

A SMALL BERKSHIRE ENTERPRISE: J. DYMORE BROWN & SON 1831-1944

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INTRODUCTION

Berkshire's long and—in its way—significant industrial history still needs to be studied in a systematic way. In the absence of such a study, the most pressing task would seem to be an investigation of some of the smaller firms and of the kinds of role they played in the country's economic growth. The history of J. Dymore Brown & Son, brewers of Reading, is worth relating for several reasons. First, the brewery supplied a wholesome and highly regarded beer to a wide variety of outlets, including the Royal Berkshire Hospital, for almost exactly a century, as well as providing a reasonable living for the family concerned. Second, in its later years it attracted the attention of one of the most remarkable, if hitherto unrecognised, early twentieth century Berkshire industrialists: Thomas Skurray, who is here belatedly given some slight recognition as a 'company doctor' of great ability. Third, the shell of the Dymore Brown brewery may still be seen at the corner of Queens Road and East Street in Reading, although of course none of the plant remains. For a number of years under threat of demolition, in accordance with plans for an inner distribution road that required East Street to be widened, it has now been reprieved until the early 1980s at least. As such, it should therefore be of interest to industrial archaeologists for some time to come.

The following account divides the history of the brewery into two unequal parts, the first dealing with the 70 years or so when it was an unincorporated business, and the second with the 40 years as a limited company. At the end is an attempt to draw some conclusions from its history.

THE UNINCORPORATED BUSINESS 1831-1902

Like William Simonds from an earlier generation and George Palmer a decade later, the founder of the Dymore Brown brewery came from an agricultural background. He was the younger son of a farmer, who needed to make his living away from the land. The Brown family had been farming for centuries at Preshute, near Marlborough. The village lies within the 'chalk country' region of Wiltshire, celebrated for its sheep and arable—wheat and barley—farming.

James Dymore Brown I, second son of Thomas Brown and Mary Dymore, was born in 1803. At that period, enclosures and a change in tenancy arrangements, from life to annual tenancies, were making the livelihood of small- and medium-sized farmers in Wiltshire more uncertain and less profitable than before. Then in 1814 the wartime agricultural boom gave way to a severe and protracted depression. The returns to farming became so poor that an exodus from the land was inevitable. The eldest son John seems to have emigrated to Ontario in Canada during the 1820s, and his parents later joined him with the rest of their large family, apart from James. Much later the parents and others of the family returned to Wiltshire, but descendants remain in Canada to this day.

James, apparently left on his own in England, turned to brewing. His father had probably grown barley on the farm and may even have undertaken some home brewing himself. However, instead of going into a local brewery say in Marlborough, James learnt his trade in Hoxton, East London; that may have been through the good offices of a relative or family friend. As his name does not appear in

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the records of the Brewers Company or in the London directories of the day, he must have remained as an employee when he completed his training rather than branching out on his own.

Why he decided to settle in Reading is not known. Possibly because it was the largest town between London and home, or alternatively his mother, a Wiltshire woman born in Fyfield, may have had connections there. However, the date of his move may also provide a clue. Until 1830 brewers in many towns had a monopoly over beer sales because they held all the public houses and the magistrates would not grant any fresh licences to newcomers. In particular Reading's population, which had increased by 70% between 1801 and 1831, had been compelled to accept poor quality beer at exorbitant prices, because of its 68 public houses only two—the principal posting inns—were not tied to brewers. Then in 1830 the passing of the Beer Act allowed new beer houses to be opened without the need to obtain licences. Thus brewers and keepers of beer shops could, and did, spring up to provide the greatly needed competition.

Soon after the Act was passed, one Charles Moody—whose background is quite unknown—established himself as a retail brewer at 106 Castle Street, Reading. He must have died or suffered some other vicissitude, for in the following year (1831) James Dymore Brown was in occupation of the brewery, that had the fairly modest rateable value of £20, being valued at £200 the stock. His first year's output was 860 barrels, about a twelfth of the output of the most important Reading common (i.e. wholesale) brewer, Blackall Simonds, and in 1831 he felt confident enough of his future to marry. His wife, Elizabeth Edney, came of a farming family near Romsey in Hampshire, and four children were born before she died in 1837, aged 27.

As his output between 1832 and 1837 averaged over 1,110 barrels a year and he was the largest retail brewer in Reading, he sought larger premises. In 1838 his output fell to below 900 barrels; perhaps it was a bad year

that affected many of his competitors as well, but he may have been in the process of moving to a site on the north side of Friar Street. In the next few years his average annual output was just 1,500 barrels, with a fall to 1,150 barrels in 1843.

He had two retail outlets. One was a taphouse next to the brewery. The other was the *Royal Albert Tavern*, in Queens Road, where in 1842 he began to acquire some land. Queens Road had recently been constructed by the Corporation, at the same time as Kings Road, in order to open up the eastern part of Reading, and he bought the freehold of two plots of land at the corner of Queens Road and East Street. The cost was £296 in all, plus about £300 as compensation to the former leaseholders. He could not make use of his newly acquired land for the time being, but it was to be well situated for his future plans.

Although his output for several decades after 1843 is not known exactly, he had built up a strong enough reputation to be awarded in 1854 the contract for supplying beer to the Royal Berkshire Hospital. He had meanwhile married again and had his two sons trained in brewing. The elder, James Dymore Brown II (1832–99), became an apprentice at Wallingford—presumably at Wells's brewery, for some time the largest in the county—and was clearly of a serious turn of mind. At the age of 16 he was writing home for advice on "What are the temporal advantages of the Sabbath to the labouring classes?"

Not long afterwards he decided to emigrate to Australia. He is said to have wished to join in the 'gold rush' of 1848–49, and to have been encouraged to go out by a over-optimistic friend. When the gold diggings proved fruitless, he could not turn to farming on his own account there, since he had no capital, and he found great difficulty in getting a job at all when ships were landing immigrants at the rate of several hundreds at a time.

Within a year or two his fortunes substantially improved. He discovered in Melbourne an uncle on his mother's side, Charles Edney, who rented an orchard for him and paid him £200 as an advance against the

first year's crop. He also began to act as agent for his father's beers as well as importing some from England. More significantly for the future, he also met through his uncle Janet Patterson, the daughter of a Scottish farmer who had been drowned on his way to Australia. She now had a stepfather who ill-treated her so badly that she spent her childhood in shuttling between her married brothers and some friends.

When James informed his father of his intention to marry her, he was constrained to say: "It is true she can't play the piano, but she can cook meat and bake a damper (Aussie for *cake*) with anyone and bears a good character without having a tongue that can go fourteen times to the dozen". The fact that this diminutive teenager (she was then only 18) happened to be a strong-minded and apparently taciturn person was in time greatly to affect the fortunes of the brewery.

They were married in 1856 and stayed in Melbourne for another few years, but their success in farming was hampered by high costs and low product prices. However, by then he was needed at home. In 1860 his father was at last able to acquire the lease (which he later bought) of a plot of land in Queens Road adjacent to the two plots he already held. Together these yielded enough space for him to build his long-projected Royal Albert Brewery. James therefore returned home in 1862, to deal with the office work.

The brewery was completed by early 1864, and the thirty-quarter plant with its 50 lb Cornish boiler initially produced at a rate of 3,000 barrels a year. Brewing took place three times a week on average. The head brewer was James's younger brother Edney Brown, now just over 30 and recently married; however, he was in an advanced stage of consumption and died towards the end of 1865. James at once took over the brewing side as well.

He was clearly responsible for the rapid expansion in the brewery's trade that took place over the next few decades. In 1867 its productive capacity was doubled, and in 1873 trebled, by the installation of new 50 lb engines made by the Reading Iron Works, one Cornish

and the other Lancashire. By the following year, when he was 71, James Dymore Brown I felt ready to transfer the business to his son, perhaps in exchange for an annuity; when he died in 1875 his estate was worth less than £3,000. By 1887 output had risen to 14,000 barrels a year, the turnover being nearly £29,000. Exactly two-thirds was 'private trade' in casks to farmers and landlords over a wide area around Reading. For that purpose, in the 1870s, the business had nine agents in towns stretching from Hungerford to Windsor, and from Oxford to Southampton. Later on, difficulties of administration and physical transport caused James to restrict agencies to within 20 miles of the brewery. He backed up this agency system by vigorous and sustained advertising in Berkshire and other local newspapers.

The significance of the move to Queens Road was that it was about the only wholesale brewery in the eastern—and therefore less well covered—part of the town. Its sole rival was the short-lived Berkshire Brewery Ltd., of Kings Road, established during 1865 and in liquidation by 1881. The Royal Albert Brewery was therefore well placed to make deliveries over a wide area of growing population. On the other hand, it had only five tied houses and an off-licence, all in Reading, and its tied house trade represented only 15% of turnover; another 15% was consigned to independent public houses. Private trade, such as farmers and other large households, accounted for the remaining 70%. The major breweries, on the other hand, were busy consolidating their tied trade; Simonds' at that time had nearly 160 outlets of its own.

Although private customers were still for the moment plentiful, therefore, a time was bound to come when they would disappear and free houses become great rarities, so that the trade would be concentrated in tied houses. Nevertheless, the firm gained business during the 'arsenic' and other adulteration scares at the turn of the century, as it claimed that its beers were made of malt and hops alone, without any additives.

In 1899 James Dymore Brown II died, aged

67, a few months after formally retiring. Over and above his work in the brewery, he had been prominent in public affairs. He was a member of Reading Council and an active chairman of its Farm Committee; indeed, like many members of the Palmer family, he seems to have had strong leanings towards agriculture, but in his case without the resources to indulge them. Even so, he earned the reputation of being as much an authority on horses, particularly cart horses, as the Palmers were of cattle. He had helped to found the Royal Counties Agricultural Society, and he was chairman of its Council. Having taken up cricket in Australia, for some time he played regularly for the Reading Tradesmen's Cricket Club. He also rode to hounds.

Through his wife's influence he had been converted from the Church of England to Methodism, and had been a founder of the Wesleyan Chapel near the brewery in Queens Road. As the treasurer of the Chapel's trust fund, he had in the 1880s personally met a great deal of the £7,500 building cost and contributed also to its running expenses. In the 1890s he built an expensive house at Shiplake. All these activities represented a drain both of money and of time. Nevertheless, on his death his estate was valued at £50,000.

His eldest son James Dymore Brown III, by then aged 42 and married with six children, assumed full responsibility for running the business when his father retired, but did not become its legal owner. Janet Dymore Brown was the sole executor; she also inherited the whole of the property. Relations between mother and son can only be guessed at, but it seems possible that she transmitted the lack of affection in her own childhood to the next generation. A pathetic letter her son had sent from boarding-school many years before, complaining of always feeling hungry and of not having been visited by his parents for many months, suggests at the very least some neglect. By the time of his father's death he was the only survivor out of seven sons and a daughter; he and his wife must therefore have been very largely dependent on his mother. At

any rate, little more than two years later the business was turned into a limited company.

THE LIMITED COMPANY 1902-44

The company of Dymore Brown & Son Ltd., was incorporated in May 1902. Its paid-up capital was £17,250 in £10 units, of which £10,000 worth comprised 6% preference shares and £7,250 ordinary shares. All except £70 worth were at first owned by Janet Dymore Brown; she also received £12,000 purchase money in the form of debentures, and a further cash payment which involved raising £6,000 on mortgage from the bank. Later on she agreed to sell £6,000 worth of shares to her son, who was Managing Director (at a salary of £210 and with the Queens Road house rent-free) and £1,000 worth to A. E. Preston, an Oxford accountant who was Chairman of the company. The only other director was a Reading solicitor, H. J. Collins.

At first the new company showed a modest success. In 1901 and 1902-03 output had been over 14,000 barrels a year, comparable with the palmy days of the 1880s. Net profit in 1902-03 of nearly £2,700 was the highest the business had ever achieved. Then in 1903-04 there was a small decline in sales, to 13,000 barrels, and net profit just exceeded £2,000. At the Annual General Meeting of 1904 the directors took an honest look at the company and its prospects. On the production side, the quality of beer was still as high as ever, although the brewing plant, now 30 to 40 years old, really needed 'entire renewal'. However, marketing gave grounds for concern. The company's three travellers, with high salaries and expenses but low sales, were scarcely earning their keep, and the bulk of the trade was in fact being done by the draymen; those dealt with several thousand individual accounts, which were not known to anyone but themselves. The Board therefore decided to appoint two inspectors to supervise the draymen's duties and seek new accounts in the field. However, the downward sales trend was more ominous than appeared at a time when private customers were gradually dying out

and breweries were relying more and more on their tied public house trade.

Physical sales fell from 11,700 barrels in 1904-05 to 10,700 in 1905-06; the next four years' results are not recorded. Even worse, profits slumped to about £300 in both 1904-05 and 1905-06 and to below £150 in 1906-07. In those three years the company was able to pay only 3% on preference dividends and had to pass the ordinary dividend, compared with 6% preference and 10% ordinary dividends in 1902-03 and 1903-04. As the main shareholder Janet Dymore Brown had not attended the first two Annual General Meetings, but from 1905 onwards she was present, and sharply criticised the way in which the brewery was being run. In fact, she was mainly responsible for starving it of funds: in the two good years from 1902-03 onwards she had taken nearly £1,300 a year out of the business in dividends and debenture interest, and by 1907 the reserve fund amounted to little more than £1,000.

Then early in 1906 James Dymore Brown died of a stroke, aged only 48. The anxieties of the business and the constant effort of having to deal with his demanding mother undoubtedly contributed to his premature death; his widow and children inherited only £3,600, scarcely more than the value of his rapidly depreciating preference shares. His eldest son James Dymore Brown IV, trained at Friary brewery at Guildford, (now belonging to Allied Breweries Ltd.), had become a director the previous year at the age of 22. It must have seemed a bleak prospect to him.

At the 1907 meeting A. E. Preston made a bid to retire, but his fellow shareholders objected to this step and he was forced to stay on at a greatly reduced remuneration. About that time he met Thomas Skurray, undoubtedly one of the two most outstanding Berkshire brewing entrepreneurs of the day—the other being F. A. Simonds, of H. & G. Simonds & Co., Ltd. Skurray was a local man, having been born at Faringdon in 1868. He studied Chemistry at University College, London but was prevented from pursuing his bent of bacteriological research, when his

parents lost all their money. He therefore began his brewing career in Shillingford at the age of 20 and two years later, in 1890, he moved to Morland & Co. Ltd's brewery in Abingdon, which had just incorporated Saxby & Co's brewery at Abingdon and Field & Sons at Shillingford. Within two years he had his salary increased by 50%, and was told with unusual candour by the Board, "you might do better in a larger business". However, he had his own ideas. By 1894 he was in charge of the brewery's entire operations apart from the office work, and next year he was allowed to take a share in the management of a Guernsey brewery as well.

In 1899—less than a decade after his arrival—he became a director of Morland's, which that year acquired Ferguson & Son's Angel Brewery at Reading, but allowed brewing to continue there. His interest was not purely managerial, for he had set up his own laboratory at Abingdon, at first owned by him jointly with Morland's but later taken over by the brewery. There he developed a new method of preparing a malt extract which was to be of great value to Morland's subsequent development. In 1906, at the early age of 38, he was appointed Managing Director.

His managerial strategy involved seeking to rationalise production at a number of local ailing breweries. In 1908 Ferguson's profits were declining rapidly, and he proposed an arrangement whereby Dymore Brown's would be acquired by Morland's and would then brew beer for Ferguson's, thus allowing Ferguson's valuable Broad Street site to be used more advantageously. In 1909 Skurray and Preston began serious negotiations in Reading. Dymore Brown's output was still not far short of 10,000 barrels, and Skurray felt that by 'working' on the business he could restore its profitability. However, he could not consider offering more than £6,000 for the £17,250 nominal value of the shares, as gross profits were too low and expenditure—notably overheads—excessive in relation to the trade done.

However, Morland's other directors were not willing to buy Dymore Brown's as its prospects seemed too uncertain. Skurray there-

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fore continued negotiations on his own account. He had the financial resources to do so, for he was already a director of Wilson's brewery at Manchester and of the Hereford & Tredegar Brewery as well as Managing Director (and later Chairman) of Morland's. His revised plan was to merge the interests of Dymore Brown's with those of H. Hewett & Co. Ltd., of Waltham St. Lawrence, about eight miles away.

Hewett's had built up a good local trade, the greater part of which was in public houses rather than with private customers. In fact, it had 46 tied houses all in Berkshire except for one each in Yateley and Eversley, just across the border with Hampshire. Its chief managerial problem was the not unfamiliar one that the founder, Henry Hewett, had died in 1893 leaving only an elderly widow as owner of the business. Even so, the following year its output was 20,600 barrels, just half as much again as Dymore Brown's, and under a good manager—who became a managing director—it continued for a while to be very profitable, earning about 14% on turnover. The profits began to fall, and had more than halved by the time it became a limited company in 1900.

After the widow died five years later, both physical output and turnover suffered a decline. By 1908–09 output, at just under 15,000 barrels, was almost the same as that of Dymore Brown's, and its profits that year was no more than £500. As the Managing Director had by then died, in the next few years it had to resort to borrowing. It was able to keep going only because the debenture holders, whose loan interest was well in arrears, had to agree to this since its potential scrap value or sales value as a going concern was negligible.

Skurray's plan was to integrate Dymore Brown's productive capacity with Hewett's valuable outlets for beer, particularly its tied houses. In conditions of great secrecy, therefore, his valuers visited both breweries. On the basis of their recommendations an agreement was signed in May 1911, to run for 14 years. Hewett's remained as a separate company, but its plant was dismantled and the

registered office moved to Queens Road. Dymore Brown's now brewed for both companies and paid a royalty of £1,600 a year to Hewett's as compensation. Preston thankfully resigned as Chairman, to be succeeded by Skurray himself; the other directors were James Dymore Brown IV (who continued to manage the Queens Road premises) and H. B. Mole, a nominee of Skurray's.

What objections Janet Dymore Brown raised to these arrangements are not known, but when she died in 1913 (leaving £19,000, with provisions that her daughter-in-law should not be allowed sole charge of the sum) she expressed in her will entire support for any future sale of the business to outsiders. Skurray seems already to have bought 52% of shares and Mole another 15% in both Dymore Brown's and Hewett's and switched share ownerships to such an extent that the companies were united in all but name. In 1913 with the consent of Morland's Board, Ferguson's discontinued brewing (exactly as had been proposed in 1908) and bought its beer at agreed prices from Dymore Brown's; in return Ferguson's were to supply Dymore Brown's with wines and spirits, of which it was then selling about £4,500 worth, some through Hewett's outlets. That was the first instance of the specialisation by Ferguson's which was maintained until recently.

Output at Queens Road rose to an annual average of 15,600 barrels in the three years 1911–1912 to 1913–1914. Having achieved £1,300 profit in 1910–11, it made losses of £81 and £428 respectively in 1911–12 and 1912–13. To be sure, in those years new investment costing over £3,100 was required to replace the obsolescent plant and buildings, and other expenses had to be incurred to fulfil the agreement with Hewett's. Not until 1913–14 were profits restored to £1,260, still not enough to meet the £1,600 royalty payment to Hewett's. During the wartime years Government restrictions led to a slump in output, which even so never fell below 10,000 barrels a year.

By 1923–24 output was at the not too

unsatisfactory level of 10,200 barrels, plus over 1,200 barrels equivalent of bottled beer, and the profit of £2,200 was in real terms—allowing for the fall in the value of money—almost exactly the same as ten years before. It is not quite clear why Skurray should have spent so much time and effort arranging loans, negotiating with debenture holders and generally unravelling the affairs of these various breweries. However, in Dymore Brown's he and H. B. Mole had the fairly heavy total of £3,000 loans outstanding that they had no wish to see lost.

When the 1912 agreement came up for renewal in 1926, Skurray felt confident enough to raise the question of a fresh one with the Board of Morland's. At first the directors proposed that Ferguson's should acquire Dymore Brown's, but then agreed to buy both Dymore Brown's and Hewett's outright. Next year Morland's formally absorbed the two companies. Brewing at Queens Road was to be discontinued but beer would be transported from Abingdon for bottling on the spot. James Dymore Brown IV remained there as manager, responsible also for administering the site as a distribution depot.

Thomas Skurray died in 1938, a few months after the death of H. B. Mole. Then six years later, Morland's became a public company and all its subsidiaries—except Ferguson's Ltd., which became the agent for handling Morland's substantial wine and spirit trade—were wound up. James Dymore Brown IV was appointed a director of Morland's, retiring in 1956; bottling was continued until 1961 at Queens Road, which ceased to be a distribution depot in 1970, the year of his death. His son James Dymore Brown V, born in 1921, had already studied brewing at Birmingham University; he is currently head brewer at Morland's, with a seat on the Board. The 150-year family contact with brewing in Berkshire has thus been maintained.

CONCLUSIONS:

Although not on the grand scale of some giant companies, the history of Dymore

Brown's was eventful enough. As such it provides some lessons which may be of interest to the reader. In particular, the brewery never seems to have enjoyed the preconditions for becoming one of the premier breweries in Berkshire, and its role was always the more modest one altogether of a family firm restricted well within the size that one man could control. It was thus typical of most provincial Victorian enterprise.

Its organisation was largely one of sole ownership, with overlaps at times of elderly father and youngish son. Apart from a very few years in the early 1860s there were never as many as three members of the family all working together, a number large enough to permit specialisation of functions and thus perhaps to provide a springboard for growth. Except in the pioneering stage, a boss on his own seldom has the time or energy for giving attention to all sides of a business at the same time. Nor, apparently, was the brewery large enough to throw up a really able top manager who might have spurred on members of the family in the direction of sustained growth.

Second, the capital was always on a modest scale, and borrowing or the issue of shares outside the family was not considered. On the marketing side, although much careful planning took place before the move to Queens Road in the 1850s, there was no attempt to take advantage of the brewery's position in east Reading, particularly by establishing or buying up public houses or even taking over some old brewery with a large string of tied houses. The policy of relying overmuch on the private trade of farmers and others whose demand was bound to decline over the years was revealed with the passage of time to have been short-sighted.

Third, throughout the brewery trade of the early twentieth century—in Berkshire as elsewhere—there was too much productive capacity in relation to the current demand. Just as in the previous century the retail brewer, producing and selling on the spot, had been squeezed out by the common brewer who produced for a variety of outlets, so thereafter the small independent brewer became

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vulnerable as the production and marketing economies of scale increased with new brewing techniques and improved methods of transport. Such excess capacity could only be remedied by the extinction or 'rationalisation' of many smaller and therefore less efficient units, and that is what Thomas Skurray concerned himself with in the years up to 1918.

Although it could be argued that more adventurous capital-raising, investment and marketing policies could have put the brewery in a stronger position to withstand its more powerful competitors from the late 1900s onwards, the progress towards fewer and larger units in the brewing trade was so remorseless that the question was not if, but when, the Dymore Brown brewery would find itself absorbed or even put out of business altogether. That progress did not halt until within Berkshire (as constituted until 1974)

only Simonds—now part of the Courage (itself within the Imperial) group—and Morland's have survived. Yet the smaller units are part of Berkshire's heritage, and it does no harm to recall their existence from time to time.

Note: I am very grateful to Mr J. Dymore Brown, director and head brewer, and Mr B. G. Harrington, estates manager, of Morland & Co. Ltd., Abingdon, for making available the surviving archives and for giving up much time to discussing this topic, and to the Director of Technical Services, Reading Borough Council, who kindly provided up-to-date information about the brewery site. I would also like to thank the staffs of Reading Public Libraries, Reference Section, and of the Berkshire Record Office, without whose devoted services local research of this kind could never be successfully concluded.