

A Short History of Morland's Brewery

Written by Jackie Smith

Brewing was already one of Abingdon's major industries before the Morland family, "Brewers since 1711", left their established base in West Ilsley to expand their business empire in what was then county town of Berkshire. In the Abbey Obedientiars' Accounts there are repeated references to *Cervisia (ale)*. An official called the *Granatarius* had responsibility for the storage of grain for making bread and beer and for ensuring its quality. Conjectural plans of the abbey show the brewhouse on the south-western boundary close to the surviving domestic buildings in Thames Street

At the Dissolution in 1538 brewing was established in the greater part of these surviving buildings now in the ownership of the Blacknall family. By the end of the 18th century Edward Child had developed a major porter brewery and was leasing many licensed properties from the borough of Abingdon. He was succeeded in what was now listed as the Abbey brewery by John Francis Spenlove, a brewer from Hoddesdon, who had married into the Morland family. His wife Susanna or "Sukey", the daughter of William Morland of West Ilsley, brought with her a marriage settlement of £5,000 that enabled Spenlove to make major improvements to the brewery. Spenlove was predeceased by both his son and his wife, his sole heir being his daughter Mary. The business was held in trust for her by his business partner John Moses Carter and her cousin George Bowes Morland, a solicitor and son of Benjamin Morland of Sheepstead House, Marcham. The day-to-day running was in the hands of William Anderson, the brewery manager. When Mary died in 1866 the brewery was purchased by her cousin who then leased it to Edward Morland. When this lease ran out in 1895 all production was moved to the brewery in Ock Street.

The first brewery, however, to attract Morland attention was Belcher's Eagle Brewery in Ock Street. It is probable that this was the site of an earlier brewery belonging to Samuel Cheer since comparison of the two sale notices reveals several properties in common. Unfortunately the details of Cheer's brewery are undated though a tentative date in the 1820's is very likely. In 1861 the Eagle Brewery was advertised for sale following the bankruptcy of William Belcher, son of William Doe Belcher. Belcher's brewery did not sell immediately but according to newspaper reports was sold by private contract to George Bowes Morland and on to Edward Henry Morland, who was now in charge of three breweries. In 1887 Morland became a limited company registered as United Breweries: the logo for the company was a pyramid of three casks bearing the initial of the three breweries.

The two remaining larger breweries in town were in Stert Street and at the far end of Ock Street. The ownership of the Stert Street Brewery can be traced through documents to Benjamin Tomkins in the early 18th century. He was a member of a prominent Baptist family engaged in the malt trade. The brewery was situated near the present Plough public house and stretched from the Stert Street frontage towards the GWR Station. In the 19th century EJ Trendell, a prosperous wine merchant living in the Abbey House, owned the business. Trendell sold out to Charles Saxby and in 1889 Henry Morland, son of George Bowes Morland, bought the business as a going

concern from George Saxby. In the same year the Shillingford brewery of Field & Sons was also acquired.

The Tower Steam Brewery in Ock Street was founded by the Townsend brothers, Thomas and John Matthew. Initially they had interests in the coal and malt trade before becoming maltsters and brewers. The brewery, founded about 1840, was situated at the far end of Ock Street and gives its name to the present Tower Close. In 1894 following the death of his brother and partner, Thomas by now in his 70th year, decided to retire from business. The brewery was purchased as a going concern by Messrs Belcher and Habgood who then formed a limited company. In 1928 they sold out to Morlands who used part of the premises for their transport department but closed down the brewing operations. Morland and Co Ltd now owned the four major breweries in town but continued to market the products with their former labels.

With brewing consolidated in Ock Street a new brewhouse with increased capacity became essential. This was built in 1912 at the instigation of Thomas Skurray and continues to dominate the town skyline. Skurray was a far-sighted businessman who persuaded the company to introduce more scientific techniques into the art of brewing. In addition to the new brewhouse developments included a new malt extract plant built at the foot of The Vineyard, new maltings and a soft drinks factory. In the years between the wars further take-overs took place; the Wantage Brewery Company, Dymore-Browns' Royal Albert Brewery and the Angel Brewery in Reading, Hewitts Waltham Brewery and the above-mentioned Belcher and Habgood. This led to a large distribution network throughout seven counties stretching from Hampshire to Gloucestershire.

Between the 1960's and 1990's the brewery continued to erect new buildings and expand its operations. A new bottling plant designed by Reading architects Hatchard Smith and Bertram was erected for Morland & Co Ltd by Taylor Woodrow Construction Ltd. In 1967 Morlands boasted 235 tied houses and 17 off-licences. Three years later a decision was taken that all distribution of Morland products was to be handled in Abingdon. The anniversary brew Old Speckled Hen, produced in 1979 to celebrate the jubilee of the opening of the MG factory in Abingdon, was a resounding marketing success. A new keg racking plant was completed at the Ock Street site in 1986. In October 1990 Morland launched one of its most famous brands, Old Speckled Hen, as a draught beer. Expansion continued in 1991 and 1992 with the acquisition of 101 pubs from Courage and 72 from Inntrepeneur. Further purchases followed in 1995. In the same year a £5m investment programme included a new brewhouse to cater for the increasing appeal of the Old Speckled Hen brand and a new distribution centre on the Ashville Trading Estate to free up space on what was now a very built-up site.

Such expansion and success, however, did not go unnoticed. In 1992 the Suffolk brewer Greene King made its first take-over bid for the brewery. This proved unsuccessful but six years later it succeeded in taking over the entire Morland business. Brewing ceased on the site which was sold to the developer Berkeley Homes.

Jackie Smith, 2007

