



# Burton Ale:

## A British Comfort Beer

**“When brewing a Burton Ale, it is best to remember the things that comforted you most as a child— your teddy bear or blanket perhaps—and then aim for a beer that will evoke similar emotions.”**

**T**he brew that first made Burton upon Trent famous was not India Pale Ale, but a rather sweeter, stronger drink called Burton Ale, which was shipped abroad in considerable quantities in the 18th and very early 19th centuries via the port of Hull, on the east coast of England. In 1777, for example, 3,282 hogsheads of Burton ale, worth £26,255 (perhaps U.S. \$3 million by today's standards), were brought by British ships to St. Petersburg in Russia alone.

By 1803, Burton Ale, made by Burton brewers such as Michael Bass, William Worthington and Benjamin Wilson (and Wilson's nephew and successor, Samuel Allsopp), was being delivered not only to Germany, Denmark and Sweden, but the

West Indies as well as Russia. This was a sticky, intoxicating drink that was appreciated at the highest levels in Russian society: one writer in 1795 said: “There is a rich flavour ... a sort of twang or ho go [sic] in Burton ale, a sort of agreeable glueyness in it that the Empress of Russia [Catherine the Great] herself admires much.” According to Tobias Smollett, writing in 1805, Catherine's grandson, the Emperor Alexander, also had “a passion” for Burton Ale.

In 1822, however, the Russian government unexpectedly levied a prohibitive tax on beer imports, instantly wrecking the Burton brewers' Baltic trade, and obliging them to find new markets. One solution, of course, was to brew a differ-

ent sort of beer than the Burton Ale sold in Russia—a beer designed instead for the market among expatriate Britons in India. This new beer, for the Burton brewers, was the one that eventually became known as India Pale Ale. Another solution was to find a larger market for Burton Ale at home in Britain (Burton Ale had always been sold in its homeland, but never in great quantities).

However, according to the journalist John Stevenson Bushnan, writing in 1853, customers in Britain found the Burton Ale the Russian emperors liked so much “too heady, too sweet, and too glutinous, if not too strong. Indeed it was so rich and luscious that if a little were spilled on a table, the glass would stick to it.”

by Martyn Cornell and Antony Hayes

This original Burton Ale as described by Bushman must have been very similar to the recipe for a Burton ale in an anonymously-written book from 1824, *The Young Brewer's Monitor*. This produced a beer with a massive original gravity of 1.140, using pale malt and 4.5 pounds of hops to the barrel, only a little less hops than a good IPA. This beer needed maturing for at least 18 months.

However, according to Bushman, for the October 1822 brewing season the Burton brewer Samuel Allsopp tweaked his recipe to produce "the first specimen of the

improved Burton ale now so universally drunk and admired," making it less sweet and more bitter than the original sold-to-the-Baltic version. The first casks of the new beer, delivered to customers in Liverpool, brought complaints that it was undrinkable. Allsopp reportedly had to visit each publican to persuade them to let the beer mature, promising to take back any that was unsellable. Publicans found that the beer improved considerably with age, and eventually none of that first brew was returned unsold.

All the Burton brewers made and sold

this new style of Burton Ale alongside their pale ales and IPAs. The style was also taken up by other brewers from Northumberland to Devon, and became particularly popular in London, where every large brewer seems to have made a beer called Burton Ale. (Scotland had its own, very similar style, known as Scotch Ale or Edinburgh Ale.) In Burton, brewers made Burton Ale in up to six different grades. Bass, for example (which bottled its Burton Ales with labels carrying a red diamond trademark, as opposed to the famous red triangle it used for its India Pale Ale), made No. 1 Burton Ale at more than 1.110 OG, then the weaker Nos. 2 and 3, down to No. 4 at around 1.070 OG, and finally Nos. 5 and 6 at around 1.060 and 1.055 OG, respectively. These last two were often sold as milds: the underlying sweetness of Burton Ale means there is a blurry line between it and mild as a style.

At least three pre-Prohibition brewers in New York, Amsdell Brothers of Albany, and CH Evans & Sons and Grainger & Gregg, both of Hudson, advertised a Burton ale among their beers. In Newark, N.J., P Ballantine and Sons' brewery (founded in 1840 by a Scot, Peter Ballantine, who had originally been a brewer in Albany) also brewed a Burton Ale, with an abv of 10 or 11 percent. Ballantine's Burton Ale was said by Michael Jackson to be one of the inspirations behind the creation of Old Foghorn Barleywine at the Anchor brewery in San Francisco.

In Britain, however, although a book in 1948 could still say that pubs sold "four chief types of beer: pale ale, mild ale, stout and Burton," the market for Burton Ale was in decline. Many brewers sold it only as a winter specialty. Gradually, even these winter-brewed Burtons disappeared. In 1969, the London brewer Fuller Smith & Turner stopped making its Old Burton Extra, replacing it with a beer that eventually became known as Extra Special Bitter—ESB. Its fellow London brewer Young & Co. continued brewing Burton Ale, but changed its name in 1971 to Winter Warmer.

By 1976, the Burton Ale style in its original sense had been so completely forgotten that when Ind Coope brought out a

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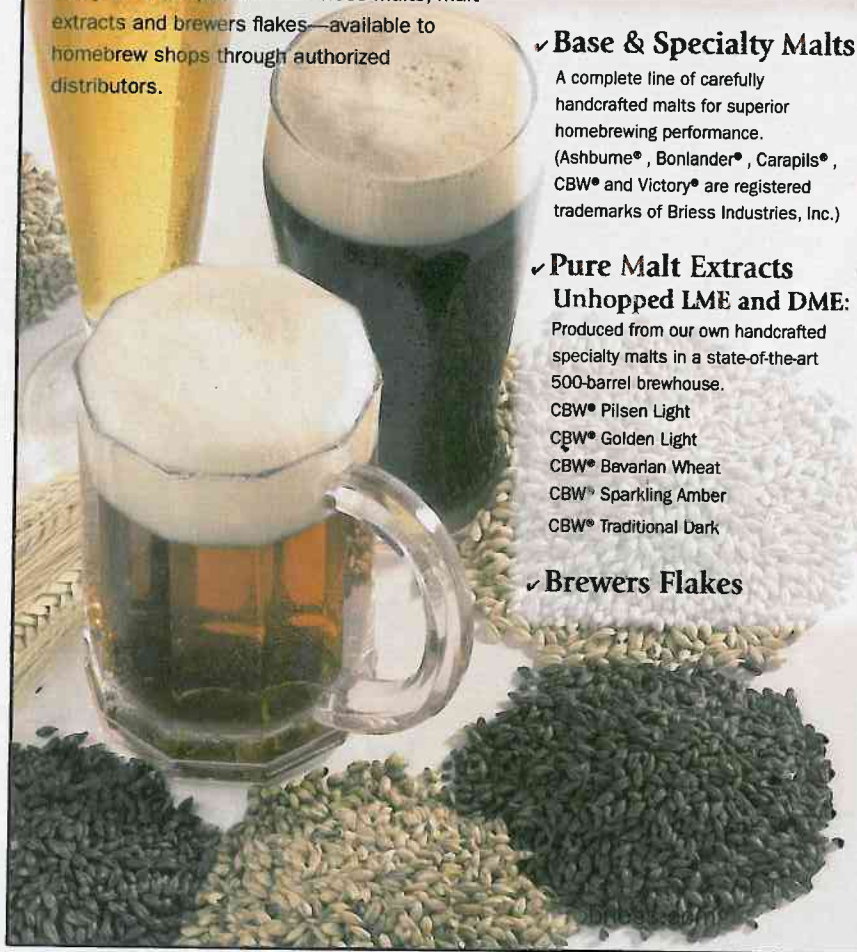
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new draught pale ale based on its Double Diamond IPA, it called it Ind Coope Burton Ale (something that annoyed Martyn's father, a great fan of "genuine" Burton Ale, intensely).

Today there are probably just six or seven survivors of the style still brewed. One, Greene King's BPA, or Burton Pale Ale, a typically Burton-style sweet, darkish beer made with dark sugars and crystal malt, is never sold on its own but blended with 5X beer to make Strong Suffolk Vintage Ale, a barleywine. The others are No. 1 Barley Wine, Marston's Owd Rodger, Theakston's Old Peculier, Fuller's 1845, Timothy Taylor's Ram Tam, and Young's Winter Warmer. This last beer is a classic of the "modern" Burton Ale type, however—well-rounded, mellow, on the somber side of amber, 1.055 OG, but only 5 percent ABV, and with a dark sugar tang (from the use alongside malted barley of "YSM," Young's special, proprietorial mixture of brewing sugars) offset by a hint of bitter undercurrent.

### Brewing Burton Ale

Burton Ale is a comforting beer brewed for adults. It is not an extreme beer catering to childish tastes, but a strong, rich beer, playing off plenty of bitterness against a sweet, malty undertone. It has no rough edges.

English pale malt provides the fermentable extract, with sufficient caramel undertones. Chocolate malt is added, partly to add complexity, but also for color. It leads to a dark brown, but not black appearance; midway between London and Newcastle style brown ales. The beer should be crystal clear in the glass.

Plenty of English low alpha hops are required, more for the sheer vegetable mass than for the bitterness, although this is a particularly bitter beer. Beyond a certain point, extra hops add few IBUs; however, they add complexity of flavor.

The yeast must leave a fair amount of sweetness behind and add English character, including fruity esters. Use the upper end of the yeast's recommended pitching rate as this is a high gravity beer.

The beer must be given time to mature



## Absent Friends Burton Ale

### Ingredients

for 5 U.S. gallons (19 liters) (assumes 75% mash efficiency)

<b>12.7 lb</b>	(5.75 kg) Pale malt (preferably floor malted Maris Otter)
<b>4.4 oz</b>	(125 g) Chocolate malt
<b>8.8 oz</b>	(250 g) East Kent Goldings (4.5% a.a.) 90 min
<b>1.75 oz</b>	(50g) East Kent Goldings (4.5% a.a.) dry hop
	Windsor ale yeast (pitch plenty of yeast)

**Original Gravity:** 1.070

**Final Gravity:** 1.017

**IBUs:** high

### Directions

Reduce your water's total alkalinity to 100-120 ppm (as CaCO<sub>3</sub>). Adjust calcium content to 180-220 ppm using calcium sulfate. Mash in at 150° F (66° C) and hold to starch conversion. Mash-out at 169° F (76° C). Boil for 90 minutes. Ferment at around 64° C (18° C). Rack into maturation tanks and mature for a year. Rack into dispensing tanks/casks and dry hop. Give it two weeks before serving for dry hop character to develop, with the kegs/casks given a good roll around the yard daily for the first few days.

**Extract version:** Substitute 10 lbs (4.5 kg) of Maris Otter liquid malt extract for the Maris Otter. Steep the chocolate malt in the brewing liquor for 30 minutes at 158° F (70° C), strain, add malt extract, bring to boil, and proceed with recipe as stated.

for all of the components to meld—a year to 18 months is recommended. Dry hops should be added two weeks before serving to add freshness.

When brewing a Burton Ale, it is best to remember the things that comforted you most as a child—your teddy bear or blanket perhaps—and then aim for a beer that will evoke similar emotions.

Drinking a Burton Ale should take you back to a safe, comfortable place, not for you to drown your sorrows, but to help you deal with life's little knocks. It is a personal beer, and is best brewed for the brewer.

If others benefit, so much the better.

**Martyn Cornell is a founding member of the British Guild of Beer Writers, a former BGBW Beer Writer of the Year and author of *Amber Gold and Black: The History of Britain's Great Beers and Beer: The Story of the Pint*. Antony Hayes is a homebrewer who lives in Tonbridge, Kent. He started brewing in 1988, and has enjoyed success at the national level. He is a BJCP judge, and has judged national competitions on three continents, together with being on the judging panel for the Champion Beer of Britain competition.** 