

Barley, malt and beer

The Whilton Local History Society met on 3rd November 2011, for an illustrated talk on barley, malt and beer.

Records of a 1388 investigation show that the lord of Whilton Manor had stores of malt in his granary and was growing more barley than any other cereal, some no doubt destined for brewing. The best malt for brewing ale came from barley, which grew well in Whilton.

Some people were very suspicious when hops were first introduced from the Continent. Andrew Boorde, an Englishman, wrote in 1557 "... *Beere is made of malte, of hoppes, and water, it is a naturall drynke for a doche [Dutch] man, and nowe of late dayes it is moche vsed in Englande to the detryment of many Englysshe men for the drynke is a colde drynke. Yet it doth make a man fatte, and doth inflate the bely, as it doth appere by the doche mennes faces and belyes.*" Eventually hops became accepted and records show hops being bought for brewing in Whilton by the early 18th century.

The essential ingredient for malt is grain, and the best grain is barley. 16th and 17th century Whilton farmers were making their own malt, and their wives brewing the beer for consumption by their families and labourers. A malt house and brewery would have been part of their farm buildings.

After soaking in a steeping vat, the swollen grain was drained and transferred to a vessel called a couch, where it began to germinate. It was then spread out on the growing floor, the depth dictated by the temperature, but sufficiently deep to encourage vegetation. It was turned at intervals to achieve even growth and over the next fortnight or so it was turned and moved towards the kiln. Temperature was also controlled by ventilation. As the germination proceeded, the grain was spread thinner on the floor.

Once dried, the barley was moved into the kiln, for a few days. A slow fire was used to start, and then gradually raised to suit the purpose of the malt and the desired colour. Malt was stored for a few months to develop flavour. The art of malting depended on adapting to changes in weather and temperature, and in timing the different processes as the grain changed. Barley does not germinate well in high temperatures, and so malt houses were mainly in action during the winter, which was also a time when agricultural workers needed employment.

Because the process involved control of the fire beneath the malt, there were always some hazards. This probably explains why John Dunkley, a maltster who rented the kiln and part of what is now Holly House in 1735, included in his lease a "*bedsted and bedding belonging to it*", so that he could keep an eye on the process during the night. An additional hazard was that the kiln was thatched. We know that in 1748 Thomas Facer charged 18 shillings for three loads of straw to thatch this kiln.

While the grain was being roasted, it rested on a hair cloth to prevent it dropping onto the furnace below. In 1635 yeoman William Langton, who owned a malt kiln in Whilton, left "*the steeping fatt and haire cloth belonging to my kilne*" to his son, William. This may have been the kiln purchased sometime before 1591 by Thomas Langton the Elder when he acquired a homestead with kiln and barns from Sam Lynnell. By the end of the 1700s, farmers were beginning to buy malt from professional maltsters, such as the Barkers of Holly House, but farmers' wives continued to be the brewers. George Judkins of Roughmoor left his brewing vessels to his wife in 1802, as did Thomas Emery in 1842.

But there was change in the wind. The Plough was originally a private house, but by 1786 the tenant was William Moss, who besides being a tailor, was brewing beer there and was described as a publican too. By the 1830s it was "known by the sign of the Plough," and Joseph Emery was innkeeper. Brewing continued here until Phipps the brewers took over in mid Victorian times, bringing an end to Whilton brewing.

It may seem surprising, but the 1841 census records four public houses in Whilton: the Plough, the Spotted Cow at the Locks, which also served the canal, the Wheatsheaf in Brington Lane, and the Mill, which probably provided refreshment for the miller's customers. The publican was his elderly

mother aged 84. Other publicans had second or even third occupations and did not rely on the pub for their whole livelihood.

In addition, Whilton had a short lived off licence. Sometimes before 1901 the Stone House acquired an "outdoor beer licence". In 1913, the house was put up for sale. The auction was held in the Plough and the house was bought by Phipps the brewers, who cannot have enjoyed the competition from down the road. As a result there is a codicil in the Stone House modern deeds, stating beer may not be sold from the house.

After the war country pubs began to decline, although the Plough and the Spotted Cow survived into the 1950s. There is a codicil to the story of pubs in Whilton, because there was an attempt to create a new one. The Bannaventa pub was built by David Steele in 1975 on the site of the old farmhouse at the Locks. Its history was not happy and it failed to attract locals or passing trade. It closed in 1991 to become the Whilton Locks Carpet Centre, a rather dismal end to the story.

Within the last year Whilton-grown barley has stopped being used for brewing, and so this marks the end of a long tradition in the parish.