

THE COBBOLDS MEET THEIR MANCHESTER MATCH

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During Christmas 1805, as John and Elizabeth Cobbold surveyed their large family at Cliff House, they will have reflected that all 22 children would need good careers or suitable husbands. The eldest son John was already brewing at Eye, preparing to succeed his father in time at the Cliff Brewery. That left several more sons as well as those who would enter the services or the church.

William Cobbold, youngest surviving son by John's first marriage to Elizabeth Wilkinson, was at 22 trained for the brewery trade. To that end his father and eldest brother took him to Manchester by Post Chaise early in January to discuss the purchase of a working brewery there from one Thomas Caistor. Caistor's son James could not succeed him as planned because the steam of the Brew House had damaged his sight.



The journey took two days, and next morning they met Mr Caistor who, 'professing great friendship, showed them the house, brew house and premises,' on rather more than an acre, in his opinion worth far more than he was asking. John Cobbold senior asked 'whether [the business] could be comfortably conducted by a young man of good morals and sober habits without subjecting him to spend his money and time unpleasantly in public houses to obtain custom'. He was told that neither Mr Caistor nor his son 'ever went in to any Public House on such an occasion'.

The deal was soon struck for £8760 and on 25 March, William Cobbold was the owner occupier, his father giving him £1240, the change from ten thousand pounds, to get him started. Mr Caistor thought John Cobbold 'abundant and liberal' to his son, who would never need more help. Which other young man had ever been given so good an introduction to trade in Manchester? John went home much pleased that William was so comfortably fixed in trade and among such good friends.

The truth was very different, as William soon found out, and the letters he wrote his father and brother during the next year tell the whole sad story in great detail. On many occasions he had to ask his father for more capital. He had to sack Booth, his traveller, who brought in few orders, had twice been a bankrupt. To customers he posed as head partner in the brewery.

William took over Caistor's clerk as book-keeper who told him that Caistor was still owed £8,000 by

customers, and James Caistor, much restored now that he was out of the brewhouse, and pretending to help, went about collecting what was owed to his father, cleaning up before Cobbold's new traveller arrived.

The worst problem, however, was the well water, which produced 'ropy' beer nearly all the year round, and it emerged that the Caistor had had to cart in water of good quality which reduced his profit. This is why he sold up. There was much competition in the trade, and publicans expected William to win their loyalty by becoming familiar, and entering 'into all kinds of Vice with them'.

In a desperate attempt to secure business William asked his father to help him buy some public houses where only their beer would be sold, but his agent in the purchase made deals on his own behalf. A friend, Mr Salisbury, collected local opinions of Caistor, who 'was known of old as a damned rascal who always goes as far as the law will allow, but takes care to slip the halter'.

Historians of brewing in Manchester believe that a brewery was founded at Strangeways as early as 1778 by two grain merchants, Thomas Caistor and Thomas Fray, although the first documentary evidence is found in 1794. They chose a site just north of the city to avoid paying a grain tax to Manchester Grammar School. Caistor left the business by 1804. This was the brewery of which Henry Boddington became sole proprietor in 1853, and Boddingtons only ceased trading in 2005. The brewery which the Cobbolds bought from Caistor was at Downing Street, Ardwick, south-east of the city.

It is greatly to William's credit that he persevered so long with this unpromising enterprise. He was still there in 1811, living at Chorlton Row, but in August that year he took over an Epsom brewery from John and Rebecca Rutter. Two years after moving to Surrey he married Maria Sophia, daughter of the Revd Francis Colman Negus, rector of Brome near Eye. Retaining ownership of the Epsom brewery until 1824, in June 1817 he moved with his wife to Colchester to run the North Hill Brewery which was still the Cobbold Essex branch a century later. William and Maria's only daughter, Julia Mary Nunn, was born in 1826, the year William died aged only 42.

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