BREWERY HISTORY

The journal is © 2023
The Brewery History Society
Brewery History (2023) **195**, 17-23

A GENUINE FAILURE: THE GOLDEN LANE BREWERY, LONDON 1805-1829

MARTYN CORNELL

In May 1803, Britain declared war on Napoleon's France, alarmed at the threats it perceived from the *Empereur* to its markets and its colonies. After the return of war, prices of raw materials and foodstuffs in the UK rose, and in response manufacturers, including brewers, put up their prices, too. Three months into the war, in August 1803, the retail price of porter climbed to a never-before-seen height of 5d a pot. Eleven months later, in July 1804, with malt prices soaring, the Committee of the Porter Brewers, the controlling body for London's best-selling beer, set a price of 6d a pot, though only for a week.[1]

Such high prices finally encouraged a new entrant to challenge the Big 12 London porter brewers by brewing porter and selling it to publicans for less than the giants charged. After a hundred years of porter-brewing in London, there were considerable barriers to entry into the porter market: the only way to compete was on the equivalent scale to the Big 12, which required premises capable of brewing tens of thousands of barrels of beer a year, the capital to acquire such premises and brew on such a large scale, and an immediate and effectively guaranteed number of customer publicans to generate sufficient sales, this last being increasingly difficult as the big brewers tied more and more publicans to them through loans and purchases of their properties.

William Brown, one of the founders of the *Morning Advertiser*, the publican's newspaper, who decided to make an assault on the Committee of the Porter Brewers' oligopoly in the summer of 1804, later claimed that it was the news that he and Joseph Parry intended opening a concern to be called the Genuine Beer Brewery, selling porter to publicans at a price that would enable them to retail it a half-penny cheaper a pot (quart) than the giant brewers' product, which forced the Big 12 to drop the price of porter straight back to 5d a pot.[2] Naturally this was something the big brewers denied: they insisted that the move was because the price of malt had abated.[3]

With the laws of the time making a successful joint-stock company almost impossible to float, Brown and Parry's scheme involved raising the necessary capital by inviting multiple 'partners' to subscribe for a share of the profits. In a couple of years, 600 'co-partners'" 120 of them publicans, subscribed more than £250,000,[4] an average of more than £400 each, perhaps £40,000 each today. Brown and Parry used the money to acquire the Sun brewhouse on Golden Lane, Barbican, formerly owned by Gideon Combrune, and within three hundred yards of two members of the Committee of Porter Brewers, Samuel Whitbread on Chiswell Street, and John Calvert of the Peacock Brewery in Whitecross Street.

The Sun brewhouse dated back to at least 1638,[5] and was being run by Joseph Dickinson (or Dickenson), nephew of Rivers Dickenson of the considerable porter brewery in St John Street, Clerkenwell, by 1763.[6] Combrune, nephew of the Hampstead-based brewer and author Michael Combrune, had been involved in it since at least 1782.[7] He was a mid-sized porter brewer, with an output of 28,400 barrels, in 1792,[8] but switched soon after to brewing mostly table beer.[9] Then in April 1801 an "inquisition of lunacy" was held into Combrune's state of mind.[10] He died just over a year later, in May 1802.[11]

The brewery continued running under Combrune's name — it was the eighth biggest table beer brewer in London in 1804, making just over 13,100 barrels in the 12 months ending July 5— though it was put up for sale at least twice, in the winter of 1802,[12] and in July 1803,[13] each time apparently without finding a buyer. Then in January 1805, Brown and Parry announced that they had acquired the brewery and its plant for the London Genuine Beer Brewery, and brewing would 'immediately commence'.[14]

It took another nine months before the first porter that Brown and Parry brewed was mature enough to be sold, but



Figure 1. William Brown, founder of the Genuine Beer Brewery, from a print called The School of Projects, published for *The Satirist* on 1 October 1809 by S. Topper in London.

late in October 1805 the pair announced that deliveries were due to start within a couple of days:

> In order that the Public may know the houses that vend the Beer from other Licensed Houses, every Customer is furnished with a Copper-plate Impression, engraved by Girtin, for he purpose of placing in some conspicuous part of their houses on which is inscribed the following words:- 'London Brewery, Golden-lane, Barbican, established 1804, Brown and Parry's Genuine Beer from Malt and Hops, only. Pro bono Publico.' Houses that have not the above specification are not vendors of the Genuine Beer supplied from this Brewery.[15]

The 'engraved by Girtin' reference is odd, since it seems to refer to the water-colourist and engraver Thomas Girtin, but he had died three years earlier. However, this is one of the earliest references, if not the earliest, to promotional brewery advertising.

Brown and Parry sold 14,200 barrels of porter in 1805, and in their first complete year of production, to July 1806, they sold 57,400 barrels, putting the brewery eighth in the list of largest London brewers. In February 1806 the brewery printed a list of more than 170 pubs that were taking its beer, including noted hostelries such as the Tiger, by the Tower of London, the Grave Maurice in Whitechapel, the Lamb in Leadenhall Market and the Angel, Islington.[16] In the second full year of production, to July 1807, the brewery made 125,600 barrels of porter, pushing it up to fourth largest brewery in the capital, ahead of Whitbread (104,250 barrels), and behind only Meux Reid (170,400 barrels), Barclay, Perkins (166,600 barrels) and Truman Hanbury (136,000 barrels).[17] Shares in the brewery, originally £50 each, were now selling for more than twice as much,[18] and it was heading towards 400 publican customers.[19]

This was an unprecedented rise, and the old-established porter brewers were alarmed. Whether members of the Committee of Porter Brewers approached the Excise Office is not known — William Brown claimed that the clerks at rival breweries had been declaring that 'the Golden Lane brewery would be cut up" and "would not stand long'[20] — but in November 1807 the Commissioners of Excise told Brown and Parry that the tax-free allowance of three barrels in every 36 granted to common brewers would no longer be given to the Golden Lane brewery because 120 of its co-partners were licensed victuallers, retailing beer in quantities of less than 4½ gallons, and the law did not allow brewers who were also retailers to claim the allowance.[21] The allowance, supposedly granted because common brewers suffered greater 'waste in leakage and fillings' than their smaller retail brewer rivals, but actually an encouragement by the excise authorities to the bigger brewers, who were much easier to supervise, was worth 8d a gallon, or more than £4,000 a year. Brown and Parry were already working on narrower profit margins, selling at a wholesale price 5s per barrel less than the other large London porter brewers to enable their customers to charge the public a halfpenny less a pot, while they needed to spend money on the brewery to produce porter that would be within shouting distance of the quality of rivals: the 7,000-barrel vat the brewery possessed in 1809 would not have cost pennies.[22]

Brown and Parry took the excise commissioners to court, insisting that just because some of the partners in the Golden Lane brewery were also beer retailers, that did not make the brewery a beer retailer. They won their case to be treated the same as other common brewers,[23] an important step in the slow development of joint-stock companies in the UK. Meanwhile their output continued to rise, while others stuttered, so that for the six months from July 1807 to January 1808 the Golden Lane brewery had the second highest sales of any porter brewery, at just under 65,700 barrels, behind Meux Reid at 79,700 but ahead of Barclay, Perkins on 61,000.[24] The Southwark brewery was clearly spurred into renewed effort over the second half of the year, for the total at the final rest saw Brown and Parry pushed down in to third place at 131,600 barrels, with Barclay, Perkins second on 184,200 barrels, selling twice as much as it had in the first half, and Meux Reid top on just over 190,000 barrels.[25]

The Golden Lane firm's legal problems were not completely over: in 1809 it appeared in court again, accused of adulterating its beer by using isinglass to clear it. The attempts by Napoleon Bonaparte from 1806 to impose the 'Continental System,' a Europe-wide trade embargo on Britain, had made isinglass, an essential product for brewers looking to produce clear beer, harder to obtain and sent the price soaring, hitting 32 shillings a pound in May 1809,[26] from 3s per pound.[27] The Scots-born inventor William Murdoch (or Murdock), who worked for Boulton and Watt at their Soho steam engine works in Smethwick, near Birmingham, but who is most famous for developing gas lighting, came up with a method of making an isinglass substitute from the skins of fish such as cod and skate, presenting it to the Committee of the Porter Brewers in London. They paid him £2,000 for the recipe, a sum equivalent to more than £200,000 today.

(According to William Buckle, a former colleague at the Soho works, when Murdoch was in London explaining to the porter brewers the nature of his substitute for isinglass,

> he occupied very handsome apartments; he, however, little respected the splendour of his drawing-room, and fancying himself in his Laboratory at Soho, proceeded with his experiments

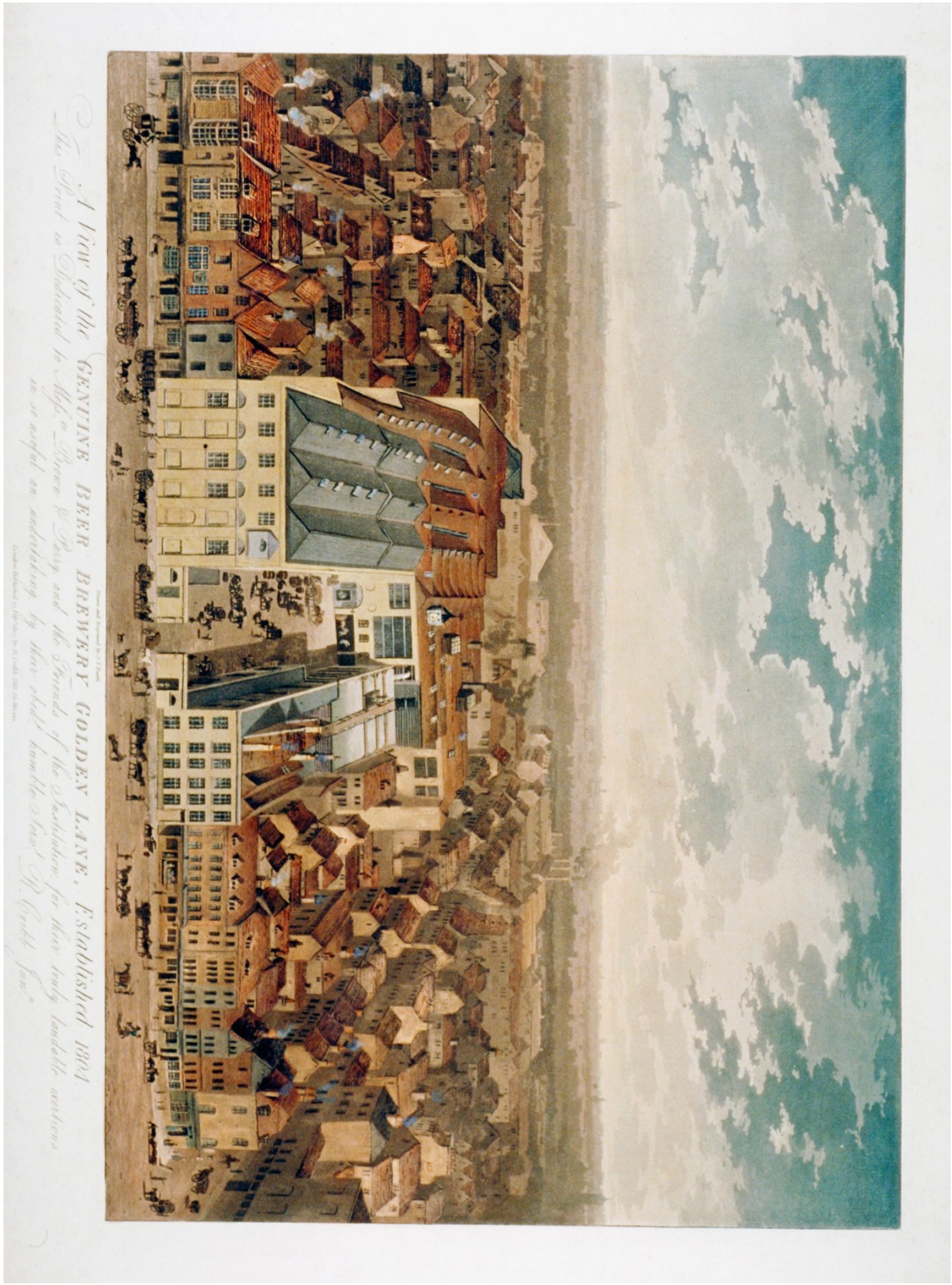


Figure 2. An engraving of the Golden Lane brewery made in 1804.

quite careless and unconscious of the mischief he was doing. One morning his landlady calling in to receive his orders, was horrified to see all her magnificent paper-hangings covered with wet fish skins hung up to dry; and he was caught in the fact of pinning up a cod's skin to undergo the same process.[28]

Another account said that Murdoch had been bringing back to his 'expensive lodgings at the West End' a basket of fish: there he would

flay the fish on his drawing-room table and hang the skins to dry on velvet sofas and silk curtains. When his landlady caught him at work there was a scene, and Murdock, much to the surprise of his simple mind, was ignominiously ejected, after being made to pay the damages.[29])

The date for Murdoch's invention of his isinglass substitute has been given as 1795,[30] though this seems around a decade too early, not least because Murdoch did not return to Smethwick from Cornwall, where he had been supervising the steam engines installed in tin mines, until 1798, and thus would not have had in 1795 the 'Laboratory at Soho' Buckle mentions.[31] At any rate, nothing seems to have been done with Murdoch's recipe until 1809, when James Butcher, a yeast dealer, set up a plant to manufacture isinglass substitute to the Scot's formula, using fish skins and stale beer.

His premises were in Brick Lane (today Central Street), which ran north off Old Street on the northern edge of the City of London.[32] Butcher supplied six casks of the isinglass substitute, as an experiment, to Brown and Parry's porter brewery a couple of hundred yards to the south in Golden Lane, which had been one of the 16 London porter brewers that had found the £2,000 to pay Murdoch for his recipe.[33] By 1808 they were producing 131,600 barrels a year, behind only Barclay Perkins and Henry Meux.[34] Naturally, they were anxious to save costs where possible, which is doubtless why they were keen to try a cheaper substitute for isinglass.

Unfortunately for Brown, Parry and Butcher, the Excise authorities decided to prosecute the Golden Lane brewery over the isinglass substitute, for the alleged offence of adding 'noxious, unwholesome' ingredients to their beer, contrary to the Duties on Beer Act of 1802. When the case came to the Court of Exchequer in London in December 1809, the Solicitor General, Sir Thomas Plumer, told the jury that if Brown and Parry

contend they have a right, by law, to fine their beer with the offals of the fish market, because it will fine it, I will not enter into a chemical discussion whether it will fine it or not ... it is enough for me to say the law upon the subject will not let you put stinking fish into your beer … I will not hold my nose, I won't drink it, because the law says I am not to have any of this stinking stuff put into my beer.[35]

The case for the defence was led by Sergeant Vaughan, later Sir John Vaughan, one of the country's leading barristers. The defence side was able to call on a host of expert witnesses including William Murdoch, Humphrey Jackson and Humphry Davy, the Regency era's best-known scientist, who all testified that the isinglass substitute was perfectly wholesome and could not, in any case, be an 'additive' because it sank to the bottom of the cask and was not served with the beer.[36] The services of Vaughan and Davy could not have been cheap, which suggests that their rival porter brewers may have contributed to Brown and Parry's defence costs, on the grounds that a victory for the Golden Lane brewery over finings substitutes was a victory for all. The presiding judge in the case, the Lord Chief Baron, Sir Archibald Macdonald, was certainly impressed by the standard of the witnesses. When Humphry Davy had finished giving his evidence, Vaughan announced: 'My Lord, we have another chymist,' to which the apparently star-struck Macdonald replied: 'After Mr Davy, you need not trouble yourselves'.[37]

In his summing-up, the judge told the jury that at a time when isinglass was scarce, the invention of Murdoch's substitute was 'likely to prove advantageous,' and it was evident that the finings could not be composed of 'filthy unwholesome ingredients,' because if they were put in the beer in a putrid state they would turn the whole sour. He 'thought the verdict ought to go for the defendants,' Macdonald said, and the jury obediently obliged by declaring Brown and Parry not guilty.[38]

Butcher does not appear to have prospered, despite the victory in court: in May 1812 'Butcher, James, of Golden Lane, in the Parish of St. Luke, yeastman, dealer and chapman' was listed as bankrupt.[39] The failure of the Excise to have finings declared illegal did mean a victory for the brewers, in that the Beer Act of 1816 replaced the restrictions of the Act of 1802, which said beer could be brewed from malt and hops only, with, instead, a ban on anything intended 'as a Substitute for Malt or Hops,' implicitly allowing fining agents, which were not a substitute for beer's primary ingredients.[40]

The Golden Lane brewery had other, more serious difficulties, with an almost continual rise in the cost of malt, from 77s per quarter for Norfolk pale in 1807 to over 100s in 1813.[41] The problem was that to keep its prices below those of its rivals, the brewery had to weaken its beer, and use poorer-quality ingredients. At the same time it was paying out more in interest and dividends than it was making in profit, meaning working capital was disappearing.[42] Sales began to slip away, and it fell down the table of top porter brewers: 114,000 barrels and fourth place in 1809, the year

Barclay, Perkins took the top spot with a record 205,300 barrels brewed;[43] 84,500 barrels and eighth place in 1810;[44] 72,400 and ninth place in 1811.[45] Shareholders received a dividend in 1810, but that was the last time they would see a payout.[46]

In February 1812 it was announced that Brown and Parry had been succeeded as managers of the Golden Lane brewery by two men named John Cocks and John Campbell.[47] However, sales continued to slide away: 51,300 barrels and 10th place in 1812;[48] 45,500 barrels in 1813 (the year Barclay, Perkins brewed just under 258,000 barrels);[49] 30,160 and 12th place in 1814.[50] Output was now less than a quarter of what it had been at the brewery's peak, seven years earlier.

The brewery was still battling with its influential rivals in its bids to gain corporate privileges, such as the ability to sue for debts in the name of its secretary or under a common seal, rather than having to get all the hundreds of partners to sign writs. Two attempts to get Parliamentary approval for the change, by Brown and Parry in 1809 and Cocks and Campbell in 1814, were both stymied by porter brewer MPs such as Samuel Whitbread II and the Calverts canvassing their friends to vote against the Golden Lane brewery's bill when it was presented.[51]

In 1817, with hop prices at their highest after the 'year without a summer,' the global cooling caused by the eruption of Mount Tambura in Indonesia in the spring of 1815, the Golden Lane brewery seems to have followed the other big London porter manufacturers in raising the price of a barrel to 55s and a pot to 6d. This did not last long: under pressure from shareholders and publicans, Cocks and Campbell announced in February 1818 that they had dropped their prices back down to 50s a barrel, meaning a retail price of 5½d a pot.[52] It took another year for the rest of the big porter brewers to lower their own prices. The price drop seems to have given the Golden Lane brewery a boost, since sales rose from 25,800 barrels in 1817 to 35,700 in 1818, while most of the other big London firms saw output stay static or drop slightly. But at Barclay, Perkins, now easily the dominant brewer in London (and Britain, and biggest in the world), production leapt 21%, from 281,500 barrels in 1817 to 340,600 in 1818, more than twice as much as the number three brewer, Reid and Co (the former Meux Reid, in Liquorpond Street) and 84% more than the number two brewery, Truman Hanbury in Brick Lane.

Prices of raw materials, meanwhile, stayed high, and in July 1818 Cocks and Campbell were forced to say that

> In consequence of the great advance in the price of Malt, as also of Corn and Hay, since the Price of Beer was reduced by this Establishment, we are under the necessity of advancing the price Five Shillings per Barrel. We regret the unavoidable necessity of the present advance, and shall feel much pleasure in reducing the price as soon as circumstances permit.[53]

Customers did not, apparently, react well, and sales dropped to just over 26,000 barrels for the 12 months to July 1919, though only two of the other now 11 big London porter brewers (the two Calvert concerns had merged in 1814) also saw output fall.[54]

The partnership between Cocks and Campbell was dissolved in September 1819,[55] and the business continued as Cross and Campbell.[56] By 1824, production was down to just over 20,000 barrels of porter a year.[57] That September an announcement appeared that the partnership between J. Cross, J. Campbell and J. Leigh of Golden Lane, Barbican, brewers had been dissolved.[58] John Campbell and James Leigh continued the business for another year, but sales continued to fall away: just 12,380 barrels of porter in 1825, and only 11,800 in 1826, far below the next-largest porter brewer, Elliott of the Stag brewery in Pimlico, who was making 60,000 barrels a year.[59] That year a private Act of Parliament was passed allowing the brewery and its plant and utensils to be sold, and notices inviting bids appeared in London newspapers in the October.[60]

The following month one of the brewery's directors, Robert Shepherd, called a meeting of the brewery's shareholders at the Golden Lane premises and proposed that a group of 'principal shareholders' should unite and buy the brewery 'on very advantageous terms,' since he was 'convinced, in a few hands, and improved management, [it] could still be made a very profitable concern.' Shepherd was roundly attacked from the floor of the meeting, one shareholder declaring that he

> did not believe [that] in any one of the disgraceful bubbles of the day another instance could be found of any body of respectable men who would continue in the management of the concern for ten or fifteen years at a loss to the proprietors of £10,000 per annum, [and marvelling that] one of the directors should have a new light fall on him, and at the last hour discover a new plan for making one of the worst managed concerns in the metropolis profitable.[61]

The concern failed to find a buyer, and continued to limp on and in September 1827 the brewery premises and plant were advertised for sale again.[62] Alderman Matthew Wood, an MP for the City of London and noted hop merchant, made an offer for the brewery, which was turned down by the directors.[63] Finally in May 1829 the entire contents of the brewery were put up for sale, including 1,000 barrels of strong old beer 'in fine condition,' a 420-barrel fermenting

tun, working rounds, coolers, 21 oak vats ranging from 200 to 2,000 barrels in size, a 36-horsepower Boulton & Watt steam engine, 2,000 feet of copper pipe, and a fire engine.[64] The next year all the building materials were sold, including 1.5 million bricks, plus slates, tiles, stonework and timber.[65]

References

1. Mathias, P. (1959) *The Brewing Industry in England 1700-1830*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.244.
2. Brown, W.R.H. (1808) *Golden Lane Brewery: The Attorney General versus Brown, Parry and Others*. London, England, p.ix.
3. Mathias, P. (1959) op. cit.
4. ibid., p.245.
5. Brown, M. (2015) *London Brewed: A Historical Directory of the Commercial Brewers of London from circa 1650*. New Ash Green: Brewery History Society, p.28.
6. ibid., p.27.
7. ibid.
8. Monckton, H.A. (1966) *A History of English Ale and Beer*. London: Bodley Head, p.209.
9. Wilson, A. (1807) *Appendix to the Naval History of the United Kingdom*. Cork, Ireland, 1807, p126
10. Brown, M. (2015) op. cit., p.27.
11. *The Gentleman's Magazine*. London, Vol.91, June 1802, p.585.
12. *Morning Herald.* London, 2 October 1802, p.2.
13. *The Daily Advertiser and Oracle.* London, 28 June 1803, p.1.
14. *The Courier.* London, 10 January 1805, p.1.
15. *The Morning Chronicle*. London, 23 October 1805, p.1.
16. *Morning Advertiser*. London, 1 February 1806.
17. *Public Ledger and Daily Advertiser*. London, 9 July 1807, p.3.
18, Mathias, P. (1959) op. cit., p.246.
19. Brown, W.R.H. (1808) op. cit., Appendix I, p.8.
20. ibid., p.xii.
21. Mathias, P. (1959) op. cit., pp.246-7.
22. ibid., p.61.
23. ibid., p.248.
24. *Morning Advertiser*. 11 January 1808, p.3.
25. *The St. James's Chronicle or British Evening Post*. London, 7 July 1808.
26. *Edinburgh Advertiser*. 26 May 1809, p.3.
27. Mathias, P. (1959) op. cit., p.52.
28. Buckle, W. (1850) 'On the Inventions and the Life of William Murdock,' paper read before a meeting of the Institution of Mechanical Engineers, 23 October, accessed at www.gracesguide.co.uk/William_Murdoch:_by_William_Buckle
29. *Boston Weekly Globe*. Boston, MA, 6 November 1883, p.l6.
30. Mathias, P. (1959) op. cit.
31. Smiles, S. (1904) *Lives of the Engineers Bolton and Watt*. London: John Murray, p.401.
32. Mathias, P. (1959) op. cit. says Butcher's manufactory was in Golden Lane, which ran south from the junction of Brick Lane and Old Street; *Morning Advertiser*. London, 4 December 1809, p.2, in its report on the court case involving Butcher's isinglass substitute, quotes the Solicitor-General as saying it was made at Brown's house in Brick Lane
33. *Morning Advertiser*. op cit. The fact that Brown and Parry had been among the porter brewers who paid Murdoch £2,000 for his invention, when they did not start brewing until 1805, is more evidence to suggest that Murdoch met the London porter brewers some years after 1795.
34. Mathias, P. (1959) op. cit., pp.244-6.
35. Records of Attorney-General v Brown and Parry, 1809, UK National Archives, CUST 103/66, fol 928
36. Sumner, J. (2013) *Brewing Science, Technology and Print, 1700-1880*. London: Pickering & Chatto, p.125.
37. Mathias, P. (1959) op. cit., p.53.
38. *Morning Advertiser*. op. cit.
39. *The Law Chronicle and Professional Advertiser*. London, No.XXXIII, 4 June 1812, p.1.
40. Sumner, J. (2013) op. cit., p.126.
41. Mathias, P. (1959) op. cit., p.249.
42. ibid.
43. *The St. James's Chronicle*. 13 July 1809, p.4.
44. *Morning Post*. 12 July 1810, p.3.
45. *Evening Star*. London, 12 July 1811, p.4.
46. *Morning Advertiser*. 11 January 1828, p.3.
47. *The Courier*. London, 24 February 1812, p.1.
48. ibid., 9 July 1812, p.3.
49. *The Star*. London, 14 July 1813, p.4.
50. ibid., 14 July 1814, p.4.
51. Mathias, P. (1958) 'The Brewing Industry, Temperance and Politics,' *The Historical Journal*. Vol.1, No.2, p.104.
52. *Morning Advertiser*. 3 February 1818, p.2.
53. ibid., 11 July 1818, p.1.
54. *Morning Chronicle*. 13 July 1819, p.3.
55. *The General Evening Post*. London, 2 September 1819, p.1.
56. Brown, M. (2015) op. cit., p.28.
57. *Morning Advertiser*. 12 July 1824, p.3.
58. *The News*. London, 3 October 1824, p.3.
59. *The St. James's Chronicle and General Evening Post*. 28 July 1826, p.1.
60. *The Courier*. 25 October 1826, p.1.
61. *The Morning Herald*. 13 November 1826, p.3.
62. ibid., 28 September 1827, p.1.
63. *Morning Advertiser*. 11 January 1828, p.3.
64. *Morning Chronicle*. 2 May 1829, p.4.
65. *Morning Advertiser*. 1 February 1834, p.1.