

## THE ORIGINS AND SPREAD OF THE THREE-THREADS MYTH

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### Introduction

What would be the most influential article by far on the history and origins of porter, repeated and reprinted for the next 200 years probably hundreds of times, often verbatim, and providing what would become the standard narrative on the drink's earliest days, first appeared in February 1802 in a publication called the *Monthly Magazine and British Register*.

Unfortunately it was wildly inaccurate and utterly misleading, based on a total and disastrous misunderstanding of two early 18<sup>th</sup> century terms, 'three-threads' and 'entire butt', misplaced porter's first appearance by more than a decade, and muddled the types of beer on sale at the time porter first appeared. It has taken more than two centuries to uncover a more accurate history of the birth of porter, and the inaccurate version, because of its ubiquity, is likely to be repeated for a long time to come. This is a small attempt to put the record right.

### Origins of the three-threads myth

The *Monthly Magazine* had been founded in London in 1796 by the radical educationalist and publisher Richard Phillips.<sup>1</sup> The article on porter was part of a long and miscellaneous collection of pieces titled 'Extracts from the Port-Folio of a Man of Letters,' covering six pages. Under the sub-heading 'The Porter Brewery' (using 'brewery' in the then-usual sense of 'brewing industry,') it said:

The wholesome and excellent beverage of porter obtained its name about the year 1730, from the following circumstances, which not having yet been printed, we think them proper to record in this work. Prior to the above-mentioned period, the

malt-liquors in general use were *ale*, *beer*, and *twopenny*, and it was customary for the drinkers of malt-liquor to call for a pint or tankard of *half-and-half*, ie a half of ale and half of beer, a half of ale and half of twopenny, or a half of beer and half of twopenny. In course of time it also became the practice to call for a pint or tankard of *three threads*, meaning a third of *ale*, *beer*, and *twopenny*; and thus the publican had the trouble to go to three casks, and turn three cocks for a pint of liquor. To avoid this trouble and waste, a brewer, of the name of HARWOOD, conceived the idea of making a liquor which should partake of the united flavours of *ale*, *beer*, and *twopenny*. He did so and succeeded, calling it entire or entire butt, meaning that it was drawn entirely from one cask or butt; and as it was a very hearty nourishing liquor, it was very suitable for *porters* and other working people. Hence it obtained its name of porter.<sup>2</sup>

As was the way with 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century journalism, which saw no shame in plagiarism, within a fortnight at least ten different newspapers around the country, from Scotland to Kent, copied the *Monthly Magazine*'s account of the birth of porter without altering a word, but without giving the *Monthly Magazine* any credit.<sup>3</sup> The *Edinburgh Advertiser*, its plagiarists rather slower (or possibly wanting to leave a half-decent gap after its rival, the *Caledonian Mercury*, had published the story), repeated the account in September 1802, adding, in a footnote which suggested the *Advertiser*'s own porter drinkers did not like to be associated with the working classes, that though porter took its name from porters, 'it is equally relished by all Ranks of People'.<sup>4</sup>

Around the same time - the preface is dated 10 August 1802<sup>5</sup> - an identical account to the *Monthly Magazine*'s, together with an extended description of Whitbread's

brewery in Chiswell Street and more details about porter brewing,<sup>6</sup> appeared in the first edition of *The Picture of London*, a guidebook to the capital compiled anonymously by the travel writer John Feltham.<sup>7</sup> The guidebook, like the *Monthly Magazine*, was also published by Richard Phillips, and doubtless Feltham's copy on 'The Porter Brewery' was lying around the publisher's office, having been written for *The Picture of London*, and was slapped into the *Monthly Magazine* as filler, to be picked up and ripped off by rival rags. *The Picture of London* then went through more than two dozen editions and revisions until at least 1827, and the same story, in essentially identical wording, was still appearing in its pages until at least the 21<sup>st</sup> edition, in 1820, when it was being printed for a new publisher, Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown.<sup>8</sup>

By this time, 1820, the date for the first appearance of porter given in *The Picture of London* had been 'corrected' to 'about the year 1722.' Feltham's account of the birth of porter had meanwhile been reprinted the previous year (though with the 1730 date) in a new edition of Abraham Rees's massive multi-volume *Cyclopædia*,<sup>9</sup> with which *The Picture of London* now shared a publisher. The story had also been reproduced earlier, in 1811, in the fifth edition of a book called *Arithmetical Questions on a New Plan*, by William Butler, 'teacher of writing, accounts and geography in ladies' schools,' with Butler adding extra details to the story, obtained from 'personal inquiry': that Harwood 'was one of the partners in a respectable brewery known by the name of the Bell Brewhouse, Shoreditch,' and that

Entire butt beer was first retailed at the Blue Last, Curtain Road [which was just 250 yards from Harwood's brewery] and the intercourse between that public house and the Bell Brewhouse has continued ever since without intermission.

Butler also expanded on the origins of the name porter, writing that Dr John Ash, author of the *New and Complete Dictionary of the English Language*, 'says that it obtained this appellation from being much drank by porters in the city of London'.<sup>10</sup>

### **Wider still and wider**

Feltham's and Butler's narratives, backed by the support of Rees's *Cyclopædia*, meant the story began to be

repeated more and more widely (generally without credit), probably because it answered a question many were interested in - how did the nation's most popular beer come into being - with an appealing tale that featured esoteric information about the past and a lone hero solving a tough problem to the benefit of the public weal. Effectively identical stories on the origins of porter, all reproducing Feltham's original account, including giving the year of the drink's origin as 1730, began appearing in newspapers every few years, generally with one new reprint sparking half a dozen or more copyists. The tale even escaped abroad, in translated versions: as early as 1812 German beer lovers were being told that 'Der Brauer Harwood brauete den ersten Porter',<sup>11</sup> while in 1821 Polish brewers were instructed that the idea of a drink that combined the taste of 'Ale, Beer i Twopenny' had come to 'piwowar Harwood' in 1730.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century dozens - possibly hundreds - of publications repeated Feltham's error-filled account of three-threads and the birth of porter. The ubiquity of Feltham's account mean that practically every history of beer and pubs in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, popular or serious, repeated the idea that porter was the specific invention of Ralph Harwood of Shoreditch, and devised in order to solve the 'problem' of serving a popular drink called three-threads, a mixture of ale, beer and twopenny, that had to be dispensed by getting drink from three separate casks, and this new drink was first sold at the Blue Last in Shoreditch: to name a selection, *A History of the County of Middlesex* (1911);<sup>13</sup> *London Inns and Taverns* (1924);<sup>14</sup> *Beer Has a History* (1947);<sup>15</sup> *The Brewing Industry in England 1700-1830* (1959);<sup>16</sup> *A History of English Ale and Beer* (1966);<sup>17</sup> *Dr Foster's Book of Beer* (1979);<sup>18</sup> *The Great British Beer Book* (1987);<sup>19</sup> and *The English Pub: A History* (1994).<sup>20</sup>

### **Rodondo**

It has been claimed that a long satirical poem by the 18<sup>th</sup> century attorney, poet and polemicist Hugh (or Hew) Dalrymple, 'Rodondo; or the State Jugglers, Canto III,' published in 1770,<sup>21</sup> contains evidence that porter was a development of three-threads pioneered by Humphrey Parsons, at the Red Lion brewery in St. Katharine's, by the Tower of London.<sup>22</sup> However, this is a misunderstanding by Alan Pryor of two small sections of the poem more than 250 lines apart, the first saying

Let us together lay our heads,  
And make a liquor of three threads,  
Which being jumbled in one barrel,  
Will take off all pretext of quarrel

and the second, much later:

and chuck'd down, as he'd chuck a slug,  
The whole contents of Hum[phre]y's mug.

which is followed five lines later, after a mention that what was in 'Humphrey's mug' was wine, by:

No sooner was the potion down,  
Than dreadful Civil War began,  
To waste the Parson's inward man,  
For Porter, who possessed of old,  
The sole dominion of his hold ...

Pryor ends the quote there, though further lines show that the 'hold' is the Parson's stomach, where the porter he usually drank is now battling with Humphrey's wine. Pryor claims that 'The information is all there, a liquor of three threads all in one barrel in Parson's sole dominion; this is the story of the development of porter by Humphrey Parsons.' But Humphrey Parsons is not mentioned in the poem, which is about contemporary politics, involving people from the 1760s, not someone who died in 1741, when Dalrymple was only aged ten or so. The 'Humphrey' referred to is Humphrey Coates, a wine merchant and close friend of John Wilkes, the radical politician and son of a London gin distiller, while the 'Parson' is the Reverend Charles Churchill, another close friend of Wilkes, who was notoriously fond of porter (the artist William Hogarth, who had been attacked in verse by Churchill, made a print depicting Churchill as a bear holding a pot of porter).<sup>23</sup> The 'three threads' in the first quote from the poem refer to Wilkes as gin, Coates as wine and Churchill as porter. Nothing in 'Rodondo' has anything to do with the development of porter, or the history of three-threads, or Humphrey Parsons.

### Three-threads

In fact, three-threads, as the *Dictionary of the Canting Crew*, published in 1694, makes clear, was a combination of just two different malt liquors, 'half common

Ale, and the rest Stout or Double Beer',<sup>24</sup> 'stout' and 'double beer' both meaning an extra-strong drink, perhaps 10 or 11% alcohol by volume, while 'common ale' was the same as table ale or small ale, and brewed at one and a half bushels of malt to the barrel, giving an O.G. of around 1045. Mix a beer that was 10 or 11% alcohol by volume with one that was only about 4.5%, and you will have a beer of around 7.5% or so, the same strength as common strong beer: but one that gave the retailer a better profit than 'entire gyle' strong beer did, because despite being the same strength as 'entire gyle' strong beer, it had paid, in total, less tax.

From the time when taxes were first imposed on beer and ale, in 1643, during the English Civil War, and for the next 139 years the excise authorities recognised only two strengths of beer and ale for tax purposes: 'small,' defined originally as having a pre-tax value of six shillings a barrel, and 'strong,' defined as having a value of more than 6s a barrel.<sup>25</sup> Since the exciseman had no way, at the time, of measuring the strength of the beer the brewer was producing, basing the tax on the retail price was the only way to proceed. To begin with, the tax represented only a tiny proportion of the retail cost, at less than a tenth of a penny a pint for strong drink and not even two tenths of a penny per gallon for the small stuff. But in 1689, after William III of the Netherlands and his cousin, wife and co-ruler Mary had arrived in Britain and pushed Mary's father, James II, off the throne, the need to pay for the 'war of the British succession' and the continuing Nine Years' War against Louis XIV of France saw the duty on beer and ale bounced upwards, from two shillings and sixpence a barrel to 3s 3d. The following year, 1690, the tax was doubled, to 6s 6d a barrel on strong ale and beer, more than a farthing a pint, when strong liquor retailed at a penny-ha'penny a pint, or 3d a quart 'pot'. The rise in the tax on small drink was proportionate, to 1s 6d a barrel, but still the total tax on small beer and ale equalled only a half-penny a gallon.<sup>26</sup>

The flaw in the system was that extra-strong beer or ale paid the same tax as 'ordinary' or 'common' strong beer. Unscrupulous brewer, and retailers, could therefore - and did - take a barrel of extra-strong beer and two of small beer, on which a total of 7s 3d of tax had been paid, mix them to make three barrels each equal in strength to common strong beer, which should have paid tax of 14s 3d in total, and save themselves 2s 4d a bar-

rel in tax. This may have been equal to only a fifth of a penny a pot, or thereabouts, but it was still 6% or so extra profit.

The excise authorities were certainly wise to this fiddle, and laws banning the mixing of different strengths of worts or beers were passed by Parliament in 1663 and again in 1670-1, 1689, 1696-97 and 1702, with (in William III's time) a fine of £5 per barrel for beer so mixed. That did not stop either brewers or publicans trying it on. Some time between 1698 and 1713, on the internal evidence, a manuscript was written titled *An account of the losse in the excise on beer and ale for severall yeares last paste, with meanes proposed for advanceing that revenue.*<sup>27</sup> It was probably produced by an anonymous Excise or Treasury official, because he had access to official tax data from 1683 to 1698, and it gives an account of the prices and likely strengths of beers and ales at the time. 'Very Small Beer' retailed pre-tax at 3s a barrel, and paid (since 1693) 1s 3d a barrel tax. 'Common Strong Beer and Ale,' made from 'four Bushells of mault,' suggesting an original gravity of 1075 to 1085, sold for 18s a barrel and paid, at the time, 4s 9d a barrel tax. 'Very Strong Beer or ale the Barrell being the Strong from 8 Bushells,' suggesting a huge original gravity, perhaps north of 1160, sold for almost twice as much, £3 a barrel, but still paid the same 4s 9d a barrel tax as common strong beer or ale.

The fact that very strong brews paid the same tax as 'common standard strong drinke,' the anonymous author wrote, had 'begot a kind of trade of Defrauding,' and he declared that 'the notion thereof and Profit thereby' of mixing very strong ale or beer with small beer and selling it as common strong ale or beer 'has been of late & now is generally knowne,' and 'the traders therein have turned themselves more and more to the practice of Brewing it,' 'very strong Drinke being now Commonly a parte of the Brewers Guiles, and the whole of many who Brew nothing else.' The result, he said, was that 'the Consumption of it is everywhere, which you have under several odd names, as Two Threades, 3 Threades, Stout or according as the Drinker will have it in price, from 3d. to 9d. the quarte.'

In 1697 a tax on malt was introduced alongside the taxes on the finished product, at the bizarre-looking rate of six pence and sixteen 21<sup>sts</sup> of a penny a bushel. For the first time, the country's very large number of private house-

hold brewers had to pay tax, if they bought their malt from commercial maltsters, while brewers were also now paying more tax when they brewed extra strong beer than when they brewed 'common' strong beer, because of the extra (taxed) malt used. Even on double beer at eight bushels to the barrel, that only came out to around three farthings per gallon more tax, and brewers continued to cheat the revenue by mixing small drink with extra-strong. A disgruntled former General Surveyor of Excise, Edward Denneston, 'Gent,' who had been involved in inspecting breweries since at least the early 1680s, wrote what amounted to a 40-page rant in 1713 with the unsnappy title *A Scheme for Advancing and Improving the Ancient and Noble Revenue of Excise upon Beer, Ale and other Branches to the Great Advantage of Her Majesty and the general Good of her Subjects.*<sup>28</sup> It claimed that the brewing profession had become rich solely because of the 'Frauds, Neglects and Abuses' practised by the brewers to the detriment of the country's tax take. Brewers, he said, were 'Vermine ... that eat us up alive,' and he told them he wished them 'all boiled in your own brewing Cauldrons, or drowned in your own Gile Tunns.'

Denneston was a man with a grievance: he claimed that when he was a General Surveyor of Excise in London, he had spent several hundred pounds of his own money uncovering fiddles at the royal brewhouse in St. Katharine's, by the Tower of London, which brewed beer for the navy. One such fraud cost the government £18,000 a year, and he had been promised a reward by the House of Commons for stopping it, which, he said, he had never received. He also claimed that the country was losing £200,000 a year in unpaid tax - equivalent, in relative terms, to more than £4 billion today - because of the wider fiddles practised by brewers and publicans, and declared:

before there was a Duty of Excise laid upon Beer and Ale, it was not known any Brewer ever got so much by his Trade as what is now call'd a competent Estate; but since a Duty of Excise was laid upon Beer and Ale, nothing is more obvious, amazing and remarkable, than to see the great Estates many Brewers in and about the City of London have got, and are daily getting.

This, he said, was because 'the Brewers in general, ever since there was a Duty upon Beer and Ale, have been more or less guilty of defrauding that Duty in several

Methods,' including bribing the excise officers (in October 1708, 'T- J-, Brewer' was put on trial at the Old Bailey for allegedly giving 40s a week to four officers of the excise 'to connive at his mixing of Small Beer with Strong,' though he was found not guilty),<sup>29</sup> illegally brewing with molasses rather than malt, like the brewer 'lately and remarkably in Southwark,' who was 'fined several Hundred Pounds, for using of Molossas in his Beer and Ale,' and, in particular, avoiding the tax on strong beer and ale by mixing extra-strong drink with small.

One such fiddle Denneston claimed to have uncovered when he was working for the Revenue in London as General Surveyor involved the publican at the Fortune of War in Well Close, Goodman's Fields, just to the east of the Minories, and on the edge of the City. Denneston said that while visiting Well Close on official business, he spotted a sign outside the pub which said: 'Here is to he Sold Two Thrids, Three Thrids, Four Thrids, and Six Thrids.' 'My Curiosity up on this Subject, led me into the House,' Denneston said.

I call'd for my Host, desir'd to know what he meant by the several sorts of Thrids? He answer'd, That the meaning was, Beer at Twopence, Threepence, Fourpence, and Sixpence a Pot, for that he had all sorts of Drink, and as good as any in England; upon which I tasted all the four sorts, and found they were all made up by Mixture, and not Beer intirely Brew'd; upon which I order'd the Surveyor of that Division to go and search that House, where he found only two sorts of Drink, viz extraordinary Strong Beer, and Small, so that according to the Price he Mixt in Proportion; the same Fraud being more or less practis'd through the Kingdom.

Denneston must have had an extraordinary palate to detect the difference between mixed beers and 'intirely brewed' ones, but ignoring that, 'Three Thrids' is obviously the same as three-threads ('thrid' is the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Cockney pronunciation of 'thread,' so that, for example, Threadneedle Street in the City is found in churchwardens' accounts spelt 'Thridnedle Street'),<sup>30</sup> and Denneston confirms that three-threads was a mixture of extra-strong beer and small beer, sold for three pence a pot, or quart, with two-threads costing two pence, four-threads costing four pence and so on, depending, clearly, on the proportions of small beer to extra-strong beer. Why 'threads'? One definition of 'thread' is 'a thin continuous stream of liquid:' the

Elizabethan author Thomas Nashe wrote of 'thrids of rayne,' while another writer in 1723 wrote of 'fat Liqueur' that when poured out would 'go on in a long Thread whose Parts are uninterrupted'.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

'Three-threads' as a drink looks to have died out by the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, so that in 1760 the aged brewery worker calling himself Obadiah Poundage, in his also influential account of drinking in the reign of Queen Anne, wrote of 'what was then called three-threads'.<sup>32</sup> Four decades later, by Feltham's time the nature of three-threads had clearly been completely forgotten, and there was no one around to tell Feltham he had got it wrong: thus we have the foundation of one of the longest running myths in the history of beer.

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