

India Pale Ale

(Martin Adams)



In 1861 the Victorian writer Charles Stuart Calverley penned a lengthy poem in praise of beer. Readers who persevere as far as lines 57-58 are rewarded with:

*O Beer ! Oh Hodgson, Guinness, Allsopp, Bass !
Names that should be on every infant's tongue !*

Not perhaps a high point in English poetry, but what is remarkable is that some of the names singled out for praise remain familiar 160 years later. Guinness and Bass are both still commonplace and a third, Allsopp, which effectively disappeared in 1959, is likely to be resurrected following the brand's acquisition by Brewdog in 2019. That leaves Hodgson, forgotten and unloved, a stranger to the modern reader (and drinker), but a key name in the emergence of the iconic beer style, Indian Pale Ale (IPA).

In the 18th century, trade with India was ruthlessly dominated by the East India Company. As a lucrative perk, its ship's commanders were allowed to engage in private trade, carrying freight of their own on the outward voyage to sell on arrival in India; a notable commodity in this trade was beer for thirsty expatriates. Ships bound for India would dock in the Thames at Blackwall, near where it is joined by the River Lea on which George Hodgson ran a brewery less than two miles away in Bow, by the distinctively shaped bridge which gave the area its name. Proximity and ease of access, coupled with the favourable credit Hodgson offered to ship's officers made him an ideal supplier. The most popular beer of the time, porter, did not fare well on a sea voyage lasting 3-5 months at temperatures varying between 11° and 28°C and, even at its best, porter was probably not the ideal drink for the torrid Tropics. But Hodgson also offered a brew described as October ale, a strong, hoppy, pale beer, traditionally brewed in the Autumn for maturation of a year or more before consumption. Because the high levels of

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ethanol, CO₂ and hop oils presented multiple hurdles to the growth of spoilage organisms, the beer had excellent keeping qualities and it was discovered that, unlike porter, shipments of October ale matured magnificently during the voyage to India to give a sparkling refreshing beer relished by the British population.

Trade in October ale expanded in the late 18th Century and took off at the beginning of the 19th when, between 1801 and 1813, Hodgson's contribution quadrupled to 4,000 barrels per annum. Some other London breweries participated, such as Barclay who produced an 'India Ale' (as it had become known) from 1799, but Hodgson dominated the market - sufficient for his name to become generic, rather, as in more recent times, Hoover became synonymous with vacuum cleaners and Biro with ballpoint pens.



East India Company Ship, Alnwick Castle.
Thomas Whitcomber, Public domain via Wikimedia Commons

Unfortunately, George Hodgson and his son Mark, who took over running the brewery around 1810, left much to be desired in their business ethics – trying to cut out the ship's officers and local merchants, lowering prices to drive out competitors and then increasing them later to recoup their losses. This provoked the ire of the East India Company and in 1821 Campbell Marjoribanks, a director and three times chairman of the Company, invited Samuel Allsopp, a Burton-on-Trent brewer, to a dinner at which he promoted the attractions of the Indian market. At the time, the Burton brewers were keen to find a replacement for their export trade to the Baltic, lost as a result of the Napoleonic wars and the imposition of tariffs by Russia, and though Allsopp's head brewer reputedly spat out a trial batch of the new beer, the first consignment of Allsopp's India ale was despatched in 1822 and proved a huge success. Its superiority was due to the mineral content of the Burton water, particularly the high levels of calcium, magnesium and sulphate ions; London water though rich in calcium was lower in sulphate. In the brewing process, calcium ions precipitate out as calcium phosphate during mashing, decreasing the pH

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of the wort, magnesium has a lesser effect on pH but is important in the activity of several yeast enzymes, and sulphate contributes a drier, more bitter flavour to beers. Some brewers such as Ind Coope of Romford responded to this discovery by opening premises in Burton, but from the mid-19th century others found the effect could be replicated simply by adding the mineral gypsum (calcium sulphate) to brewing water: a process known as ‘Burtonization’.

Other Burton brewers such as Bass and Worthington swiftly followed Allsopp, producing their own Indian pale ales and supplanting Hodgson whose share of the India trade declined rapidly. It was down to less than 7% by 1841 and by 1849 the Hodgson name had disappeared from the Bow brewery.

The new style of pale, bitter beer from Burton became hugely popular at home and abroad - a bottled version, produced by Bass and sporting the first registered UK Trademark, the red triangle, can be seen prominently displayed on the eponymous *Bar at the Folies-Bergère* painted by Edouard Manet in 1882. Shipments of beer from Burton to London increased to such an extent that when W.H. Barlow designed the train shed for St Pancras railway station in 1868, the undercroft below the platforms was designated primarily as a warehouse for arriving beer. With the station’s redesign to accommodate Eurostar in 2007, the undercroft became a shopping area and the Eurostar departure lounge. Today, while waiting for trains to the continent, travellers can muse on the fact that the spacing between the many original iron columns on view is delineated in one of the lesser-known units of measurement: the beer barrel.



St Pancras railway station Mary G90 Creative Commons Att - Share Alike 3.0

After the demise of Hodgson, the Bow brewery changed hands several times, finally being bought by Taylor Walker in 1927 and demolished in 1933 to be replaced by council flats. Bow Bridge is now a multi-lane flyover, notable only for a, probably apocryphal, story that a figure from the criminal demi-monde of the 1960s’ East End is now an integral part of one of its supports.