along with the Williamsons' other inns, certainly catered for lesser folk. They were not places that monied gentlemen chose to visit.

Thrapwood was a lawless, non-parochial area, outside the law, where property taxes could not be collected before 1857.⁶ The slowly improving status of the area in the second half of the 19th century may have helped the Hulme recovery.

George sold the Queen's Head at auction on 13 June 1911 at the Wyvern Hotel, Malpas. It was bought by Soames, the Wrexham brewers, for £675. The new owners extended the property shortly after buying it. So ended the Williamson connection with the Queen's Head. It had provided the family with rental income and a major outlet for their ale for more than 40 years, accounting for 38% of overall sales, 89% in 1896, a very poor year.

There had been minor problems at the Queen's Head during George's ownership before Bebbington. According to the Thrapwood History Society's report,⁷ George Williamson and Walter Hulme were in trouble in 1897 with the Malpas Council for discharging sewage into the nearby brook and had to undertake remedial action. Again in 1906, Walter Hulme, was again in trouble for allowing drunkenness in the (tiny) kitchen.

Bebbington was seriously unsatisfactory and my grandfather got rid of him in 1911 for his ‘cavalier attitude’. The pub closed in October of that year. George gave up his Mollington brewery in the same year and retired to manage his investments, apparently deciding that the Queen’s Head was a distant and troublesome investment that he could manage without now he no longer had ale to sell.

The Red Lion, Sandy Lane, Bickerton

As mentioned above, George Williamson senior had been tenant and licensee of the Red Lion coaching inn (now the Bickerton Poacher) for the seven years ending in December 1861, prior to his move to the Nag’s Head in the following year. The Williamsons, father then son, recorded supplying ale from the Nag’s Head to the Red Lion from the beginning of the first ledger and had probably done so from 1862. Mr Vernon, the tenant and licensee of the Red Lion after George, typically bought eight half barrels of sixpenny ale at 46s. a barrel and one or two of eightpenny at 60s. Mr Joseph Nixon bought the Red Lion in 1877 and continued to buy ale from George for a further two months. Both the details of the sale and a surveyor’s plan hang in the saloon of the Bickerton Poacher, the latter illustrating the extent of the property at the time.

The White Lion, 8 Milton Street, Chester

Table 3. Sale of Ale to the White Lion, Milton Street. The White Lion (previously called the White Swan and later the Carters’ Arms) was to be found on the south side of Milton Street, just past Sydney Street and opposite the bowling green, not far from the canal and, in the other direction, near the cattle market in George Street.⁸

George Williamson senior was living, brewing and selling ale at the White Swan in 1853 and the 1856 Post Office Directory of Cheshire lists G. Williamson as licensee of the White Lion, the name having already changed. The Directory, however, was out of date as George was at the Red Lion, Bickerton at the time, according to his surviving rent book, unless, of course, he held two licences, which seems unlikely. There is evidence suggesting that he bought the White Lion in 1869 or more likely in the early months of 1870; but not until his 1876 will, is his ownership established.

The ledgers show that the Williamsons supplied ale to the White Lion from the Nag’s Head brewery from September 1870 until 1882, except for the last four months when it was supplied from Mollington.

From the beginning, sales to the White Lion were mostly of small commercial quantities. Tenants are listed in

| Month and Year | Tenant | Value of Sales £ | Sales per Month £ s |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Sept. 1870 to Feb. 1872 | Benjamin Phillip Owen | 140 | 7 14 |
| March 1872 to Jan. 1873 | Ellis Gilliam | 66 | 6 0 |
| March 1873 only | John Littleton | 9 | 9 0 |
| April 1873 to Dec. 1873 | Joseph Vernon | 115 | 12 14 |
| Jan. 1872 to July 1873 | John Horswell | 31 | 4 8 |
| Sept. 1874 to June 1876 | Frederick Hodges | 98 | 4 19 |
| Oct. 1876 to Aug. 1877 | Thomas Chesworth | 132 | 12 0 |
| Sept. 1877 to Dec. 1878 | Peter Wilkinson | 292 a | 19 9 |
| Jan. 1878 to May 1878 | George Hughes | 7 b | 1 8 |
| Sept. 1879 to June 1881 | Charles Williams | 119 | 5 8 |
| Aug. 1881 to June 1882 | George Astbury | 53 | 4 19 |
| | | Total £1062 | |
| | | Average £89.7 p.a. | |

Table 3. Sale of Ale to the White Lion, Milton Street, 1870-1882

Note. The above sales values cover different periods so do not tally with those in Table 1.

a. After deducting £10. 6s discount.

b. Excluding a bad debt £18.9.

Table 3, together with their purchases and periods of occupation. There were eleven licensee/tenants in twelve years. John Littleton lasted only a month, others only a few months. Benjamin Phillip Owen, George's newly acquired son in law in 1870, second husband of his daughter Ann, stayed for 18 months, others lasted between six and 22 months.

Sales varied from £4 8s. to over £19 a month, the latter achieved by Peter Wilkinson, whose contribution to George's turnover in 1877 was outstanding. Peter was one of few of George's tenant customers to receive a discount, in his case of about 3%. Previously Joseph Vernon and Thomas Chesworth had done well. As with all George's public houses, the licensee was paramount. Although other factors may have been favourable at the time, Peter was, undoubtedly, one of the best of landlords.

George resorted to the courts on one occasion. The *Chester Observer* 3 June 1882 (seen in the National Newspaper Archive), County Court section, reported that on Thursday George Williamson brought a case against Charles Williams, tenant of the White Lion at the Chester County Court to recover a rent debt of £1.15s.2d. and did so in part after court expenses. Presumably George thought it not worthwhile pursuing George Hughes for his earlier debt of over £18 for ale. Debts for ale were probably harder to recover at law than contracted debts.

George Astbury, the last functioning licensee, arrived in August 1881 but lasted only eleven months. His licence is among the surviving documents. He appeared before the Court of Summary Jurisdiction on 8 July 1882 and was fined 40s. plus 9s. costs for selling beer in the premises 'one hour and fifty minutes before half an hour after noon on Sunday the second day of July 1882'. 49 shillings was a substantial sum at the time, reflecting the serious view magistrates took of breaches of licensing hours, particularly those designed to avoid encroaching on church time. Should Astbury default and should there be insufficient value of property to confiscate, he would be imprisoned in Chester Castle for one month. His licence was endorsed with the details of the conviction in a neat script. The endorsement refers to the inn as the Carter's Arms, although George still entered it as the White Lion in his ledger.

Finally, John Williamson (not close family) became licensee on 27 September 1882. He bought two quarter casks that September, paying two guineas. That was George's last recorded sale to the White Lion /Carter's Arms. John was seemingly only a caretaker, although the original intent may have been to establish him as a long term tenant.

The White Lion had been a poisoned chalice, disastrous for many tenants and a pain in the neck for George, who closed it in 1882 soon after moving to Mollington. In nearly twelve years it had brought £1,062 worth of ale, an average of £89.7 per year compared with the Queen's Head's £130.6. Its closure, nevertheless, contributed to the substantial drop in sales that followed. No doubt competition was fierce between local public houses for the custom of cattle drovers, market men, workers from a nearby corn mill and labourers from the area's lower classes. Nevertheless, George clearly had difficulty finding suitable tenants. Perhaps capable, reliable and honest ones were in great demand and soon found their way into one of Chester's many better class taverns. After closure, George let the building as a private dwelling, finally selling it 33 years later on 25 October 1915 to Mr Jas. Wild, Butcher, Foregate Street, Chester for £480. The property no longer exists, sacrificed in 1969 to road development.

The Sportsmans' Arms, Whitby

After leaving the Nag's Head and a short break, William Darlington, George's brother-in-law, became licensee of the Sportsmans' Arms, Whitby, near Ellesmere Port, where he bought large quantities of sixpenny ale from my grandfather, frequently over twelve half barrels a month and once twenty, paying 38s. a barrel initially and 36s. later, at the time Walter Hulme at Sarn was paying 42s. Purchases from Mollington ceased abruptly in July 1889 and after a brief revival in 1890, finally stopped in January 1891 after four years. Business with the Sportsman's Arms totalled £167 over the period. Again the building no longer exists.

Travellers' Rest Inn, Bronwyfya, near Mold

According to a surviving rent book, George let the cottage adjoining the public house from 1887, to the licensees at a

rent of 1s. 6d. a week. Mr John Davies, the first occupant bought sixpenny ale and a little best from George in 1887- 89 totalling £52. Mrs Amelia Tyler took over in December 1889, buying £47 worth, later becoming Mrs Amelia Ferguson. George ‘took possession of’ (possibly only renting) the inn itself in 1891 and charged Mrs Mort 4s. 6d. per week for inn and cottage. She stayed only seven weeks. During that time she bought £10.10s. worth of ale but left with a debt of £4. 2s. for ale and £1 11s. 6d. for rent which latter she paid under duress. The Travellers’ Rest isn’t mentioned again in either the rent book or the sales ledger, which may indicate that George owned neither the public house nor the cottage, only leasing them from another party.

Pool House, Rhydygoleu, near Mold

George certainly owned this shop and off-license, charging £15 p.a. rent. Between 1897 and 1911, he supplied six different tenants with mostly sixpenny ale at 42/- a barrel. Pool House bought George’s last two barrels of ale before he retired. Of the six tenants only two, Geo. Henry Hodgkinson and James Edgar lasted longer than 12 months, again indicating George’s difficulty finding satisfactory tenants. All bought seven or eight half barrels most months, which is as expected for an out of town supplier. Untypically, he supplied Mrs Mary Ann Humphrey, his first Pool House customer, with Barclay and Perkins’ London Porter, and XX and XXX beers, probably from the same source, but only for five

months until Mr L.I. William Lewis took over the tenancy. Rhydygoleu licensees were valuable customers during the last 13 years of George’s brewing career. After he retired, George sold the property to Huntley & Mowet, Island Green Brewery, Wrexham, on 1 December 1911 for £450.

The Wheatsheaf, Handbridge

George supplied the Wheatsheaf with ale briefly in 1893 and again in 1903, ending up with a bad debt of £4.4s. George owned the property at least from 1899 leasing it to the West Cheshire Brewery Company of Birkenhead at an annual rent of £24 until 25 March 1904, although the lease was terminated by agreement on 25 January 1903. George probably intended to oust the Birkenhead Company when an opportunity arose but it never happened. No record of the property being sold has been found, again possibly because George only rented it himself.

Sales to farmers

Farmers generally bought harvest ale, a low alcohol brew to rehydrate farm labourers. As the century progressed demand declined as more agricultural machinery came into use, lessening the need for hand labour. George made his last sale of ale to a farmer (Mrs Griffiths at Two Mills, Wirral) in 1907 although sales had been falling away since the early 1890s. Nevertheless, farm-

| Name | Place | Dates | Value £ |
|-------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|-------------|---------|
| Thomas Wright | Trafford Hall Farm | 1870 - 1892 | 299 |
| James Hamilton | Mollington | 1887 - 1900 | 73 |
| Moses Dickinson | Chorlton | 1889 - 1893 | 70 |
| Robert Johnson | Whitby | 1887 - 1904 | 59 |
| Edward Littler | Christleton | 1878 - 1892 | 43 |
| John Prichard | Bridge Trafford | 1876 - 1878 | 30 |
| William Lee | Waverton | 1877 - 1885 | 29 |
| Peter Mason | Dunkirk | 1882 - 1892 | 27 |
| Mr Gregory | Waverton | 1880 - 1883 | 21 |
| Twenty three farmers bought smaller amounts totalling | | | 108 |
| Total value of sales to farmers between 1870 and 1911 | | | £759 |

Table 4. Sale of ale to farmers.

ers were important customers. Over a period of 26 years, 32 farmers bought £759 worth of ale. Some bought ales over many years, others only once or twice. A few farmers bought malt and hops, and/or barm (yeasty froth) for home brewing and spent grains for livestock.

Thomas Wright of Bridge Trafford Hall farm (287 acres) bought ale from 1870 and probably before. The Wright's farm gate was little more than 100 metres from the Nag's Head. For the next eleven years Wright bought harvest ale mostly in April to July. Once he bought 18 half barrels (2,592 pints) in the single month of April 1876 at £1 per half barrel although more usually he bought twelve to sixteen half barrels in total over the period May to July and a half barrel of best in December. He also enjoyed an occasional half or quarter barrel gratis. At one time Thomas Wright supplied George with a character reference, and he, Thomas, and John Prichard, who farmed over the road from the Nag's Head, witnessed George senior's 1869 will. They were Bridge Trafford's leading citizens.

After Thomas Wright death in 1881, his widow, Esther, took over the purchasing of ale for the men until 1888, when she left the farm. George reduced prices for her from 20s., first to 18s. and then to 15s. a half barrel. She became George's mother-in-law when he married her youngest daughter in 1882. Nevertheless these were very favourable prices. Her need for favour and other evidence suggests that Esther was having financial problems - after a lifetime bearing 17 children. From 1870 to her death in 1889, the Wrights had been by far the Williamsons best farming customer, buying £299 worth of ale in total. No other single farmer bought more than a quarter as much.

Bridge Trafford Hall farm no longer exists, except for a derelict two-storey cottage. The land is now Goway Woodland Park Nature Reserve, much enjoyed by dogs and their walkers, having been used after the war for dumping rubbish and industrial waste, some toxic, which was later covered by landfill (Walter Johnson, private communication).

Grocers

The Williamsons supplied Charles Wainwright, a Liverpool grocer, with small quantities of ale on two

occasions in the 1870s. He also sold sixpenny ale in small quantities from 1876 to 1885 to John Williamson, his younger brother, who was then a grocer at 60 Low Hill, Liverpool, charging him the then private customer price of 48s. a barrel. The total value of sales to John over the period was £57.

Private customers

Although numerous in number and making up the bulk of the 450 accounts, most of the Williamsons' private customers bought ale in only small quantities, quarters or later, particularly after 1900, eighth casks or pins (a pin being 36 pints), sometimes regularly but mostly only occasionally, perhaps for a family gathering. Many such customers were local, a few Chester city dwellers. Nevertheless in total they bought appreciable amounts, specially in years of poor sales to the public houses, presumably when George fostered their custom, perhaps by advertising.

Pricing policy (Table 5)

The 19th century saw little inflation. Indeed some prices fell towards the end of the period, significantly those of cereals following increasing imports from the prairies of N. America, resulting in cheaper brewer's malt. Prices for Williamson ales were at their highest in the 1870s when George junior took over the brewing from his father. Those were the best times, high prices and peak turnover. Competition from industrial brewers, who were rapidly gaining ground in the market in the century, presumably played their part in forcing George to reduce his prices later.

Until the mid 1880s, farmers and private customers paid higher prices than public houses for George's ales. Prices were clearly under pressure in the 1880s as he struggled to find stability in competitive markets, but eventually the pubs lost out, paying 42s. a barrel for ale against the 40s. or less, paid by other customers during the last 20 years of George's brewing life. The Queen's Head paid 42s. a barrel consistently for 23 years from 1888. On occasions, George charged his lowest prices to the White Lion, perhaps hoping to stimulate business in difficult times. No doubt, public houses in Milton and neighbouring streets, were com-

| Year | | Queen's Head | White Lion | Nag's Head | Farmers | Private Customers |
|------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|------------|------------|------------|-------------------|
| 1870-72 | B | 63 | - | - | - | 64 |
| | A | 46 | 46 | 46 | - | 48, 50 |
| 1873-75 | B | - | 60 | 60 | - | 64 |
| | A | 46 | 46 | 46 | - | 48 |
| | H | - | - | 40 | 40 | - |
| 1876-78 | B | 64 | 60 | 60 | 64 | 64 |
| | A | 46 | 46 | 46 | 48 | 48, 50 |
| | H | - | - | - | 40 | 40 |
| 1879-81 | B | 64 | 60 | 60 | - | 64 |
| | A | 46 | 46, 42, 38 | 46 | 48 | 48, 50 |
| | H | - | - | - | 40 | 40 |
| 1882-84 | B | 64, 60 | - | 60, 54 | 64 | 64 |
| | A | 46 | 42 | 40, 36 | 48 | 48 |
| | H | - | - | - | 36 | 40, 36 |
| Sportsmans' Arms | | | | | | |
| 1885-87 | B | 60,58 | - | - | 64, 56 | 64, 56 |
| | A | 46, 44 | 38 | - | 46, 42 | 48, 42 |
| | H | - | 36 | - | 48, 38, 36 | 40, 36 |
| Travellers' Rest | | | | | | |
| 1888-90 | B | 56 | - | - | 60 | 60 |
| | A | 42 | 34 | 46 | 48 | 48 |
| | H | - | - | - | 40, 36 | 40, 36 |
| 1891-93 | B | 56 | - | - | - | - |
| | A | 42 | 34 | - | 40, 36 | 40, 36 |
| | H | - | - | - | 40, 36 | 36 |
| 1894-96 | B | | | | | |
| | A | 42 | - | - | 36, 30 | 40 |
| | H | - | - | - | 30 | 40, 36 |
| Pool House | | | | | | |
| 1897-99 | A | 42 | 42 | - | - | 40 |
| | H | - | -- | - | 36 | 40, 36 |
| 1900-11 | Prices remained at the 1897-99 level to the end of George Williamson's brewing career. | | | | | |

*Table 5. Prices charged for ale. Shillings per barrel; eightpenny or best (B), sixpenny ale (A), and harvest (H)
Note. Production of eightpenny ceased in 1894 and of harvest in 1905.
42s. per barrel = 1½d. per pint.*

petitive, individually falling in and out of favour with drinkers.

Brother-in-law, William Darlington, negotiated a very favourable price (34s, a barrel of sixpenny ale) when he was at the Sportsmans' Arms but bought large quantities. From the mid 1890s farmer customers, of which there were then few, paid less than private customers, but generally bought larger quantities. George charged standard prices to all but his closest relatives; his wife's family members enjoyed no favours, apart from his mother-in-law briefly.

Beer duty

In 1880, beer duty, based on alcohol content, was introduced in place of taxes on malt and sugar. Alcohol content of the finished product needed to be determined by measuring the 'Original Gravity' of the initial wort and adjusting the sugar content to give the required alcohol end concentration. For this purpose George acquired a 'Revenue Saccharometer' by Loftus, 146 Oxford Street, London, which is now in the family archive. It consists of a brass float with a graduated arm, four interchangeable weights, labelled, 1000, 1030, 1060 and 1090, and a Fahrenheit mercury thermometer, all neatly packed in a polished box.

Twelve Inland Revenue receipts have survived. George paid £3 15s. 0d. on 20 November 1880 and either £4. 7s. 6d. or £4. 13s. 9d. monthly thereafter except once when he paid only £2 3s. 9d. In total he paid £50. 4s. 6d. cash. A letter from the Inland Revenue dated 23 June 1885 shows that beer duty for May of that year was 6s. 3d. per barrel or just over ¼d. per pint. Presumably an exciseman called monthly to check the barrels and collect the duty.

Defaulters

In all, 21 customers either failed to pay, or paid under distraint or court order. All except the four already mentioned, Hughes and Williams at the White Lion, Maria Mort at the Travellers' Rest and Bebbington at the Queen's Head, left bad debts of under £1 that were not pursued. On three occasions George accepted a day or two of field work from private customers in lieu and on

one occasion, a debt was worked off by delivering ale to the Queen's Head at Sarn over the Christmas period.

Estimate of ale production

George left no information about ale production nor of its cost. However, sales of 'spent grains' give an indication of the frequency of brewing. In 1878 John Prichard started buying 'spent grains', a waste product of brewing from George, presumably for animal feed. In that year, he bought 39 lots, each of six 'measures' at 6d per measure. (I have been unable to quantify a Cheshire measure). In subsequent years, Prichard bought 93 further batches in 38 months, suggesting that George was brewing an average of 2.4 times a month between 1878 and 1882. Annual volumes indicate that he was brewing an average of 6 to 8 barrels (216 to 288 gallons) per brewing during those years at the Nag's Head which were among the most active. These are reasonable figures, consistent with the fact that ale keeps only three or four weeks in sealed barrels in cellar conditions. George would need to brew twice a month in the summer, possibly less frequently in the colder months, in order to have fresh ale available at all times. Volumes are more speculative as George may have fed spent grains to his own livestock.

In 1883 and 1884, Mr Walker Jones of Mollington bought spent grains 42 times in 19 months, averaging 2.2 times a month. He bought lots of 18 measures, suggesting that George was brewing larger batches per month than previously. George again recorded selling spent grains 22 years later, from 1906 to 1911, this time to Mrs Griffiths, a farmer at Two Mills, Ledsham, in the Wirral. She bought batches of 12 measures on 88 occasions in 64 months, indicating that George was brewing an average of 1.6 times a month. Mrs Griffiths bought larger batches of spent grains than did Prichard although rather smaller ones than Walker Jones, the figures indicating that brewing frequency was less than previously while volumes remained reasonably large. George may have invested in refrigeration at some time prior to 1906, enabling him to extend the life of his ales.

Retirement

After 29 years at Mollington, George Williamson sold his brewery at auction for £1250 on 11 May 1912, mak-

ing a small loss after expenses of £69. He had purchased it only four years earlier on 22 June 1907 when the Feilden's Mollington Estate was parcelled up and sold.⁹ Although George lost a few pounds on the deal, ownership had provided security of tenure and saved him four years rent. The site was bought by Thomas Crump, who is listed in the Society's register of brewers. I have been unable to find out whether Crump bought the on-site brewing equipment or operated the brewery and, if so, for how long.

The 19th century saw much change, improving prosperity, improving health and longevity, steam power, remarkable industrial development, the importation of foodstuffs and exportation of industrial goods, a shift from agriculture being the major employer, to industry. Governments saw fit in the early part of the century to encourage ale brewing, hoping to displace gin drinking, but later began to see it as a taxable commodity. Agricultural machinery, both horse-drawn and steam powered, largely replaced hand labour in the fields and under employed farm workers in Cheshire moved to the cotton mills of Manchester. Farmers all but ceased buying harvest ale and George stopped producing it in 1905. Working class people could afford stronger, better ale. Perhaps, also, he was seeking to simplify his operation. Both tavern brewing, as George and his father had practiced, and country brewing declined as city industrial brewers gained ground, but his move in 1882 to specialist brewing in Mollington had provided him and his family with a comfortable living.

George Williamson was one of a disappearing breed. The 19th century saw the coming and going of beer houses and the demise of small scale brewing, in favour of large town and city brewers. These either closed or were taken over in the following century by today's giant companies only to be eventually closed by them in the pursuit of economy. The last 50 years or so have seen the rebirth of small scale independent brewers who combines craft and science often so successfully. These 'craft' brewers are the successors of George Williamson and his ilk.

George retired to live in reasonable comfort with his wife and four surviving daughters - they had no sons - at 39 Dee Banks, Chester. He died in 1927, in his 74th year, leaving sufficient capital to provide for his widow and two unmarried daughters. Brewing had served the family well.

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