

Two East London breweries

interviews recorded and transcribed by Dr Denis Smith

I. The Albion Brewery, Whitechapel Road : Frank Gibbins

The Albion Brewery was established by James Mann in Whitechapel, east London, in 1807, when the following advertisement appeared:

"ALBION BREWERY At a meeting of select friends, it was decided to establish a Brewery, under the above title, with a view to amending the Public's Beverage and at the same time to reduce the price."

James Mann was succeeded by his son, also called James, who in 1846 took into partnership an experienced brewer Robert Crossman. They were joined a few years later by Thomas Paulin, who had worked with Crossman at the Isleworth Brewery. The company traded as Mann, Crossman and Paulin, and comprised the Albion Brewery and five beer-houses. In 1850 they expanded a little by acquiring six further beer-houses. In the mid-19th century London's breweries were significant companies. John Weale observed "The Breweries of the Metropolis may be considered as amongst its most important manufacturing establishments, whether in reference to the capital employed, to the extent of their premises, or to the age of the eight great establishments known as the London porter breweries" (1). In the 1870s the company expanded further, and there was a change in the nature of the business. This was a period of economic prosperity in Britain. The company built a new brewery at Burton-on-Trent, and the Albion Brewery, which until then had brewed porter changed to mild ale. They introduced the first bottled brown ale in 1899. Mann, Crossman and Paulin merged with Watney Combe Reid & Co. in 1958 to form Watney Mann (2).

Frank Gibbins was born in 1906. He served his engineering apprenticeship with W H de Ritter & Co between 1921 and 1927, joining the Albion Brewery two years later. Frank Gibbins was appointed charge-hand fitter in 1937, and foreman engineer a year later.

Latterly he was Plant Superintendent, retiring in 1971. The interview was recorded in his office at the Brewery on 27 May 1971.

"I started in the brewery 1929, of course in those days the power was all steam...which provided the power throughout the brewery for the various drives - it was transmitted through heavy steel shafting and gearing -iron gears and mortise wheels in pairs, the mortise wheels of course were to reduce the noise on the gears, these were fitted with wooden teeth made of hornbeam and it provided the power

for the mash tuns, the mills for grinding the malt, the hoists for taking the malt up to the malt stores, hop stores, in fact everything was really driven by steam."

"The wooden teeth in the gearing was fitted into slots on the periphery of the wheels and the shank of the tooth was fitted into these pockets and fixed by a pin underneath."

"The steam engines which were the main source of power was a beam engine by Kittoe & Brotherhood in 1867 and a horizontal engine - Robert Morton in 1872." The beam engine, built in London, had a cylinder of 28in diameter and developed about 90hp. The beam, 13ft 6in long, was supported by four Doric columns 10in diameter and 8ft 6in high. The engine was removed for preservation in 1978. The horizontal engine, built in Stockton-on-Tees, had a 24in diameter cylinder (3). "These at the time I arrived at the brewery were run for about six to twelve months each in turn. We used to do all our own maintenance on these engines. The speed of these engines was thirty revs per minute on the main crankshaft, and there were about fifty pairs of bevel wheels, or gear wheels, to transmit it to various sections. Another interesting steam engine we had was on our artesian well, which is approximately two hundred and fifty feet deep, and that was driven by a twin engine - condensing set, and there were three buckets down at the bottom of the well, we used to get approximately two hundred and fifty barrels an hour - we say barrels in the brewery whether we are talking about beer or liquor - which is what water is in a brewery."

"Some years after the war the engine was taken out and we bring the water, or liquor, up now by submersible pump."

"Of course we have always had a fairly extensive maintenance staff here of fitters, and mates, coppersmiths, blacksmiths, welders. In fact we were always able to do most of the repair work ourselves, not that the main engine ever entailed very much work, except on one occasion many years ago when the [15 ft diameter] flywheel on the beam engine came loose on the shaft - we had to make a repair job in the weekend by turning [i.e. milling] the boss [on] the flywheel down on either side and fitting a split steel coupling so that it gripped the boss of the flywheel and the shaft, and to this day this has never moved again. Its very rare of course we use it now, in fact ... we can't for work, but if we have visitors around they like to see the engine running and ... that is when we do run it. But for work of course all the old shafting and everything like that has been

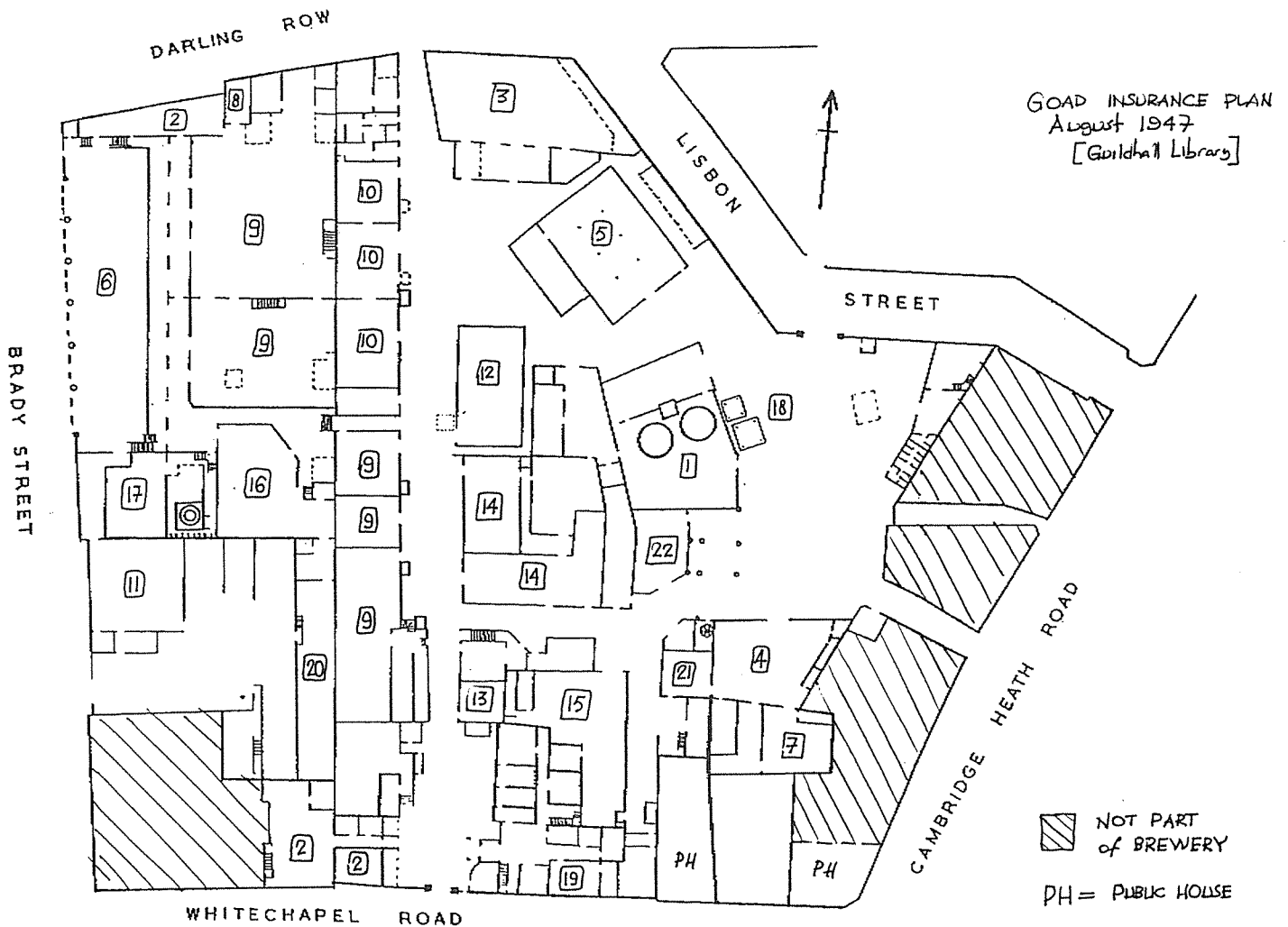


Fig 1. Plan of Albion Brewery (from 1947 Insurance Plan)

1. Boiling Coppers 2. Offices 3. Keg Sterilising 4. Fitter's Shop 5. Continuous Brew House
6. Beer Stores/Loading Bank 7. Carpenter's Shop 8. Plumber's Shop 9. Fermenting Vats 10. Sugar Store
11. Boiler House 12. Silo 13. Canteen 14. Malt Store (Ground) Engine Room (1st) Mash Tun Room (2nd)
15. Porter Store (Vats & Barrels) 16. CO₂ Plant 17. Refrigerators 18. Spent Hop Tanks 19. Kitchen
20. Electrician's Shop 21. Smithy 22. Malt Store.



Plate 1. Frank Gibbins

dismantled and now everything has got its own independent electric drive."

"... We had five boilers in those days on what we called the intermediate pressure of sixty pounds per square inch which these engines ran at. There were another three boilers in another house which used to run at a hundred - that was for air compressors - we had steam air compressors, and then another three boilers over in the barrel washing department, which was a very busy department washing the wooden kegs, these have now disappeared, beer is nowadays put in the steel [sic] kegs - aluminium kegs. Of course, in the days of the wooden barrel we had a very large cooperage staff here who were continually making barrels and repairing the old ones."

"When these mortise wheels required re-toothings we used to get them done by a firm in Millwall, the name of Hunt, who I don't know whether they are still in existence, they had the necessary machinery for cutting these wooden

teeth." E Hunt & Co, engineers, were based at Mellish Street, Millwall, until 1939 (4).

"Of course, there have been some vast changes in my forty odd years in the brewing industry, particularly with this filtration, sterilisation and that sort of thing of beer today. I served my apprenticeship at W H de Ritter's in Limehouse, as a fitter and pattern-maker". W H de Ritter & Co Ltd, mechanical engineers, had premises at 41 Three Colt Street, until the early 1970s (5). "I came to the brewery as a fitter in the first place but after a few weeks the old pattern-maker was pensioned off and I was asked to do the job. We used of course, if we had any breakages or any maintenance required new castings, we used to make our own patterns, send (to) the foundry, get the castings and we'd do our own machining."

Although brewing no longer takes place at the Albion Brewery, it is used as offices by the Watney group, and the attractive exterior has been renovated.

II. The Essex Brewery, St James Street, Walthamstow : Fred Weares

William Hawes established a brewery in St James Street, Walthamstow in 1859. It was taken over by the Essex Brewery Company, of which Hawes became a director, in 1872, and by Collier Brothers in 1874. The building was extended that year by the addition of a public house, the Essex Brewery Tap (Plates 2 & 3). In addition to providing employment and refreshment, the Brewery fulfilled other social needs. Women living near the Essex Brewery were allowed to fetch boiling water from the brewery on their washing days; this was apparently not an unusual custom (6).

The Essex Brewery was bought by Tollemache and Cobbold in 1922, to break into the London trade, a move strongly opposed by competitors. They already had breweries in Cambridge, and Ipswich, their headquarters (7).

Fred Weares joined the Essex Brewery just after the Second World War, c1946, remaining until it closed in 1971. The interview was recorded in his fruit and vegetable shop, Boundary Road, Walthamstow, on 3 December 1974.

"Well, I worked there for twenty six years, and my father before me worked there for forty eight, - I'm not sure the length of my grandfather's time, but it was a fortnight after the brewery actually opened - always been engineers all the way through the family like, you know - followed on, one tradition after the other."

"... one had to maintain the plants, steam raising plant, bottling plant, brewing plant. - A rough guide on brewing, it was roughly right to the time of their closing they were still brewing what one would say on the old fashion way, except round about fourteen years ago [c1960] they introduced a redox system, where after the beer was brewed

instead of going into hogsheads - stored that way, bottling from that, it was introduced into a tank system which was a brine-jacketed tanks, and obviously speeded the process up ..."

"The raw materials, taking hops as such, the brewers used to go down to the hop fields in the autumn to select their hops, which were purchased on site, stored into cold stores at Tottenham, and drawn off as required throughout their necessary needs. Their malt was done the same way ... they bought from the fields and then it went processed ... from barley into malt, and that was drawn on as required from the maltsters. "In its heyday the Brewery employed "... approximately roundabout the hundred and twenty - forty on transport, sixty would have worked in the bottling department, brewery only employed about six, which was a very small staff but that was all that was required. Engineering roughly covered about eight, which included some stokers, and then you had six personnel working in the cellars - which I haven't counted in, there was about fifteen office staff." "... now water in a brewery, which is a crime to use the word water, it's water while its underground but directly it reaches the surface it's then known as liquor - ... there was two artesian wells, one Baker's one Potter's - they got their name through the people who actually bored their wells. Both wells are bored to three hundred and eighty feet into the chalk - and just for a bit of information the water level actually was a hundred and twenty feet standing, and then when pumps were running it used to drop to the hundred and sixty foot level. They were pumped straight up to a storage tank at the top of the brewery ..."



Plate 2. Essex Brewery and Brewery Tap c1890. Note the tower, and sack hoist on the left, the advert for porter, and the wagonettes perhaps for a works outing. (Photo Vestry House Museum)

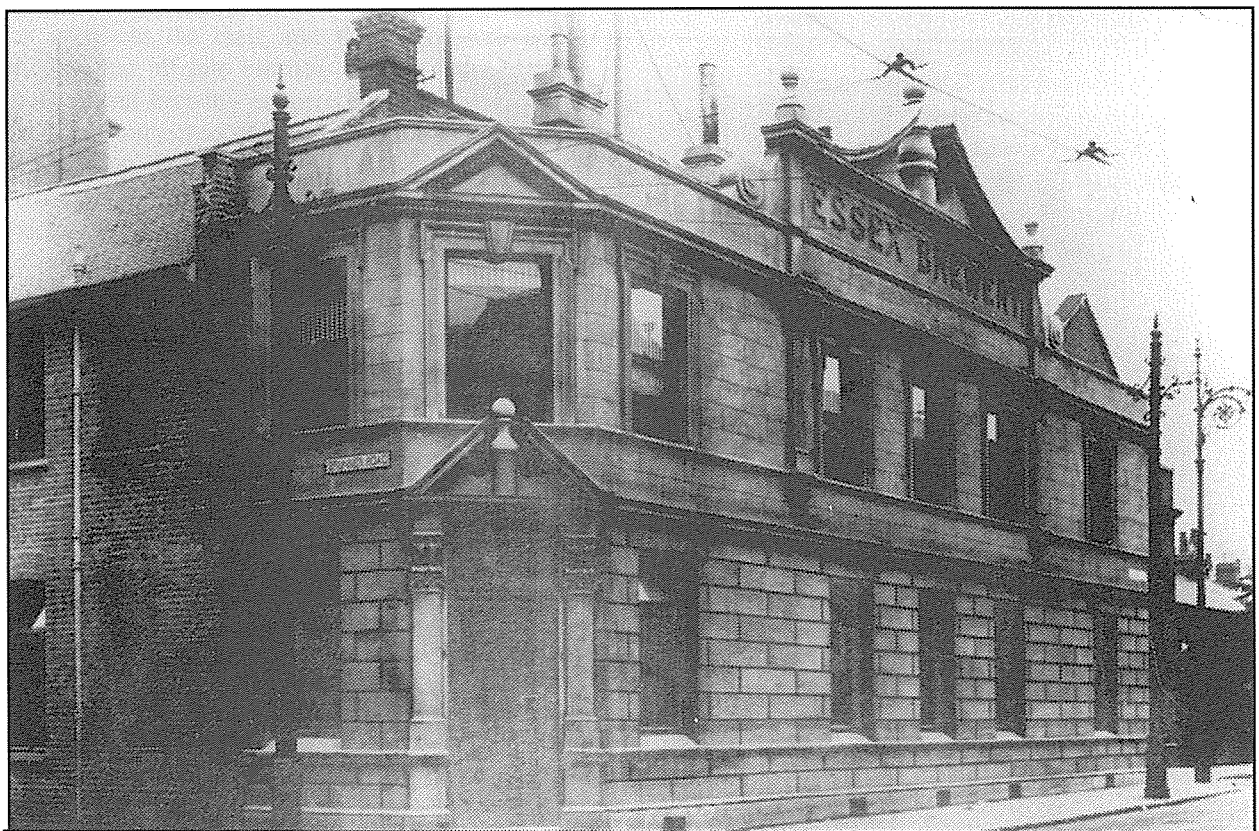


Plate 3. The former Brewery Tap c1904, altered and turned into offices after 1890. The rural scene has been overtaken by urban expansion including the tram. (Photo Vestry House Museum)



Plate 4 The Brunner Road elevation of the Brewery. The tower and sack hoist of the early building are surrounded by later extensions. (Photo D Smith 1972)

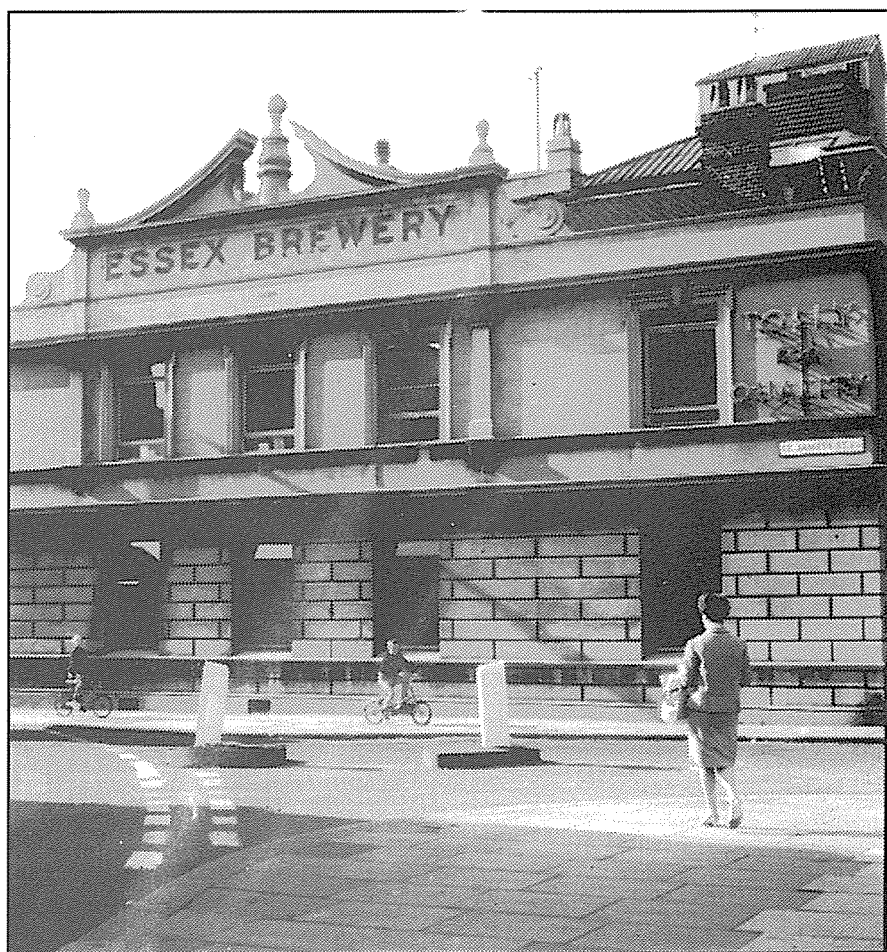


Plate 5. The St James's Street offices, very similar to their c1904 appearance, a few years before demolition. (Photo D Smith 1972)

"Now, to come onto the fact of steam, many years ago right back in the early twenties they used to generate their own electricity, which they supplied to Everett's bakers and quite a lot of shops in James Street. Then, time passing by, that was done away with, and from about 1948 we had ... two thirty foot Lancashire boilers installed, fitted with mechanical stokers. After so many years that was removed, we went back to hand firing. Then we switched over to chain grate stoking, which was back to mechanical again, and then ... just before we closed we went over on to oil firing."

"On the side of the building no doubt you see that we had a hoist ... where the lorries used to pull up for unloading their hops and malt - very old piece of machinery really - couldn't really tell you the date of it, it was a wire on a drum and the brake actually used to be a wooden brake on it (Plate 4). In my time it was driven by electric motors but, of course, going back many years ago it was steam driven, and ... the lorries used to just pull up underneath it and everything was pulled up such as malt and hops ... also their brewing sugar went up that way."

"On the brewing side they roughly used to brew about a hundred and fifty barrels a day, as the market trends required that quantity."

"They brewed more than one sort of beer; the beers they were brewing was a light Tolly, which the brewery was famous for, a light bitter, a brown ale, and a stout. The rough process of it - I'll give you a guide - once the malt was ground and up the top, so it was passed into a mash tun, this is where the malt and the liquor was added together, then run off into brewing coppers - the brewery had two 80 barrel brewing coppers, boiled approximately hour and a half, subject to whatever beer was being brewed that particular day, then run off into what they called a "hop back" where all the hops and that settled which caused a filter plate for them - run off into a fridge. From the fridge it would cool it down to roughly about a temperature of about seventy - then it would be known as beer - 'cos

incidentally before it reaches the fridge its known as "sweet wort". Thereby it would ferment, yeast would be added in the fermenting vessels, there it would go through its process for a couple of days, the heads would be skimmed, and then the process, laying into the vats would continue for another seven days. After which it was drawn off, either as draught beer or passed on to redox tanks ... ready for bottling."

"You may wonder what conditions were like at work, and it was an old building, but it had atmosphere and "charm" - if one can use that word about it, because groups of families carrying on through the years, that sort of made a happy atmosphere there, and, I think, you know, its really missed by most people ... "

Brewing at the Essex Brewery ceased after 112 years in December 1971, though it was used for bottling beer brought from Ipswich for a further two years (Plate 5) (8). The brewery has been demolished.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Mr Roger Colori, Vestry House Museum, London Borough of Waltham Forest for information about the history of the Essex Brewery.

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