

## JOHN HAMLYN BURNELL AND THE ALBION BREWERY, SAN FRANCISCO

MARTYN CORNELL

In 1875, a 27-year-old Englishman named John Hamlyn Burnell shipped brewing kit from England to San Francisco, and set up the Albion ale and porter brewery on a site at Hunter's Point, then outside the city limits, and supplied by some of the only natural springs in the San Francisco area.

Burnell was born in 1848 in East Hoathly, near Horsham, East Sussex, but christened at a church near where his father George, a surgeon, was living in Upper Manor Street, Chelsea, London. In 1870, when he joined a Freemasons' lodge in Arundel, Sussex aged 21, his occupation was given as 'civil engineer' and his residence as 'Canada'.<sup>1</sup>

According to *100 Years of Brewing*, Burnell trained under William Garton, the pioneer of the use of invert sugar in British breweries, and founder of the Anglo-Bavarian Brewing Company, and worked as a brewer at Anglo-Bavarian's brewery in Shepton Mallet, Somerset (despite its name, the Anglo-Bavarian Brewery made only English-style ales, not lagers.) At one point in the early to mid 1870s Burnell was working as a farmer in Westbourne, Manitoba with two of his brothers.<sup>2</sup>

Before he left England permanently, Burnell — generally referred to as 'J. Hamlyn Burnell' — married Frances 'Fanny' Constable in Lyminster, West Sussex in June 1875: her father, George Sefton Constable, ran the Swallow brewery in Arundel nearby (later to merge with a brewery in Chichester to form Henty & Constable)<sup>3</sup> and the couple had presumably met through Burnell's links with Arundel that had led him to join the Freemasons in the town: perhaps — this is speculation — his future father-in-law persuaded Burnell to move from civil engineering to brewing.

Burnell then immigrated to California that same year, shipping the equipment for an ale and porter brewery direct from England, and established the Albion Brewery: a surviving stoneware beer bottle bears a paper label reading 'Albion Ale, Estab'd 1875, J.H. Burnell'.<sup>4</sup> At Hunters Point, he dug

out cellars from solid rock, one, at least, being 600 feet long, where the beer was aged, and constructed underground bottling vaults.<sup>5</sup> He also built a brewhouse that looked more like a Norman castle than a brewery, made of stone and included a three-story turret. (Sources suggest that the building material for the brewery was ballast stones dumped by ships in San Francisco harbour: at least one brewery was built using ballast stones, the former William Hancock & Co. brewery in Cardiff, South Wales.)

The brewery is listed as Burnell & Simpkins, (John Hamlyn Burnell and T. H. Simpkins, proprietors) at the corner of G and 9<sup>th</sup> Avenues, South San Francisco, in the San Francisco City Directory for 1877.<sup>6</sup> Burnell's youngest brother, Frederick Borrer Burnell, born 1858, was listed as a brewer, and another brother, Edgar, born about 1857, was also working for the firm. After Simpkins left the partnership about 1878, Frederick was made a partner, and the firm was listed in directories from 1879 until 1886 as 'J.H. Burnell & Bro'.<sup>7</sup> The oldest brother, Martin, born 1847 in Chelsea, London, also moved to San Francisco (having married, in 1872, a woman named Anna Hoogs from Elko, Nevada: the pair had a son born in Elko in 1874) and by 1880 was working with Charles D. Turner as Burnell & Turner, sole agents for Albion ales and porter, based in Sacramento Street.<sup>8</sup> For the year to 31 December 1882 Burnell & Bro. brewed 665 barrels, putting it 32<sup>nd</sup> out of 36 breweries in San Francisco, and with barely a tenth of the output of the city's leading brewer, John Wieland at the Philadelphia Brewery on Second Street.<sup>9</sup>

But the Albion brewery produced a porter that, according to the San Francisco Chronicle, writing in 1887, was 'equal to the Dublin stout,' and considerably cheaper, at \$1.50 for a dozen bottles, against \$2.50 for the imported version.<sup>10</sup> The hops used were imported from Kent, and the 'porter malt' — meaning the roast, 'patent' malt — from London, and both the ale and porter were bottled in corked stoneware bottles on the premises.<sup>11</sup> The brewery looks to have been brewing

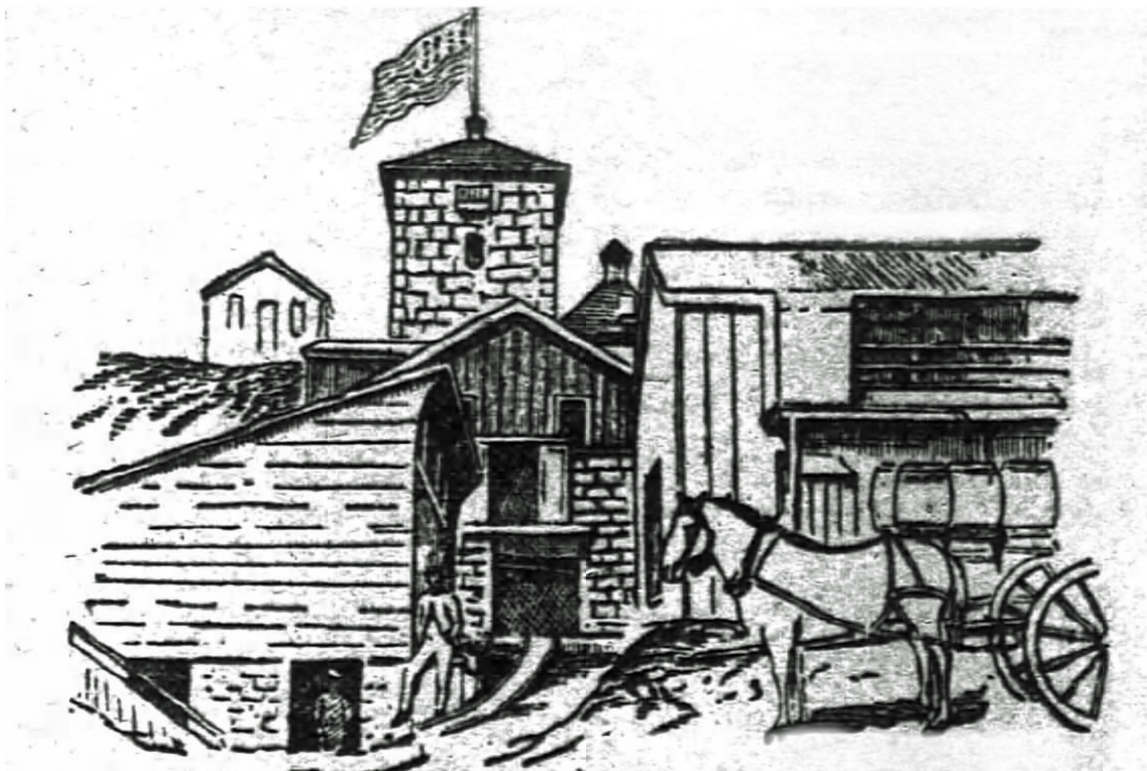


Figure 1. A drawing of the Albion brewery from 1887.

lager by 1889 at the latest: a price list in the *Chronicle* gives 'California Lager Beer' from the Albion Ale and Porter Brewery at \$9.50 a 32-gallon barrel, less than half the price of the ale and porter, at \$21 a barrel. The porter in bottle was \$12 for eight dozen pints. For comparison, Bass stout and ale from Burton upon Trent in England was \$52.50 per cask — size not given, but probably an imperial hogshead.<sup>12</sup>

A fair few of the Burnells' local rivals, such as the Chicago Brewery, founded on Pine Street about 1876 by H. Ahrens but by 1882 the third largest in the city (albeit only a third of the size of Wieland) also made dark beers: in 1890 the Chicago Brewery advertised its 'First Prize English Ale and Porter,' alongside Pilsener lager, and 'Chevalier malt Steam Beer,' Steam beer being the style developed in California before the arrival of refrigeration, using bottom-fermenting yeasts at temperatures associated with top-fermenting yeasts.<sup>13</sup> The Chicago brewery was being very unusual in promoting the type of barley used in its Steam beer, Chevalier, originally developed in Suffolk, England in the 1820s and by the 1890s one of the most planted varieties of malting barley around the world.<sup>14</sup> (San Francisco was not the only place where breweries made both steam beer and porter: Ruhstaller's City Brewery, at Twelfth and H in Sac-

ramento, in the 1890s brewed 'Gilt Edge Steam Beer' and also 'Fine Old Porter').<sup>15</sup>

Burnell's brewery, by now listed as 'Albion Ale and Porter Brewery, J. Hamlyn Burnell, proprietor,' was described as 'an immense success' in a laudatory report in the *San Francisco Examiner* in October 1890, with the newspaper declaring:

It is only fair to state that Mr Burnell is the only one who has ever successfully produced English ale and porter made on English principles of fermentation in California. Of course, one might as well ask a silk manufacturer to produce good silk out of wool as to expect good English ale where the German process of fermentation is used. The general appreciation of Albion ale and porter may be gathered from the fact that for four or five years at the Mechanics' Fair Mr Burnell has been awarded a special price for the excellence of his products ... The sample of the ale shown the reporter was bright, clear, of good quality and excellent flavor, quite equal to any imported brand and superior to many. This is not to be wondered at, for there is 600 feet of cold vaulting at the brewery in the natural rock, where the ale is aged thoroughly both in wood and in bottle, before it is placed on the market. A special feature is made by Mr Burnell of supplying families by his wagons, which run regularly through the city and from which one is able to procure any quantity

ESTABLISHED 1875

HARRY FRANCIS  
SECRETARY AND MANAGER



*Albion*  
ALE & PORTER  
BREWERY  
INCORPORATED

TELEPHONE  
MISSION 695

OFFICE  
2491 MISSION STREET  
SAN FRANCISCO, CAL.

BREWERY  
HUNTERS POINT



Figure 2. A brochure for the Albion brewery circa 1915.

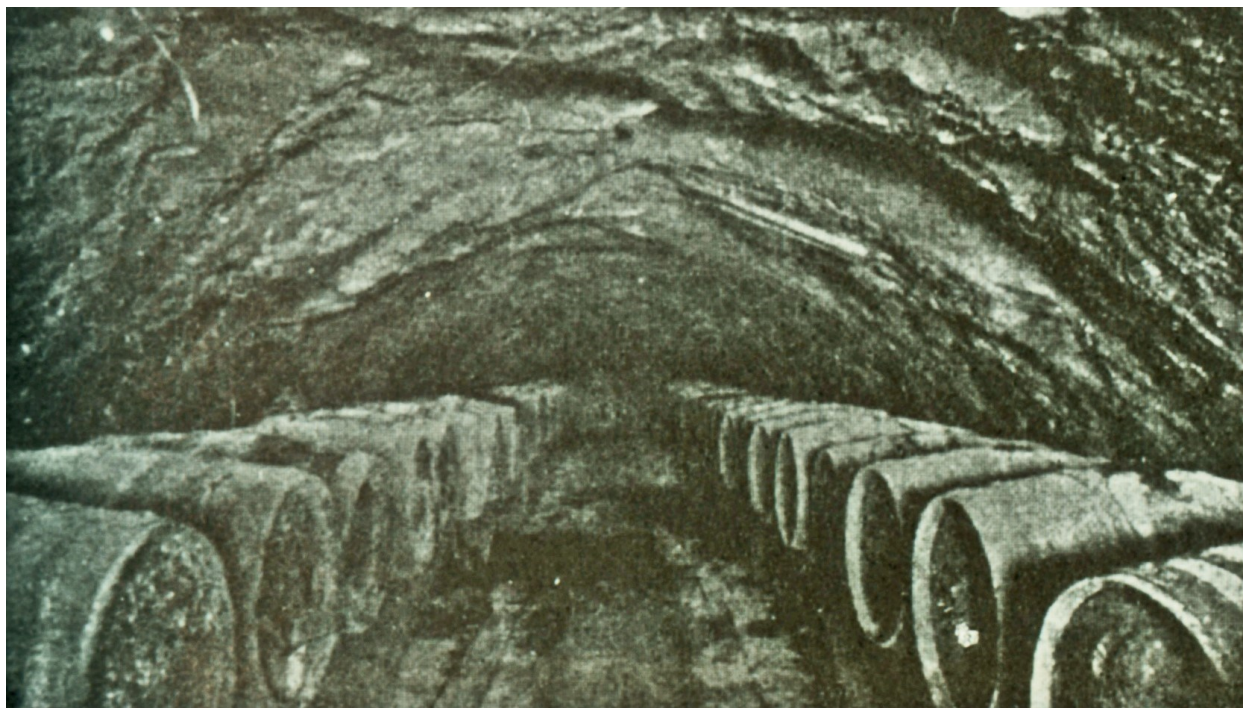


Figure 3. The cellars at the Albion brewery, from *100 Years of Brewing*, 1901.

exceeding one dozen by sending a post card to his office, 519 Sacramento street. We hear a syndicate has been formed to buy out the brewery for the purpose of increasing its capacity and starting the manufacture of New York Cream Ale on a large scale.<sup>16</sup>

John Burnell died in December 1890, aged just 41, and was buried in the Masonic Cemetery in San Francisco, leaving an estate worth \$12,000, perhaps \$350,000 today. The business was carried on by his widow, Fanny, as Burnell & Company, with Frederick, who seems to have left for a few years, back at the brewery.<sup>17</sup> The brewery was associated with tragically early deaths: in October 1897 Charles West, 45, who worked for the Albion ale and porter brewery as an agent, was found in the hills 'back of Colma,' near the brewery in South San Francisco, with a .38-calibre pistol beside him and a bullet through his heart. The newspaper report of his death said West 'had been drinking quite heavily of late'.<sup>18</sup>

In 1898 Fanny Burnell's share in the business was bought by William M. Edgell, and the firm continued as Burnell & Co., with Frederick Burnell and Edgell as proprietors.<sup>19</sup> Two years later the company was caught up in a widespread scandal in California when it was one of a dozen local firms, including Enterprise Brewing on Folsom Street and the San Francisco Breweries Ltd., an amalgamation of concerns in

San Francisco and Oakland that included John Wieland's big Philadelphia brewery on Second Street, charged with faking millions of labels on bottles of stout over a nine-year period to make it look as if they were bottles of the Dublin giant Guinness.

A court in California was told that Burnell & Co. had been supplied by one printing firm with more than 850,000 labels 'so similar to Messrs. Guinness's label that the general appearance of the spurious articles was the same as the general appearance of the genuine article, especially in the hands of an expert barkeeper.' Some of the labels had a crown in place of the harp found on genuine bottles of Guinness, some two red triangles, one superimposed on the other, but all bore the words 'Genuine Double Extra Export Dublin Stout,' or something similar, and 'Bottled by E. & F. Brown, Dublin, who sell no other Brown Stout in bottle.' Guinness contented itself with winning injunctions against the guilty firms that banned them from using any labels that bore any resemblance to its own, and made them surrender up all remaining fakes and promise to be on good behaviour in the future.<sup>20</sup>

The Albion brewery survived the great San Francisco earthquake of 1906, unlike two thirds of its rivals in the city, thanks to its position away from the central area of San

Francisco, where the fires that followed the quake did huge damage. At the time of the earthquake it was one of only three breweries in the city making porter, out of 25.<sup>21</sup> Frederick Burnell died aged 49 in Alameda, across the bay from San Francisco, in December 1907, and the next year the firm became the Albion Ale and Porter Brewery. The brewery was incorporated in 1909, with shareholders including Herman de Vries van Doesburgh, a Dutch-born wine-maker from St Helena in the nearby Napa valley.<sup>22</sup>

World War One was a boost to breweries such as Albion, since it removed European competition from the local market. In April 1916 a retailer in Santa Barbara, 280 miles south of San Francisco, announced that ‘Owing to the difficulty of obtaining Imported Goods,’ it had decided to stock the beers of the Albion Ale and Porter Brewery, ‘conceded to be the finest brewed on the Pacific Coast, and unsurpassed for Purity, Fullness of Flavor and freedom of acidity. The fact that this Brewery was established in 1875 speaks for itself’.<sup>23</sup> Being more than 40 years old in California was clearly impressive. The business looks to have been in financial trouble soon after, however, with Edgell, Van Doesburgh and the brewery company sued by the Livermore Savings Bank, which won a judgment against them in the summer of 1917.<sup>24</sup> The company was officially dissolved on 18 November 1920.<sup>25</sup>

However, the brewery building survives, and is now a protected landmark, though the cellars dug into the rock now appear to be filled with water from the springs. In addition, the Albion brewery was to inspire one of the pioneers of the American craft beer movement, Jack McAuliffe, who started the New Albion Brewery in Sonoma, 40 miles to the north of Hunter’s Point, in 1977 to brew ale, stout and porter. In an interview with the *Sacramento Bee* in 1977, McAuliffe specifically gave Burnell’s brewery as one of the inspirations for the name of his own venture, the other being that the English explorer Sir Francis Drake had named the area around San Francisco ‘New Albion’ when he passed by in 1579, four centuries earlier.<sup>26</sup> McAuliffe probably did not know this, but after Fanny Burnell ended her involvement with the Hunter’s Point brewery she settled in Napa, just nine miles from Sonoma, where she was living in 1918.<sup>27</sup>

## References

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2. *Manitoba Directory for 1876-77*, St. Boniface, Manitoba, Canada, 1876, p.24.
3. Richmond, L. and Turton, A. (eds.) (1990) *The Brewing Industry, A Guide to Historical Records*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, England, pp.114-5.
4. Pastron, A.G. (ed.) (1981) *Behind the seawall: historical archaeology along the San Francisco waterfront*, Appendices Vol. 3. San Francisco: S.F. Clean Water Program, pp.600-1. A number of sources claim the brewery was started in 1870. This is wrong. Similarly, Burnell’s middle name is occasionally misspelt ‘Hamlin.’
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6. Pastron, A.G. (ed.) (1981) op. cit., p.601.
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9. *Daily Alta California*, Wednesday 14 February 1883, p.1.
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14. Beaven, E.S. (1947) *Barley: Fifty Years of Observation and Experiment*. London: Gerald Duckworth and Co., p.90.
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24. *The Recorder*. San Francisco, California, Tuesday 17 July 1917, p.7.
25. *ibid.* Tuesday 23 November 1920, p.5.
26. *The Sacramento Bee*. Sacramento, California, Monday 3 October 1977, p.19.
27. Polk-Husted Directory Co’s Napa City Directory 1918, Vol. VI, Oakland, California, 1918, p.21.