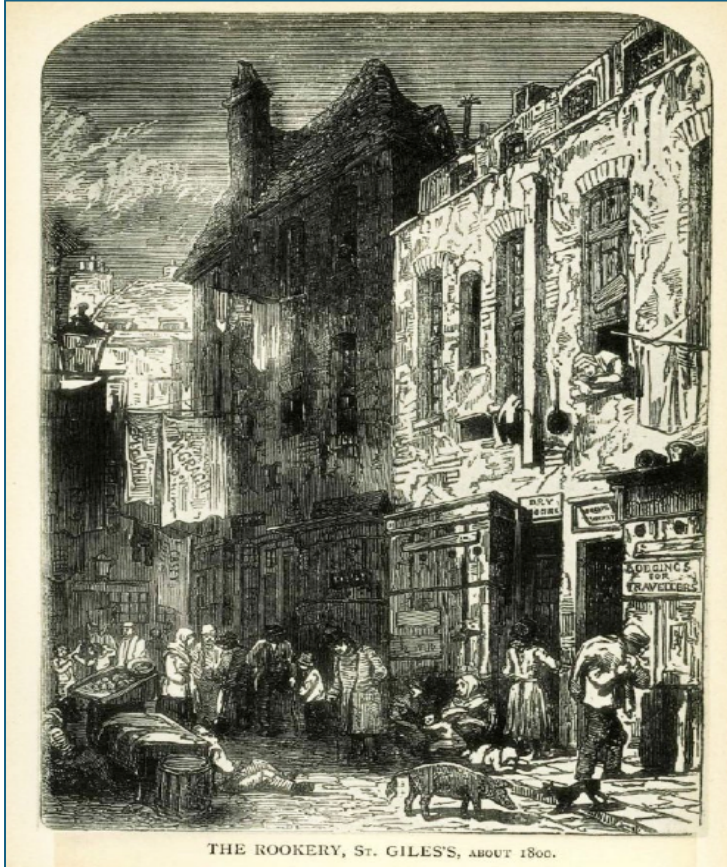


The London Beer Flood of 1814.

Pre-amble:

In the early nineteenth century the Meux Brewery was one of the two largest in London, along with Whitbread. In 1809 Sir Henry Meux purchased the Horse Shoe Brewery, at the junction of Tottenham Court Road and Oxford Street. Meux's father, Sir Richard Meux, had previously co-owned the Griffin Brewery in Liquor-Pond Street (now Clerkenwell Road), in which he had constructed the largest vat in London, capable of holding 20,000 imperial barrels.



Henry Meux emulated his father's large vat, and constructed a wooden vessel 22 feet (6.7 m) tall and capable of holding 18,000 imperial barrels. Eighty long tons (eighty-one metric tons) of iron hoops were used to strengthen the vat. Meux brewed only porter, a dark beer that was first brewed in London and was the most popular alcoholic drink in the capital. Meux & Co brewed 102,493 imperial barrels in the twelve months up to July 1812. Porter was left in the large vessels to mature for several months, or up to a year for the best quality versions

At the rear of the brewery ran New Street, a small cul-de-sac that joined on to Dyott Street; this was within the St Giles rookery. The rookery, which covered an area of eight acres, "was a perpetually decaying slum seemingly always on the verge of social and economic collapse".

In later Literature.

In 1850, the English novelist Charles Dickens was given a guided tour of several dangerous rookeries by "Inspector Field, the formidable chief detective of Scotland Yard". A party of six—Dickens, Field, an assistant commissioner, and three lower ranks (probably armed), made their way into the Rat's Castle, backed by a squad of local police within whistling distance. The excursion started in the evening and lasted until dawn. They went through St Giles and even worse slums, in the Old Mint, along the Ratcliffe Highway and Petticoat Lane. The results of this and other investigations came out in novels, short stories, and straight journalism, of which Dickens wrote a great deal. *Oliver Twist* (1838) features the rookery at Jacob's Island.

Thomas Beames, the preacher of Westminster St James, and author of the 1852 work *The Rookeries of London: Past, Present and Prospective*, described the St Giles rookery as "a rendezvous of the scum of society"; the area had been the inspiration for William Hogarth's 1751 print *Gin Lane*.

A rookery, in the colloquial English of the 18th and 19th centuries, was a city slum occupied by poor people and frequently also by criminals and prostitutes.

The Horseshoe Brewery Flood.

On Monday 17th October 1814, a terrible disaster claimed the lives of at least eight people in St Giles, London. A bizarre industrial accident resulted in the release of a beer tsunami onto the streets of London around Tottenham Court Road.

The Horse Shoe Brewery stood at the corner of Great Russell Street and Tottenham Court Road. In 1810 the brewery, Meux and Company, had had a 22 foot high wooden fermentation tank installed on the premises. Held together with massive iron rings, this huge vat held the equivalent of over 3,500 barrels of brown porter ale, a beer not unlike stout.

In Meux's Brewery everything is as filthy as steam and smoke, and dust and rust can make it; except the steam engine, which is as polished and as clean as the bars of a drawing-room grate. The first operation of this engine is to stir the malt in vats of twenty-eight feet diameter, filled with boiling water; the second is, in due time, to raise the wort to the coolers, in the floor above; then this wort is conveyed by leaden pipes into the tub where it is to ferment, and afterwards into the casks where the porter is first deposited.

One of these casks, measures seventy feet in diameter, and is said to have cost £10,000; the iron hoops on it weigh eighty tons; and we were told that it actually contained, 18,000 barrels, or £40,000 worth of porter. Another contained 16,000 barrels, and from thence to 4,000; there are above seventy casks in the store.



At the time of the disaster the Horse Shoe brewery had been in the hands of Henry Meux for just five years. The brewery's origins are obscure: in the 20th century, at least, Meux & Co claimed a foundation date of 1764.



However, a brewhouse with its entrance off Banbridge Street (now Bainbridge Street) is shown on John Rocque's map of London of 1746, just behind Well Yard at the foot of Tottenham Court Road.

The "brewery tap" on Tottenham Court Road, called the Horseshoe, is supposed to have been in existence as a tavern since 1623, and to have been called the Horseshoe from the shape of its first dining room.

Its age, if true, suggests the brewery was named after the tavern. A Mr Lot, brewer, of "Rainbridge Street" is mentioned in 1761, and a Mr Cox, brewer of Baynbrigg Street in 1775.

Soon after, Charles William Cox and Thomas Fassett were brewing in Wells Yard. By 1785 another partner, Joseph Ruse, had arrived: he insured the brewery that year for a value of £800. In the list of London brewers' output from 1786-7, Fassett's was the 11th largest porter brewery in the capital, producing 40,279 barrels of beer a year, a long way behind the leader, Samuel Whitbread, on more than 150,000 barrels a year.

At around 4:30pm on 17 October 1814, storehouse clerk George Crick inspected the tank and noticed that one of the 700-pound iron hoops had slipped off the cask, but, as this occurred two or three times a year, it did not seem unusual and he thought nothing of it. Despite the tank being full and pressure from the fermentation building inside, Crick's boss told him that no harm would ensue from the broken ring and instructed him to write a letter to another brewery employee requesting it to be fixed at a later date.

On this afternoon, one of the iron rings around the tank snapped. About an hour later the whole tank ruptured, releasing the hot fermenting ale with such force that the back wall of the brewery collapsed. The force also blasted open several more vats, adding their contents to the flood which now burst forth onto the street. More than 320,000 gallons of beer were released into the area. This was St Giles Rookery, a densely populated London slum of cheap housing and tenements inhabited by the poor, the destitute, prostitutes and criminals.



Soon after, at around 5:30pm, Crick heard a massive explosion from inside the storeroom. The tank had ruptured, releasing the hot fermenting ale with such force that the vat burst into splinters and the back wall of the brewery collapsed. The blast also set off a chain reaction, breaking off the valve of an adjoining cask and breaking open more vats, adding their contents to the flood which had now burst out onto the street.

The flood reached George Street and New Street within minutes, swamping them with a tide of alcohol. The fifteen foot high wave of beer and debris inundated the

basements of two houses, causing them to collapse. In one of the houses, Mary Banfield and her daughter Hannah were taking tea when the flood hit; both were killed.

In the basement of the other house, an Irish wake was being held for a 2 year old boy who had died the previous day. The four mourners were all killed. The wave also took out the wall of the Tavistock Arms pub, trapping the teenage barmaid Eleanor Cooper in the rubble. In all, eight people were killed. Three brewery workers were rescued from the waist-high flood and another was pulled alive from the rubble.

All this 'free' beer led to hundreds of people scooping up the liquid in whatever containers they could. Some resorted to just drinking it, leading to reports of the death of a ninth victim some days later from alcoholic poisoning.

'The bursting of the brew-house walls, and the fall of heavy timber, materially contributed to aggravate the mischief, by forcing the roofs and walls of the adjoining houses.' The Times, 19th October 1814.

Some relatives exhibited the corpses of the victims for money. In one house, the macabre exhibition resulted in the collapse of the floor under the weight of all the visitors, plunging everyone waist-high into a beer-flooded cellar. The stench of beer in the area persisted for months afterwards.

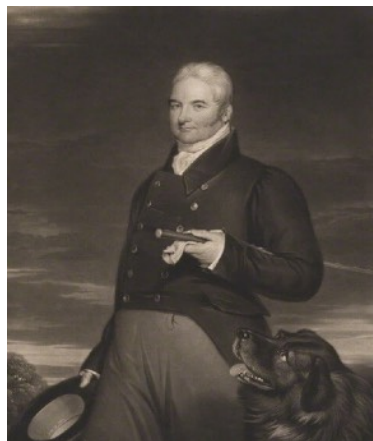
The brewery was taken to court over the accident but the disaster was ruled to be an Act of God, leaving no one responsible.

The flood cost the brewery around £23000 (approx. £1.25 million today).

However the company were able to reclaim the excise duty paid on the beer, which saved them from bankruptcy. They were also granted £7,250 (£400,000 today) as compensation for the barrels of lost beer.

This unique disaster was responsible for the gradual phasing out of wooden fermentation casks to be replaced by lined concrete vats. The Horse Shoe Brewery was demolished in 1922; the Dominion Theatre now sits partly on its site.

In 1921 the Horse Shoe Brewery, which was increasingly an anachronism as a large brewery in the heart of London, finally closed, with production transferred to Thorne Brothers' Nine Elms brewery in Wandsworth, which Meux had bought in 1914. (The brewery was demolished in 1922, and in 1927-28 the Dominion Theatre was erected on the site.)



In 1956 Meux merged with Friary Holroyd and Healey of Guildford to form Friary Meux. Eight years later, in 1964, Friary Meux was snapped up by the fast-expanding Allied Breweries. Like Taylor Walker, the name was revived by Allied in 1979 as a disguise for one of its pub-owning subsidiaries, but vanished again when Allied sold its pubs to Punch 20 years later.

Sir Henry Meux, 1st Baronet (8 May 1770 – 7 April 1841) was a British brewer, owner of the London brewery which became the Meux Brewery.