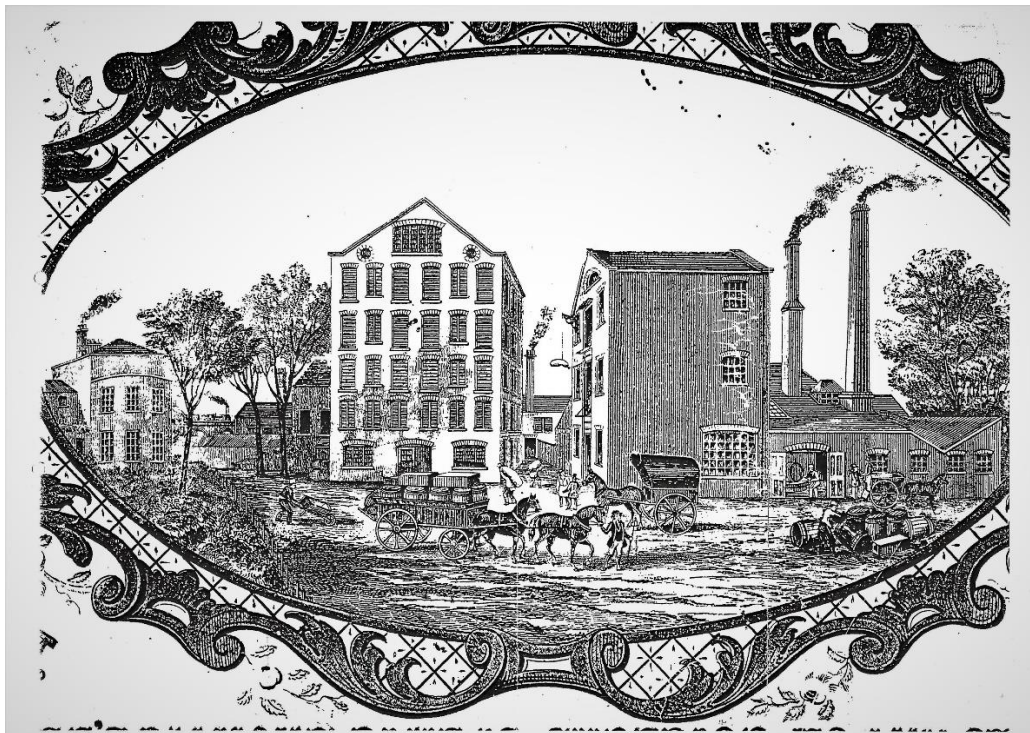


Bermondsey Street Back Stories

Number 21: The Maltings

By Jennie Howells

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The Slee Works in the early 19th century

The Maltings – Sarson's

The Maltings, at the corner of Tanner Street and Tower Bridge Road, is on a site which has seen prehistoric, Roman and medieval occupation. At the height of Bermondsey's leather industry, this site too was used for leatherwork. When the leather industry started to move out in search of more space, it was replaced by food processing. On top of the all-pervading and unpleasant smell of leather tanning, there came a sweet overlay of biscuits (Peck Frean), chocolate (Shuttleworths) and jam (Southwell and Hartley). One of the first food businesses to arrive and one of the last to leave had a sharper tang. A vinegar works was

established on the site of the Maltings. It had a complex business history but eventually became known as Sarson's, famous the world over for its malt and speciality vinegars.



Traditional vinegar is brewed

Vinegar has a proud history dating back centuries to the ancient civilisations of Egypt, Greece and Rome. True vinegar is brewed and undergoes a double fermentation process. It is brewed from any number of alcoholic bases such as wine, cider, beer or whatever is the local alcoholic tipple. Malt vinegar, for which the Sarsons brand is renowned, is made from malted barley using a process where grains are 'cracked' and 'mashed' in hot water to extract the sugars. Yeast is added to the liquid in a fermenter and this converts the sugars into alcohol. This is like brewing beer but without the hops. After some days, an acebactor – a benign bacteria - is added, turning the alcohol into acetic acid to give the vinegar its characteristic, robust flavour.

The many uses of vinegar

Vinegar is added to a huge range of products such as sauce, pickles and marinades, adding sharpness to the other flavours. It is also an effective preservative with medicinal and cleansing properties. The traditional sprinkling of vinegar on fish & chips, sadly was more often the cheaper 'wood vinegar' or in modern terms 'non-brewed condiment' made in a chemical process from acetic acid.

How did Sarsons come to the Maltings?

There was a vinegar yard in operation in Southwark as early as 1641 and it was not long before south London became a major centre of vinegar production. By 1814, Noah Slee had established a vinegar works on the site of what is now the Maltings. Tanner Street was known as Russell Street at that time, and Tower Bridge Road did not exist, so it was a very different area. The business at that time was known as Slee, Vickers & Slee. The first Slee was Noah and the second was his son.



Malt

Early production techniques

In the early days, the brew house contained mash tuns with paddles where a substance called 'wort' (water, grain and malt) was added to fermentation tanks. A four-storey building called the stove house contained stoves for acetification involving hot gases that were moved around the building in piping.

Expansion in the 1820s

There was significant expansion in the 1820s. The works consisted of two ranges – an eastern and a western side. One of the earliest buildings in the western range was a malt store or granary built around 1825. It was modified later, perhaps after a merger with Champions, another vinegar business. A brew house, boiler house, engine house and the 89 foot high brick chimney were built between 1825-9. At this time, the brewing and production process depended on steam engines. A beam engine was installed in the engine house in 1845. By this time the company was known as '*having considerable trade*' and this site was the **fifth largest vinegar works in the country**.

Then came the railway viaduct....

The arrival of the pioneering London to Greenwich railway in 1836 briefly threatened the vinegar works but in the event, the route of the railway viaduct passed to the north without damaging the site. Indeed, the company acquired a generous lease on six of the railway arches. These were used for stabling, storage and cooperage (barrel and cask making).

Change of ownership

During this period, and certainly by 1838, Mr Vickers left the business and was replaced by Mr Payne. The company now traded as Slee, Payne & Slee.

The owner lived nearby

Traditionally, in the early 19th century, business owners lived next to their works, and Noah Slee was no exception. He bought a handsome house to the north of the site, which had its own garden and orchard and can be seen in the contemporary advertisement for the company shown on the front page.



Vats at Sarson's then (Tanner Street) and now (Manchester)

More growth needed more investors

After the departure of William Payne, the firm became Slee & Slee & Co. and in 1874 it was incorporated as a limited company. Members of the Payne and Slee family continued as managing directors and oversaw another period of expansion. Adjacent property, including shops and houses was purchased and much of this demolished. New buildings were erected including one for the company plumber and a bottling plant. There was a new entrance in Russell Street (Tanner Street). Giant vats were a major and highly visible feature of the vinegar works. They were made of wood and all were very large. Capacities varied from around 5,550 gallons to 28,000 gallons. Workers were forbidden to go near them – even when empty - without permission. Similar vats are still in use at the Sarson's works in Manchester today.



The Malt Store

Then came Tower Bridge Road ...

In the 1890s Tower Bridge was opened to relieve the pressure of traffic on London Bridge, especially commercial traffic associated with the docks. A new road was cut through the from the bridge south to meet Bermondsey New Road. This required the demolition of many industrial buildings which had been used by the leather industry. The new road was in the style of a continental tree-lined boulevard, a smart approach to the new bridge. Later the whole stretch from Tooley Street to the Bricklayers Arms roundabout was named Tower Bridge Road.



A Campions advertisement

Merger with Champions

In 1908, the company became Champion & Slee when it amalgamated with Champions Ltd., a firm established in the early 18th century in City Road north of the river Thames. The City Road premises and its contents were sold at auction and some vats, pumps and piping were removed to the Tower Bridge Road site which was described as *'one of the most compact and completely equipped breweries in London'*.

Consolidation in the industry after World War 1

After WW1, vinegar companies suffered from falling prices and decreasing demand. Some of these problems were resolved by mergers. Crosse & Blackwell, a major food processing firm with a factory in Crimscott Road, Bermondsey acquired both Champion & Slee and rival firm, Sarsons in 1929. Sarson's had been founded a generation before Slee, in 1794 and was originally known as a 'drysalter' – dealers in salt, mustard, dyes, and chemicals for food preservation - and had only taken to malt vinegar brewing at the end of the 19th century. By 1932 the firms joined with others to form British Vinegars Ltd. The head office was moved to the Tower Bridge Road site. Sarson's became synonymous with vinegar production and was retained as the trading name. Further takeovers and mergers meant that the number of independent vinegar brewers had reduced to six by 1970.

Production continued at Tower Bridge Road until 1992

Production continued at the Tower Bridge Road site. Vats were refurbished and plant rebuilt. Products included malt vinegars, wine vinegars, distilled vinegar and a range of speciality vinegars. In 1979, British Vinegars was taken over by the Swiss firm, Nestle which in 1960 had already acquired Crosse & Blackwell. The Tower Bridge Works were closed in 1992.

What happened to all the Equipment when production ended?

Some of the plant moved to Sarson's brewery in Manchester. Of the two engines left, one is now at Crossness pumping station in Bexley in south-east London. Another engine, a vinegar-circulating pump originally built in 1897 and installed at Sarson's around 1930, which worked continuously till 1954. It is now at the Forncett Industrial Steam Museum in Norfolk. The bottling plant was removed to the British Vinegars site in Lambeth. A few of the giant vats visible from Tanner Street remained for some years. The Sarsons brand is now part of the Japanese firm, Mizkan.



Listing

Some of the Georgian and later industrial buildings on the site have now been listed to ensure that they remain preserved as part of our industrial heritage. They include:

- Early 19th century bonded warehouse
- Mid 19th century engine house, boiler house, coal store, brewhouse, fermentation vats
- Late 19th century still house and plumber's office

Renovation

In 2006, a respectful renovation by Glen Howells Architects gave the Sarson's site a new lease of life. It became a mixed use commercial and residential development with apartment and office space. Remaining historic structures were integrated with new buildings. The original brick and timber facades of the former vinegar works were connected by new steel and glass walkways and the former Sarson's main yard became an airy central space. Two new wings at the gateway used London stock bricks to recall the history of the site.



Sarson's renovation, as was, looking north (left), as is west (centre) and north (right)

Local People remember Sarson's well

Many Bermondsey people have more personal memories of the Sarson's site at Tower Bridge Road. Tennis players in Tanner Street Park recall the sharp smell of vinegar drifting over them in the afternoons. Less pleasing were the tales of cockroaches and other vermin from the works which invaded the workers' terraced housing in adjacent Brunswick Court. The vats were sterilised then removed. The terraced houses were demolished in the 1980s and replaced with modern houses. The chimney of the vinegar works was retained as was that of Hartley's jam factory close by on Tower Bridge Road. – the sweet and sour of Bermondsey's industrial history.



Tennis courts in Tanner Street Park 1920s