

C WATKINS PATENT STEAM BREWERY, HEREFORD

by Paul Withers



In October of 1842, Charles Watkins, a publican running the Imperial Vaults in Widemarsh Street, Hereford, went to an auction sale in the Green Dragon inn and bought the Hereford Brewery, which had been trading as Reynolds and Wase and had gone bust. Watkins already brewed beer for his own pub, as did most publicans in those days, usually in an outhouse at the back of the premises; but the acquisition of the Hereford Brewery enabled him to start large scale production and a business empire.

Empire was in the air, the red areas on the world map were growing. Imperium was an attractive prospect to a Victorian gent, so the first

thing he did was to change the brewery's name to 'The Imperial Brewery', and as his empire grew, all of his enterprises were given the name 'imperial'. His family was growing too, he was to father no fewer than ten children, and his daughters, a little unkindly, perhaps, were known (behind his back, of course) as "their imperial highnesses".

In business his strategy was to decrease his reliance on others; this not only cut expenses, but gave security and resulted in increased profits. He therefore started farming to produce wheat for his flour milling business and barley for his beer. Perceiving that the greatest profits came not from brewing, but the retailing of beer, he acquired public houses to sell his popular products. The Imperial Brewery became the largest brewery in the county.

Charles Watkins was a typical self-made businessman of the period, and apart from relating that one of his fine beers was a gold medal winner at the 1886 International Exhibition, we do not have any more to say about him, and our focus becomes his third child, Alfred, who was born on the 27th January 1855.

Strictly speaking, the story should end here, but the son was a much more interesting figure than his father. He lived 80 full years until 1935 and was everything a Victorian gentleman should be: a radical businessman and entrepreneur, socially responsible, rich by his own efforts, and much else besides. If Charles was worthy, his son was not only very worthy, but remarkable. Where the father was notable in local life the son became notable nationally. The father was a businessman, brewer and publican, but the son was all of those and in addition became known as a photographer; an inventor; a well-known author, whose books are still read; and an antiquarian. In his spare time he kept bees, rowed, founded the local debating society, was a Justice of the Peace, County Councillor, an Alderman and a supporter of women's suffrage and more. This is all the more remarkable because the latter phase of his life, for which he is best known, did not start until he was sixty!

Although he was the owner's son, Alfred was not given an easy ride. Starting as a delivery boy, once he was old enough he worked in the brewery, learning all about the trade, from coopering to brewing and bottling. Once competent he was sent out as a traveller, responsible for getting orders for the brewery. After a while he transferred his interest to the flour mill. He took every opportunity possible to modernise it, beginning with installing a generator and electrifying the plant, this not only enabled the replacing of mill stones with steel rollers, but was the first electric light in Herefordshire. Being a traveller widened his horizons, taking him not only throughout Herefordshire and the neighbouring counties, but to the London market too. His patent flour, called Vagos (after the Roman name for the river Wye, which flows through the city), sold nationally and was reckoned to give a good, healthy, well-textured bread.



Starting with a pinhole camera he built from a cigar box around 1875, he became obsessed with photography, a passion that was to last for the rest of his life. As pinhole camera gave way to plate camera, he realised that to be successful at photography it was necessary to get the exposure correct – and exposure is perhaps the most difficult aspect to understand because there are four different, yet interdependent, factors at work: strength of the illumination, film sensitivity (i.e., speed), lens aperture, and shutter speed.

Furthermore, when developing the plate, the temperature of the developer and the length of time for which it was in the tank were important. He did extensive research on all these factors, which was published in the *British Journal of Photography* in 1890, the same year that he built and patented an exposure meter.

Although his exposure meter was a good one, the typically British reaction of the photographic industry to it was negative, and to get it into production he was obliged to invest his own capital and set aside a room in the Imperial Flour Mills for its manufacture. These Meter Works also made and sold other measuring devices including dough meters for domestic and trade baking.

The meter came to the market at the right time and was a success. In the first year he sold 1,400 meters at a guinea each. He was to patent various other affordable exposure meters which, along with cheap cameras, ensured that photography developed into a highly popular mass pursuit. His highly successful Bee light meter, priced at 2/6d, was produced in Birmingham by R. Field, otherwise manufacturers of range finders for surveyors and the military. Its name was chosen because of Watkins' other hobby, bee-keeping, and because it suggested something small and efficient. It sold world-wide, especially after having been used by Herbert Ponting, the photographer for Scott's 1910 Antarctic expedition. A superior model, the 'Queen Bee' was available for 5s, postage 1d. They continued to be sold to both amateur and professional photographers for nearly fifty years. The company also developed the Watkins Time Tank and the Watkins Time Thermometer, and published the *Watkins Manual of Photography*, which ran to 11 editions. Watkins personally answered many letters from photographers with queries and problems.

In 1910 Watkins was elected a Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society and was awarded the society's Progress Medal, its highest honour, for his research work. The following year he completed a reference work *Photography; its Principles and Applications* – the 'bible' for amateur photographers for a couple of gener-

ations, which was reprinted three times.

In 1888 Watkins had joined the Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club, Herefordshire's natural history and archaeology society. He was to become its dominant figure, and its president in 1918. His photography made the Club's *Transactions* the most advanced illustrated publication of any such local society, rivalling and bettering those of many more academic ones. Throughout his life he gave illustrated talks on a wide variety of subjects including chapels, dovecotes, wayside crosses, the city walls and ancient pottery. In 1921 Watkins read a paper to the Woolhope Club members that was to begin a controversy that still carries on to this day. His new and radical ideas were on the subject of ley lines.

You will almost certainly have heard the term, but perhaps, like me have not considered it any further. The theory starts with prehistoric tracks, following trading routes that crossed the landscape, usually in straight lines. These original routes were subsequently re-used and along them we find later, historic features.

This grid of ley-lines was revealed, Watkins tells his readers, when visiting the Herefordshire countryside. Viewing a map led him to see, before he saw it on the ground, a straight line linking various ancient sites. Further map-assisted hill sightings yielded similar astounding results elsewhere. Readers were told that the theory could be verified using an inch to a mile Ordnance map and a ruler, by sticking a pin on 'an undoubted sighting point' placing the straight edge against it and moving it around until no fewer than four sites (including place names), moats, mounds, standing stones, churches, wayside crosses, holy wells, legendary trees, cuttings, Roman roads and ancient bridleways, came exactly into line. Travelling along the line on the ground would reveal further sites not marked on maps, such as woodland glades, trenches, fragments of causeways and more.

Some of these lines, according to Watkins, were up to sixty miles long. They were not, however, simply walking trails, these were sighting lines, originally surveyed from primary, hill-top observations points and were the basis for modifying the landscape to assign alignments for the construction of cuttings, embankments and causeways, building megaliths, mounds, planting trees and making ponds.

For some reason, it did not seem to occur to him that if you take a sufficiently large number of dots on a map, a line will pass through many of them by accident, and that this is exacerbated when sites are located in valleys where there is not a lot of room for doing much else than follow nature's topography.

If photography was the obsession of his youth, then this was the obsession of his old age as he attempted to convince others of the rightness of his theories. He published *The Ley Hunters Manual, Early British Trackways, Archaic Trackways around Cambridge*; and *The Old Straight Track* which is still in print. Some still take his theory seriously and the *Ley Hunter* magazine is still regularly published. Fringe elements have added their own superstitions and belief, connected to Atlantis, Glastonbury, Egypt, or wherever. A friend of mine was told by his rather nutty brother, that if he slept on a particular old oak bench in his house his arthritis would be cured as it was at the exact conjunction of two ley lines.

However, we run ahead of ourselves. In 1889 both Charles Watkins and his son and partner Henry died. Nine years later, the two surviving sons, one of whom was Alfred, sold out to The Tredegar Brewery, who paid £64,000 for the brewery and its tied public houses. The Tredegar Brewery was owned by J T Jenkins & Co., who, strangely enough, seems to have been a relative of mine. Yes, I might have been the heir to a small share of a large fortune if my grandfather had taken the pledge, for his grandmother, a formidable Welsh matriarch, who ruled the family, was determined that no one who was a drinker should inherit money that might set them on a path to drunken oblivion. It did not seem to strike her as strange that she should make a living from brewing and selling alcohol whilst insisting on strict sobriety for the rest of the family. However, one has to point out that her daughter fell down a flight of stairs at the dead of night, breaking her neck, whilst she was drunk, which was why she had a certain antipathy towards it.

Anyhow, when it was discovered that Edwin was imbibing liquor, a family meeting was called and she announced "Our Edwin is not having our money to piss against the wall." On her death, everything, farms, pubs, and breweries and everything else went to his sister !

Watkins was also into politics, he was a traditional liberal, against the intrusion of party politics in local elections. He was strongly for Free Trade and in favour of the campaign for Votes for Women. He became a County Magistrate in 1907 and served on the Bench for many years. In 1914 he became a County Councillor for Tupsley and was eventually made a County Alderman.

He was chairman of the committee responsible for the design of the War Memorial in St. Peter's Square, Hereford, which is still there.

There is also a numismatic connection. He was not in favour of decimal currency, and produced a booklet entitled *Must We Trade in Tenths ?* which sold for 3d. It proposed an octaval currency based on the pound and the half-crown, in which he was supported by George Bernard Shaw.

For more details, see

www.woolhopeclub.org.uk/files/AlfredWatkins.htm,

www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/06autumn/daniels.htm,

Wikipedia.