

CORPORATE MEMBER PROFILE

A HISTORY OF THE DONNINGTON MILL BREWERY (NOW DONNINGTON BREWERY LTD)

UPPER SWELL, STOW ON THE WOLD, GLOUCESTERSHIRE



(Surely the most idyllic brewery setting in the United Kingdom)

Much has been written and said about the idyllic Cotswold setting which is the home to Donnington Brewery but nothing quite prepares you for the experience when you first see it. In April last year, a group of Labologist Society members were fortunate enough to be invited to view the site and the brewery.

In writing this I thought that I needed to get your attention immediately with images of the earliest known labels from Donnington Brewery – so here they are.



They seem to date from the 1920s and at first sight you might think (as I did) that at least you have the Stout and BB Ale labels in your collection. If so, look again and you will probably see that you do not. It is interesting also that the brewery often used the one word Stout on a bottle front label but DS (Double Stout) on the neck label.

Anyway, back to the Society visit. Maggie (my long-suffering wife) and I arrived early, having spent the previous evening enjoying the hospitality of the Plough Inn at Ford including, of course, a good sampling of Donnington Brewery beers. It was a beautiful morning and we were first to arrive at the brewery. It was truly a magnificent sight. The silence spoke to your heart, the sun was lighting up both the lake and the honey-coloured stone brewery buildings. The black swans were swimming on the water and (as it seemed) came to greet us. The Cotswold Hills sweeping away into the distance looked stunning. This really must be the most idyllic setting for a brewery in the United Kingdom!



The Rear of the Brewery and Waterwheel



Black Swans on the Brewery Lake

The building itself dates back to 1291 when it was one of the mills of Broadway Manor.

Sometime in the 16th century the millrace, a sluice connecting water to the water mill, was built. The building, like many others in the Cotswolds where the wool trade was dominant, was used as a cloth mill but it was converted into two corn mills by the Lord of Donnington Manor in 1580.

Early in the 17th century the mill became a separate freehold estate and in 1827 was bought by Thomas Arkell. It has remained in the private ownership of the Arkell family ever since – now for almost 200 years.

In the rest of this article, I want to focus mainly on the ownership of Donnington Mill and its brewery and in particular to trace the way in which title passed through the generations from Thomas to the present owners.

Thomas was the great, great grandfather of Lawrence Claude Arkell who built up the brewery in the late 20th century – more of him later. It would appear that Donnington Mill was sold to Thomas Arkell by a certain Samuel Charles who

previously occupied the mill and was very likely the owner of it. He was present at the mill until 1823 having acquired it in 1810 as part of the estate and assets of Charles Cornbill (who was, interestingly, described as a maltster and baker at Stow on the Wold)

Thomas, who was born about 1769, married Susannah Iles on 22nd November 1801. Her surname will crop up again shortly. But there is a bit of a mystery with Thomas and Susannah concerning the motive for the purchase of Donnington Mill because he was a farmer at Kempford (over 20 miles away) and when he died on 6th December 1839, his death notice in *The Wiltshire Independent* records the fact that “he spent the whole of his useful life, save the first two years of his infancy, on the same farm”. It would seem therefore that Thomas acquired Donnington Mill as an investment property relying on others for the day to day management.

The availability of Donnington Mill for letting was being advertised about three months before Thomas died when a certain Mr Hall was “leaving” and again just two months after his death. Yet a further attempt to let the mill was made in September 1842. The situation was to radically change however when Susannah died in May 1855 and on 27th September 1855 the whole property was available to buy at auction.

The press notices of these attempts to let and then sell Donnington Mill are revealing in a number of respects. Firstly, it is clear that by 1855 (and most probably earlier) “a large Malthouse” had been built. In fact, John Powell is recorded elsewhere as being the Maltster at Donnington Mill as early as 1838 and, in 1842, he was said to be available “on the premises” to show the mill to prospective tenants. Secondly, although we get a detailed description of the Donnington Mill estate at these times, no mention is made of any brewery.

It would appear that the attempts to let or sell Donnington Mill were unsuccessful and, as a result, the ownership became fragmented. By an Indenture dated 29th September 1865 the property was divided into five lots. These were owned by two sons and three sons-in-law of Thomas and Susannah.



The Cotswold stone frontage of the brewery and the main entrance

This ownership situation continued until the death, in 1871, of one of the five partners, William Arkell of Longborough, a son in law. This prompted another

attempt to sell the Donnington Mill estate. From the press notice of the resulting auction on 2nd November 1871, it is clear that the brewery at Donnington Mill (which is of course where the brewery derived its name, not through being, at any stage, located in the village of Donnington) was now well established. The mill was home not to just a maltings but also to:-

A 5-quarter Brewery (together with)

.....A Brewers House with all usual Business and Domestic Offices belonging thereto.....

It was also confirmed that alongside other businesses carried on at the mill was now “a Brewery Trade of about 500 quarters yearly and which is capable of great increase. The trade of four tied houses is now in connection with the Brewery”

But who was actually carrying on the trade of brewing? It is often reported that Richard Iles Arkell (a grandson of Thomas and Susannah from whom he acquired his middle name) started a brewery in the mill in 1865 but he was just 18 at the time and was probably the brewery manager, no doubt brewing beer alongside other enterprises.

Even the 1865 date is not totally free from doubt because in 1918, Richard recalled that he had been “associated with the brewery since 1864 and proprietor since 1872”. Certainly, he had arrived at Donnington in 1864 and was no doubt involved in the building of the brewery and then possibly trial brewing. However, in 2015, Donnington Brewery celebrated their 150th Birthday as follows

“We are delighted to proudly announce a very special celebratory ale – ONE FIFTY – exactly 150 years from Founders Ale which was brewed on 27th May 1865 here at Donnington Brewery. A momentous day, indeed, in our history”



Johnny Arkell studies the brewing book

Celebrating 150 years to the day since the first brew



The brewing book with details of the original Founders Ale had been discovered in May 2011 and the brewery still has records of some of the first beer brewed at Donnington Mill. “*Too heavy*” says one entry. “*Not the right colour*” says another. However, happily, on 27th May 1865 the brew was fine – consisting of “*25 barrels of Best and 26 barrels of Table*”

Richard first sold his beer to the gentry in the hunting field, although as some of them had small breweries on their own estates it must have taken time to build up a

solid customer base, and of course his beer must also have been very acceptable! Indeed, so acceptable, that two brewery employees, Alfred Hyde (a drayman) and Charles Wilkins (a brewery labourer) were tempted to attempt to steal some to assist with Wilkins' wedding celebrations. The matter was reported in the Wilts and Glos Standard of 9th June 1877, with some humour, as follows

“Wilkins, it is said, had been in the army, and was due to be married on the morning of the arrest, to a woman of the neighbourhood, a person known by the strange and very unfeminine name of ‘donkey’. It was supposed that the Donnington best ale was intended for the wedding festivities; however, as the old adage says ‘there’s many a slip ‘twixt the cup and the lip’ and it proved so in this instance, as the police took charge of the intended bridegroom and placed him in (prison)”

It seems that Sgt. Shipton from the local constabulary (acting on information received) had waited all night at the brewery and at 6 am on the morning of the wedding caught the pair stealing the beer. He arrested them adding the words “this is how you are robbing your master”. Hyde, who admitted on the way to the police station that he taken beer previously, pleaded guilty in court to stealing 6 quarts of beer worth 3s 3d and was sentenced to six weeks in prison with hard labour. Wilkins pleaded not guilty and was discharged as nobody saw him drink the beer. The reaction of the jilted bride-to-be is not recorded!



John Arkell (1802-1881) was the motivating force behind two breweries

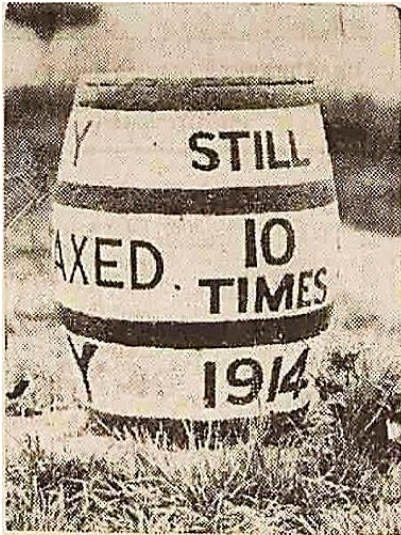
Meanwhile, on a more sober note, the attempted 1871 sale having been unsuccessful, negotiations had been entered into by which Donnington Mill and Brewery were sold by the five partners to John Arkell for a sum of £1,050 (current equivalent value about £100,000). John, who was Richard's father, had successfully set up Arkells Brewery in Swindon in 1843.

On 12th February 1872, a further indenture was entered into. The documentation makes it clear that the brewery was a business originally carried on by the five partners named in the 1865 indenture, all uncles of Richard who was now aged about 25 and became the proprietor of the brewing business.

Richard was assisted in the brewery business by Thomas Lane for more than 30 years. In 1871, Thomas was a “brewery servant” but by 1881 he was a brewer through until at least 1901. His sons joined the business as “brewery labourers” and by 1901, William was a drayman and Job was a cellarman.

Richard was, it seems, rightly proud of his beer (and especially his Family Pale Ale) as this advertisement from the Wiltshire & Gloucestershire Standard from 1901 indicates

<p>DONNINGTON ALES AND STOUT.</p> <hr/> <p>Guaranteed Brewed <small>FROM</small> Malt and Hops.</p> <hr/> <p>SPECIALITY—FAMILY PALE ALE, 1/- per gallon.</p> <hr/> <p>R. I. ARKELL, DONNINGTON BREWERY STOW-ON-THE-WOLD.</p>



A QUAIN ROAD SIGN
 This concrete barrel stands at the junction of the Stow-Tewkesbury and Donnington roads and was placed there some years ago by the proprietor of the Donnington Brewery, a country brewery carried on in the old flour mill. It says "Y Taxed Y. Still 10 Times 1914."

The words are confusing but the message is clear
 (Gloucestershire Echo 9/5/1936)

During the First World War there were legal restrictions on the amount of beer that could be brewed (and its strength) which Richard fell foul of. He was summoned to court for the offence and despite his protestations that he had produced low gravity beer for the hay makers and was only slightly over the limit for the brewery (having under brewed in the previous quarter) he was fined £25 (current equivalent about £1,300) plus costs. (Gloucestershire Echo 1st January 1918)

Breweries found it tough going during the years of the First World War, with beer consumption reduced by a half, labour shortages and huge increases in beer duty taxation. As a result, in a protest, the pictured stone barrel appeared at the junction of the Stow to Tewkesbury road where it joins the road to Donnington. It read "Y Taxed Y. Still 10 Times 1914"

Local information is that it was placed there by the "proprietor of Donnington Brewery" but we cannot be sure about that and precisely which proprietor! It seems likely however that it was the work of Richard. Certainly, he was right to draw attention to the massive beer duty increases, to pay for the war and to reduce beer consumption. In fact between 1914 and 1918 the increase was about 13 fold not just 10.

Richard died aged 71 in 1919 and three of his sons (Herbert John, Dennis James and Wilfrid Thomas) inherited the growing brewery business from their father. But there were six children in the family who took a case under the Arbitration Act which finally resulted in Herbert John taking over the brewery solely in 1923. It had been run by Richard's executors for the intervening period of time.

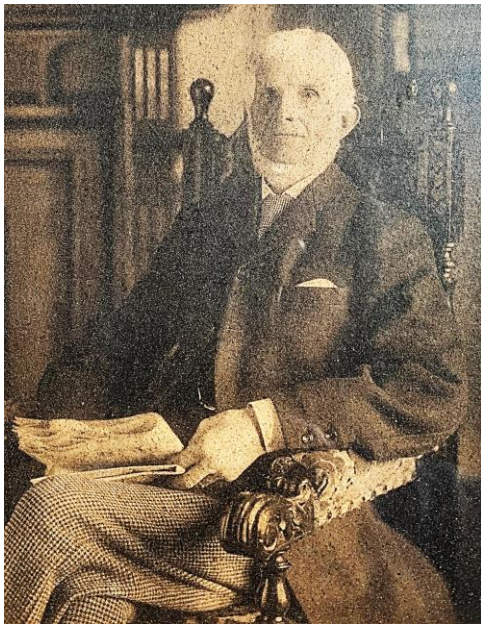
*Drink British Beer—
 Real British Beer;
 Brewed from English Malt and Hops,
 Without the help of Foreign sops;
 We know 'tis very rare,
 But the quality is there.*

BREWED BY—
H. J. ARKELL,
 Telephone No. 3. **Donnington Brewery, STOW-ON-THE-WOLD.**

Tewkesbury Register & Agricultural Gazette 21/6/1930



Herbert, who had two sons and two daughters, ran the brewery until 1951. One of his sons, Lawrence Claude, more commonly known as Claude, then took over the running of the brewery from his father. Claude was known as a "real country gentleman" and a very private man who devoted his whole life, apart from his Second World War service as a pilot in the RAF, to running the brewery which he did very successfully.



Herbert John Arkell
(1880 – 1951)



Lawrence Claude Arkell
(1918 – 2007)

Sadly, Claude died on 31 May 2007 at the age of 89. Being lonely and in poor health he committed suicide. It is said that on the fateful morning he followed exactly his usual daily routine. He would be seen each day “slowly crossing the brewery yard from his Cotswold-stone built converted stables to open up for the day’s brewing. Jacket and tie, always the boss; shuffling a little, walking stick, just in case; greeting the men, inspecting the brew. Then to the office manned by the always cheerful but now elderly Val (Mr Valentine Teale) where he would captain his ship for an hour or so before returning home for a nap”. On the day in question, he waited for the staff to knock off at lunchtime and then went to his garden where he shot himself. He left a note to explain what he had often threatened to do.

His wife Adrienne had pre-deceased him by almost eight years but with no children of his own, he left the majority of his estate to his cousins Peter and James Arkell, owners of Arkell's Kingsdown Brewery in Swindon. There were fears that this would signal the end of Donnington Brewery but James confirmed that the brewery would carry on and stay in the ownership of the family, adding

“Claude’s whole life was steeped in brewing. He was one of the country’s oldest and finest brewers and well respected in the brewing industry”

Claude and Peter shared the same Great-Grandfather, John Arkell, who started Kingsdown Brewery and, we now know, bought Donnington Mill and Brewery in 1872. Claude’s will together with the probate documentation show that he died a wealthy man with net assets in excess of £14 million. He was seemingly very generous to family members, household staff, brewery workers and local charities with legacies of nearly one and a half million pounds but the residue was left to Peter and James “in full confidence that they will use their best endeavours to continue my Business of Donnington Brewery in the family tradition for as long as they are able”. It is clear that Claude saw the priority as the preservation of the brewery as a going concern and some evidence that other family members were not happy that such a large part of his estate had passed them by!

Claude, however, knew he left his beautiful brewery in safe hands. James had learned the art of brewing alongside his cousin at Donnington Brewery and under his guidance (and successive generations of the Arkell family) Donnington Brewery has continued to flourish. The honey-coloured buildings sit quietly in the valley next to the mill pond, with its black swans, originally from Australia and introduced by Claude who took a keen interest in them. It is all part of the tradition of Donnington Brewery.

Visitors to the brewery today see much the same brewing plant and equipment as Richard Iles Arkell used in 1865. For an excellent description of the brewery building see “The Donnington Brewery – A Photo Essay” by Ed Wray published by the Brewery History Society in 2014 (Vol 159 p 44)



Clockwise from top left:

Mash Tun;

Hot Liquor Tank;

Hopback

Inside the Copper;

The brewery came to national attention when it was used as the setting (along with the Coach & Horses at Longborough) for an episode of the BBC TV detective series Father Brown. Aptly named “The Brewer’s Daughter” it featured a murder at the brewery with plenty of BB and SBA being consumed at the pub by Father Brown (pure fiction, of course!)

Donnington Mill and Brewery is now (since 30th January 1987) a Grade 2 listed building. The business was transferred into a limited liability company, Donnington Brewery Ltd, during the year to 31st March 2019. A detailed trading account is not provided in the accounts but the Balance Sheet indicates that the Freehold Property (presumably the Mill with the Brewery and 18 public houses) now owned by the company had a value at the transfer date of over £21 million. John Arkell, often known as Johnny and second son to James, is now entrusted with looking after the brewery and preserving it for future generations.

I’m indebted to and thank the following people for their help

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Eric Doré