

SMOKED PORTER

The last newsletter mentioned that friends of the late Frank Foy would sometimes send him interesting newspaper snippets about Baldock discovered in the course of their own research. One such, from the Cambridge Chronicle, concerned a case of slander brought in July 1823 by Mr. John Izzard Pryor against a Baldock ‘medical practitioner’, a Mr. Bally, who had alleged that Mr. Pryor’s brewery adulterated its beer with tobacco. Bally claimed to have analysed the beer and had “*made it his business to travel from alehouse to alehouse, repeating the same slander, and vouching it upon the credit of his supposed skill in chemistry.*” Bally had also claimed that Pryor had previously been convicted and fined for such an offence. Although Mr. Pryor’s counsel did not think that such accusations carried much weight in Baldock itself, as Mr. Pryor was so well known there, there was evidence to show that the persistence of Bally’s claims had an effect further afield where “*some persons would be found sufficiently credulous to believe such a statement.*” In Hertford, for instance, a publican who had previously ordered beer to the value of £300-£400 annually from Pryor’s brewery had lately ceased to order it because his customers would make remarks such as “*Come, let us have some of your real shag beer.*” Mr. Joseph Tranter, Mr. Pryor’s brewer who had been in his employment for 20 years, declared that “*he could safely state that nothing was made use of in his brewery but malt, hops and yeast.*” The jury found against Bally, who had declined to appoint a counsel for his defence, and awarded £400 damages against him.

The Pryor brewery in the High Street was a large concern that had been established in the 1730s and by the 1820s was brewing on “*an extensive scale*” the beer being “*of a superior body and flavour resembling London porter in a great degree.*” Mr Pryor’s father, a Baldock maltster and farmer, had leased the brewery in the 1770s bringing into his own hands the whole supply chain: growing the barley, malting it, brewing the beer and then selling it in his own pubs. John Izzard Pryor had purchased the brewery outright in 1799 and, by the time it was sold to Simpsons in 1853, it had 120 tied houses spread over four counties and also supplied beer to several other pubs and inns.

The making of porter required not only the dark malts provided by Baldock’s maltsters but lengthy storage in the large cellars beneath the brewery to develop the flavour. Apparently the flavour of porter could be enhanced by putting tobacco and “*certain drugs*” into the brew and, at the time in question, the adulteration of porter was a matter of national debate. Mr Bally evidently picked up the subject and convinced himself that Pryor’s beer was also adulterated. Whatever the truth of the matter, the jury felt that the accusation was slanderous. However, £400 would not have done much to cover the loss the brewery suffered from the allegations, as can be seen from the loss of the business with the Hertford pub. As Bally’s claims were prevalent in Hertfordshire at least, Mr. Pryor felt compelled to send a letter to the editor of the Cambridge Chronicle. This contained an affidavit, sworn before a Justice of the Peace by himself and Mr. Tranter, to the effect that they had never been convicted of adulterating their beer (as alleged by Bally) and that such adulteration had never been used by them or by anyone else to their knowledge.

Almost nothing is known about Bally. Presumably he was the Archibald Bally described as a surgeon in the 1823 directory but, unsurprisingly, not in that of 1827.

ANOTHER SNIPPET

Another interesting piece sent to Frank Foy was from the Ipswich Journal of 30th March 1793: “*Chelmsford, March 29th: Yesterday the party of Dragoons quartered here, set off for Baldock, in Herts, in great haste, on account, as we are informed, of a riot there.*” Chelmsford is 40 miles away and by the time a message had been sent for help, the troopers gathered from their billets, mounted, and then journeyed to Baldock (presumably not less than 12 hours altogether), the rioters must have long dispersed. There have been several riots over the course of Baldock’s history although they did not occasion the calling out of the military. The reason for this particular riot is not known; perhaps the declaration of war by Revolutionary France in the previous month had prompted a rise in food prices – a frequent cause of unrest.

LOST AND FOUND

Trawling through back editions of the newsletter, whilst searching for something else, an item was found about a stone commemorating the foundation of the National School in 1834 being missing from the garden of the White Lion. That was in 1996 and, for the sake of completeness, we should report that the stone has since reappeared and is now in the possession of the museum.