

## BOOK REVIEWS

### **Ale City – St Albans Beer History and Remarkable pubs Protz, R. with photos by Lewis, W.**

**Stroud: Amberley  
2025, Pp.96, £15.99  
ISBN: 978 1 398-12511-7**

St. Albans is an ancient place, from Roman Verulamium and Alban, the first Christian martyr in Britain, to the Abbey (only a cathedral from 1877) and an important staging point on Watling Street. A document from 1637 reports there were 14 stage coaches, 21 wagons and 23 pack horses passing through the town each week with a lot of people needing victualling. There were 27 inns, several taverns and 26 ale houses for a population of 3,000, that is one pub for every 57 citizens. Folks still enjoy their beer in St. Albans and the city claims more pubs per square mile than any other place in Britain. Despite pubs closing elsewhere they have been three new ones added during the 2020s to a total number of 50, so there are plenty for Roger Protz the accomplished beer writer to tackle in this little Amberley book.

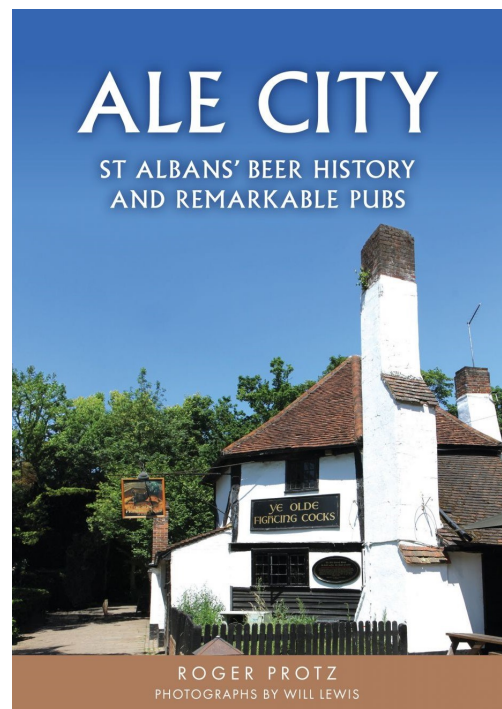
From archaeological work nearby, Protz surmises that beer was probably brewed in the city in Roman times remembering that the Carlsberg Research Laboratory in Copenhagen has that reported Roman soldiers received beer as part of their daily rations. Brewing no doubt flourished in the days of the monastery after its founding in 1089 again postulating prestigious consumption from documents elsewhere. Famous residents included Thomas Becket and the only English Pope Nicholas Brakespear was not allowed to become a monk at St. Albans as he was allegedly insufficiently educated! Two brewers are recorded by name in 1302 and another two were expelled along with the monks in 1539.

Brewers in the town date from the late 13<sup>th</sup> century and a town inventory of 1353 records 81 of them although it is not known how many worked at the abbey and the two associated nunneries. In 1588 14 people were brought before the mayor and reprimanded for brewing extraordinarily strong ale. By 1606 the breweries and maltings were consuming too much wood which put the price up of fuel up so the Corporation limited the number of brewers to just six, four of

those were members of the Corporation! Commercial breweries appeared in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century each brewing in the hundreds of barrels a week. Most were absorbed into the largest which was Adey & White. J.W. Green from nearby Luton took them over in 1936.

So after the obligatory potted history of the city with *Good Beer Guide* in hand he sets off to study the 50 pubs. He probably did not need the *Guide* as the *Hertfordshire Advertiser* reports he has lived and drunk in the city for the last 50 years.

The most famous is Ye Olde Fighting Cocks which appeared in the *Guinness Book of Records* as Britain's oldest up to 2000 when the editors found the founding date of 793 to be unsubstantiated. It was certainly there in 1807 and was probably a pigeon house from two centuries earlier. Owners M&B have rebuffed several attempts by animal rights cam-



paigners to get the name changed. Oliver Cromwell probably did not stay at the Cocks nor was the captured King John of France incarcerated at the nearby Fleur de Lys after the Battle of Poitiers in 1356. History lessons abound as Protz continues his perambulations via the Boot, the White Hart, the Peahen, the Goat, the Hare and Hounds, the Three Hammers and a host of others all supported by many photographs as is Amberley's policy. There is a special place for the Farriers where the first CAMRA branch was founded in 1972. Its first beer festival took place in the Old Market Hall in 1974 and its headquarters was in the City until moving to Luton in 2025.

To bring the story up to date Protz visits the Three Brewers of St. Alban's Brewery set up in 2013 in a potato shed on a farm on the way to nearby Hatfield. An interesting read full of delightful snippets and facts.

ROGER PUTMAN

### **Brewing in Lincolnshire Cartwright, A.**

**Stroud: Amberley**

**2024, Pp.96, £15.99**

**ISBN: 978 1 398-12523-1**

Lincolnshire is Britain's second largest county and like the largest, Yorkshire it was divided into three historic administration areas helpfully called 'Parts'; Lindsey, Kesteven and Holland. All these were swept away by the local government changes of 1974. Most of the county is agricultural and the area is famous for the quality of its malting barley. Many old malting buildings now lie derelict or have been converted into alternative uses. The gaunt remains of Bass's eight malthouses at Sleaford lie testament to nineteenth century industrial entrepreneurship. At the same time a low population density did not lead to large breweries but the ones which were established have interesting heritages. In this new publication in the Amberley 'Brewing in' series author Adam Cartwright has chosen to study eight of them including a pair of the more recent micros. Three of them including two micros are still operating today. Perhaps the most well-known, Batemans is not covered as its 150 years of operation is covered by Cartwright in its own Amberley book.

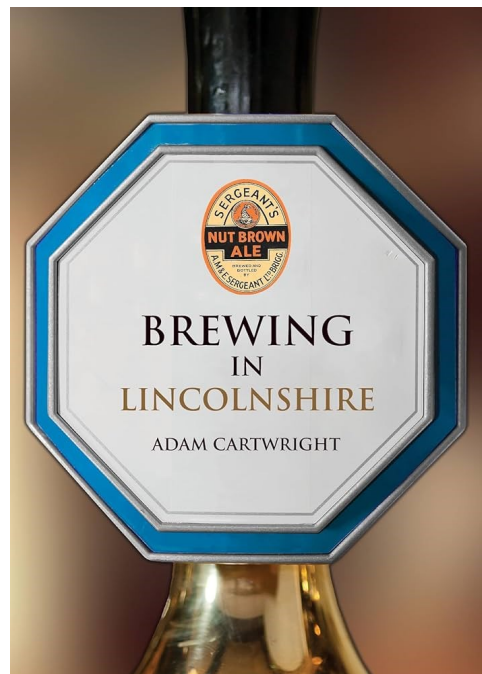
Of the eight, the largest was Hewitts of Grimsby founded in 1869, it merged with Moor and Robson of Hull in 1960 and on into Eddie Taylor's United Breweries and then Bass Charrington in 1967 before being closed in 1969. Typical of the time we learn of founder Willam Hewitt hawking his beers around home brew houses proving his quality was superior. On taking on the White Hart pub in Spilsby he

became Lord of Manor, surely the first for a pub? The Company had a Scientific Director in the 1890s who produced non alcoholic beer (by removing the alcohol post fermentation rather than not putting it there in the first place) at a plant in Retford, another first. Cartwright continues to unearth fascinating snippets as he explores Melbourn, Mowbray, Sergeant, Soulby and Soames.

Melbourn in Stamford is the oldest and celebrates 200 years in 2026 albeit not continuously. Herbert Melbourn appeared in 1870 after a series of brewery bankruptcies and immediately installed a new brewhouse. One hundred years later the brewery was sold to the Earl of Gainsborough and his son in law the Earl of Liverpool. Somewhat out of their aristocratic depths it was sold on to Samuel Smith of Tadcaster in 1974 and dray horses were reintroduced. Brewing soon ceased and the plant became the Stamford Museum for a while before Sams started making fruit beers still using an 1876 mash tun, probably the oldest in the country.

Samuel Mowbray founded his brewery in Grantham in 1828 but lost control of it within a decade. His successors prospered but Cartwright details how some 10% of its pubs were lost after the 1904 Licensing Act gave magistrates more power to refuse licences, often somewhat arbitrarily. Mowbrays was subsumed in J.W. Green's march north of Luton in 1952 and brewing was wound up in 1958.

Sergeants of Brigg was always small never having more than 20 houses. It was founded in the 1830s by the euphoni-



ous Antonie Middlemore Sergeant. Helped along by the growth of nearby Scunthorpe iron works, it was bought by Hewitts in 1954 but did not survive the attentions of Bass Charrington in 1967.

The Soames name did not appear until 1889, but the Spalding brewery dates back to 1803 and grew to be the county's second largest. A merger with Mowbrays was proposed in 1931 but talks petered out and it was eventually taken over by Steward and Patterson of Norwich in 1946 and brewing ceased immediately.

Edward Soulby started brewing in 1840 and moved to Alford not far from the North Sea coast in 1869. Family problems forced a leadership crisis and Tom Winch from the Chatham brewing dynasty bought into the firm forming Soulby, Sons and Winch in 1896. The extended Winch family also set up in Biggleswade as Wells and Winch and at Maidstone as Style and Winch allowing the original Chatham plant to close. In 1924 a takeover by Marston's of Burton was proposed but its due diligence discovered that the Royal Oak in Ruskington had sold only two barrels and 51 dozen bottles during the whole of the previous year; Marston's was not impressed. In 1951 it passed to the rapacious J.W. Green but production continued until 1952 after Mowbray was taken over.

8 Sail was founded in 2010 beside the famous eight sailed windmill next door. Ferry Ale Brewery which used the initials F.A.B. on much of its promotional material invoking childhood memories of the Thunderbirds was founded in 2014 and did rather well distributing polypins of beer nationwide during the Covid.

So that is the outline history of the breweries in Cartwright's book and he deftly fills in the gaps in an easy reading style covering deceit, tragedies and misfortunes as well as a deal of good luck. The last 200 years has seen war with shortages of men and materials as well as bomb damage, fires, government tinkering, cash flow problems, beer duty, declining sales and changing social habits affected breweries nationwide. Lincolnshire saw all these through this lively story of eight of its notable brewers.

The Amberley series majors on lots of graphics and this book is no exception. Photographs of the old breweries are scarce and those of the interiors even scarcer so the text is effectively leavened by pictures of notable pubs and historic advertisements and beer labels. There is not a single picture of a bewhiskered Victorian gentleman.

ROGER PUTMAN