

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - June 2010

Brakspear Brewery

Michael Parsons, the former Managing Director, gave a fascinating illustrated talk on Brakspear Brewery to the Wargrave Local History Society.

Michael's pictures were an interesting mix of archive photographs and those of the site today - still quite recognisable. He had joined Brakspear in February 1974. W H Brakspear was described as a 'perfect country brewery' - with 124 public houses and 3 shops, and even a 'cash and carry', and at the time the firm was enjoying a very high profile.

This had arisen as a result of articles in the Guardian, 'Boston on Beer'. Keg beers, such as Watneys Red Barrel, were sweeping the country, and pushing out traditional cask conditioned beers. Richard Boston attacked this 'Red Revolution' and went on to mention the fledgling Campaign for Real Ale. This did a lot of good for Brakspear, with sales rising, not least in London, where previously their brewery output only served the area within the radius that could be served by a horse and dray from Henley. Richard Boston was not only attracted by the beer, but also the lovely old brewery buildings and its pubs.

Most of these pubs were tenanted at that time, but a new venture 'Tabard Inns', had been started by Michael Chalcraft. This was to have managed houses, aiming to realise a profit from food as well as drink sales, and make best use of a valuable asset - the pub itself. Many of the tenants did indeed produce first class food - although some took a simple view of catering - one would 'make a pile of sandwiches on a Friday' - and declare 'they were all gone by Monday'. Sadly, the profits were not as high as expected from this venture.

Although Brakspear was doing well in 1974, there were problems ahead. The sales of lager had risen from 1% of the market in 1961 to 16% in 1974, taking sales from cask conditioned beers. Lager sales were to rise to 74%, although real ale has had a resurgence, and is now 21% of a declining market. The other major problem was the massive valuation that had been put on the public houses. It was considered essential to provide a good return on this capital. Some pubs were being run by people who had other jobs, and others by retirees. The need arose, therefore to close uneconomic pubs and to increase the rent on others. This upset some people - elderly Mrs Mace at The Horns in Crazies Hill shut herself in when faced with a rise of 33% in her rent, and said she 'did not want to see him' when Michael called. Although the brewery's motives were questioned, if they had not addressed the problem, someone else would have done, by way of a takeover.

There were several bids to acquire Brakspear. A property speculator had made an unwelcome approach in 1962, and this led to William Brakspear and John Chalcraft approaching Whitbread, who bought enough shares to avert the problem. In return, Whitbread had a director on the board, and Brakspear were required to stock Mackeson stout. Whitbread made a bid to take over completely in 1973, but Brakspear were determined to continue their own way. Further bids followed from Trumans, in 1980, and Morlands in 1986. Sadly, Morlands has also now closed, as have other local brewers Morrells and Wethered (and Whitbread themselves no longer brew beer).

Within the brewery, much looked as it had done since the early 1900s - gas lights in the front office had been replaced, but the mahogany counters and glass screens remained. But although it may have seemed a 'sleepy company', it was forward thinking behind the scenes - a large computer was installed (and the service was offered to other local firms) - even if the board did not immediately embrace the project! With

the aid of old photographs, the basic processes in the brewery were then shown. The malt hoisted to the top of the building, and from there wherever possible gravity was used - each major stage being at a lower level than the previous one. The large steam copper had a capacity of 120 barrels, and once the yeast was added the beer would drop to the fermenting room. The beer would then be put into wooden casks, from which the bottles were filled (a 'messy process') and left to come 'into condition' - a secondary fermentation taking place. The brewery made their own malt until 1972 - the malthouse built in 1900 replacing an earlier one off Bell Street. It was a vertically integrated company, providing all that were needed with its own stables (later garages) and building department - they could even build a pub, had their own signwriters, electricians etc.

In 1979, the firm celebrated its bicentenary, with several special events and the publishing of a company history. It had been founded by Robert Brakspear - then aged 19, from Witney - who had joined Richard Hayward at the Bell Street brewery. Robert had to run the brewery by 'his own observations' - of which he made detailed notes. He used scientific aids, such as a thermometer and hydrometer to test the beer. In 1812 the firm moved to the present site in New Street, when it merged with the Sarney brewery. Robert died later the same year, and had no obvious successor, but his youngest son, William Henry, took over when he reached the age of 21, in 1823. He became 'one of Henley's oldest and most respected townsmen'. He brought in many improvements, but was a 'very tough chap indeed'. His Fines Book survives - 1/- for being 'drunk on the premises' or for being 'too late in the morning'. W H Brakspear died in 1882, and his sons Archibald and George took over, but this was not a good time for the company, and marked the move from the family as the managers to them just being the owners. They did however develop the brewery, adding for example a new fire copper in 1893. John Chalcraft joined the company in 1914, becoming head brewer, and later the first company chairman who was not a member of the family. A new distribution yard was opened in 1986, but otherwise there was little changed until brewing ceased in 1992. By that stage, sales of beer to the tied trade was in decline, the free trade was selling at massive discounts, and the value of the New Street site could not be ignored, and so the making of beer was put out to contract. Some of the equipment was relocated to the Wychwood brewery at Witney, where the Brakspear beers continue to be made.

Members were able to take home a sample of the present-day brew, thanks to the kindness of the present day owners of the Brakspear brand .

The next event is on Wednesday, July 7th, when the Society will have a private visit to the Science Museum large exhibit store and archives at Wroughton. After the summer break, we meet again on Tuesday, September 14th when Marshall Barr, chairman of the Berkshire Medical Heritage Centre, will tell us about the history of The Royal Berkshire Hospital. Then on Tuesday, October 12th the topic will be The Robert Piggott Junior School, when David Poynter will recount some of his memories as Headmaster there.