

THE STORY OF THE MANOR PARK BREWERY

GEOFF DYE

Brewing in Alton

Alton lies at the head of a valley in the north east of Hampshire some 50 miles south west of London, just off of the main A31 Guildford to Winchester road. A natural spring occurs some half a mile to the west, the infant river Wey. This flowed through the town and the grounds of the brewery and was a main feature of the brewery being in front of the main buildings. The river flows on through Farnham and eventually into the Thames at Weybridge. The natural subsoil in the area is chalk which acts as a sponge soaking and retaining vast quantities of water similar to that at Burton Upon Trent. The supply of brewing water for the brewery came from a private well originally owned by Courage Brewery and located just off the A31 where it meets the B3006 about one mile south of the town centre. Alton had always been a brewery centre with three major breweries in the town - Courage, Watneys, and The Manor Park brewery - the latter brewing until April 2015. Courage ceased on the brewing side in September 1969, but continued to can, bottle and keg beer and became the export bond for the group. Watneys ceased in August 1970, whilst both the sites were used for distribution until the 1980s .

The story of brewing in Alton goes back to before 1763 when documents refer to land sold and a brew house erected, later to form Crowley & Co. At first brewing was on a small scale taking place in the area where the Swan Hotel is today, and probably supplied one or two pubs and the family trade. The area was well known as a hop growing area and the Hampshire Downs produced a large amount of good malting barley. Malting barley is still produced in the area but commercial hop growing ceased by 2000. With all these ingredients brewing

expanded in the town, whilst those in nearby towns fell to early takeovers. Alton was aided by the coming of the railways on 28 July 1852 which greatly increased the distribution of Alton beers. The development of Aldershot in the 1860s for military use also helped . By the 1900s the town had two large breweries in the town centre. One of these, Halls, was taken over by Courage of London in 1903 and enlarged and rebuilt in 1905 to supply London and the local pubs with Alton Pale ales. The other brewery, Crowley & Co., was also rebuilt in 1901 to supply public houses that they had acquired, closing the breweries and concentrating production in Alton. The two breweries carried on facing each other across Turk Street until in the early 1960s a site next to the Courage brewery became the new Manor Park Brewery.

Planning and construction of the Manor Park Brewery

Lager up to the early 1950s represented only about 100,000 barrels in the U.K. and production was dominated by a few companies; Tennents in Scotland (which began brewing lager in 1885) and the Alloa brewery, also in Scotland, traded under the name of Graham's Golden Lager. In north Wales there was the Wrexham lager brewery, in Manchester The Red Tower lager brewery, Moss Side, and Barclay Perkins in London. A large amount of lager was brewed for troops overseas and was mainly packaged in bottles. Towards the late 1950s the larger U.K. brewers finding they had lost considerable trade since the end of World War II realised that lager represented a growth area to replace lost sales. Under Guinness's direction the Harp brand was created by three German brewers, Doctor Hermann Muender, N. Woelfel and Alfons Walser. The three were

asked to brew a lager to be first launched in Ireland in 1960. This lager was a continental type to be brewed with seedless hops, lager yeast, secondary fermented and cold stored. The brewing took place in a specially converted brewery in Dundalk, Ireland. The project was a great success and in light of this Guinness decided to launch the product on the mainland. The experience in Ireland was quite different to that on the mainland in that Irish pubs tended to be owned not by breweries, but by individuals and run by them. On the mainland the situation was different in that most pubs were tied to brewers. Late in 1960 Guinness decided it needed a joint venture with a brewer or breweries to succeed and enlisted the help of Courage and Barclays who were at that time brewing in two plants in London and one at Alton, a very much southern based company. Scottish and Newcastle breweries, and Mitchells and Butlers were also approached with these companies covering South Wales, the Midlands, The north east and Scotland.

A joint company was set up and it was decided to brew in four locations, Dundalk, Holyrood brewery Edinburgh, the Moss Side Brewery, and a new site in the south. The site chosen in the south was a six and a quarter acre site adjacent to the existing Courage brewery in the centre of Alton. The reason for the choice was as follows, Courage owned the site, it had excellent supplies of water, was next door to the Courage brewery site, plenty of room for expansion and with London 50 miles away and Southampton less than 40 miles was an ideal place for distribution. This site was the first new green-field site of a brewery since the Guinness Park Royal site in London in 1936, and was to have the latest plant, much of which was in use up to the end. Planning approval was granted on the 21 March 1961 subject to the upgrade of the Alton sewage works costing £275,000 of which the Harp consortium contributed £71,118. Subsequently a new sewage works was built just downstream about a quarter of a mile away.

On 24 March 1961 John Laing Construction was awarded the contract for the civil engineering, building works and design. Total costs were estimated at £2,500,000. Site clearance began on 24 April 1961 with 23,000 cubic yards of soil being removed and 15,000 cubic yards of hoggin used for filling. Orders were placed for the steelwork with Dorman Long, and piling contractors were Frankpile Ltd., who made a start on the 18 May 1961. 750 piles were put in to support the brewery struc-

ture on a wholly chalk strata. The piles were the Franki cast in situ type and were sunk up to 20 feet deep using three rigs with up to 28 a day being placed allowing for further expansion. Each one was designed for 50 ton loadings.

The design of the brewery was a steel framed construction using 1,200 tons of British steel. The main building was 430 feet long by 120 feet wide and 90 feet high. The fermenting rooms had a 120 feet single span and the whole structure was bolted together on site. The 120 foot span was achieved by using a major lattice girder truss taking the load from the lattice transverse trusses. No riveting was done on site and joints were bolted with high tensile stressed bolts used in the major truss assembly. The exposed structural steelwork was specially treated by shot blasting, zinc spraying and chromate painting to give maximum protection.

The main block was divided into cells each containing one tank which could be independently cooled to suit the beer being conditioned. The walls and roof members were made of thermalite precast lightweight concrete planks to give insulation. The outer walls of the main block were clad in aggregate and whinstone panels, whilst on the inside four inches of cork were covered in tiles. In the administration section and laboratory the front was faced with glass curtain walling and blue vitreous enamelled panels to make maximum use of the south facing light. Floors were of concrete in the production area and serpeggiant highly polished marble in the more public areas.

During construction the town's main sewers had to be diverted on the 25 July 1961 and several large Wellingtonia trees felled to make way for engineering workshops, general stores, boiler house, water treatment plant, and tanker filling station. No packaging was to be carried out on site, either the lager would be sent out by tankers or by a special overhead pipeline constructed to the Courage plant next door. Building progressed quickly and by 28 August 1961 the first steelwork had been commenced. Externally by, 4 December 1961, the basic fabric had been completed and the first of the 124 enclosed lagering tanks had arrived on site. These were delivered by lorry from Rochester in Kent from Burnett and Rolfe, and disrupted traffic in the town over a long period. They were put in place by a special gantry which lifted the vessels horizontally to the required height and

slid them into place, a process cheaper than crane lifting. The design of the brewery provided for the minimal amount of labour with bulk malt being received by tipper lorries into one of the ten concrete silos and being automatically weighed in transit. Grain was transferred to the brewhouse by a computerised control panel which also controlled all other aspects of production. The panel selected was a Steineker Hydro Automatic system using wet milling for the treatment of the malt. Brewing was to be carried out by the decoction system using two mash tuns and one lauter tun of an 18 foot diameter, one copper in the steineker form, and were all made from stainless steel. The design allowed for the doubling of the size of the brew by the addition of another lauter tun and copper. One man on the panel could control and view the whole process through sight gauges up to the wort receiver. Spent grains and hops were removed by compressed air to the north site of the site where contractors Waterers removed the spent grains, and E. Thomas of Lasham the spent hops. Wort was then clarified in a de Lavel continuous centrifugal separator and then cooled in a plate heat exchanger supplied by A.P.V. After cooling yeast was pitched in line before reaching one of the 9 open stainless steel fermenting vessels, each of 250 barrels, or the 8 enclosed fermenters of 500 barrels where CO₂ gas was recovered from the fermentation. Two types of yeast could be incubated whilst the lagering rooms held 124 tanks of three sizes: 125, 250, and 500 barrels. Of welded construction lined with Prodard Glas, a type of glass lining, and supplied by Towler & Sons Ltd. of Stratford, London. These tanks had stainless steel access doors and located in cooling cells in four tiers of varying capacity. The smaller 125 barrel ones were used up to early 1995. They were later reused when capacity was needed after the Berkshire brewery was closed and production transferred to Alton.

The rate of installation meant that one tank had to be installed each day for six months. The tanks of 10 feet diameter and 50 feet long had to be lifted to a maximum of 60 feet. After the lagering process Anker Brothers & Co. Ltd. provided Kieselguhr filters followed by sheet filters. The beer was then sent to another room where 16 x 80 barrel stainless steel vessels either held the beer for the tankers or sent it overhead to the Courage plant. Some of the production was also racked into vessels for ships stores, mainly the two Queen Elizabeth liners, or dispatched to the Guernsey brewery for kegging and bottling on the island.

The ancillary plant included two oil fired steam boilers of 12,000 lbs evaporation, whilst the refrigeration consisted of two Freon rotary compressors driven by 450 hp 3.3 kv motors and two backup circuits using alcohol solution as the refrigerant in case of breakdowns. The water from the Selborne Road well was treated in a Zeo Karb Hydro gen ion starvation system to reduce hardness for the boiler feed. A special electricity supply was required at 11 kv reduced to 1,000 kv and by transformers to 3.3 kv and 415 kv.

By 16 February 1962 the boiler house and chimney was erected and on 9 March 1962 the nine open fermenters of 250 barrels had arrived. Oil storage tanks arrived on the 30 March and by the 16 May the first of the two boilers had arrived, these were oil fired each of 12,000 lbs per hour evaporation. The 15 June saw the arrival of eight 500 barrel fermenting vessels.

It was not all work for the Laing employees some of whom were billeted in Culverton House, originally residential, an application had been made on 20 October 1961 for change of use. On the 20 May 1962 an event took place that would seem inconceivable today with the health and safety rules. The Bakers Arms pub, a Strong's brewery pub in the high street, teamed in a tug of war against Laing. To make it more interesting the chosen site was the river Wey outside the front of the brewery. Both teams were each side of the river and it was not long before Laings team won with most of the Bakers Arms men pulled into the river.

On 30 May 1962 an unveiling plaque was placed on the wall of the brewery by the managing director Robert McNeile M.B.E. M.A. The east cladding, completed on 14 June, as was the hop store on the same day. On that Sunday dozens of contractors dug up Turk Street to lay the electricity supply to the brewery. By now the brewery was almost finished, the spent grain silos arrived on 23 July, and on 21 August a connection was made into the Courage water main. On 27 August the Steineker lauter tuns were installed and on the last cladding panel put on on 25 October 1962. The brewery was now finished.

The first malt arrived on 20 November 1962 and seven days later the first hop delivery from Czechoslovakia. The first board meeting took place on 11 December and on 19 December 1962 the first brew took place. The

final bill for construction was £2.5 million, but until 24 January 1963 the brewery was not linked to the phone system, the first call was made by the chief engineer.

The first brew

Under the watchful eye of the head brewer Mr P. Lumsden on 19 December 1962 the first brew took place with the lager being processed through the brewery and the first road tanker left on 7 February 1963. The official opening took place on 28 June when a special brew was started by the Late Admiral of the fleet, Earl Mountbatten of Burma. This brew was bottled (not on site, but probably in the Courage plant) and was later given to employees, some 1,000 bottles were produced and given away in October 1963, 650 guests were invited plus 85 employees were all treated to a magnificent lunch in one of the marquees provided for the occasion. At this time the brewery was stated as having a capacity of 1,000 barrels a day.

The beer launched was keg Harp, a beer of some 1035 degrees known in the trade as yellow as it was dispensed via a yellow and blue font, this was dispatched to numerous bottlers and keggers. Later other brews appeared, a stronger version called special or blue, a Harp export and a brew that was similar to Ind Coope Long Life, i.e. mid way bitter/lager called sparkling and was also sold as Courage number one, and in cans as Barclays Sparkling. It was canned and bottled in the Courage plant and was also put into 5 gallon kegs for ships stores.

The *Brewers Guardian* reported in March 1965 that bulk Harp Lager had been installed in the bars of Queen Elizabeth II based in Southampton, replacing each round voyage some 300/400 5 gallon kegs. Nine stainless steel tanks had been installed giving a capacity of 3,240 gallons. The lager arrived by 50 barrel road tankers in Southampton and was pumped directly on board to refrigerated rooms on E Deck. The tanks were 3' 10 1/2" by 4' 6" deep and designed with a working pressure of 30 P.S.I. Beer could be dispensed in each bar at a rate of ten pints a minute. A test rig had been built in the brewery to simulate conditions on board ship. The brewery's chief engineer Mr Brian Wheldon travelled on the liners first atlantic crossing to ensure all was in order.

In July 1961 Mitchell & Butlers had merged with Bass Worthington and after Charringtons joined in 1967 the consortium would be reduced to Courage, S&N, and Guinness. The Bass group went their own way with their own brands. Later Greene King joined in a very minor shareholding.

By 1968 the demand for Harp had increased so much that expansion was planned. After just 10 months and at the cost of £1/2 million the expansion was completed and was officially opened on Friday 12 July 1969. Boosting production by 25% to 1250 barrels a day. The new building consisted of a four storey steel framed storage block joined onto the north wall containing 29 lagering vessels of a total 14,000 barrels. Of these 15 were horizontal cylindrical holding 500 barrels, six were dual purpose horizontal vessels (500 barrels when used for fermenting and 600 barrels when lagering). The other eight were vertical bright beer tanks holding 250 barrels and all capable of automatic cleaning. Further expansion took place in March 1971 with the arrival of Belgium made conical fermenters 48 feet by 14 feet, weighing 18 tons and with a capacity of 1,000 barrels sent via Southampton Docks.

The period September 1973 to September 1974 saw total Harp sales increase to 1.5 million barrels. With the mainland sales being 1 million representing 15% of total lager sales. Harp was now taken by 56 bottling and canning plants and 24 racking plants.

This expansion was part of a £2 million expansion which was finally completed in 1978 boosting production to 750,000 barrels per year.

By the late 1970's changes were in the wind, Courage had announced a new brewery on a green field site on the edge of Reading (since closed and now the site of a Tesco distribution depot). This plant was to brew their own brands of Hofmeister and Kronenbourg 1664, and later other brands, Fosters and Budweiser. At the same time S.N. wanted to brew their own lagers at Moss Side and Edinburgh, even Greene King converted their Biggleswade brewery to produce lager. Courage also wanted to close their Alton plant as well and move operations to Reading. Eventually The Moss Side brewery was returned to S.N. and ceased to brew Harp as was the Edinburgh brewery. The Dundalk brewery continued to produce Harp for the Irish market. Storm



Figure 1. The Manor Park Brewery, Alton, 1962. Courtesy of Martin Smith.



Figure 2. Courage dray entering the main entrance. Courtesy of Martin Smith.



Figure 3. Main front of the brewery showing tanks before cladding. Courtesy of Martin Smith.



Figure 4. A special lift used to install horizontal tanks without the use of costly cranes. Courtesy of Martin Smith.



Figure 5. Removal of one of the tanks, 2016. Photo by the author.



Figure 6. Removal of one of the tanks, 2016. Photo by the author.

clouds loomed, the Alton brewery was brewing vastly under capacity.

Bass steps in

Bass had closed their Mile End brewery and the nearest to London was in Birmingham, Alton seemed an excellent site. On the 25 September 1979 Harp Lager Southern L.T.D, together with the Courage site, sports ground, pump\well and old maltings was purchased by Bass. Harp beers continued to be produced until September 1984 when the production transferred to Park Royal Guinness where a separate brewery had been built. Export beers ceased a year earlier. In August 1980 the former Courage site was cleared to be replaced by a state of the art Warehouse and keggling plant. From March 1982 Bass beers were produced along with the Harp beers. Beers brewed were Carling Black Label, Tennents lager, Tennents extra, Hemeling Lite and two bitters the first and only to be brewed on site, Toby bitter and Stones Bitter.

In May 1982 the new packing hall was opened by the then Chairman of Bass Sir Derek Palmer when the town mayor presented him with a 110 year old silver ink stand. Part of the money was spent on the old maltings which was converted into a social club for employees. The club had a self contained room for functions, bar stage and dance area for up 300 persons and a skittle alley. Bass also kept the Courage sports club retaining the tennis courts and football pitch as well as the bowls green. They also played host each year to the town's bonfire party.

On 5 october 1984 a commemorative dinner was held at New Cavendish Street London the Harp's H.Q. to mark 22 years of the Manor Park Brewery.

By 1986 Bass were brewing 1,250,000 barrels a year and packaging 750,000 barrels a year in 11, 22, and 36 gallon kegs. Employees totalled 217 and brews were reduced to just Carling, Tennents extra, Tennent's pilsner and Toby.

In 1987 it was announced a second keggling line was to be put in costing £ 2 million which would increase the keggling capacity to one million barrels a year. Kegging would cease at Burton on Trent and that brewery would

concentrate on canning. The new keggling plant was opened on 15 November 1989 by Bass Chairman Rubin Manners. In August 1990 a further four conical fermenting vessels arrived by road, they were brought from Aberdeenshire, the 600 miles escorted by police. Each vessel was manufactured by Alexander Dey Newmill of Huntley and were 55 feet high and 15 feet wide with a capacity of 1050 barrels, the largest to be installed. At the same time the old brewhouse was upgraded with a new lauter tun to replace the two smaller ones dating back to 1962.

In September 1993 the brewery received a quality assurance award 150 9002, the first national brewer to do so, and in the December of the same year two long serving employees retired; Ray Stevens, 25 years service, and Frank Andrews, 35 years (some with Courage). Later in that year beer was sent to the continent for bottling.

In 1994 a new brewery manager took over from Simon Hadman who had seen the brewery through the biggest expansion period in its history. One of his first ideas was to engage employees children with the brewery when the first 'take your daughters to work day' commenced, when four Amery Hill children spent a day on a work experience scheme.

The summer of 1994 was a noticeable time in the brewery's history as it took on Grolsch to be brewed under licence, the only U.K. brewery to brew it.

Further upgrade took place costing £850,000 in the spring of 1996 with a new water treatment plant, cooling tower, keg labellers, and a new yeast plant. Bass did the town proud sponsoring sporting events and brought their dray horses from Burton each year for the town show. Although public tours were always available in the brewery it was about this time that Bass developed the theme and linked up with The Watercress line to do steam trips and brewery visits.

The latter days of Bass

Brewing took place on a round the clock rota. Starting at either 5pm or 10pm Sunday night until 4pm on the Friday. On the 15 March 1995 operating the brewhouse panel control was Mr D. Holt, at that time four brews

took place per shift all controlled by one operative. The breakdown of production was 60% Carling, Tennents Pils 15%, Extra 15%, Grolsch 5% and Toby 5%. The brews were centrally decided at Burton and allocated to the various breweries in the U.K. depending on the national requirements. All sites were computer linked with each other Alton, Sheffield, Cardiff, Birmingham, Tadcaster and Edinburgh. A brewing schedule was dispatched to Alton and agreed.

The brewhouse operative started on the controls and via the computer grain was wet milled in either of the two mills before entering the Lauter tun. Extraction took place and the wort flowed into the 'copper' made of stainless steel, and built partly inside and partly outside the brewhouse. After each brew automatic cleaning took place, the only manual part was climbing the stairs and loading the copper with hop pellets, and adding adjuncts like copper syrup and gypsum. Brewing liquor was taken back to a pure state after it was received from the Selborne Well and then adjusted for each brew. Shifts were generally on a three by eight hour pattern and brewing was 24 hours a day. In between logging the brewing process Mr Holt had to take samples for the laboratory. From the copper the brew transferred to Mr Kennedy, the brewer in charge of fermentation. Received from the copper the wort passed through the original two paraflows and one of the five yeast strains were added. At that time all fermentation took place in the new conical vessels or the horizontal enclosed ones. At this time all but two of the open vessels had been removed, the two left were for possible ale experiments. During the fermentation yeast was removed using the original yeast presses and stored for Marmite of Burton to collect by tanker. After fermentation the beer was centrifuged and passed to the conditioning vessels for the lagering process now down to 7/10 days. Grolsch was treated to a longer lagering time. At the end of the lagering, powder was added to aid filtering and the beer was pushed through filters passing into holding vessels before being pasteurized in tubes, cooled and flowed to the 14 head or 16 head kegging lines. These lines were automatic from the time the empty kegs arrived on pallets. On arrival from the yard kegs went through an external clean, internal flush, cleaning rinse and the full clean and dry. On the line when filled they were weighed, capped by hand and checked for leaks. The full kegs were palletised 6/11 gallon or 4/22 gallon to a pallet and removed by a continuous stream of fork lift

trucks. From the warehouse a primary run of 38 ton trucks took the beer to depots at Totton, Bristol, Silvertown, Newhaven and further afield as required. Three local vehicles were kept for local deliveries. The whole warehouse could only hold about one and a half days of production. In 1995 John Redman took over as head brewer to lead the brewery into the next phase.

The Molson period

June 2000 saw the announcement that due to the government's beer orders policy designed to limit the size of big brewers pub empires, Bass was to sell the brewing arm for £2.3 billion to the Belgium group Interbrew. Interbrew had already purchased the Whitbread breweries in May, leaving it with a 84% slice of the beer market in the U.K. At that time Manor Park employed 128 persons and more job cuts were expected. Alton, although a large plant, was one of six effected. Early in 2001 it was announced that the deal was to be referred to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission, the recommendations included that Interbrew had to sell some of the breweries and brands.

Alton was to find a new owner in Coors, an American based company. A deal was signed in the early hours on Christmas Eve 2001 and the brewery and brands Worthingtons, Caffreys, and the U.K. rights to Grolsch passed to them. The deal cost Coors £1.2 billion giving a 18% share of the market and second place in the U.K. The brands at Alton changed with Grolsch and Carling now being the main ones.

May 2004 saw a £28 million contract to outsource the entire 1.2 million kegs and casks Coors owned to the American company supply chain Trenstar. Radio tracking tags were fixed to all kegs and they became Trenstar's responsibility.

Not long afterwards in August 2004 an announcement was made that Coors would merge with Molson to create the fifth biggest brewing group in the world with value of \$6 billion and producing 60 million hectolitres a year. The company became the second largest in the U.K. having 21% of the total market.

In early 2010 the Berkshire brewery at Reading closed and production of Fosters and Kronenbourg was trans-

ferred to Alton to be brewed under licence. Most of the Coors beers were then transferred to Burton.

By February 2008 an expansion plan was announced to increase production by 60%. Making it the largest brewery south of Burton. With the purchase of Sharps brewery in Cornwall the company set about a review of its operations. The Alton brewery was to only brew contract beers, however it was found that out of specification beer was difficult to get rid of so Carling was also added to the brew list. The sports facilities that they had purchased via Bass was the first to go, sold for more housing. Then Heineken announced it was to take back the brewing control of Fosters, Heineken and Kronenbourg by expanding their Moss Side brewery to take the production, spending £55 million on the brewery. Molson Coors during their review had spent £75 million on their Burton plant integrating the old Ind Coope brewery with the Bass plant.

I had the great pleasure on 10 July 2014 in being able to visit the Manor Park Brewery for one of the last official visits as it turned out (also members of The Brewery History Society). At that time the brewery was still in full production with some 34 brews a week of 500 barrels each at 6.6% strength, the Carling brew was reduced to the sale gravity before going into trade, some of the 6% beer was made available to consume and was enjoyed by all.

The axe falls on the brewery

Just before Christmas 2014 the company announced that they had received planning permission on the sports

ground site, and a further blow would be the brewery would close at the end of May 2015, with the loss of 105 jobs. The remaining Carling production would transfer to Burton and that Tadcaster would receive no increases in production. The rundown started just after Christmas 2015 with some staff being transferred to other locations and some leaving. The last brew took place during April 2015 with Mr Kennedy on the panel, the oldest serving brewer left, 35 years at Alton. As fitting a part of the last Carling brew at 6% was bottled and given to staff together with a C.D. showing the first brew at a reunion wake which took place in the hospitality suite overlooking the kegging plant which I also had the pleasure of attending. Very shortly afterwards the last beer left the site. Since then some of the plant has been removed, some conical fermenting vessels left for Burton, and the plant decommissioned. The site as of December 2018 is now weed covered awaiting yet more housing. The end of Alton's brewing heritage, and the end of what was once thought the most cost efficient brewery in the country.

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