



Brewing at Mount Saint Bernard Abbey in England, 19th Century

May 19, 2016 by Gary



Mount Saint Bernard's Brewer Rates His Own Product (1890)

[Mount Saint Bernard Abbey](#) (MSB) is one of three Cistercian communities in activity in the United Kingdom. The others are Caldey Island in Wales and Abbey Sancta Maria, Nunraw, Scotland. Each is Strict Observance (Trappist).

In Ireland, Mount Melleray Abbey is also Trappist.

None currently conducts any brewing, but MSB did for much of the 19th century, certainly, and I understand it is considering restoring brewing.*

MSB is located near Coalville in Leicestershire. A delegation came from Mount Melleray in Ireland to found MSB in the mid-1830s. I have written earlier of Abbaye Notre Dame de Melleray (or Mellerai) in Brittany, France. To summarize a complex history, in 1790 Trappists departed from La Grande-Trappe at Soligny in Orne, Normandy due to the repression of monastic life under the Revolution. They sought refuge initially in Switzerland. Invading French armies forced them to flee, including to Russia and finally Britain.

In 1795 they were given refuge in Lulworth, Dorset by a sympathetic Catholic family. Finally, in 1817, under

changed conditions in France, the monks departed Lulworth to found Melleray Abbey in Brittany. Recurring anti-clerical measures in France forced the monks to leave France again, and they established Mount Melleray Abbey in Ireland as successor.

In this process of constant migration and re-establishment of Trappist life, Westmalle Abbey was founded by monks who intended originally to re-settle in Canada. Melleray Abbey in Brittany, and also the original home of the Strict Observance, la Grande-Trappe in Normandy (Notre Dame de la Trappe), were re-established finally by other faithful on a permanent footing. All indeed have continued to the present date, however the Trappists in France's Melleray will depart the monastery later this year due to declining numbers. Other Trappist abbeys in Belgium are connected as well to this history, as are a number in North America. All are an outgrowth of the repression of monasticism by the French Revolution and later Napoleon.

Just as a reminder, both La Grande-Trappe and Abbaye Melleray in Brittany brewed beer. The French Melleray, founded by monks who departed Lulworth and some of whom were British, *brewed on the English system* – this is amply documented, which I discussed in earlier posts. While little is known about the beer they made, I would think it was probably all-barley malt. In the early 1800s beer in England generally was so, whether produced by commercial breweries or in manors or universities. Melleray's beer probably resembled one of the grades of English mild ale then available, all rather strong in those days. If strong beer, it would have been diluted for drinking at refectory. It is possible, too, that Abbaye Melleray made a mixed-grain beer – this might depend on what the farm at the domain grew.

I would think records might be available at Melleray today in Ireland or indeed still in France to indicate how the Lulworth arrivals brewed in Brittany once established there.

As for La Grande-Trappe, almost certainly its beer was low-alcohol. Normandy had an old brewing heritage derived from Viking invaders, which partly was displaced by cider-making in the Middle Ages. Nonetheless, beer continued to be made in the region including by some abbeys and certainly was available at La Grande Trappe after Abbé de Rancé did his groundbreaking reformatory work. In fact, initially only cider was used but some fathers found cider didn't suit them, and in any case was not always available. Abbé de Rancé, wishing not to have recourse to wine, commanded that a brewery be installed, as confirmed in [this 1866 history](#) of the legendary abbot and the Trappists.

Dieulouard Abbey in Lorraine, an English Benedictine establishment, brewed beer for almost 200 years before the French Revolution with high repute for taste and strength. It was probably served to the fathers in a low-alcohol version or was diluted – an 1890s source I cited earlier said the beer “supported dilution”. Just as today the Trappist monasteries don't serve their strong specialties to the fathers, in former times the fathers likewise did not drink strong beer. If they did drink at all, a weaker version was used for daily use.

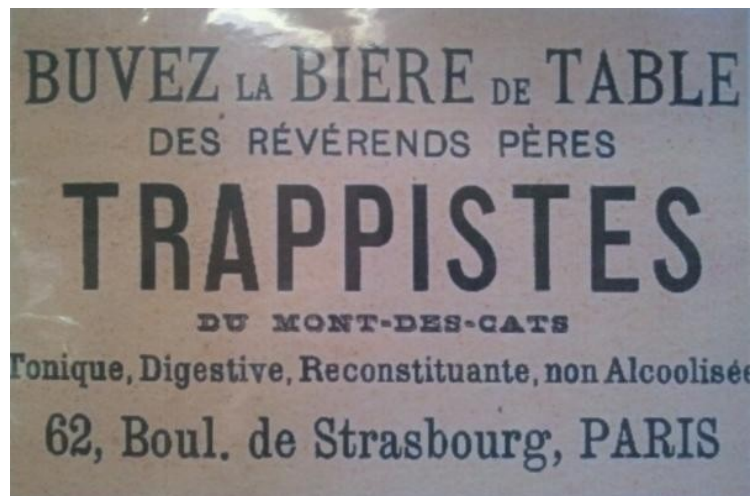
I explain all this as, in terms of what the 19th century monks drank at MSB, we should not expect necessarily to encounter unmixed (so to speak) reports. This is particularly so if, as seems the case, MSB made only one beer, as it would have been weak in alcohol. It is true that Westmalle excelled from the starting block in the brewing arts, but it may have been an exception or made strong beer mainly for its guests and sales at the abbey gate.

So what did visitors say of MSB beer?

Here are the details in a reversed chronology. In [an article describing a visit](#) to MSB in 1890 entitled *An English Monastery*, published originally in the magazine *All The Year Round*, the (un-credited) author asks his host what the fathers eat. The answer is, bread, vegetable soup, boiled rice, jam (“to help the rice go down”) and “a cup of beer”. To the reply “then you are not teetotalers?”, the father says, “The beer is not exactly double X, you know”. Apart from the amusing subtext, one can deduce the beer was weak, in line with the tradition I explained.

[The second statement](#), by a visitor who drank the ale with the monks in 1872, was that the beer was “most indifferent”. This can be read to mean weak again, of course it is possible the visitor (who seemed rather supercilious by the tone of his piece) meant it was sour or tasted bad, but I don't think likely that was meant.

A further statement is from our friend who authored the [memoir of Antwerp](#) I discussed in my last post. In this book, he included a parenthetical entry on MSB which he visited with a friend in March, 1847. He states (at pg. 150) that he found the beer of “purity and excellence” along with the various foods served. He uses the term “home produce” to describe all these items but clearly he meant the produce of MSB, not of England or the U.K. in general.



Now, true enough the beer could have changed over the decades, that is possible, but I conclude finally that MSB's beer was likely fairly low in alcohol but otherwise sound. If the beer was small beer of 1% or 2% abv, it probably didn't taste great. Some reading who are familiar with non-alcoholic beer may see what I mean (useful as that article is, sometimes). Possibly the MSB beer was 3-4% abv, this at a time when ales and porter started at 5% and just went up from there, but I incline that it was very weak: see above the c. 1900 ad for Mont des Cats table beer, this may well have been the kind of beer MSB brewed.

One odd thing is that a few accounts of visits to MSB make no reference to beer or other alcohol at all. One describes the only beverage mentioned as water. Maybe MSB brewed at some times and not others, or in some years and not others, it is hard to say.

I am not clear when brewing was abandoned at MSB, I'd think perhaps before the First World War. I hope MSB does make its own beer one day again. This would be most salutary from a number of standpoints, while to be sure it's a decision that must be carefully thought. If MSB commences brewing, I would suggest it make an ale from all-English materials including the yeast. I wouldn't use a Belgian yeast, in particular. Making a traditional English ale would honour much of the history in question: it was English brewing skill that was deployed at Melleray's brewery in France in 1817. And English Benedictines brought similar skills to Dieulouard Abbey in Lorraine, [as I discussed here](#), and made English-style beer the renown of Lorraine for almost 200 years.

Further, the “Belgian taste” is familiar in the market today from the numerous Trappist beers, and other beers in that style, available in the market. I would do something different, strictly English, in particular, and no American hops, which seems consistent with early MSB brewing history.

Finally, as to alcohol, I would make a fairly rich beer at 5% or 6% abv. 7% seems rather high, anyhow Ampleforth Abbey is currently filling that niche nicely. If the MSB monks will drink the beer and 5%-6% is felt too high, it can always be diluted with 50% sparkling water. There is historical precedent for abbey beer to “take” water in this fashion.

Note re images above: This first image is from the website of Mount Saint Bernard Abbey, linked in the first sentence of the text above. The second image appeared in [this news story](#) in the Catholic journal La Croix on the issuance of a beer in 2011 by Mont des Cats Trappist monastery in France. It shows a “table beer”, thus with no or very little alcohol, marketed when Mont des Cats abbey had a working brewery onsite c. 1900. These are believed available for historical or educational purposes. All feedback welcomed.

FIRST ADDENDUM: AFTER PENNING THE ABOVE, I LOCATED YET A FURTHER ACCOUNT OF A VISIT TO THE

ABBEY, FROM 1842, WHICH DESCRIBES THE BEER SERVED. SEE THE LINK AND MY DISCUSSION IN THE COMMENTS BELOW.

***SECOND ADDENDUM, ADDED NOVEMBER 4, 2017: NEWS REPORTS EARLIER THIS WEEK STATE THAT LOCAL AUTHORITIES HAVE GRANTED PERMISSION TO MOUNT SAINT BERNARD TO ESTABLISH A BREWERY THAT WILL HELP SUPPORT THE TRUST THAT FUNDS ITS ACTIVITIES. THE BREWERY WILL BE ONE OF ONLY A DOZEN BREWERIES AUTHORIZED TO USE THE TRAPPIST DESIGNATION FOR ITS BEER. MOST EXISTING TRAPPIST BREWERIES ARE IN BELGIUM WITH A SCATTERING IN OTHER COUNTRIES INCLUDING ITALY AND THE NETHERLANDS.**

< An English Visitor Renders High Praise to Westmalle's Beer, 1847
> Montreal Notes

2 thoughts on "Brewing at Mount Saint Bernard Abbey in England, 19th Century"



Ed

May 20, 2016 at 12:34 pm |
Reply

Good find – very interesting



Gary

May 20, 2016 at 2:32 am |
Reply

I have since found another account of a visit to Mount Saint Bernard, from 1842, here is the link:

[https://books.google.ca/books?](https://books.google.ca/books?id=NcMmAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA93&dq=monks+visit+Lulworth+beer&hl=en&sa=X&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=monks%20visit%20Lulworth%20beer&f=false)

[id=NcMmAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA93&dq=monks+visit+Lulworth+beer&hl=en&sa=X&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=monks%20visit%20Lulworth%20beer&f=false](https://books.google.ca/books?id=NcMmAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA93&dq=monks+visit+Lulworth+beer&hl=en&sa=X&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=monks%20visit%20Lulworth%20beer&f=false)

The careful observer, Reverend Robert Aspland, stated that the beer served with the meal was like "table ale". Table ale was the weaker sort of ale suitable for taking with meals.

If regular strong ale c. 1840 was 7% abv and common ale was 5% (as we know in both cases), table ale would have been under the common ale certainly, anywhere from 1%-3% abv, possibly a touch more.

The sources I've collected all seem to suggest, therefore, that Mount Saint Bernard's beer was a weak, or table ale, therefore suitable for monastic life and in keeping with St. Benedict's Rule to use the wine of the land moderately. (I use the two terms, ale and beer, indistinguishably in my post even though there may have been some difference in alcohol between table ale and table beer before 1850 – whatever difference there was is simply not material due to the variations which would have existed in each category).

In terms of what Mount Saint Bernard might consider to brew if it starts up brewing again, I think this type of table beer, say 3% abv, while historically sound, is not suitable. While technically feasible to brew and bottle it – after all some commercial beer was as weak as that in the English market 40 years ago – it is too weak for the commercial market today. Such a beer would be difficult to keep from souring, as well, unless very well-hopped and even then... You could pasteurize it, but that is not desirable for a number of reasons, even if possible to do with the type of brewery to be used.

I would suggest a 5% abv beer be brewed for bottling on the lines laid out in my post above. If served to the brothers at their meals, they can cut it 50/50 with water which will bring it close in alcohol and character to what the abbey brewed in the 1800s. Or, a second brew, draft-only, could be brewed at 2-3% abv to serve to guests of the abbey and the brothers.

Doing a 5%-6% beer for bottling is not ahistorical in my view since it is known some abbeys made stronger beers for special purposes – a festival or holiday – and to sell at the abbey gate. So doing what I propose would fit into this history, which indeed most Belgian Trappist breweries follow at the present time, i.e., the strong beers in the line are sold to the public and the brothers drink (generally), if at all, a “single” or “pater” beer which is much less strong.

Gary Gillman

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