

Saving the Past: The rescue of the Allied Breweries Archive

This is an overview the work done by Ray Anderson and Mike Brown in saving the Allied Brewery Archive. An appendix is available to indicate the whereabouts of the material rescued.

The Brewery History Society (BHS) has been instrumental in ensuring that the archive of a company that once billed itself as the “biggest drinks company in Europe” was saved from destruction. Here Ray Anderson and Mike Brown recount what was involved.

The Strongrooms

Early in 1860 Samuel Allsopp & Sons opened their New Brewery in Station Street, Burton upon Trent. Henry Allsopp, the senior partner, proudly proclaimed it to have a greater capacity than any single brewery in England. In the basement of the splendid building which fronted onto the railway was a storage area, 170 yards long, 40 yards wide and capable of holding up to 30,000 casks. Some eighty years later, shortly before the outbreak of World War II, a suite of strongrooms was constructed at one end of this massive space. The only access to the strongrooms was through a locked door on the ground floor and down a narrow stone staircase. This led to an outer chamber from which two rooms and a larger caged area, all locked, extended. The caged area in turn led through to a walk-in safe fronted by a twelve inch thick steel door behind which were two further rooms and at its heart another locked cage containing the most sensitive documents. In this secure vault were collected together the minute books, title deeds, property records, ledgers etc not only of then extant companies but also of ancestor breweries and many of the companies that had been taken over. Over the next sixty years the strongrooms were the major depository for the records of what became Allied Breweries Ltd.

The Rise and Fall of Allied Breweries

In order to understand why the records came under threat and obtain an idea of the scope of the archive some background on the companies involved is necessary.

Allsopps had merged with its neighbours Ind Coope in 1934. By the time they merged, both companies had weathered periods of financial ruin and reconstruction and prospered sufficiently to take over a number of other brewers. Amongst notable acquisitions by Allsopps had been Showell's Brewery, Oldbury (1914), The New Victoria Brewery, Plymouth (1920), Hall's Oxford Brewery (1925), Stretton's Derby Brewery (1927), Archibald Arrol & Sons, Alloa (1930) and The Lichfield Brewery (1930). Ind Coope had in turn acquired a similar number of other brewers including Burton rivals Bindley & Co (1914), Robinson's Brewery (1920) and Burton Brewery Co (1927) together with Woolfs Ltd, Crewe (1923), Colchester Brewery Co (1925), All Saint's Brewery, Leicester (1929), Budden & Biggs, Stroud (1931) and Leeds City Brewery (1931).

After 1945 the company became increasingly acquisitive and grew rapidly. Purchases included Aylesbury Brewery (1947), Parker's Burslem Brewery (1949), Wrexham Lager Brewery (1949), Lonsdale & Adshead, Macclesfield (1950), Trouncer & Co, Shrewsbury (1952), Benskins Watford Brewery (1957), Taylor Walker, London (1959). By the end of the 1950s Ind Coope (the Allsopp name was dropped in 1959) had accumulated a large tied estate (c. 5,200 pubs) and developed its bottled Double Diamond into a national brand. In 1961, in a move which brought together three of the ten largest UK brewers, Edward Thompson, chairman of Ind Coope, persuaded two strong but docile regional companies, Tetley Walker and Ansells, to join his dynamic national company.

The new company was by any measure easily the biggest brewer in the UK and, in terms of assets, because of its considerable property holdings, the largest brewing group in the world at the time. It

had twelve breweries, owned 11 percent of the UK's pubs and through reciprocal trading agreements and the free trade, supplied 48 percent of total outlets including hotels, clubs and off-licences. The name Allied Breweries was adopted in 1963 and the company continued to expand acquiring Friary Meux, Guildford and Thomas Ramsden, Halifax in 1964 by which time it operated 14 breweries, 125 hotels, 8,575 on-licenses and 1,780 off-licenses and wine shops. The massive company was initially successful, but after it started to diversify its activities in the late 1960s it lost ground as a brewer. Showerings, Vine Products & Whiteways were acquired in 1968 and J Lyons & Co (ice cream, tea, coffee, cakes, catering, motor vehicles and meat products) in 1978. Renamed Allied-Lyons in 1981 and Allied Domecq in 1994 the company grew ever larger as it absorbed food and drink companies both in the UK and internationally. Widely seen as unwieldy and under-performing by the end of the 1980s, the company was dismembered during the 1990s. Cider, perry, British wines, speciality drinks and Lyons Maid ice cream had all gone by February 1992. Divestment of brewing interests took a little longer.

After separating the pubs from production in the wake of the Beer Orders of 1989 which restricted pub ownership by brewers, Allied off-loaded a 50 percent stake in its breweries to Carlsberg in 1993 to form Carlsberg-Tetley. But Carlsberg's sacerdotal self-regard sat uneasily with Allied's worldly pragmatism and the joint venture floundered. An attempt to merge Carlsberg-Tetley with Bass in 1997 was blocked by the government but as a consequence Allied was able to achieve its aim and dispose of its remaining stake in the ailing company to Carlsberg.

By the end of the century Carlsberg-Tetley had only two breweries, Leeds and Northampton. The Burton brewery had been sold to Bass - or at least most of it had. Bass did not want the old Allsopp building which had long been converted into offices and Carlsberg-Tetley continued as its owners. Allied Domecq Retailing, the Allied pub company, remained in the building as tenants of Carlsberg-Tetley but, following a particularly poor set of results, the pubs were sold to Punch Taverns plc in 1999 in a final break with Allied's brewing past.

The Problem

So it was that Carlsberg-Tetley Brewing Ltd inherited the breweries and the brands whereas Punch inherited the pubs of the once mighty Allied empire. Punch continued to occupy the Burton offices of Allied Domecq Retailing and the new company became tenants of Carlsberg-Tetley. Then in early 2002 Carlsberg-Tetley sold the offices to a property developer and Punch Taverns prepared to move out. What was to become of the archive still sitting in the basement?

Allied, alone amongst major accumulators of brewing companies in the UK, had never employed an archivist or made any arrangements for professional attention to be given to its archives. For many years the material had been looked after by a retired member of staff from the estates department, Reginald Carrington-Porter, who came in twice a week to pick up any queries there had been with regard to the archive and try and answer them. It was Reg who looked after the occasional visitors to the archive. That the archive had retained its integrity so well over the years was a credit to Reg, but now in his mid-80s, he had stopped coming in. Corporate indifference had left a vacuum. It was at this stage, mid-April 2002, that the Company Secretary of Punch, Richard Bell, who was on the verge of retirement, approached the Brewery History Society for advice. As a long-time Allied man Richard was keen on a personal level to see the archive survive.

The Rescue

The accumulated material in the strongrooms was clearly at risk but who owned it? There were at least three possible claimants i.e. Allied Domecq, Carlsberg-Tetley and Punch. Fortunately the position had been clarified a year earlier. In the Spring of 2001 Carlsberg-Tetley, in anticipation of the sale of the building and after some prompting, had commissioned a broad-brush survey of the contents of the archive. It became clear in the course of this survey that the overwhelming bulk of the material actually belonged to Punch. Punch were the successors of Allied Domecq Retailing who had

retained legal title to many of the component companies and their records when Allied Domecq plc sold the brewery buildings and brands to Carlsberg-Tetley. But Punch had no use for these dusty archives: they merely wanted the strongrooms cleared. Punch were shortly to vacate the building for good leaving it to their newly de-merged managed house company the Spirit Group. They would give access to the archive and allow material to be removed, but that was as far as they were prepared to go. How was this unique collection of records to be saved?

Initial thoughts were to try as far as possible to keep the archive together as an entity. But this was soon found to be impracticable. There was nowhere able or willing to take it. It would be necessary to split up the archive and disperse it around record offices, archives, museums and libraries. But with the nominal owners unwilling at this stage to offer any financial assistance and with so much material to be sorted this was a daunting task. Some figures will give an idea of the scale. In the basement strong rooms 54 filing cabinets, 6 chests, 7 cupboards, 163 deed/cardboard boxes and c. 120 metres of shelving were found to house archive material. The material filled up the rooms, cluttering the floors and leaving little room to begin sorting. Where to begin?

Salvation came in the shape of the Bass Museum. From the broad-brush survey report on the archive the museum curator, Diana Lay, and the Keeper of Documentation, Liz Press, were able to list those items that came within the scope of the Bass Museum i.e. just about everything that was to do with Burton. This material amounted to around 10-15 percent of the total archive contents. Material destined for the museum was marked up and on 17th July 2002 the museum van and a team of helpers whisked it away leaving some space to breathe. The museum's help did not end there. With the closure of breweries and offices around the country Allied's strong rooms had eventually been too small to accommodate everything sent to Burton. Overspill material had been housed elsewhere and some 76 deed boxes were now languishing in the old Allsopp ale stores adjacent to the strongrooms. This material was in immediate danger. It had been earmarked for destruction through a "misunderstanding" and indeed on inspection six of the boxes were found to be empty. This followed the previous disappearance, noted at the time of the broad-brush survey, of the entire contents of a room full of accounting, production and sales records sometime between 1997 and 2001. Further destruction of records had been stopped but the material in the old ale stores was obviously not secure and needed a new home quickly. Very kindly Liz Press provided us with a room in the Bass Museum to house the material safely until we had time to sort it and even sent along a van to collect it.

After these early frantic weeks the pattern of work in the archive settled into a routine involving stacking the dusty books, ledgers, documents, deeds etc into more or less neat piles arranged by proposed destination. After weeks of doing this some sort of order was achieved and packaging began, limited by the number of boxes which could be found. Deliveries to record offices then began having first cleared with them their willingness to take the material. Laden with yet another box of records hauled up from the basement, Ray and Mike became recognisable figures in the relatively plush Spirit Group offices as they shuffled back and forth to their cars dressed in old, often dust covered, clothes which contrasted sharply with the smart casual business dress now the norm for the fresh faced young business executive.

Some loads were too big to fit into cars and a van and driver was contracted to make the deliveries to Glasgow, London, Leeds and West Malling. Hertfordshire record office, through the good offices of the BHS Treasurer David Dines even sent their own van to make the collection. Smaller loads went by post as the cheapest option available, particularly when the more thoughtful record offices refunded the cost of postage. The work stretched on in fits and starts for months. By mid December over 90 percent of the material had been found a new home in 40 or so different record offices etc. With the remaining material in no immediate danger activities were suspended until after Christmas. So much for complacency.

On the afternoon Tuesday 11th February 2003 the administrative manager of the Spirit Group phoned with the information that, on the following Thursday, she had arranged for contractors to come and

throw out anything that still remained in the strong rooms. Two days of frantic activity followed with the last of the material being moved elsewhere for safe keeping. Most of the piles of old books and deeds ended up in Ray's dining room where their arrival was tolerated rather than welcomed by his wife Marjorie. Over the next few months order was gradually restored as the material was packaged and despatched around the country. Wales proved particularly taxing in correlating the old Welsh counties with the new when deciding the right destination for pub deeds. The last delivery of all, c. 6000 transparencies of pubs taken in the 1960s/70s, was made to the National Monuments Record Centre in Swindon on 13th June 2003.

The Result

It had taken over a year to save the archive but it had been worth it. An estimated 7.5 tons of records were deposited in 70 different places. The records are now more freely available than they ever were in the Allied strong rooms. With the exception of the material sent to the Bass Museum, which at the museum's request is on a loan basis, all the material has been handed over as a gift, identifying Punch as the donors through the BHS acting as their agents. There can be no doubt that the archive would not have survived without the BHS. The Society provided the driving force in the rescue, put the money up front to hire the van for the large loads and for the postage of the many parcels. In March 2003 Punch donated £500 to the Society in recognition of our efforts, although still maintaining that "...we just wanted to clear our strongroom".

Amongst the recipients of relatively large amounts of records, the London Metropolitan Archive, Derbyshire Record Office and the Essex Record Offices have completed the necessary cataloguing, others are not so far forward. At the Bass Museum a handlist of the records deposited there has been prepared and full cataloguing will proceed as time allows. All of the records, with the exception of a rolling 20 year embargo on the Allied Breweries minute books held at the Bass Museum, have been deposited with unrestricted access.

We have produced an Appendix that lists the various locations where material from the former Allied archive is now held.