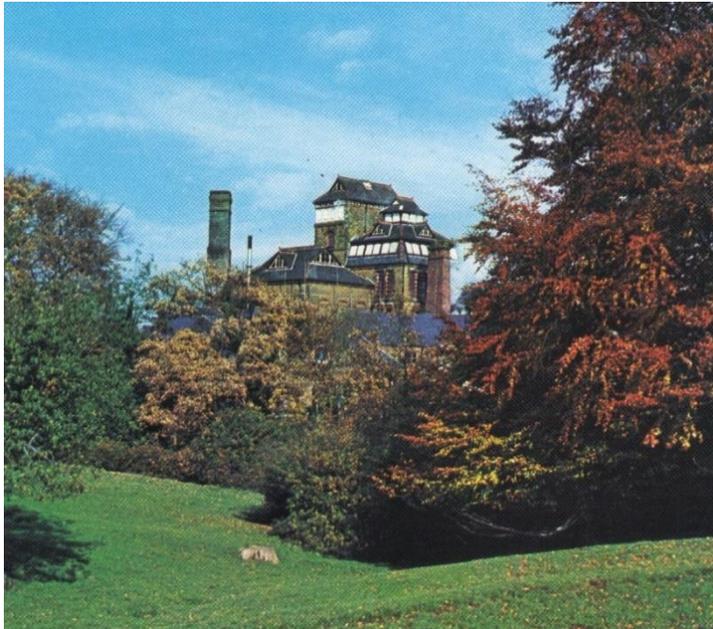


CORPORATE MEMBER PROFILE

HISTORY OF THE HOOK NORTON BREWERY

When I first began collecting in the 1960s, I cycled to breweries to obtain labels. I remember visiting Hook Norton Brewery on my bike but at the time, found no-one at the brewery. However, a little way off from the brewery, I noticed a fire burning without supervision, and on exploring further, found that a number of old labels were being destroyed. Fortunately, some packs were still waiting for the flames and I was able to retrieve some of the labels.

I was fascinated then at the sheer majesty of the building and its location in the Oxfordshire village of Hook Norton. It was only later that I read a description of the brewery as “a cross between a Japanese pagoda and a Lancashire cotton mill”. I am pleased that Hook Norton has survived the takeover madness of the 1960s and beyond, and I continue to have a fascination and respect for the company. And the beers are pretty good too.

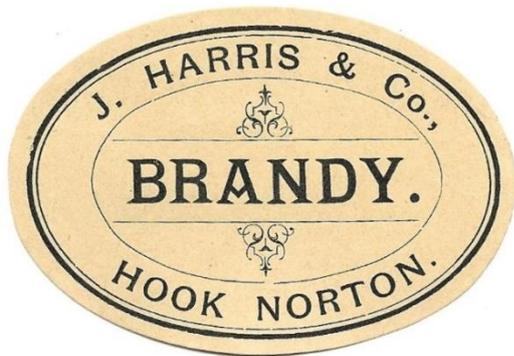


The lovely setting of Hook Norton Brewery

The origins of the business are said to date back to 1849, when it was founded by John Harris, whose family were farmers at Chilson. He was born there around 1825 and moved to Hook Norton, where he rented a 52 acre farm from John Parish in the Scotland End area of the village. Harris was a farmer and maltster by 1847 and may have brewed for his farm workers but between 1852 and 1856, he started brewing commercially (a Directory of 1852 only lists him as a maltster and the 1851 Census

shows him as a farmer and maltster employing 2 labourers). He built a small three storey brewery in 1872, designed by Henry Pontifex of London. By then, he was described as “brewer, maltster, farmer of 22 Acres employing traveller, clerk, brewer, 9 men and boy.” The size of the farm had increased by 1881 to 145 acres.

Harris supplied the private trade but in 1869 he purchased, for £210, *The Pear Tree*, next to the brewery. But it is believed that he had also bought a beerhouse at Down End in 1859. He was producing twelve different beers, which were distributed as far away as Birmingham, Witney and Byfield. The building of the railway between Banbury and Cheltenham provided the opportunity for increased beer sales to the navvies working on the line from 1865 onwards. A further two tied houses were acquired – *The Elephant & Castle*, Bloxham and one at Chipping Norton.



John Harris died in 1887, and the business was continued by his son, John Henry Harris, and nephew, Alban Clarke, trading as J.H. Harris & Co. to 1900. No beer labels have been seen with the Harris name on, but black and white spirits labels are in circulation (see illustration left).

The Hook Norton Brewery Co. Ltd. - as the brewery became – was formed with a share capital of £67,000. A new brewery was built to the designs of William Bradford and this was featured in the *Brewers Journal* in October 1900. The brewing equipment was supplied by Buxton & Thornley of Burton-on-Trent, including a remarkable steam engine.

The Victoria History of the County of Oxfordshire, published in 1905, indicated that the company employed about 50 men, and was managed by three directors, with Alban Clarke as managing director. But in May 1917, Alban Clarke died after a cycling accident and Percy Flick was appointed Managing Director. By 1928, Alban Clarke's son, Bill, began his connection with the brewery as head brewer. This association was to last until his death in January 1982.



By 1918, a Government licence had been secured to supply Coventry Working Men's Club with beer. But the brewery increased the number of its own pubs over the years from the original three and by 1939, the brewery was also supplying 93 free houses. According to the *Brewery History Society* website, Hook Norton currently owns 48 tied houses (up from 35 in 1977). *The Albion Tavern*, Chipping Norton, closed in 2010.

Percy Flick retired in 1950 and a business association was established with the Gilchrist family, who operated the Burtonwood Brewery Co. near Warrington. In 1974, Bill Clarke became Managing Director and was succeeded before 1982 by his son David Clarke (who had joined the brewery in 1960). James Clarke, son of David, is the current head brewer.

Today, the brewery, malthouse, offices and stable block are Grade II listed buildings.



Above and previous page: Selection of early Hook Norton labels. Double Stout was discontinued in 1917, and reintroduced in 1996; the brewery also produced XXXX in bottle

Keith Osborne