



Selling ‘the Drink of the Empire’: Bass & Co. Ltd

It is easy to see why pale, bitter ale made great headway in the 1840-1900 period, the golden age of British beer drinking. It was novel, bright, fresh and pale; it looked good in the new glassware; it was the high fashion of beer of the railway age. Perfected in Burton, it was, by the 1870s, produced everywhere.¹

Tastes in beer changed during the nineteenth century and this was driven in part by the expansion of the brewing industry and also by changing social attitudes and leisure pursuits.² Although regional breweries continued to produce a variety of beers that catered to local markets, one of the key national changes was a general shift in tastes from strong dark beers and porter to light sparkling beers and ales. This is largely attributed to the expansion of the brewing industry in Burton upon Trent in the 1840s which was driven by the development of India Pale Ale (IPA).³ Burton brewers, Allsopp and Bass began developing a heavily hopped, pale bitter beer for the Indian export market in the 1820s. IPA was developed to survive long sea voyages and hot climates and was therefore a successful export commodity to India and the colonies. Foster attributes the commercial success of IPA not only to its robust qualities, which made it a safe and pleasant alternative to local drinking water but also because for colonists, it evoked ideas about Britishness.⁴

The development of IPA can be traced to the October ales which were produced in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Beer production was closely aligned with the agricultural seasons and the beers

brewed at the beginning of the season used the freshest hops and malt right after the autumn harvest. The practice of using exclusively pale malt was expensive and was therefore usually found among country estate brewers who catered to the wealthiest country gentry.⁵ By the mid-eighteenth century, commercial brewers in London were also producing pale beers alongside darker beers and porter. However, pale beer was more expensive and was therefore viewed as a status drink which was popular among the upper classes, many of who became colonists in India. The market for pale ales was closely linked to the expansion of the British Empire and also to the spread of imperial ideology. This was one of the key reasons for the commercial success of Bass & Co. which produced and exported the largest volume of IPA in the late nineteenth century.

Following the railway expansion in the 1840s, the Burton brewers began to develop variants of IPA for the domestic market. Up until that point IPA had not been sold in Britain and although it is likely that the Burton brewers seized upon a commercial opportunity to cultivate domestic tastes for pale ale, a more exciting story circulating at the time claimed that a ship carrying a cargo of IPA destined for India was shipwrecked in the Irish Sea and the cargo was salvaged and sold off in Liverpool where local drinkers sampled it and liked the taste.⁶ As Jonathan Reinartz notes, ‘shipwreck theory’ provides an attractive explanation for the commercial success of IPA because it supports the prevalent historical view that nineteenth-century brewers spent very little time or resources on marketing and advertising.⁷ The Bass records support the idea that there was more to the commercial success of pale ale than simply ‘success by chance.’ In fact, the larger Burton brewers such as Bass & Co., spent considerable amounts of money on advertising pale ale and expanding the domestic market for its products.

Bass brewery was a family business established in Burton upon Trent in the 1770s. The company initially supplied local pubs and inns in the surrounding areas. Then in the late eighteenth century, it merged with another local brewer, Samuel Ratcliff and together they built a strong export trade to the Baltic region. When the Baltic trade began to fail after 1800, the company again merged with another local brewer John Gretton and trading as ‘Bass, Ratcliff and Gretton’ turned its attention to cultivating trade links to India and the colonies by developing and exporting IPA.⁸ The company also extended its reach into the domestic market. Between 1850 and 1880 25% of beer and ale sales went to

the London market; 18% were exported; 22% were distributed locally and 35% were sold by other agencies.⁹ By the 1880s, Bass was producing approximately 850,000 barrels per year with the production of pale ale accounting for 56% of total output.¹⁰ The company also secured its share of the domestic market through the tied house system and by buying licensed premises in Burton and surrounding areas and in London.¹¹

When Alfred Barnard visited Bass & Co. in 1889, he described the brewery as a major part of Burton's 'beer metropolis.'¹² Barnard was a journalist with a particular interest in the drink trade. He published detailed accounts of his tours around various breweries in Britain and Ireland and seemed to be particularly impressed with the production site at Bass & Co. where he found that 'a steady and undeviating perseverance of uniformity, order and regularity, is discernible in all the buildings and breweries connected with Bass & Co.'s establishment.'¹³ The detail in Barnard's account conveys the sheer enormity of the Bass production site which included 12 miles of railway track connecting all the buildings in the company grounds. Barnard was clearly impressed with the production process which used modern brewing equipment and employed analytical chemists to test and enhance the quality of products. This was brewing on a truly modern and industrial scale. However, the volume of output was not enough to maintain and promote the company's share of the market. It was, therefore, important to create a distinct brand identity that would be associated with all Bass products. During his tour, Barnard visited the bottle-labelling department, which he described as

... a large and important one in this establishment. [It] is conducted by a Superintendent and several clerks. The well-known red triangle or pyramid, in the centre of the oval label, used for Bass & Co.'s bottled pale ale is one of their numerous trademarks and has been in use by them for upwards of fifty years.¹⁴

The red triangle or 'pyramid' and the red diamond were in fact the first British company trademarks to be registered under the Trade Marks Registration Act in 1842. Bass was aware of the need to protect the brand identity and the company kept a label book which contained various Bass labels and those used by rival companies. This book contained labels from c. 1870 to 1924 which appear to have been used as a means of keeping a record of the development of new product labelling and also of any attempts by rival companies to copy Bass product branding.

Bass also kept an Infringement Book which contained evidence of any fraudulent attempts to copy or use Bass product branding. One undated entry in the book titled ‘Bass & Co.’s advertisements—case to advise’ stated

Bass, Ratcliff and Gretton Ltd are the owners of a trademark in the form of a triangle which is coloured red. Certain public houses where their beer is to be obtained have painted on the window adjoining the public house the triangle and in some cases there is the addition of ‘Bass & Co.’s Ales’ too ... Strangers seeing the mark on the windows are drawn into the house under the impression that they can obtain Bass & Co. ale. We have no evidence as to whether they ask for Bass & Co. ale and are supplied in draught or in bottle with ale either by no remark being made as to whether it is Bass & Co. or not, but there is no doubt that keeping up the mark attracts customers.¹⁵

The company invested considerable time and resources in order to protect the brand from fraudulent use. An online search of the British Newspaper Archive for ‘Bass Pale Ale labels’ (1850–1900) generated numerous reports of prosecutions for false labelling of products. For example, in 1859 *The Belfast Morning News* reported the case of a local wine and spirit merchant charged with purchasing quantities of pale ale and falsely labelling the bottles with an imitation Bass logo.¹⁶ Another similar case reported in *The Manchester Courier* in 1886 was of a local ale and porter merchant charged with putting false Bass labels on his products.¹⁷ In each of these cases Bass & Co. successfully pursued legal action against the individuals that had attempted to use the Bass logo. The company also placed adverts in newspapers warning customers to be wary of false labelling on products claiming to be Bass Pale Ale and recommended that customers deface the labels on empty bottles to prevent them from being refilled with ‘inferior’ ale.¹⁸ By making such a public spectacle of protecting the brand image, the company not only dissuaded fraudulent activity but more importantly, it sent out a clear message to consumers that Bass was a reputable company selling high-quality products that were worth protecting. Although tracking down and prosecuting fraudsters may have been time-consuming and expensive, ultimately it enhanced the company image which in turn made the Bass brand even more exclusive and desirable.

Although the origins of the red triangle design are somewhat unclear, it grew to symbolise quality and authenticity. Some historical accounts

state that a clerk at Bass & Co. created the red triangle design in 1855.¹⁹ The reasoning behind the design is less clear. The Bass company scrapbook contained an amusing clip from *The Westminster Gazette* in 1894, which claimed that

Everybody knows the red pyramid pale ale label surrounded by a Staffordshire knot. It was the design of Mr George Curzon, one of the employees in the London agency and was first used in 1855. Some years ago an ingenious writer in one of the Sheffield papers wittily invented a classical legend about this label ... the pyramid builders worshipped a great power called by some Tammuz, by others Bassareus, the son of the goddess Ops. He was termed Bassareus the fortifier ...²⁰

It is perhaps more likely that the triangle design represented the three key elements in Bass & Co.—namely, Bass, Ratcliff and Gretton or that the company realized the potential to reach consumers by using a simple bold geometric design on product labelling. In any case, a distinct brand image ensured that Bass products were visible during a period of intense competition in the foreign and domestic markets for beer. As Table 6.1 shows, the company spent increasing amounts on product labelling and advertising around the turn of the century

By 1904, the advertising budget had grown in line with the company profit from sales, which increased from £3,102,479 in 1895 to £3,642,377 in 1904.²¹ At this time the company had an extensive system of agencies in various cities around the UK and the world. Between 1902 and 1903, sales increases were reported in Bristol, Nottingham, Glasgow, Belfast, Plymouth, Exeter, New York and Paris.²² Indeed, by the late nineteenth century, Bass Pale Ale had even penetrated Parisian bohemian culture.

Table 6.1 Bass & Co. balance sheets 1896–1904.²³

	<i>Show cards, labels & stationery</i>	<i>Expenses</i>
1896		£13,939 7s 8d
1897		£17,762 18s 2d
1898		£23,086 13s 2d
1899		£26,284 10s 2d
1900		£22,373 1s 11d
1901		£24,232 9s 9d
1902		£20,945 3s 4d
1903		£27,779 8s 4d
1904		£39,321 4s 6d

Edouard Manet's impressionist painting from 1882 features bottles of Bass No. 1 Pale Ale on prominent display on the bar of the Folies-Bergere, which was one of Paris' top music hall venues frequented by Manet and other artists.

Although Bass had cultivated a market for its products in Paris, the sales book for 1902–1903 also noted a marked decrease in sales in London and Newcastle. Between 1903 and 1905 profits from sales also dropped from £3,866,320 to £3,481,131.²⁴ This decline in domestic sales followed the passing of The 1902 Licensing Act which imposed restrictions on the granting of new pub licenses. Since Bass had an extensive network of tied houses and had paid loans to many pubs, hotels and railway hotels across England, the decline in domestic sales and profits could be partly attributed to the change in legislation. It would, therefore, have been important to generate new sales and a key way to reach consumers was through advertising.

Bass had already established a strong brand image through product labelling and by the turn of the century, the company had built a reputation for selling high-quality beers and ales. Dwindling sales meant that in order to reach more consumers it was necessary to 'invent' new reasons for drinking Bass products and to sell these ideas to consumers—in essence, give people more reasons to drink Bass products. In order to be commercially successful, these reasons had to reflect cultural values and ideally reinforce them. One example was an advert from 1911 which depicted Bass's 'world-famed' pale ale as 'The Drink of the Empire' with its path to success from 1778 to 1911 closely mirroring the expansion and dominance of the British empire. Whether intentional or not, there certainly seemed to be some truth in this advert. In the eighteenth century, pale (or October) ale was the drink favoured by the landed gentry, colonists and military elites. It was a socially desirable drink before it was exported to the colonies and became IPA. The conflation of ideas about social class and British imperialism was already part of the appeal of the drink. All Bass had to do was market those ideas.

Bass advertising also drew upon on other aspects of British culture such as the practice of 'having a nip' of alcohol to keep out the cold winter weather or to 'ward off chills'. Bass ale was promoted as 'the best winter drink' because it contained 'nourishing' qualities which were not found in spirits. These adverts had a twofold purpose: to promote the idea that beer had health-giving properties and to persuade consumers that more expensive beers, like Bass, were especially therapeutic. It was

important that consumers viewed beer as a viable alternative to the 'pick-me-up' offered by tonic wines and cheap spirits. Bass ales, although more expensive, had a reputation as medicinal alcoholic drinks that were prescribed by the medical profession.

In 1852, several articles on the chemical composition of Burton ales appeared in *The Lancet*. These followed reports from a chemist in France, that British bitter ales contained quantities of strychnine. As the reports were circulated in the British press, Allsopp and Bass grew concerned and asked *The Lancet* to conduct chemical analyses of their beers and to publish the results in the journal. It is clear from the extract of the report shown below that *The Lancet* undertook the task of analysing the beers not only because the medical profession prescribed (and perhaps drank) Burton ales but also because the French dared to attack the British national drink.

In all those countries in which the vine tree is extensively cultivated, wine is the ordinary beverage of the population; while in England the climate being unsuited to the growth of the vine, beer is the national beverage and enters into daily consumption of all classes of persons, from the richest to the poorest. It is therefore not extraordinary that any statement calculated to throw a suspicion on the genuine character of beer, should be viewed with alarm by the public and with the utmost concern by those engaged in the manufacture, whose pecuniary interests are of course largely involved.²⁵

The reports provided very favourable analyses of Bass pale ale and IPA and refuted any claims that 'British beers' contained strychnine. Indeed, the reports also did a very good job of advertising the therapeutic qualities of Bass products

From the pure and wholesome nature of the ingredients employed, the moderate proportion of alcohol present and the very considerable quantity of aromatic anodyne bitter derived from the hops contained in these beers, they tend to preserve the tone and rigour of the stomach and conduce the restoration of the health of that organ when in a state of weakness or debility ... it is very satisfactory to find that a beverage of such general consumption is entirely free from any kind of impurity.²⁶

Although these reports appeared before the height of medical temperance later in the century when the medical profession shied away from such unreserved endorsements of the medicinal qualities of alcohol, they

do highlight one of the key ways in which Bass ales came to be regarded as ‘wholesome’ national drinks. Half a century later, Bass marketed ‘barley wine’ (which was in fact a high gravity heavily malted beer) as a ‘wholesome’ medicinal winter drink. One advert for barley wine used another report from *The Lancet* which once again analysed the chemical composition of a Bass product and found that it possessed ‘a decidedly nourishing value’ compared to other strong beers and stouts.²⁷ This medical endorsement would undoubtedly have helped Bass to market a higher alcohol beer as a viable alternative to other popular ‘medicinal’ drinks like invalid stouts, tonic wines and of course spirits like brandy and whisky.

By the turn of the century, Bass was one of many companies competing in the growing domestic market for alcoholic ‘health’ drinks and many of the adverts from the 1890–1910 period drew upon concepts of beer as a nutritious medicinal drink that could be used in a variety of situations for an array of health complaints. One advertising campaign used the miseries of the daily grind to convince consumers that Bass ale could help cure their ills. These adverts posed questions such as: ‘Can’t eat? Can’t sleep?’ and ‘Too tired to sleep?’ or ‘Tired or run down?’—and in every case the answer to the problem was to be found in a ‘nutritious’ glass of Bass ale. Another way to reach consumers was to market products for home consumption. This was undoubtedly a wise move during a period when restrictive licensing, limited pub opening hours and moral judgments made the trip to the local pub difficult or impossible for certain groups, most notably women.

By the early twentieth century, dwindling sales meant that it was important to reach and indeed create new groups of consumers whose custom and loyalty demanded more than a strong brand image. Creating and securing this market meant giving people ‘good reasons’ to drink Bass products—for health; to combat the daily grind of work or to cope with the worst of the British weather. Perhaps, people already drank beer for these reasons and all that Bass had to do was market these uses and sell the idea that Bass products were a cure-all for illness or an antidote to the stresses and strains of modern life. Intoxication was not marketed as a ‘good reason’ to drink Bass beer; in fact, the advertising was designed to draw consumers away from the very notion of intoxication—why drink to get drunk when there were so many other reasons to drink beer? Jean Baudrillard considers the manufacturing of needs and desires through the practices of marketing and advertising and argues that ideas

about commodities are often unrelated to their primary function.²⁸ In this sense, commodities communicate particular ideas about a society by creating and reinforcing cultural values. Alcohol acts as an intoxicant but the state of intoxication (drunkenness) was socially undesirable and therefore, it was necessary to market alcohol as a sign of something else: health; wellbeing; sociability; Britishness—or perhaps wealth, status and privilege. When King Edward VII visited the Bass site in 1902, the company seized upon the opportunity to publicise the event by marketing a special brew called 'King's Ale' which was also known as 'Bass No. 1 Strong Ale'. This kind of elite endorsement was something that drove the fortunes of another major alcohol producer in the late Victorian period, James Buchanan & Co. Ltd.

NOTES

1. Wilson R. G. 1988. 'The Changing Taste for Beer in Victorian Britain', in (eds.) Wilson R. G. and Gourvish T. R. *The Dynamics of the International Brewing Industry Since 1800*: London: Routledge: p. 99.
2. *Ibid.*: pp. 93–105.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Foster T. 1990. *Pale Ale*, U.S.: Brewers Publications: p. 11.
5. Houghland J. E. 2014. 'The Origins and Diaspora of the IPA', in (eds.) Patterson M. and Hoalst-Pullen N. *The Geography of Beer: Regions, Environment & Societies*: New York: Springer: pp. 119–131.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Reinarz J. 2007. 'Promoting the Pint: Ale and Advertising in Late Victorian and Edwardian England': *Social History of Alcohol and Drugs*: Volume 22:1: p. 26.
8. Owen C. 1992. *The Greatest Brewery in the World: A History of Bass, Ratcliff and Gretton*: Chesterfield: Derbyshire Record Society.
9. *Ibid.*: pp. 77–78.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*: p. 27.
12. Barnard A. 1889. *Noted Breweries of Great Britain and Ireland Volume 1*: London: Joseph Carlson & Sons: p. 46.
13. *Ibid.*: p. 49.
14. *Ibid.*: p. 117.
15. National Brewery Archive (NBA), Bass & Co. Infringement Book 1870–1925.
16. *The Belfast Morning News*: 3 March 1859.
17. *The Manchester Courier*: 23 May 1886.

18. *Northern Whig*: 'Bass's Pale Ale: Caution Notice': 21 March 1863.
19. Owen C. 1992. *The Greatest Brewery in the World: A History of Bass, Ratcliff and Gretton*: Chesterfield: Derbyshire Record Society; Barnard A. 1889. *Noted Breweries of Great Britain and Ireland Volume 1*: London: Joseph Carlson & Sons.
20. NBA: M/5/33: Bass Scrapbook: *The Westminster Gazette*: 31 January 1894.
21. NBA: Bass, Ratcliff & Gretton Ltd Balance Sheets: 1895–1904: Income from sales of ale, stout and sundry products.
22. NBA: B1/18: Bass & Co. Ltd Comparative Agency Sales Book: 1902–1903.
23. NBA: A/100: Bass, Ratcliff & Gretton Ltd, Balance Sheets: 1896–1904.
24. NBA: Bass, Ratcliff & Gretton Ltd Balance Sheets: 1895–1914: Income from sales of ale, stout and sundry products.
25. 'Records of the Results of the Microscopical and Chemical Analyses of the Solids and Fluids Consumed by all Classes of the Public: The Bitter Beer, Pale Ale and India Pale Ale of Messrs Allsopp & Sons and Messrs Bass & Co of Burton Upon Trent': *The Lancet*: Volume 59:1498: 15 May 1852: pp. 473–477.
26. 'Analyses of the Bitter Beer and Indian Pale Ales Brewed by Messrs Bass & Co.': *The Lancet*: Volume 1:1498: 15 May 1852: pp. 478–479.
27. An extract of the 1909 article is shown below on the product label.
28. Baudrillard J. 1988. 'Consumer Society', in (ed.) Poster M. *Selected Writings*: Cambridge: Polity Press: pp. 29–56.

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