

Thornley-Kelsey [Radford Hall] Brewery

Born on 7th August, 1854, Henry Edward Thornley was originally a farmer at Radford Hall, Radford Semele, who initially commenced brewing solely for his own labourers.

However, by 1898 he had broadened his business interests and is listed at Radford Hall Brewery with H. Bradshaw of 6, George Street, Leamington Spa as his agent. By 1900, H. E. Thornley Ltd was well on the way to being established and had opened offices at 146, The Parade, wholesale and retail stores at 10/12 Gloucester Street and two branches in Coventry [Canterbury Street and Cromwell Street] – and by 1902 all brewery buildings were complete. Furthermore, their ales and stout had acquired a strong reputation in the area and the brewery had begun to accumulate a tied-estate.



Spennell's Directory
Photo: ©Allan Jennings

In his book *Warwickshire Breweries*, Joseph McKenna describes the brewery's architecture thus: -
"Architecturally the building was impressive. It was four storeys high with a central seven-storey high castellated tower. The Radford Hall Brewery was constructed in a Gothic baronial style, in red brick with a line of yellow coursing at each storey".

Advertising - 1900

**THORNLEY & CO.,
BREWERS,
Wine & Spirit Merchants,
RADFORD HALL BREWERY,
LEAMINGTON SPA.**

Specialities: Diamond Pale Ale AK - 1/-
HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.
Mild Ales in Cask from 10d.

Special Dinner Ale In Bottle 2/6
Superior Pale Ale „ 3/-
Nourishing Stout „ 3/-

For the convenience of small quantities BEER and STOUT supplied in ONE GALLON JARS with Patent Tap and Screw Stopper.

Wholesale & Retail Stores: 10 & 12, Gloucester Street.

TOWN OFFICE: 146, The Parade.

COVENTRY BRANCHES: CANTERBURY STREET, CROMWELL STREET.

As well as being a farmer and running the brewery business, Thornley was also involved in the local community and during 1901-02 was chairman of the Radford Semele Parish Council. In 1888 he was a churchwarden of St. Nicholas Church in Radford Semele along with William Saunders – and again from 1889 until 1916, this time with John Staite.

On 30th June 1916, the Royal Leamington Spa Courier & Warwickshire Standard reported the death of Mr. Thornley: -

Thornley – On 27th June 1916, at Radford Hall, Leamington Spa, Henry Edward Thornley, aged 61 years.

It also printed the following comprehensive obituary befitting of a prominent member of the community: -

Mr. H. E. Thornley



Photo: ©Bob Saunders

"We regret to record the death of Mr. H. E. Thornley of Radford Hall, which occurred at his residence last Tuesday morning, after a prolonged illness.

Mr. Thornley, who was born on 7th August, 1854, and therefore nearly 62, had lived in Radford Semele for 29 years and was universally esteemed. He was the son of Mr. Charles Thornley of Kingshurst Hall, near Coleshill, and was educated at the Grammar School, Stratford-on-Avon.

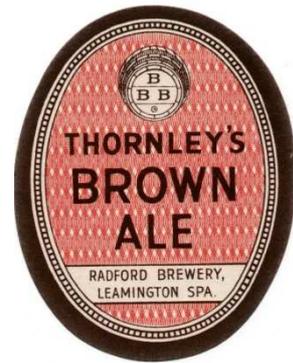
When 18 years of age he went to New Zealand, but returned to England two years afterwards and took up farming, first near Kenilworth and later at Chesterton Fields.

In 1881 he married Miss Gilman, daughter of the late Mr. Robert Gilman, Temple House, Harbury, and had a family of four sons and four daughters who, with his widow, survive him.

He moved to Radford Hall in 1887 and in 1892 the Royal Agricultural Society of England awarded him second prize for the best managed farm. An enterprising and successful business man, Mr. Thornley, at one time, went in for market gardening and previous to taking up brewing he had a bone mill.

He commenced brewing in 1899 and in 1902 he built the present brewery buildings at Radford Semele. He still kept on his farming activities and had two farms, having recently given up a third.

Interested in all that concerned Radford, Mr. Thornley was churchwarden, overseer, and parish councillor, and supported everything that made for the welfare of the village – in which he did a great deal of good in an unostentatious way. He was appointed churchwarden in 1888 and overseer in April 1907, and he had held both offices ever since. He was also a trustee of the Henry Greswolde Lewis charity and vice-chairman of the parish council.

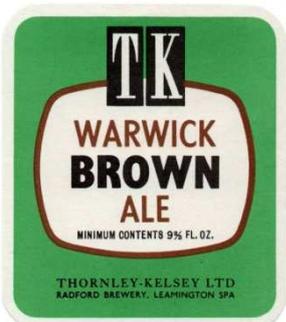


A large employer of labour, and an excellent business man, he was greatly esteemed and respected by every member of his staff, thirty of whom have joined the colours. Mr. Thornley has one son at the front and two others are engaged on munitions.

He was well known in the hunting field, for he was a keen follower of hounds and hunted with the local packs up to the outbreak of war. He will be greatly missed, not only by his wife and family but also by a large number of friends.”

The Funeral

“The funeral took place at one o’clock on Friday 30th June 1916, at Radford Church. The churchyard path was lined with school children, and the large number of parishioners and friends who had gathered betokened the great esteem in which the deceased gentleman was held.



The Rev. Canon Grinter [vicar] and the Rev. S. Thelwall [ex vicar] were the officiating clergy. The mourners were Mrs. Thornley [widow], Mr. E. R. Thornley [son], Mrs. Hooper [daughter], Mr. R. Frank Thornley [son], Mr. and Mrs. H. F. Thornley [son and daughter-in-law], Misses Ethel, Nellie and Olive Thornley [daughters], Colonel Freer [cousin], Mr. and Mrs. Walton [brother-in-law and sister], Mrs. Walter Thornley [sister-in-law], Miss Cattell, Mr. Noel and Miss Frances Thornley [cousins], Mr. Cattell and Mrs. Heelis [very dear friends of the deceased], Mr. and Mrs. F.G. Perkins, Mr. and Mrs. Holt, Mr. Harrod, Mr. J. Haynes, Mr. Hinks, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Hinton, Mr. Tennant, together with the staff and employees.

Among others present were Mrs. J. N. Paton, Dr. Olive, Messrs. Henry Field, C.E.G. Hatherall, J.P, W. Davis J.P, C.C; John Staite, Wm Staite, Jos. Stanley, J.S. Murcott, C.E. Leigh, M. Burman, W.E. Anderson, F. Pope, J.J. Reed, A.J. Pearman, G. Percy Smith, G. Spicer, J. Redfearn, J.L. French [overseer], and J.J. Rogers [assistant overseer].

The hymn, ‘O God, our help in ages past’ was sung by the choir and congregation, after which the Rev. S. Thelwall read the appointed lesson. The Rev. Canon Grinter, addressing the congregation, then said: - ‘We have been called together today to pay a last loving act of respect to our dear brother Henry Edward Thornley. Mr. Thornley has been, for about 30 years, a great and true friend of all in this parish, and one and all have suffered a great loss by his removal from our midst; how great, time will reveal.’

‘The children in this parish have lost a great, good, and true friend, God only knows how great; the sick and aged poor a generous sympathiser; the workpeople – and there are many here – a kind and considerate master; may God grant that they may always have such a good one! The church a loyal churchwarden; the dear wife, with whom we greatly sympathise, a devoted, loving, faithful husband; and the sons and daughters a loving father; and one and all a true and faithful friend.’



Photo: ©Bob Saunders



‘To the sons and daughters I would say that: - You still have left, thank God, the greatest treasure this world can bestow upon you, namely, a good and faithful and devoted mother. May God comfort you as He alone can, and give you His grace and strength to bear this and every trial He may send upon you. I also ask you to remember the bereaved ones at the throne of grace, and especially the youngest son, Walter, who is at the front doing his duty for king and country. May God help you to be as faithful and true as our loved brother who, I believe, now stands at the presence of Jesus.’

The Malt House [Photo: ©Bob Saunders]

Chopin’s Funeral March was then played by the organist, after which the interment took place in the churchyard. There were many beautiful wreaths, a list of which will appear in our next issue. Messrs. Wackrill and Co. carried out the funeral arrangements.”

In January 1930 the Leamington Spa Courier reported that: - “Mr. Edward Richard Thornley, of Radford Semele, a partner in Messrs. H. E. Thornley & Co., brewers of Radford Semele, who died on 20th November, aged 46 years, intestate, left estate of the value of £22,509, with net personalty £19,075. Letters of administration are granted to Mrs. Thornley, the widow, and Robert Frank Thornley, of The Hall, Radford Semele”.

In March 1933, H. E. Thornley was registered as a limited company, with capital amounting to £15,000, to acquire the business of brewers, etc, carried on as H. E. Thornley at the Radford Hall Brewery, Radford Semele, Warwickshire and elsewhere. Later that year the company merged with Benjamin Kelsey Ltd, of Birmingham, to become Thornley-Kelsey Ltd; the directors comprised Philip G. Kelsey, Benjamin G. Kelsey, Frank L. Buttler and Cecil W. Bourne.

Arguably the last sizeable independent brewery in Warwickshire of its era, it traded until October 1968 when the owners ceased brewing to concentrate on their wine wholesaling business. At the time of sale, the tied-estate in Warwickshire, Worcestershire and Herefordshire comprised 68 pubs – which were purchased primarily by Davenports – and, of these 68, the following 22 were located in Warwickshire: -

- Roebuck – High Street, Erdington
- Norton Arms – Forge Mills, Erdington
- Manor House – Fillongley
- Virgins and Castle – Kenilworth
- Zetland Hotel – Church Street, Warwick
- Coach and Horses – Bedford Street, Leamington
- Heathcote – Whitnash
- White Lion – Radford Semele
- White Hart – Ufton
- White Lion – Bidford-on-Avon
- Half Sovereign – Canley, Coventry
- Man at Arms – Bitteswell
- Royal Oak – Bitteswell
- Bell Inn – Monks Kirby
- Boat Inn – Newbold-on-Avon
- Green Man – Long Itchington
- Fox and Hen – Bascote
- Bowling Green – Southam
- Bridge Inn – Napton
- Bell Inn – Ladbroke
- Holly Bush – Priors Marston
- Red Lion – Avon Dassett



Photo: ©Bob Saunders



Photo: ©Bob Saunders

Kieron McMahon from Midlandspubs.co.uk, who has researched Benjamin Kelsey, related the following: -

“Much of my discoveries about this brewery emerged when I was researching the Dog & Partridge on Ashted Row. It was in 1857 that the association with this pub and the famous Kelsey family started. Benjamin Kelsey founded a brewery in Ashted, starting a company that would live for another century [the spring water around Ashted was well regarded and ideal for brewing].

Before taking over the licence of the Dog & Partridge he had previously kept the White Hart in Great Brook Street. In the 1861 census he was documented as a 34 year-old Birmingham-born licensed victualler. His parents were Benjamin Booth Kelsey and Drusilla Stokes, a couple who were married in St. Phillips on 6th November, 1825; Benjamin was born just over a year later in January 1827.



*LMS railway bridge, High Street, Leamington, 1947
[Photo courtesy: Leamington Spa Courier]*

Benjamin Kelsey proved to be a very successful brewer and, in what today is known as vertical integration, he also became a maltster and hop merchant supplying a number of other pubs in the area. Such was his success in this field, he decided to concentrate his efforts in brewing, handing over the running of the Dog & Partridge to John Seeley Kelsey.

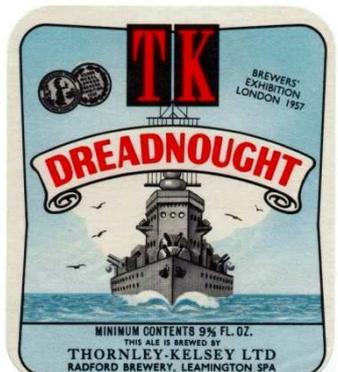
The successful brewing business enabled the Kelsey's to develop a modest estate of public houses, including the Ashted Tavern on the corner of Henry Street and Ashted Row and the White Hart in Cromwell Street. Indeed, John Kelsey moved from the Dog & Partridge to the latter shortly before his death on 5th October, 1878. His will was proved by Benjamin Kelsey and valued at £4,000, an enormous sum of money for the period.

The Kelsey empire continued to grow until, in 1933, the company merged with H.E. Thornley of Leamington Spa. Trading as Thornley-Kelsey Ltd, the new company eventually moved all brewing to Leamington.

When they decided to concentrate on their wine wholesaling operations in 1968, Thornley-Kelsey closed the brewery and sold their estate of 68 tied houses. The Bath Row based Davenport's Brewery acquired the majority of the pub estate.”

Radford Brewery – A Den of Secret Activity during the War?

In 1999, Mr. H.J. Poulter of Radford Semele wrote an article for ‘A History of Radford Semele’ about two conversations he had with two different ladies, on two different occasions that beg the question, “Was there secret activity going on at Radford Brewery during the Second World War?”



He met the first lady a few years before he wrote the article and on telling her where he lived the lady said that she had worked at Radford Brewery during the war. She had previously worked at the Admiralty and during 1940 was moved, with other Wrens [Women's Royal Naval Service], to Leamington Spa; Harrington House, previously on the site of the Royal Spa Centre, had been requisitioned to accommodate the Wrens and every day they had to walk to Radford Brewery in civilian clothes.

Despite Mr. Poulter making enquiries in the village, nothing could be confirmed, except that a man remembered delivering a churn of milk to the brewery every day during the war.

Some months later Mr. Poulter was sitting in Jephson Gardens when an elderly lady asked if she could sit next to him on the bench. She started a conversation by saying that she had not been here for over 50 years and that she was looking for a big house where she was billeted during the war.



Mr. Poulter asked if she had been a Wren and when she replied, “How do you know?” he related the conversation that he’d had with the other lady. She then said that, “the Wrens used to walk to Radford Semele every day until, following their protestations, Hercules cycles were provided to complete the daily return journey”, but didn’t offer any information relating to their roles [thereby honouring her obligations to the 1939 ‘Official Secrets Act’ – Ed].

[Adapted from H.E. Poulter’s reminiscences in ‘A history of Radford Semele’ – 2nd edition 2002]

Since the latter conversation, Mr. Poulter had not been able to uncover any further information that corroborated what the two ladies had told him. However, I have since been able to establish that the top floor of Radford Brewery was requisitioned for the war effort and assigned to the locally based Wrens who were working on decoding, and the production of blueprints.

*Photo courtesy of
Leamington Museum*

Kirsty Hyslop also contributed an interesting piece to ‘A History of Radford Semele’, about her father who worked at the brewery: -

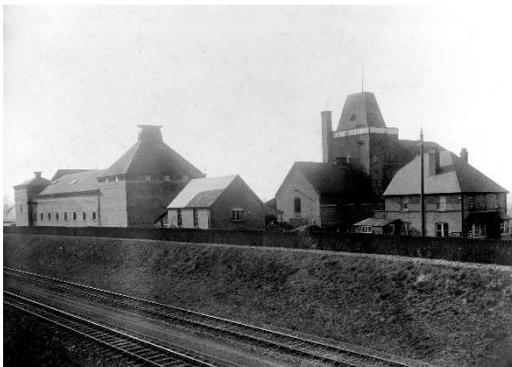
“My father Douglas Martin Brown came to Radford Semele in 1948 as the head brewer for H.E. Thornley. To begin with the family lived in Leamington and my father biked to and from work; later he moved us into a house in the brewery grounds where Miss Hooper, a Thornley relative, had previously lived. My father called the house ‘Newfields’ as the garden was like a jungle and to my Londoner father and Scottish mother it was new fields. It was a large four bedroom house, with a big formal front door that was never used and a huge mahogany and brass fireplace in the dining room. The kitchen had a range and off it an old fashioned walk-in pantry; the shelves were made of slate and it was always cold. Outside there was a well and an old wash house with a boiler where we kept chicken feed.



Photo: ©Bob Saunders

The garden was big with a formal rose garden set with staddle stones and a pond, kitchen garden, and apple trees. Part of the adjoining field was used as a chicken run; foxes gave us a lot of trouble. As children, my sister and I knew most people who worked in the brewery – Fred the stoker looked after the boilers in his big steel capped boots and overalls. There was a cooper because the wooden beer barrels were handmade and the water for brewing was tanked in all the way from Wales, although the brewery had a couple of wells.

Each working day at 8am my father would mash the beer and the smell of it would waft over to our house and all over the village. In the summer holidays I worked in the bottling plant, putting the tops on bottles of Guinness for which I was paid two shillings and sixpence per week.



In 1960, my father won a coveted silver cup in London at the Brewing Bottling and Allied Trades Exhibition for the best bottled beer in the country, against competition from Ansells, Bass etc. Towards the end of the 1960’s [circa 1968] my father left the brewery and moved into Leamington; a couple of years later the pubs were sold off piecemeal and the brewery closed – it was the end of an era.”

Photo: ©Bob Saunders

On 7th March 1969, the Leamington Spa Courier reported that “the East Midlands Electricity Board has submitted outline planning application to Warwick Rural Council for permission to build new district offices on the old Thornley-Kelsey site at Radford Semele”, and on 2nd May 1969, that “Thornley-Kelsey’s former brewery at Radford Semele was sold to the East Midlands Electricity Board for £75,000 at a Leamington auction, held on Wednesday 30th April 1969 at the Regent Hotel; auctioneers John Staite & Son started the bidding at £60,000. The brewery site, which comprises nine acres between the Grand Union Canal and the railway line, is just outside the Leamington borough boundary and had been allocated for industrial use”.

In February 1977, the Leamington Spa Courier reported that “the end of an era is in sight at Radford Semele, with the closure of what is left of the village’s once famous brewery”. This referred to that portion of the site retained to operate the TK wholesale & retail wines and spirits business, which closed on 31st March 1977.

Allan Jennings – June 2016

Acknowledgements

Leamington Spa Courier [1897-1977]

Morning News [1897-1977]

Annual directories 1897+ [Beck’s, Fairfax, Kelly’s, Moncrieff’s, Pigot’s & Spennell’s]

‘A History of Brewing in Warwickshire’ by Ken Flint [edited by Fred Luckett, Ken Flint & Peter Lee], Published by CAMRA, 1983

‘Warwickshire Breweries’ by Joseph McKenna [Published by History Press Ltd, 2006]

‘Midland Pubs’ by Kieron McMahon [www.midlandspubs.co.uk]

‘A History of Radford Semele’ – Published in 2002 by Radford Semele PCC,

[Adaption of H.E. Poulter’s ‘Reminiscences’ and a contribution from Kirsty Hyslop]

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