

Cymdeithas Hanesyddol Tyddewi a Phebidog St Davids and Dewisland Historical Society

A Brief Look at Alehouse History and Names Michael Marshman

In Medieval Britain vast quantities of ale were consumed, by all members of society (with records showing regular consumption of **a gallon of ale** per day) as it was an important source of nutrition! The lack of Manorial and Quarter Session records means there is little archive evidence available for Wales – unlike England - but when 1188 King Henry II decided to tax malt liquor to fund his crusade to the Holy Land Gerald of Wales began his *Itinerarium Cambriae* in which he refers to the edict of St David (who drank only water) in which he decreed that there should be 15 days penance for drunkenness through ignorance, 40 days for drunkenness through negligence but 120 days (3 quantains - origin of 'quarantine') for drunkenness through contempt!

Ale was brewed by fermenting grain (wheat or barley) along with malt (barley grains made to germinate by soaking in water and then halted, by drying with hot air). This **wort** was mixed with the **gruit** (mixture of herbs or spices) to aid preservation and add flavour. **Strong Ale** was produced from the 1st fermentation - highly alcoholic and the additional fermentation allowed it to be stored. **Small 'beer'** was produced from the 2nd boiling of the 'mash' and was far lower in alcoholic content – highly nutritious but with only just enough alcohol to act as a preservative so it had to be consumed fairly quickly. Women and children (and men during the daytime) drank large quantities of 'small beer'. This type of ale was common in Wales and in 1382 there is reference to brewing with barley and wheat - with flavour added through the use of honey, cinnamon or ginger. Medieval documents praise the high quality of Welsh ales and they commanded high prices across the border in England! **Beer**, made with hops rather than herbs and spices, may have arrived in Britain with the Flemish immigrants of the early C15th (a preference for their native European beers).

Commercial brewing was seasonal - as during summer temperatures too warm and beer tended to spoil. Monasteries were famed for their larger scale production of ales (Fountains Abbey – 230 thousand pints p.a.) whilst outside of the monasteries it was primarily the preserve of women (brewsters) who brewed at home for domestic consumption, with surplus for sale or trade. By the C13th the 'Assizes of Bread and Ale' set the price of these '*necessities*' as pollution of groundwater (from industries such as iron working and tanneries) meant in many parts of urban Britain the water was unsafe to drink. During the C13th–14th ale cost up to 2/3rds of the daily wage of a labourer to supply himself and his family. Legislation in 1277 declared that brewsters had to sell ale by the '**pottle**' (equivalent to ½ gallon) to ensure they did not sell short measure! The devastation of the Black Death was followed by a number of years of very poor harvests so by 1375 Edward III had to instruct ale-brewers to sell ale by farthing measures – and subsequently had to mint more farthings! With a rural population in Wales 'home brewing' persisted and the sale of ale, brewed on the premises, happened in a single room - with a table, a couple of settles and a fire whilst larger farmhouses were the best bet for offering food, drink and accommodation for travellers (being the most like to have food surplus to share and sell to visitors. In England from the C14th the growth of towns, markets and fairs people were travelling more and inns developed along the main highways but 1504 saw an Act to suppress alehouses (keeping men from archery practice required by the Crown!) but in 1620s for every 2-3 licensed alehouse there were 20-30 unlicensed premises in any parish!



In England the Puritans in the C17th restricted the sale of alcohol and imposed a fine of 6 shillings for drunkenness! In Wales, where the population continued to be largely rural ale continued to be 'home brew' into the C19th and then the strength of the chapels placed restrictions on the brewing and selling of alcohol so it is not until the beginning of the C20th that brewing to provide public houses became significant across much of rural Wales.

Summary courtesy of Sally Martyn