

At The Sign of the Bush

An Article by Aileen Tucker

Traditionally, no other country has anything at all like the English Pub, Europe has wine bars, taverna's, bistro's, tapas bars and bodegas all based on wine drinking, but ale came from the North and Germany, Holland and the Nordic Countries have brewing traditions similar to our own.



The Cross Keys, Somerset

The taverns and wayside inns of England in general owe their foundations to the Romans when they conquered Britain and began to build their forts and cities connected by a sophisticated road system. Much traffic used these roads, troops on the move, messengers, couriers, merchants, public officials, farmers and market traders, some making journeys of considerable length needing staging posts with facilities for eating drinking and overnight stays. At suitable places along the roads, 'Mansios' or 'divsonia' were built, quite often two storey buildings with a gallery around the upper floor. When socially drinking Romans reclined on cushioned couches, but here customers sat to eat, the drinking vessels which were usually of standard size were chained to posts and chess was probably played as sometimes the chequerboard pattern decorated the door-post marking the Chequers inn sign, the oldest in Britain. In towns the 'tabernae' served wine only, identified by a bunch of vine leaves over the door, while local people used their own premises for alehouses just for liquid refreshment and corrupted the bunch of vine leaves into any bush or bunch of twigs on a long pole.

In pre-roman times the celebratory drink had been mead, made with wild honey, but with the clearing of the forests and the country becoming more settled and cultivated it became scarcer. So an alternative was needed and malted grain was the obvious choice to which honey was added to flavour and give 'finish' to the drink. Eventually as the honey content diminished and the grain content increased it became a new drink altogether so needing a new name to distinguish it from the traditional 'honey mead' now drunk only by the rich; it came to be known as 'ale'. While in Britain the Romans imported substantial quantities of wine and established vineyards in the South, East Anglia and on the Isle of Wight, a lot of this was for private drinking only, its cost putting it beyond the means of the majority. What the common man drunk was ale when he could afford it and the ale-wife could afford to brew it, for ale was not cheap to make so with a celebration coming such as Christmas, a whole village would pool their resource, each giving something for a communal brewing so all could celebrate.

When the Romans left and after the end of the 4th Century, the network of inns and 'Mansio's' that had relied on travellers fell on hard times, for the superb roads that the Romans had established, with the knowledge of their upkeep, eventually fell into disrepair. The amount of traffic dwindled to practically nothing, times were dangerous and most people now did not move very far from their local area. Riverside locations continued to do quite well as waterways were much safer than roads and where possible goods were moved by boat.



Everyone brewed their own ale.

By now there were three categories of premises selling alcoholic beverages, Alehouses, taverns and inns. Alehouses were situated in hamlets and villages, they were domestic premises, more like off-licenses, for there was no provision for drinking inside, and were not in continuous use for very few people could afford to brew all the time, it was usually intermittent depending, amongst other things, on whether the householder had brewed more than he needed or had enough ingredients from a good harvest. Everyone brewed their own ale when they

could, usually done by a woman, the ale-wife, an occupation which was held in fairly low esteem but needing some skill, for brewing was a chancy business, so many things could go wrong, the yeasts used were not pure and were often contaminated with pollen, spores or wild yeasts, temperatures varied, so little brewing was done between May and October for it was difficult to keep the temperature low enough for fermentation. The monasteries had very skilled brewers and either from tithes or gifts to the foundation could count on the best ingredients available, the village ale-wife, having little if any money for ingredients would be working at a disadvantage having to use anything she could get. Wheat, oats, corn or barley were all used, herbs were sometimes added for flavour as were spices and by the 11th Century hops, which not only gave a different flavour but were also a preservative. Ale was simple to make, the malted grain was boiled with water and yeast, strained and left to stand for about two days. After which it was thick, sweet, strong and read to drink. But it would not keep and had to be drunk quite quickly before it turned sour.

It was a different matter entirely in taverns, where there was drinking on the premises, situated mostly as they were in towns and ports. They only served wine, imported of course for many of the vineyards established in this country by the Romans, had, like the roads, deteriorated and gone. Wealthy merchants, traders, burgesses and town officials were the tavern customers, for, in general, only they could afford the prices.

Inns were usually situated by the roadside at important crossroads, fords, intersecting track ways or river crossings, later around market places in towns and villages, they not only served ale and wine but with all goods being transported by pack-horse, extensive stables were needed and overnight accommodation for travellers on horseback as well as farmers and traders attending the markets. They did not serve food so either the guest had to provide his own or the inn-keeper arranged for it to be brought in from a local cookshop at exorbitant expense. They were not very comfortable places to stay, verminous and crowded, with often a very dubious reputation. There might be one sleeping chamber for the wealthy but in general no-one got a bed. The inn-keeper packed as many into a room as he could regardless of sex or age, with straw pallets on the floor if they were lucky.



The George Inn at Norton St. Philip, Somerset.

As the numbers of all these premises increased there was often much friction between the vintners, brewsters and the Crown, because of drunkenness the authorities were always trying to regulate either the number of ale-houses, the quality of the ale or wine, the amount drunk, the selling price of the product, the hours and places brewing could be done, but it made no difference, most of the time no-one took any notice. A license was needed for each brewing and once done was subject to inspection by the 'ale-connor' who had the authority to destroy ale if it was not up to standard and who could fine or bring to Court anyone infringing current Acts of which there were many, but locally any-one brewing bad ale or giving short measure were subject to penalties likely to be the ducking stool, or the stocks.

It is strange how acts significant in their own right have consequences also significant in a totally different direction. The murder of Thomas a Beckett in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170 was the last such event, which result in a major boost to an already significant movement of people which continued and increased for over 300 years – the pilgrims.

Going on pilgrimage became an important part of society at all levels, Beckett's shrine and the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham were important enough to attract pilgrims from overseas while other important national centres were the Tomb of Edward the II at Gloucester, the Thorn Tree of Joseph of Arimathea at Glastonbury and the tomb of Edward the Confessor at Winchester. A steady stream of visitors, all of which had to be accommodated with food, drink and lodgings, both on their way and once there. The traditional dispensers of hospitality for wayfarers and travellers had been monasteries or priories. Anyone could knock on the door of the porters lodge, ask and receive a 'dole' of bread and ale and a place for the night on the floor of the guest hall. However, the amount of people moving from place to place began to strain these resources so an increase in hostels and inns was needed. The religious establishments were the first to see the advantages and began building separate hospices or guest houses in nearby towns or along the pilgrim ways, some still in existence today.



It was around this time that these inns and hospices began to have signs, mostly based at first on religious themes because of their association with the Church. The Star, The Crown (of Thorns), The Angel, The Lamb, The Mitre, later as more secular premises became established, signs like the Pack Horse, the Leather Bottle, the Boatman or the Rising Sun came to be used and it would appear that for a good many people pilgrimage became a way of life.

In the fashion of the day, many inns were galleried around a central courtyard, one such being the most famous inn of all, the Tabard at Southwark. In 1388 when Chaucer used it for the starting place of his famous tales of pilgrims setting out from London to Canterbury, it was already famous for just that, the landlord Harry Bailly, was a man of some substance having twice represented Southwark at Westminster. Like many other inns it had a chequered history, it started life as a religious guest house, for Southwark was always a famous starting point for pilgrims coming from the Capitol and many inns were built there to accommodate them, it was renovated in 1628 when possibly another floor was added and although it was

destroyed by fire in 1676 it was rebuilt again, almost identically but had its name changed to the Talbot. It was a significant coaching inn and flourished until the railways arrived, but with the demise of the coaches its custom declined and it became a warehouse for carters. It was recalled to its original name of the Tabard but despite a huge public outcry in 1875 developers had their way and it was torn down.

By the end of the 14th Century ale had become a necessity. For the poor, alternative drinks had always been milk or water, but milk was now thought only fit for the very young and the elderly and with increasing population and industries such as butchers, barbers and tanners, water supplies were becoming polluted, making ale or beer the only safe liquid to drink.

More and more hops were being added for flavour and instead of the 'mash' being used only once, now water was added twice more to make brewings of weaker strengths. The first made a 'strong ale' for feasts and celebrations, the second a medium brew for social drinking, while the third made 'small beer' which was the general all-day drink being the least alcoholic. Ale had become such a staple that along with bread, was subject to numerous regulations to ensure its supply at a price everyone could afford and many wages were partly paid in ale or beer, showing how important it was.

An alarming rise in the number of alehouses had brought an increase in drunkenness, always a problem in itself, but many good yeoman were spending their Sundays in the ale-house instead of practising at the butts, as they were legally required to do. It was considered that a good six years of constant practise with the long-bow were necessary to achieve the skill that had triumphed at Crecy, neglect of this important ability was seen as a real threat to national security so Edward III passed an Act outlawing cards, dice, games of chance, foot-ball, hand-ball and more, all recreations centred in or around the ale-house. Successive Kings were all forced to do the same.

By the time Elizabeth came to the throne in 1559, due to her father's Reformation of the Church and Dissolution of the Monasteries many inns that had started life as Abbey's, Hospices, Priors or Monasteries, now became secular, some changed their names, especially if the estate was bought or acquired by established wealthy families who gave them their sign, The Blue Boar, The White Hart, Bear and Ragged Staff, The Talbot or the Gloucester Arms.



The Barley Mow, Bathwick, Bath

During the 15th and 16th Century the rise of cart and wagon trades altered the ground places of the new inns that were springing up in response, they needed very long courtyards with entrants to front and rear, for coaches and wagons cannot reverse and the communal hall got smaller as separate dining parlours were introduced.

During the 16th Century particularly more traffic started using the roads, England was prospering with the wool trade and more settled times. While travellers were still on horseback, goods were now often moved in wagons rather than on pack-horses and stabling in quantity was still needed. In York for instance in 1537 the city's inns had facilities for over 1700 horses and 1000 beds for their owners. State business increased for Elizabeth 1st was a great 'promenader', when moving about the country on 'progresses' the Court and its servants stayed in large houses but hangers-on and

local dignitaries joining in the entertainments stayed at adjacent inns to the benefit of the delighted landlord.

Beer had joined ale and was now being served in ale-houses, it had come very slowly to popularity being at first too bitter for English taste. More and more hops were used in its brewing so giving it a distinctive flavour and allowing inferior grain to be used. Along with its better keeping qualities this made it a much cheaper product than ale, which lost ground in towns but kept its predominance in rural areas well into the 18th Century.



The Archway at The George, Norton St. Philip, Somerset

When Charles 1st succeeded his father, his concern again was with drunkenness and too many ale-houses. In 1633 numerous riverside inns in London were closed down or at least forced to close their riverside doors because they were convenient escape routes for the criminals and petty thieves who hung around the waterside. Taverns began to get a very unsavoury reputation, because of their opening hours and availability, they soon became the haunt of foot-pads, cut-throats and general low-life, while whispers about smugglers floated around many inns and taverns in coastal villages and ports.

All through the 17th Century many changes were underway, licensed premises tended to be larger than in previous times

and offered more services. Brewing techniques had improved with a greater variety of beers of great strength, all being given imaginative names like Cloak and Dagger, or Pharaoh, so named because it would not let people go. There were now many commercial breweries, so landlords did not necessarily have to brew their own. Plate and pewter started to replace wood and leather for tankards and drinking vessels. Early attempts at bottling beer had some success but as glass bottles were valuable it seems to have been more of a country gentleman's hobby. Tobacco was a new item provided by taverns being sold by the pipe; food was of better quality and more widely available as were lodgings. The Puritans had begun to make themselves heard preaching abstinence and denouncing drink, with good cause, it is estimated that there were around 24,000 alehouse keepers in England while by 1631 there were 551 in Westminster alone, this does not include taverns or inns who were subject of an Act of 1606 pointing out that the "ancient, true and proper use of inns is for the receipt, relief and lodging of wayfaring people", not to entertain idle layabouts and drunkards.

With the Commonwealth the Puritans were able to press their policies forcibly, not only cutting down on the licensing of new alehouses and inns, but closing down many existing ones. Alehouses had played a crucial part during the Civil War, armies on the move can be thirsty, private houses were not legally required to billet troops so this fell to alehouses and inns, whether the landlord got paid is another matter, a considerable number didn't and had to close. Many of our old pubs today date back to



Tuckers Grave Pub - Somerset

the Civil War and owe their continued existence to what happened on their premises. At Uxbridge there is an inn built in 1575, where in 1645 commissioners from both sides met to

sue for peace, unsuccessfully, whatever its name was before, it is now known as the Crown and Treaty. Prominent personages staying at various inns the night before significant battles or while eluding pursuers or escaping overseas gave historic importance to buildings, in the main thus ensuring their history kept them going.

With the Restoration and as a backlash to the Puritans, Britain once again seemed to throw herself into the beer barrel. Charles II became another monarch concerned about the amount of drunkenness amongst the population. A survey of this time reported on the number of drink-related deaths, but it is a footnote that is of most interest for it stated that the statistics given did not include deaths resulting from inebriates lying in the streets being run over by carts and wagons, as these were “too numerous to mention”. In previous centuries and up to then, no stigma had attached to being drunk, indeed considering beer or ale of varying strengths were all most people had to drink, everyone was probably in a mild state of intoxication much of the time and this applied to all classes of society and was considered normal, but public attitudes were changing, the emerging middle and professional classes disapproved entirely.



Ye Olde Mitre, London

While the alehouses were for drinkers and the inns for travellers the taverns were social meeting places for all sort of professional classes, actors, writers, politician's, poets, business men and men of letters, heavy drinkers were usually the order of the day as was serious gambling in which women participated as well as men. From inventories of the time we can get a glimpse of what these taverns were like inside. One large Tavern in London had in the main room a bar with bins and shelves, partitions formed six drinking rooms. Four of which had benches round the three sides, the other two had side benches with a table between, in the covered-over yard were six more 'drinking rooms' again with benches and tables all made of

elm, a cupboard with a shelf above and a plain table for trenchers. All of this seems to indicate a good trade in food as well as drink, although the bar would have just been a hatch in the wall of the store-room through which the pot-boys or drawers passed the jugs or flagons of ale, for now many taverns had ale-houses downstairs with rooms for wine drinking upstairs.

Music was part of the general scene as were puppet shows; well lit by candles and a 'goodly fire', full of 'merrie-making and gossip' it sounds a very busy cheerful place, this was of course what draw in the customers. By the middle of the century many town taverns began to diversify, coffee was introduced in 1650 and served first in taverns as was chocolate in 1657 and then tea in 1660, before moving to premises of their own. 'Ordinaries' were another off-shoot, originally being a substantial repast served about noon around a communal table appealing to men of business and city traders, they soon became very popular and eventually gave their name to either a large room in the tavern or a separate establishment altogether. By the beginning of the 18th Century it can be seen how things would develop over the next hundred years, the coffee houses became the Gentleman's Clubs, the 'ordinaries' became chop houses and restaurants, taverns declined as the upper classes eventually abandoned them and they joined with alehouses to become pubs. Inns were approaching their golden age, but before all this happened there were still many changes to the nations drinking habits and the

major one, certainly not for the best as it almost brought the country to its knees, was 'gin fever'.

There had always been a small amount of spirit drinking, Aqua Vitae and Usquebauch had been around for over a hundred years and French Brandy had been coming into the country in ever larger amounts for some time, but all were regulated by cost, gin was cheap. 'Drunk for a penny, dead drunk for tuppence' was no joke and in many cases the operative word was not 'drunk' but 'dead', tens of thousands of people died from accidents, gin poisoning, starvation or neglect. It was estimated that at any given time one quarter of all the population of London, men, women and children were completely intoxicated.



'Gin Lane' By William Hogarth

This scene was repeated in towns and cities all over the country, rural areas escaped the worst consequences but everywhere was touched by it. People were not fit to work and the crime rate soared. In fact, the whole fabric of society began to break down. It was 1751 before any of the Acts that were hastily passed in an effort to control the situation, had any effect at all, and just in time as consumption that year in just legitimately produced gin alone, totalled 7,049,822 gallons and virtually the entire population was semi-permanently drunk. The authorities also had other troubles to contend with, all through the century the major occupation in England was smuggling, being so wide-spread that in some country districts whole communities were involved. Inns were natural stopping places, hiding places or meeting places for smugglers and their contraband, they had plenty of stabling for the pack horses and wagons needed for transportation, the best place to hide extra brandy kegs was amongst ones that had a legitimate place there, many's the remote country inn near to the coast that has hidden cellars or underground tunnels and its dark tales of the nights when the 'Gentlemen' rode. All very romantic now, but at the time, a deadly serious and dangerous business.

After the excesses of the gin years there was a Puritan type backlash, magistrates and justices began to refuse licenses to alehouses and dram shops and impose many restrictions on existing ones, not so much from religious principles as from a utilitarian one. The Industrial Revolution was getting underway and a sober workforce was needed, by the end of the century the alehouse was virtually a thing of the past having given way to the beer shop and the public house. The difference being of course that while ale-houses had been domestic premises which eventually offered their parlours and kitchens for 'in house' drinking, public houses were specially built for the purpose.