THE 1904 MALTHOUSE ON MORLANDS OCK STREET SITE

The Brewers Journal of 5 September 1905 refers to the opening the previous year of a new 100-quarter floor maltings on the Ock Street site of Morland's United Breweries. This was on land at the bottom of Winsmore Lane purchased 1886 by John T Morland and Edward Morland from the trustees of Charles Tawney of Oxford. The design of the new structure was by Joseph D. Wood, Architect and Brewers' & Maltsters' Engineer, of Birmingham. Two years earlier J. D. Wood had added two further malthouses to the existing two in the Vineyard belonging to W. Thomas & Co. of Abingdon, Birmingham and Leamington Spa.

A 'quarter' is a measure of volume not of weight, the Corn Returns Act of 1882 defined a quarter of barley as weighing 400 lbs. (182 kg) whilst a quarter of malt weighs 336lb. (152kg). So a 100 quarter malthouse was capable of steeping, that is soaking, 18.2 tonnes of barley at a time. This compares with the two new maltings on Thomas's Vineyard site which had a combined capacity of 200 quarters. Looking further afield, the Bass maltings at Sleaford in Essex, built at the same time, consisted of eight interconnected malthouses, each with a capacity of 120 quarters, 960 quarters in total. But Bass was a national brewer with a significant export trade whereas Morland's was a small regional brewery. W Thomas & Co., later subsumed into Associated British Maltsters, was not a brewer but a 'sales' maltster, producing malt for others to brew.

Malt, the chief ingredient of beer, is artificially germinated grain, usually barley, with germination arrested by kilning or curing at the point when the starch in the grain is turning to the sugars essential in brewing. The term 'floor malting' refers to the large open floors on which that germination took place.

Morland's new malthouse had three kilns for drying and curing, a single one at the northern end and two side-by-side at the southern end. Adjacent to the single kiln was the receiving area for incoming barley and other items. The barley was received and cleaned at this point and then dried in the nearby kiln. This kiln had a double purpose, in addition to drying the incoming grain it also acted as a malt kiln for an earlier malthouse, dated to 1716, to which it was connected by a bridge. The old house was only 13 feet (3.9 metres) away and referred to as the 'present No. 2 house'. That 1716 structure existed until the 1960's, but had been converted to a store and carpenters' workshop decades before.

Form often follows function in industrial buildings and this is particularly so in the case of a floor maltings, a very distinctive structure with a long, low profile and reduced floor heights. Starting at the receiving and drying end of the new maltings (the northern end) and moving along the building, two cast-iron hopper-bottomed steeps (cisterns) were located halfway between the ground and first floors. Each steep was capable of soaking 50 quarters (9 tonnes) of grain at a time. The water for the steeps was drawn from boreholes situated on site.

Following on down the building were two growing floors, on the ground and first floors. Each floor was 135 feet by 50 feet (40.5 by 15 metres) as were the two floors above; the second floor was the malt store and the third floor the barley store. The 1st, 2nd and 3rd floors were supported on cast-iron columns, thirty-three on each floor arranged in three rows of eleven.

Finally, at the Southern end of the building were the two malt kilns where the partly germinated barley was kilned or dried to arrest germination and, by varying the temperature,

adjusting the colour and flavour. From there the malt was cleaned and stored until required by the brewery. All three kilns were fired by anthracite. All the equipment, the grain elevating and the screening equipment was supplied by Nalder & Nalder of West Challow, near Wantage and powered by a gas engine, make unknown.

One feature of this particular building was the provision of fodder handling and storage, only one other example is known in this country of these incorporated in a malthouse and that is at Brooks Malting at Mistley, Essex. At the Morland malting a bean and oat crushing room was on the first floor along with a hay, clover and straw store, on the third floor were the fodder bins. Horses were the only means of transporting both barley in and malt out of the site at the time. After the Great War came steam traction and later motor transport, but horses supplemented the latter for distribution right up to the 1950's. And, of course, helped save petrol and diesel during WWII.

The 1904 malthouse had a working life of almost 60 years, consequently modifications and replacements were made during that time. One major modification was air-conditioning in 1942. All malting had previously ceased during the summer months. This was due to the inability of all floor maltings to properly manage temperature and humidity. That problem was solved by the introduction of air-conditioning, something that had been happening in the industry from the late 1930's. Given the circumstances applying during WWII, when there was an extreme shortage of both labour and materials, when even the smallest of conversion and maintenance jobs required a permit from one ministry or another, it demonstrates the importance attached to the maintenance of morale amongst both the civilian and military populations.

In 1946 the two malt kilns were converted to oil firing, the barley kiln continued to be fired by anthracite, and new malt elevating and screening equipment installed, again supplied by Nalder & Nalder Ltd. of Wantage.

In March 1960 the Board of Morlands were examining the economics of making their own malt versus buying-in. A report was produced on the 16 March 1960 which suggested that their costs were less than the average costs of bought-in malt, but it was recognised that there were certain deficiencies in their approach to establishing their own costs. Nevertheless, at that time the decision was made to continue producing malt. Despite that decision, later in 1960, a proposal was made to convert the 1904 maltings to a bottling plant. On the advice of Whitbread, who by then had a significant holding of Morland shares, it was rejected at a Board meeting in July 1960. The proposed new bottling hall was to be built on former allotments adjacent to the malthouse with the malthouse itself converted to storage. That later happened and production of malt on Morland's site ceased on 30 September 1961.

Later in the 1960s the Malthouse became a wine and spirit store on the ground floor, storage on the first and offices and a Boardroom on the second. The offices were refurbished in the 1980s and in the 1990s the ground and first floors also converted to offices. And so they remained until the takeover of Morland's in 1999 by Greene, King & Co. Ltd. The Abingdon brewery was closed, production transferred to Bury St. Edmunds, and the Ock Street site sold for redevelopment as housing.

Conversion of redundant maltings for residential use is popular with developers, but it is only one of several uses to which they are put, usually without losing their feel of being a former industrial structure. Other conversions have been to offices, retail outlets, other commercial uses and leisure and arts centres. The most well-known of the latter is Snape maltings in Suffolk converted to a concert venue. Many maltings throughout the UK have survived, but there are many which have not.

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