

A history of the Cirencester Brewery

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There has been occupation of the brewery site in Cirencester town centre for nearly 2,000 years. Soon after the Romans occupied this area of Britain a fort was established and with it a *vicus* or civil settlement. Around AD 70, as the conquest was consolidated, the fort was thrown down and the town handed over to a civil authority. Cirencester became the capital of the Dobunni tribe (*Corinium Dobunnorum*), growing from the original *vicus* and designed on the usual Roman grid pattern, in a series of *insulae* or islands. The brewery site was in one of these islands, being some way north of the forum and administrative buildings. Most likely it was a residential and shopping area.

The archaeological evidence is sketchy, but a report in 1944 shows that a mosaic floor and coloured wall plaster were recovered in 1849 to the rear of the Cirencester Brewery site.¹ Roman material was found in test pits dug before the building of Bishop's Walk, Tesco and the Link Building. No Anglo-Saxon finds came up, but medieval ones did. It is known that Castle Street and Cricklade Street were major town arteries in medieval times, so it is certain that they contained medieval shops and houses.

These would be traditionally long narrow properties, with shop, living quarters, workshops, yards and allotments going back from the street. Behind would be open agricultural plots. These can be seen on the 1795 map of Cirencester, drawn up by Richard Hall.²

Prior to the refurbishment of Brewery Arts, and as part of the Arts Council Lottery Fund grant procedure, between the 12 and 17 July 2001, two test pits were dug in the south-west area of Brewery Arts courtyard. The results were perhaps disappointing, but in Pit 1 there was a silty dark grey-brown clay, identified at other sites in the town as a medieval cultivated area, above Roman levels, and possibly part of a Castle Street tenement. Above this, 18th and 19th century pottery was found, no doubt partly from the Cirencester Brewery, which pre-dated Brewery Arts. In Pit 2, a well was discovered with post-medieval glazed pottery.

One of the medieval buildings fronting Cricklade Street was the Bell Inn. This was a courtyard inn on a site opposite the former Woolworth's store. It had always been associated with the brewery and there is conclusive evidence to suggest

this. The Bell Inn is mentioned as Le Bell, along with several other Cirencester inns - the Angel, Crown, Hartished (Hart's Head), Katherine Wheel, King's Head and Lyon - in a 1540 Court of Augmentations list.³ This means that it belonged, with the other inns, to the Abbey of St. Mary, at that time situated behind the Parish Church, and was taken into crown hands at the Dissolution of the Abbey. Often abbeys owned inns in the later Middle Ages to cater for visitors. Another mention of the Bell comes in 1685, in the will of Giles Cambridge of Coates. The Bell was bought by Giles from one Edward Barston. Giles willed the inn to his wife, who died in 1698 and then to his son, Andrew.⁴

More relevant to our story, there is a list of Cirencester inns in the Cirencester Parish Papers in Gloucestershire Archives, dating to about 1800, which contains 73 entries. Of these, 41 had recently been suppressed (there were always too many inns). The Bell Inn is listed, but had evidently been moved to a new building, as the original Bell Inn, 'now the Brewery', is listed as suppressed, with Clifford as the occupier. This is the essential early link between the Bell Inn and the brewery. From the 1790s, a new Bell Inn appeared at the corner of Cricklade Street and Castle Street and was only closed in 1957. The building is now occupied by the estate agent Savills and the sign of the Bell can still be seen on the corner of the building.⁵ The old Bell Inn had become part of the brewery buildings.

The Cirencester *Brewery Prospectus* of 1930, a copy of which is lodged in the Corinium Museum's files, confirms the connection. It says that the Cripps' family brewery had been in existence since 1798 and that

the oldest transaction on record of the business, now known as the Cirencester Brewery Ltd, is a way bill, dated November 29th 1803, for materials conveyed to Cirencester by the Thames and Severn Canal by barge, loading at the Hawk's Wharf, Upper Thames Street, London. The barge was consigned to a Mr. Gibbs, who was then the landlord of the Bell Inn, premises identical with part of the buildings, which still form part of the Brewery.

As the result of several 20th century brewery takeovers, the original brewery documents have largely disappeared, but in the 1930s this would not have been the case and they would have been kept in the brewery offices. There is no doubt that we are looking at increased transport along the canal system, created in the 18th century. By November 1789, the link between the River Severn, via the Stroudwater Canal, and the River Thames at Lechlade was complete. Cirencester became the terminus of a branch of this canal and the basin was situated between Quern's Hill and Quern's Road, with three wharves and a wharhouse. The first coal barge arrived in the town in May 1789.⁶

The Bell Inn, like all other inns at the time, would have had its own small brewhouse, but as the 1803 way bill is specifically



Figure 1. The Old Bell Inn. From Welsford, J. & Grace, P. (1990) Cirencester in the 1930s & '40s. Nelson: Hendon Publishing. Courtesy of Peter Grace.

mentioned in the 1930s prospectus, it looks as though the new Bell Inn, as well as the old, was owned by the brewery. As people moved, in the late 18th century, from the country to the towns and as population increased and transport networks became easier, domestic brewing at home decreased and went into the inns and some independent breweries and malthouses grew up as well, often supplying the inns they owned.

I now want to discuss the 1798 date for the foundation of the brewery, given in the 1930 *Brewery Prospectus*. In the Land Tax records in Gloucestershire

Archives for Cirencester, from 1780 onwards, the Cripps family, who owned the brewery for much of the 19th century, paid substantial Land Tax on several properties in the parish, but their name is not specifically linked with a brewery. In the *Gloucester Journal*, 17 March 1792, also in Gloucestershire Archives, the following advertisement appeared:

Cirencester, Gloucestershire. A Brewery for sale.

To be sold, a modern well built Dwelling House, with a garden and suitable offices, late the property and residence of Mr. William

Hewer, brewer deceased and also the Brewhouse. Malthouse, Cellars and fixtures of the same, which are in such good condition and so conveniently put together, as to be one of the most complete Breweries of its size, outside London, adding to the present extensive trade of the said Brewery (which has been the work of years) and the certainty, by proper management, of increasing it, in a very considerable degree, must render the whole a desirable purchase to a person inclined to enter the trade.

Applications were to go to a Mr. John Brown of Cirencester or a Mr. Howes of Winston. The same advertisement appeared several times in the *Gloucester Journal*, a weekly paper founded in 1722. Eventually there was an auction on 30 April at the Fleece Hotel, at which, presumably, the brewery was sold. It is interesting to note that in the 1793 *Universal Directory* (Gloucestershire Archives), under Cirencester, William Hewer is listed as the only brewer in the town, though there was a maltster named Bowly. William Hewer had died earlier, but the *Directory* would be using information collected well before its publication date.

Unfortunately, there is no mention of the location of the brewery. In 1798, again in the *Gloucester Journal*, in June and July, there is an advertisement for a brewery in Cirencester to be sold with Tophouse, garden and premises, this time in the occupation of John Lucas, with a stock of porter, ale and beer, 400 casks, a copper,

malt tun and vats. It is described as a compact good business, well supplied with water. Only by December had the stock been sold. Could these advertisements relate to the sale of the 1792 brewery again? No address is given, but, again, it must have been prominent enough in Cirencester for everyone to know where it was. Applications were to go to a Mr England at the premises or a Mr Whateley, Attorney at Law.

Were these breweries linked with the start of our brewery in 1798? If they were situated on the site of the later brewery, it is possible that someone bought these substantial premises and expanded them by taking in the suppressed Bell Inn. Alternatively, they could have started a new business altogether in the Bell Inn and its environs after it was suppressed and available for development. We do not know and it is possible that there were other small brewing concerns in Cirencester, unrelated to inns, which were un-named or unrecorded in the 1790s.

It would be useful to put the late 18th century brewery in its historical context. Great Britain was at war with Revolutionary France and, in 1798, the *Gloucester Journal* tells us that a Cirencester Committee of Defence was set up to defend the town under Lord Bathurst, in case the French invaded. Both Joseph and Edward Cripps were members. In that year too, Nelson won the Battle of the Nile in the Eastern Mediterranean, forcing Napoleon back to France and

thereby putting Great Britain in future danger. There was not only increased population, but war and soldiers to stimulate the brewing industry. The new canals could transport barley and hops easily across the country. Already, in the first part of the 18th century, the number of breweries and brew-houses in England and Wales had doubled and the trend continued. Subsidiary industries like barrel making also stimulated trade. In this sort of industrial take-off, small concerns could become big breweries and buy up inns to supply. This, as we shall see, happened to our brewery in the 19th century. Cirencester was a small town but ideally placed on the road and canal systems for this development.

The next reference to the brewery comes in the *Gloucestershire Directory* of Gell and Bradshaw in 1820. It was situated in Cricklade Street and was listed as Croome, Cripps and Co. This is the first time the Cripps family are mentioned in connection with the brewery. Were they in at the start in 1798 or did they buy into a partnership with the Croomes, a well known local family, in the early 19th century? Other brewers in the town were listed as John Masters in Thomas Street and Francis Smith in Cricklade Street. In 1824, an existing brewery on the crossroads with Lewis Lane, further along Cricklade Street, was sold to Edward Bowly, a Siddington gentleman, and a very successful business, known as the Cotswold Brewery, developed there.⁷ Cirencester was obviously enjoying the nationwide expansion of the brewery trade!

The *Gloucestershire Directory* of 1842, by Pigot, lists Joseph Cripps and Co. as brewers in Cricklade Street (Gloucestershire Archives) and the 1838 Tithe Apportionment Map for Cirencester, also at Gloucester, shows a large brewery building behind Castle Street and Cricklade Street. In 1847, Baily and Jones' *Gloucestershire Directory* shows the company as Cripps, Byrch and Co, with Shergold and Kimber as independent wine and spirit merchants in Cricklade Street. *Keyworth's Directory* of 1861 has Cripps, Demainbray and Co. as brewers in Cricklade Street. The Cripps had become senior partners but new partners were evidently taken on and changed as expansion continued. For example, the Gloucestershire directories of Slater (1850) and Kelly (1856) add Mullings to the list of partners. Most of the brewery buildings probably dated from the 1820s, as those remaining in New Brewery Arts are early 19th century.

In the *Brewery Prospectus* of 1930, we are told that, since 1847,

through the foresight and business abilities of the late Mr. Frederick Cripps, a prosperous business has been built up and developed on the site of the old public house.

In Cirencester's parish register, there is a Frederick Cripps, brother to William, baptized in 1808 and son to Joseph Cripps, baptized in 1787, the probable partner-owner of the brewery. His grandfather was Joseph, baptized in 1765.

The wealth of the Cripps family came originally from the wool trade and they had been in Cirencester since the 16th century. By the 19th century, they were rich and important enough to represent the town in Parliament. From 1806-12 and 1818-41, Joseph Cripps sat as an independent-minded member and was succeeded by his son. The other parliamentary seat was held by Lord Bathurst. They were a numerous family with houses in Coxwell Street, Thomas Street and Cricklade Street in the early 19th century. There was also a branch of the family at Ampney Crucis in the later 19th century.

By the time they bought into the brewery, the Cripps family owned a bank in Coxwell Street and Joseph Cripps junior owned two clothing mills in the near vicinity of the town, making worsted and employing the poor.⁸ A brewery would be an added investment at a time when industry was thriving in Great Britain. Rich and influential middle class families frequently put spare money into such concerns. A glance at the Cirencester Census Records from 1841 to 1881, in Gloucestershire Archives, shows Frederick Cripps of Coxwell Steet as variously a banker, brewer, farmer and magistrate. No doubt, this is the Frederick Cripps of the *Brewery Prospectus*. Which members of the Cripps family owned the brewery is unclear from the records but I suspect it was a family concern involving quite a few of them.

An interesting incident was reported in the *Wilts and Gloucestershire Standard*

on 1 October 1853. It appears that there was a 'monster nuisance' from putrescent hops, piled up at the brewery and not removed. The article points out the public health hazards, including mention of recent measures taken locally to prevent cholera. It was hoped the brewery owners would set an example to neighbours and clear up the mess. The 19th century was a time of increasing public health measures, but the smell from the brewery chimneys and its detritus must have overwhelmed the small town of Cirencester.

The first mention of the Cirencester Brewery by name comes in Morris's *Directory* of 1865, with Cripps as brewers. By 1875, when the 6" Ordnance Survey map of the area was published, the brewery was huge. Its buildings went back from the Cricklade Street frontage as far as the building now containing WH Smith's shop. It was the biggest industrial complex in Cirencester and the largest employer in the town. The 1876 *Gloucestershire Directory* (by Morris) has the entry 'Cripps and Co, brewers and maltsters at Cirencester Brewery in Cricklade Street.' All subsequent directories up to the 1930s follow suit.

In 1882 the expanding Cirencester Brewery acquired the Cotswold Brewery.⁹ Frederick Cripps of Ampney Crucis bought it for £17,290 and included in the sale were 16 local public houses. These were added to a growing number of public houses which, as we shall see, were being purchased by the Cirencester

Brewery at the time and which included inns as far afield as Swindon and Cheltenham, though most were in the villages around Cirencester. Cotswold Brewery stopped production. According to the Cripps papers in Gloucestershire Archives, the Maltings in Cricklade Street, associated with, though not owned by the Cotswold Brewery, had already been bought in 1877 by Edmund William Cripps. Buying out rivals and purchasing pubs must have made the Cripps' Brewery one of the largest concerns in Gloucestershire by the late 19th century.

By 1888 Cirencester Brewery had become a limited liability company. More expansion saw another Maltings erected and the wine and spirit business of Shergold and Kimber taken over and enlarged. Mineral water was also introduced as a new product.¹⁰ In the 1894 *Trade Directory for Gloucestershire* (by Baily and Jones), the brewery was listed under its new name, the Cirencester Brewery Co., with one Thomas Matthews of 104 Dyer Street given as manager and secretary. Handbills from 1894-1914 confirm the new status. Here is a typical one:

Cirencester Brewery Ltd., Brewers and Wine Merchants, Successors to the business originally established by Messrs. Shergold and Kimber, 3, 4, 5, and 6 Cricklade Street.¹¹

The brewery was diversifying its business into wine and spirits.

In the *Wilts and Gloucestershire Standard* of 2 April 1892, there is an article about

further improvements to the brewery. On both sides of the entrance to Brewery Yard, handsome additions were built in the Gothic Style for use as offices. Among the buildings taken down for the rebuilding was the Old Assembly Room of the Bell Inn. The offices were said to be very comfortable and an example of the architecture can still be seen in the building on Cricklade Street, at the front of the former Thresher's Wine Shop. The 1901 Cirencester Census names Frederick W Cripps of Coxwell Street as Director of the Brewery Co. He was born in Ampney Crucis.

In 1914 Thomas Matthews died, aged 78, and there was a tribute to him in the *Wilts and Gloucestershire Standard* on 17 January. It was reported that, as a young lad, Matthews had moved from Sapperton to Cirencester to be a clerk at the Cripps' Brewery Co. and had worked there until his death. From his junior post he 'rose in virtue', became a traveller for the company, brewer and then general manager. When Cripps became the Cirencester Brewery, he was appointed company secretary. He was succeeded by his eldest son, Ernest. The Matthews' family were associated with the brewery into the 1930s.

In the Corinium Museum file, there is an interesting First World War handbill, which reads:

Cirencester Brewery Ltd.

Order a Pint of Beer and drive a nail into the Kaiser's Coffin. Drink the National Beverage

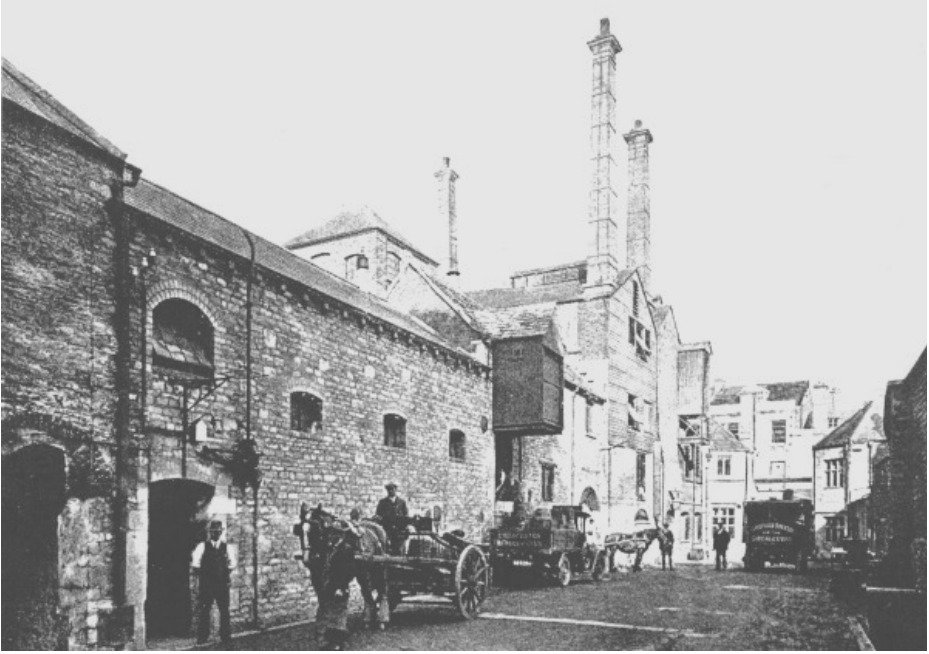


Figure 2. The Cirencester Brewery in the early 20th century. From Welsford, J. & Grace, P. (1990) Cirencester in the 1930s & '40s. Nelson: Hendon Publishing. Courtesy of Peter Grace.

and Help your Country by paying your share in the War Tax

By 1920, the firm owned 92 licensed houses and 120 private properties in a radius of 25 miles of Cirencester.¹²

In the 1930 *Cirencester Brewery Prospectus*, the list of products, other than beers, is very large. It included: Aerated Waters, Bottled Ales, Burgundy, Chablis, Canadian Whisky, Champagne, Claret, Cocktails, Cordials, Cyder, Empire Wines, Gin, Graves, Liqueurs, Madeira, Olive Oil, Rum, Port, Sauterne, Sherry,

Sparkling Moselle, Vermouth, Irish and Scots Whisky. The company bottled its own beers, ales and stouts and held a selection of Burton upon Trent beers for those who liked the taste. The wine business was particularly well developed, bottling being carried out on the premises. Spirits were held in bonded stores.

The *Prospectus* continues:

Quite recently (1920s and 1930s), to meet the demand for what our American friends call 'soft drinks', the manufacture of Minerals has been undertaken by means of the most



Figure 3. The Entrance to Brewery Yard, Cricklade Street in the 1930s. Figure 2. The Cirencester Brewery in the early 20th century. From Welsford, J. & Grace, P. (1990) Cirencester in the 1930s & '40s. Nelson: Hendon Publishing. Courtesy of Peter Grace.

modern machinery from a remarkably pure and suitable supply of water from a well on the Brewery premises.

The brewery's 1930 illustrated price list included the following beers: 'Family Ales, Bitter, Pale, XXXX, Stout and No.1 Barley Wine.' On the front cover of the list is a phoenix rising from the flames, which is also Cirencester's emblem. Most beer bottles associated with the company carry this mark and are now enthusiastically collected.¹³

William Parry Cripps joined the family firm in 1928. He was appointed secretary and manager of the company in 1934, a

post he held until 1937 when Cirencester Brewery was amalgamated with H & G Simmonds of Reading at which time he was made director of Cirencester Brewery¹⁴ and Sir Frederick Cripps retired as chairman and managing director.¹⁵ The following notice appeared in the *Wilts and Gloucestershire Standard* on 5 June 1937:

We understand that on and after 30th June, the Cirencester Brewery Company, will be controlled by Messrs H&G Simmonds the well known brewing firm of Reading, Bristol and Davenport and that Captain E.T.Cripps and Mr.B.J.B.Stephens will still be associated with the direction and management of the

company and will remain on the Board. It is expected that Mr. W.P.Cripps, the present secretary, will be elected as Director.

Thus Simmonds, a much bigger brewery, had made an offer not to be refused and had acquired the Cirencester Brewery and over 90 licensed properties connected with it. The public houses were, of course, the point of the takeover for Simmonds, who were in the process of buying up a series of West Country breweries during the 1930s.¹⁶

Operations in Cirencester continued under the direction of the Cripps family. In 1939 *Kelly's Gloucestershire Directory* listed the Cirencester Brewery Ltd. as wine and spirit merchants, under the direction of William Parry Cripps, Sir Frederick's son. The brewery was finally liquidated in 1949, bringing to an end the long association of the Cripps family with brewing in Cirencester.

In fact, after 1937 operations had been scaled down. In the late 1930s much of the brewery was demolished including the offices fronting onto Cricklade Street and the brewing areas, leaving a small office and store on the site of the former Thresher's wine shop. The Old Bell Inn, with its courtyard, was also demolished - a terrible loss for Cirencester's medieval heritage. A row of shops replaced the Bell and offices and, from 1937 to 1949, Simmonds operated from the small office already mentioned, simply distributing beers and minerals. The brewery buildings were now reduced to their present

form and beer was no longer made on the premises.

These brewery buildings (now New Brewery Arts) were turned over to war production between 1939 and 1945 as were the new shops, as yet unoccupied, on Cricklade Street. These 'shadow factories' produced Spitfire parts and the brewery buildings were used to manufacture the tail-fins of Lancaster bombers.¹⁷

The brewery yard, in its heyday, must have been very busy, with horse-drawn carts bringing in hops, barley and casks and taking out full crates of beer and mineral waters. Sometimes used hops were sold to local farmers as cattle fodder and there would be terrier dogs to keep down the rats. The enormous hop and barley sacks were hoisted up the gantry (still in front of the building) to be taken in for the beer brewing process. The brewery also had a well of very good water. This may date from Roman times, though the actual structure, when excavated was 19th century in date. In 1921, it was estimated that 8,000 gallons a day could come from the well and, in the 1930s, in drought conditions, it was suggested that this well could supply the whole town, though it was never used for this purpose.¹⁸

The present New Brewery Arts consists of solid stone, early 19th century buildings used as storage areas. The Niccol Centre was a barrel store and the front and rear buildings, connected by walkways, contained the later beer bottling plant and bottle washing area (the gallery and cof-

fee house). Most of the brewery's activities, as we have already seen, took place in the buildings demolished after 1937. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Niccol Centre was used as a council storage depot and Cotswold Archaeological Trust kept its excavating tools there. After the demise of the brewery, Johnson's sheet metal engineering firm took over the front building and it was Johnson's relocation in 1976 to the Love Lane Industrial Estate which caused the council to buy the buildings, with a view to demolishing them prior to redevelopment.

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11. *ibid.*
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