

WRITING BREWING HISTORY

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On 6 May 2016, during the Brewery History Society's A.G. M. at Greene King's Westgate brewery in Bury St. Edmunds, Professor Richard Wilson was made an honorary life member for his outstanding contribution to brewing history. This is the text of his speech.

I became an historian of the brewing industry entirely by accident. Greene King, under its forward-looking chairman Sir Hugh Greene, also Director of the BBC, was searching for an historian of the company. He thought he had hooked Bernard Donoughue who taught at the London School of Economics. A part-time researcher was appointed, but Lord Donoughue as he became was appointed senior advisor in the Cabinet Office in 1975 and was clearly too busy to undertake the commission. Sir Hugh then had the idea of coming to the recently founded University of East Anglia to find a likely historian. He had lunch with the vice-chancellor, Frank Thistlethwaite who mentioned my name. I was summoned, without warning and in trepidation of some misdemeanour, to have coffee with them. Kitted out in flares (this was the mid-1970s), I was greatly in need of a hair-cut.

A young economic historian who had only written a book on merchant society in the eighteenth-century, Sir Hugh invited me to talk the project over with one of his fellow directors, Martin Corke. He was most encouraging and we quickly agreed terms: I would write a serious, but not heavy, history of the firm which would be jointly published - this was the big lure - by The Bodley Head and Johnathan Cape, both houses with which Sir Hugh had connections. I had the full support of the board and access to their archive scattered across head office and also, this turned out to be important,

papers with the firm's solicitor. Sir Hugh's brother Raymond, the family historian, was also extremely helpful.

The history of Greene King went back to the 1790s although its archive was sparse before the amalgamation of the Greene and King breweries in 1887. The managing director in the 1940s firmly believed he was aiding the war effort by its clearance. The project turned out to be far more engrossing and interesting than I had at first naively thought. Not only could I chart the growth and, crucially, its survival after the 1950 as an important regional firm, but the principals of the firm across its history were themselves much more interesting than the usual conservative proprietors of country breweries. Benjamin Greene, the founder of the firm acquired from his neighbour in Bury a West Indies sugar plantation which remained in the family for 60 years. He briefly owned a newspaper in the early 1830s to air his extreme views in favour of the state of slavery. So controversial did he quickly become that he had to escape to London where he founded a notable sugar importing firm. He left the daily management of his brewery to his 17 year-old son. Another became a director and in turn Governor of the Bank of England - a true Victorian plutocrat. There were no fewer than three members of the Greene family serving as MPs in the early 1900s. The Kings and Lakes were equally interesting in their own way. Together with their paternalistic attitude to their workforce, the story makes for lively social history.

Since the breweries archive was thin except, like most breweries, it had good runs of profit and production statistics and a set of remarkably full board minutes

produced by a long serving, model company secretary after 1887, and since there was no general history of the brewing industry I had, for context, to resort to the brewing journals in the Brewers' Society London library. Making sense of the Greene King archive and extensive reading in the brewing journals, a wonderful source, was my seven year apprenticeship as a brewing historian. The eventual book *Greene King: a Business and Family History* (1983) was I think the best of the half dozen I wrote in my career.

What was the next step? As often, there was a measure of luck in it. Peter Mathias had always hoped to write a second volume taking the history of brewing well into the twentieth century after the acclaim of his magisterial survey of the industry from 1700 to 1830. For various reasons this second volume never appeared and in the late 1980s the Brewers' Society, anxious to find someone who would take on the monumental task. I jibbed at the notion of working on the post-1945 period and they readily accepted the idea of joint authorship with Terry Gourvish, who at the time like me was a member of the economic history sector at the UEA. I had been involved with him in the in-house publication of his fine *Norfolk Beers from English Barley: a History of Steward and Patten 1793-1963* and a couple of years earlier we had co-authored a revisionist article in *Business History* on the 'Profitability of the British Brewing Industry, 1885-1914'. It was agreed I would provide an account of the industry from 1830 to 1914, Terry from the outbreak of the Great War to 1980.

These were the glory days of the Brewers' Society in Portman Square. We were paid a fee and research expenses; they funded a Peter Mathias-trained Ph.D student Fiona Wood; they set up a committee to supervise us on the lines of the one employed on his history of British Rail project. It was chaired by Sam Whitbread; Edward Guinness and Ewart Boddington were members along with a retired director of the Society and its helpful Senior Public Relations Officer, the crime writer, Mike Ripley. Donald Coleman, the fastidious professor of economic history and the author of a first-rate three volume history of Courtaulds, was its academic advisor.

For the next four years, together with Fiona, we haunted the Brewers' Society library and the archives of the big London breweries, and in vacations made forays to

look at the regional collections of a representative sample of breweries. We had an enormous amount of help from both the Brewer's Society and brewery archivists across England and Scotland. Donald Coleman kept our writing up to scratch: we had to present a chapter every six months for the committee to peruse. In 1994 our *The British Brewing History 1830-1980* was published by Cambridge University Press. We had always been in trepidation that it wouldn't measure up to Peter Mathias's celebrated account of the earlier period. Reviewers generally agreed it was a fitting sequel.

There were various academic spin-offs. I was invited to write an introduction to Lesley Richmond and Alison Turton's invaluable guide to the archives of the brewing industry. I became involved in organising two sessions on brewing at the International Economic History Society conferences in 1990 and 1994 at Leuven and Milan. Out of the latter came 15 essays jointly edited with Terry Gourvish as *The Dynamics of the International Brewing Industry* (1998). There was much pleasure in researching an essay on the early attempts to brew lager in late Victorian Britain for a festschrift presented to the famous historian of Carlsberg Kristof Glamann in 1993. And I was fortunate to supervise a couple of research students. Christine Clark's doctoral thesis was published as *The British Malting Industry since 1830*; Rob Donovan's on 'Drink in Victorian Norwich' appeared in four articles in *Brewery History*.

Later, I was invited to become editor of the food and drink entries in *The New Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, commissioning and editing contributions and writing about a dozen on major brewers myself. One was on Edward Guinness, Earl of Iveagh and I would have liked to have written a full scale biography, only to discover that he had instructed his personal papers to be destroyed on his death and the family were fearful that any account would somehow re-ignite the embers of the Saunders' affair.

In dwelling on how I became and matured as a brewing historian, I hope I have conveyed something of my enjoyment of the subject. Two things stand out. First, is the enormous amount of help I received over the years from all those interested in the history of the industry. Secondly, and this is linked, is that I quickly realised how important the industry was and how wide-ranging its impact. For various reasons, chiefly bound up with

the controversial nature of alcoholic drink itself, it has never been as popular an area of serious study as the great industries of our Industrial Revolution - textiles, especially cotton, coal mining, iron and steel ,engineering, shipbuilding and chemicals Yet brewing, although it has no great export dimension, is of equal significance. You can argue even greater. All those various aspects of its make-up: the complexities of the malting and brewing processes; its links with agriculture; its retail networks and the government's constant efforts to tax its output and set the boundaries of its consumption, espe-

cially in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, make it a fascinating and important subject for study, one that gets to the heart of our cultural, economic and social history.

I appreciate enormously the honour the Brewing History Society is conferring on me today, fittingly at Greene King's Westgate brewery. In its promotion of the study of this great industry, I wish it every success in the future.