

Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England



Women's
Work in a
Changing
World,
1300–1600

Judith M. Bennett

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JUDITH M. BENNETT

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JMB

August 1995
Durham, North Carolina

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BL	British Library
CCR	<i>Calendar of Close Rolls</i>
CLB	<i>Calendar of Letter Books of the City of London</i>
CLRO	City of London Record Office
CPMR	<i>Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls of the City of London</i>
CPR	<i>Calendar of Patent Rolls</i>
CSPD	<i>Calendar of State Papers Domestic</i>
EETS	Early English Text Society
ESRO	East Sussex Record Office
GL	Guildhall Library
L&P	<i>Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII</i>
Norwich Leets	Leets held in Norwich, 1288–1391 (see the appendix for further details)
NRO	Norfolk Record Office
NtnRO	Northamptonshire Record Office
Oxford Assizes	Records of the enforcement of the assize of ale in Oxford, 1309–1351 (see the appendix for further details)
OUA	Oxford University Archives, Bodleian Library
PRO	Public Record Office
Rolls Series	Chronicles and Memorials of Great Britain and Ireland during the middle ages published under the direction of the Master of the Rolls
SRO	Southampton Record Office
STC	A. W. Pollard and G. R. Redgrave, <i>Short-title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland and Ireland and of English Books Printed Abroad, 1475–1640</i> (London, 1976–1991)
Statutes	<i>Statutes of the Realm</i>

VCH	Victoria History of the Counties of England
Wing	Donald G. Wing, <i>Short-title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales and British America and of English Books Printed in Other Countries, 1641–1700</i> (New York, 1972–1988)
YAS	Yorkshire Archaeological Society
YCA	York City Archives

In addition, the notes contain many shorthand references to materials collected in a survey of presentments made under the assize of ale. These references have been indicated by the word “Sample” followed by an abbreviated archival citation. Please consult the appendix for further details about these abbreviated citations.

A BRIEF NOTE ON CONVENTIONS AND TERMS

I wish to clarify a few matters that might confuse some readers. Until 1971, the English monetary system was based on a shilling (s.) of 12 pence (d.) and a pound (£) of 20 shillings. The penny was broken into 2 halfpennies, or 4 farthings. I have retained this system here. For comparative purposes, it might help to remember that an adult male laborer might earn 1½d. a day in 1300, 3d. in 1400, 4d. in 1500, and 8d. in 1600. Wages for women were generally one-half to three-quarters the wages of men.

Ale and beer were measured in gallons (roughly 4½ liters—that is, today's imperial gallon, not the smaller U.S. gallon). A gallon was itself divided into 8 pints, 4 quarts, or 2 pottles. Brewed drink was also measured in barrels, each containing usually 32 gallons of ale or 36 gallons of beer. A barrel was divided into 4 firkins, or 2 kilderkins. Grain and malt were measured in quarters (roughly 290 liters), each quarter containing 8 bushels.

The calendar used in England until 1752 treated the feast of the Annunciation (25 March) as the beginning of the year, counting 1 January through 24 March as part of the preceding year. I have converted such dates to modern style. In identifying places, I have retained the old counties, as used before the reorganization of 1974. Spelling and punctuation are now much more standardized than was the case before 1600, and in the interest of improving the readability of passages quoted from original texts, I have not hesitated to modernize spelling and insert punctuation. I have, however, found it useful to retain some compound words—such as *singlewoman*, *alebrewer* and *beerbrewer*—that were common in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century English but have fallen out of use since then. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

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BREWSTERS

Early in February each year, magistrates in many English towns come together in what are informally known as “brewster sessions.” In these meetings, they supervise the trade in alcoholic beverages—not only ales and beers, but also wines, spirits, and other intoxicating liquors. They renew licenses for selling such drink, permit transfers of licenses between holders, grant new licenses, and even bestow occasional permissions for special occasions. In most jurisdictions, for example in the brewster sessions of Lewes, magistrates customarily hear a report from the licensing inspector. Within living memory, large numbers of licensees would come to hear this report and responses to it, ending the day with a celebratory dinner in a local public house.¹

Except for brewster sessions, the word *brewster* has virtually disappeared from contemporary English. With *brewster* has disappeared a history that this book seeks to recover, a history of women in brewing. *Brewster* once had a clear and unequivocal meaning: a female brewer. In the fourteenth century, when women did most of the brewing in most places, their presence was signified in the various languages of the time: *braciatrices* and *pandoxatrices* in Latin texts, *braceresses* in Anglo-Norman, and *brewsters* in the English that was being used with more and more frequency. In *Piers Plowman*, William Langland created Betoun the Brewster, and well into the next century, *brewsters* often served as a female counterpart to *brewers* in the newly dominant English language of the day. By 1500, however, the neat gender distinction of *brewster* and *brewer* was fading away. In a trend common in English and other languages, the male *brewer* increasingly served for both sexes, but, rather surprisingly, *brewster* sometimes did the same, particularly in northern England. Over time, however, *brewer* won out as a term for both sexes, and *brewster* survived only in limited uses: as a surname, as a word known to some historians and literary scholars, and of course as a descriptive term still used in the ever-conservative traditions of English law.²