

# GRAPEVINE CUTTINGS (May 2002)

By Rob Upson

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF BREWERIES IN AUSTRALIA

Within five years of the First Fleet arriving at Sydney Cove, Australia's first official brewer, James Squire, began brewing beer in 1793. Up until then, rum and illegally brewed spirits were the only alcoholic beverages available to the early settlers. Coinage was in short supply and rum became a popular means of paying for goods and services (*See footnote*). The effects of excessive drinking of strong liquor, however, became a major problem for the young colony and the government was only too pleased that this less volatile beer was becoming available in spite of its dubious quality. Other brewers soon followed and by 1810 there were nine breweries operating in N.S.W.

The Melbourne Brewery, established by John Mills in 1837, was the first brewery in Victoria. Before then, breweries had already commenced in Tasmania (1818) and Western Australia (1830). By the time the first brewery made its appearance in Bendigo in 1853, well over 100 breweries had already been established Australia wide.

For the first hundred years since colonisation, brewing appeared to be a very precarious occupation. Numerous changes in ownership, partnership dissolutions and bankruptcies suggested that brewing was a more hazardous business than most. One of the main problems that confronted these early brewers was that of climate. The British system of brewing was not suitable for most conditions in Australia. Hit and miss methods prevailed and as a result the beer was of inferior quality. Unscrupulous brewers were known to 'doctor' bad batches to make them more palatable. Additives used included lime, tobacco, potash, alum, honey, liquorice, treacle, ginger and even chillies. Even if a brewer managed to make a reasonable batch, transportation added another variable that could affect its quality. In the early days beer was sent long distances in horse-drawn wagons, exposed to the sun over rough roads, causing deterioration of the product. Casks and bottles were often damaged or broken which added to the brewer's loss. It was no coincidence, therefore, that wherever a township was established, one of the first industries to commence was a brewery in order to satisfy the local market.

By the time of Federation in 1901, a total of 950 breweries had come and gone from 340 country towns and capital cities Australia wide. The maximum number of breweries operating at any one time in all the colonies was 307 in the year 1889. From that time the number steadily declined until by 1993 there were only ten of the old breweries left. Economies of scale with fewer, larger and professionally managed companies had caused closures, amalgamations and takeovers of all the small town breweries.

*Footnote.* The officers of the New South Wales Corps controlled the supply and distribution of rum. Corruption was rife and they became known as the Rum Corps. When, in 1808, Governor William Bligh tried to stamp out this practice, the NSW Corps mutinied and locked him up. This was known as the Rum Rebellion and the situation wasn't resolved until the next Governor, Lachlan Macquarie, took over. Poor old William Bligh had suffered yet another mutiny against him.

*Reference: The Breweries of Australia, a History by Keith M. Deutscher*

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