

A Naval Brewhouse? At Dover?

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Introduction. Many Society members will know that, following the Dissolution of the Monasteries, the Maison Dieu at Dover became a small Royal Navy victualling yard. The brewery there was the smallest and longest-lived of all the Navy's brewhouses: four locations delivering the daily gallon ration until 1831.

The Crown acquired a 'well-fitted brewhouse' on the site. Items including a mash tun and millstone were purchased mid-sixteenth century. During the Armada campaign (August 1588), Sandwich beer soured very quickly but Dover's was 'as good beer as was brewed in London'. Victualling at Dover was suspended during the Civil War then revived by the Victualling Board (VB).

In continuous operation between 1690s-1820s, Dover supplied beer to ships in the Downs, periodically supplementing supplies elsewhere. The Navy used commercial brewers nationwide, although from the 1750s it was self-sufficient at its major ports.

The Victualling Board. The era of the naval brewhouses coincides with the VB, responsible for feeding crews worldwide. There is now broad consensus that the VB did a good job. The diet had far too much salt and alcohol and not enough fresh food to provide vitamins, but naval food was reliably better than seamen got at home.

Certainly, the VB had failures, and several concerned the beer supply. The standard of past naval beer had been dire, justifying in-house production. Brewing science was rudimentary. Due to uncontrollable

fermentation all brewers tried to avoid summer production, the Navy's most active period. As a reason for sour beer, this inescapable seasonal problem was as valid as it must have been irritating for frustrated recipients. As for preservation: even sound beer suffered when stored in wooden casks for any time in good conditions, let alone warships' crowded holds. The VB insisted on a six-month warranty, but bulky beer was used first, being unlikely to last, and replaced whenever possible.

Rationale for the Beer Supply. The Navy relied on beer. Safer than water, men were accustomed to a large quantity, and it provided most of their carbohydrates. Furthermore, it was (wrongly) believed that beer mitigated scurvy. Substitute wine/spirits could not provide sufficient hydration.

The quality of beer, and water improved gradually, but summer brewing remained risky. With solutions in sight, the beer supply was abolished prematurely in January 1831, following a botched costing



A contemporary depiction of Southdown

comparison with rum. Water quality on board remained inadequate until iron tanks were universal, and steam enabled distillation. Neither applied until the 1850s.

The VB established its brewhouses as follows:

- 1) Hartshorne, East Smithfield, London, leased 1680s
- 2) Insworth, near Plymouth, rented 1680s
- 3) Dover, revived 1690s
- 4) Southdown, Plymouth, purpose-built 1730s replacing Insworth
- 5) Weevil, Gosport, commercial brewery acquired 1750s
- 6) Red House, Deptford, purpose-built 1790s replacing Hartshorne
- 7) Royal William, Plymouth, almost complete externally 1831, to replace Southdown, never used.

Except Insworth and Dover, these became substantial establishments. Greenwich Naval Hospital built its own brewhouse in 1717, replaced in 1831, simultaneous with abolition.

Type of Beer. Replicating a period beer is complicated; materials and processes have changed. Nevertheless, a 2021 “recreation” of Sea Beer proved heavily hopped to last and between 3-4% ABV to avoid incapacitating crew members imbibing periodically. Another beer, ‘Petty Warrant,’ was brewed regularly, weaker for issue in harbour; comparable to universal small/table beer.

Sources. Many of the few published references to naval brewhouses are inaccurate, most imply they were peripheral. Local records are limited for defence establishments and few commercial records survive. However, a rich archive of VB material exists at Kew and Greenwich.

Summary Chronology of HM Brewhouse at Dover

The VB's first raw material purchases attributed to Dover are hops from John Hollingberry in October 1698 and malt from Thomas Scott in October 1700. Contracts allocated to Dover in succeeding years aggregate to:

Volume (Malt Quarters = Beer Tuns)	Prop'n of VB Whole	Gallons
1701 2,063	23%	441,375
1702 3,447	31%	737,658

Dover's early share of in-house output from the three small breweries was, therefore, significant.

VB out-letters first refer to Dover in 1708, ordering the Agent ‘to brew as much beer as possible in HM Brewhouse [and] to employ the brewers at Deal’, to supply the Downs. Principal Deal supplier was Jeremiah Kelly, implicated in a famous fraud investigation centred on Portsmouth, where contractors conspired with pursers to falsify receipts, receiving payment for beer never delivered.

Between 1709-10, the VB bought beer from these brewers in the Rochester and Chatham area:

	Total Tuns (= 216 Beer Gallons)
Thomas Best (Chatham)	751
John Bryan & Matthias Fletcher	479
Hannah Helby & Richard Wood	212
John Olive	375
John Ivyhurst	883

By 1728, the Dover brewhouse was in a bad way: inefficiently configured and utensils worn out, precluding repair ‘without much charge [that] would not reduce the number of persons employed, but only lessen their labour’. Even so, Dover beer had a good reputation, despite poor maintenance

common to all VB premises. In 1746, the Downs commander wanted a storeship stationed there permanently, to ensure continuity of supply of all victuals but especially beer and to mitigate the issue that 'when the wind is south-east...vessels cannot get out of Dover'. During the Seven Years War (1756-63), the VB frequently shipped beer westward. Indeed, Sir Edward Hawke, blockading Brest prior to victory at Quiberon Bay, banned beer from Plymouth, insisting on alternative sources.

During the American War, cooping practices at Dover caused concern. Drinkable beer remained essential; cask quality was key. In 1781 a critical London VB Officer reported that beer casks were mended with pickle staves, heavily impregnated with salt, then inadequately cleaned without boiling water and not properly seasoned, thus subject to leakage, exacerbated by storage of cask hoops sufficiently chaotic to promote rot. Staff censure seems to have had due effect.

In 1784, Henry Belsey was appointed Master Brewer, a new title for an existing role, presumably comparable to the brewery manager's status elsewhere. Belsey was deemed 'a sober, diligent man, a very good judge of corn, [who] had worked in the Brewhouse [as] a Labourer for several years, and that he had acted as Foreman.'

Ships often returned beer deemed defective, port staff frequently upheld the quality. The sloop *Scout* objected to two batches of Dover beer so Russell, VB Agent, asked local brewer Collins to assess the quality which he confirmed acceptable. The matter was referred to the London Master Brewer Fisher 'a person of great knowledge and experience,' who concluded the first batch was neither sour or stale but flat...brewed as long back as

last November and with old hops but being still sound. I think, as the warm weather approaches, it will recover itself, and be fit to issue again' and 'the second...was new beer'. Overall, Fisher considered brewing 'appears to be conducted with due care and attention, and the beer in store at present is in good condition.'

Dover remained a key resource during the next war and VB beer remained popular. Being duty free, it was attractive to external customers such that eternal disputes with the Board of Excise resulted. In 1802, the VB was asked to supply thirsty dockyard smiths since contractors had proved unreliable but this was precluded, the VB unable to supply even its own bakers at Dover since 'any allowance of beer issued on shore would be disposed of...to the great loss...of the Revenue'.

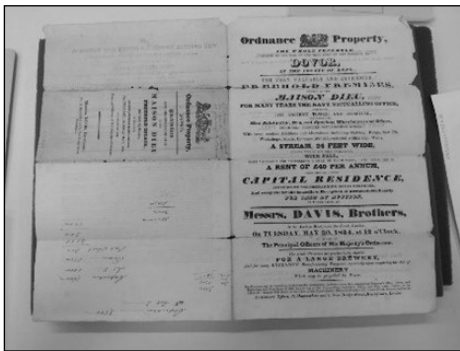
In 1804, the VB wanted a steam engine but was told 'a horse engine will be better adapted for working the pumps at Dover': probably pragmatic due to small-scale operations. Constrained by under-funding, another VB irritation was anonymous accusation. In 1807, outpost breweries were portrayed as inefficient; the VB responded describing appropriate procedures across the estate including the revelation that Dover mashed three times, between Weevil's two and four at Deptford and Southdown.

In 1812, Master Brewer Henry Bowles retired aged 72, on a £150 salary after 31 years' faithful VB service. It seems he was not replaced and, by 1822, Dover's day was done. The VB recommended supplying the Downs by hoy from Deptford and, in March, the *John* was appropriated from Plymouth.

In June 1825, the VB 'inspected the several Premises belonging to this Department at

that Place', observing 'that the Mash Tub was perfectly fit for use, but the Coolers totally decayed...they had become unfit for use before the Establishment was finally put down. The bottom of a new Copper [stood] in the Yard,' subsequently sent to Deptford. The officers considered 'whether it can ever be expedient to re-establish the Dover premises as a Victualling Yard' but, having observed the Naval Premises at Deal saw 'no reason to think it will ever be advisable,' proposing instead 'to remove such of the materials as may be useful [to] Deal, or elsewhere, and to sell the Dover Premises,' although 'the Wharf, Pump and Water-side Premises should of course always be retained for temporary supplies of Water'.

The protracted site sale process resulted in transfer to the Board of Ordnance in 1830 for £7,500, followed four years later by public sale.



Auction Notice

Dover may have been a small VB site but it had the potential for significant commercial operations. The brewhouse location is uncertain. According to the History of the Corporation of Dover, the Ordnance Department 'separated the lots, selling the mansion privately, and the

Maison Dieu itself, with the land down to the river, was then purchased by the Dover Corporation...'

Dover Purchase Summary

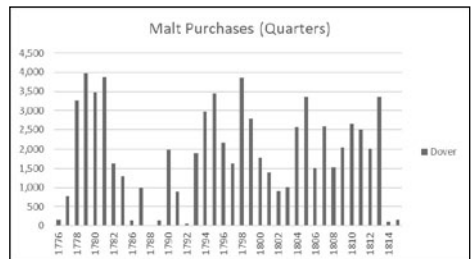
ADM 20: 1684-1787. 2,643 hundredweight of hops costing £10,974

Top 5 suppliers: William Pilcher, John Robinson, Henry Henshaw, Phineas Stringer, John Reynolds

ADM 112: 1776-1826. 6,018 hundredweight of hops costing £35,556

Top 3 suppliers: John Bolland; George & James Finch; Thomas Jull (or Tull?)

ADM 112: 1776-1815



Aggregate 70,900 quarters of malt & tuns of beer = 15,314,400 beer gallons.

Conclusion. In my King's PhD thesis, *Thirsting for Glory – Beer Supply to the Royal Navy in the long Eighteenth Century*, I am exploring the importance of the largely unknown naval brewhouses to establish their true significance as a new mirror on the historian's Contractor State model.

The brewhouse at Dover is unusual in that the VB neither replaced nor upgraded it. Hence, output volume remained reasonably constant while proportional significance declined, but Dover remained an essential reserve source of supply for a critical commodity. Within the hidden world of naval beer, Dover is the best-kept secret, and I am hoping for the Society's help in addressing that.