

**A LIFE OF SPICE JR Staien**, Stockwell Press, 1961(?)

In the Autumn of 1907 I was a clerk in a local Brewery, Wine & Spirit Stores and Mineral Water Works. Only two of the old hands are left now. There were about twelve fully employed and several casually employed. Father and son were in the business. They were very generous and the business was conducted to the penny. It was wonderful tuition to be with them. A Loan Book was kept, the date loaned, to whom, by whom taken, and time of day. When returned, two lines would be drawn across the entry, Time Returned, by whom, and date, and time. Anyone buying would have to sign, and thereon state kind of vehicle it was loaded on. There were no controversies over any transaction, because everything was foolproof. We worked in a large office, with one window facing the main street; it was a very pleasant outlook. It had a very large grate, and there was always plenty of coal. At the desk, which extended half-way across the office, on the right-hand side facing the window, was a counter with a flap-door let in, and facing that was a very wide shelf containing six polished nine-gallon casks, brass taps, with little white china buckets hung underneath to catch the drops, and containing Irish and Scotch whisky, rum, gin, French and British brandy.

Above and behind them was a very large glass and mahogany cupboard with all kinds of spirits and wines. We had a Retail Licence, but only a few friends came in to pay for a drink. They usually bought a bottle, ordered a drink and went out. There was no sitting accommodation.

I had been there a month, when one morning father and son were sitting on chairs each side of the fire. I was busy, sitting on the office stool, entering up the goods that had been sent off by conveyances, from order book to day book. Into the office came two women and one man. I knew them all, and because I was busy, the son, who was Mayor of the town that year, attended to them. The first lady asked for a bottle of rum and said "Please enter that down to my account." "All right, Mrs James, thank you," he replied. Directly after, the other woman asked for a bottle of gin, and before the son handed it to her, up got his father, who was then between seventy and eighty years of age, and with a wild look in his eyes and his finger pointing to his son, said, "How dare you serve another customer before entering down that bottle of rum? You know that is how businesses are ruined." He then sat down, and I was feeling quite hot all over, and thought in my mind, "I will watch that he will never catch me serving a customer as the son did." The old man was very strict; if you made inadvertence he would tell you off well, and would never refer to it again.

Often a woman tramp, carrying a baby, would call and ask for a copper. Up he would get and say, "Woman, what business are you doing with that child, tramping the roads? Go away, I can't give you anything." No sooner had she gone a few yards away, than he would give me two shillings or half a crown, saying, "Give that to her."

We brewed beer about twice a week, and it was the town's boozing Paradise, especially on a Sunday. There was more given away in the office and the brewhouse than the weekly wage amounted to. Each employee received every Friday one sovereign, never silver, except the traveller, who was paid 35/- per week. The man usually bottling beer and stout would drink one bottle for every four dozen, and nearly every man ordering in the office would have a drink. Under the counter we always had on tap an eighteen-gallon cask of beer. Several men in the day would just come in a yard or so to enquire the time, or to chat, and were always asked to have a drink. I would serve the whisky glass about half an inch deep, when the old man would say, "Oh, give more than that, boy." Another half-inch and he would say, "That's better."

It was the Vicars' and Curates' meeting place on a Tuesday. They would walk down the passageway, papers in their hands, and some with handbags, and step briskly up a step into a room at the back of the office. All quiet there; some would buy whisky, others gin, and always a stiff glass of spirit. I remember one Vicar

coming in to the cool back room on a very hot day, and saying, "Bring me a pint as big as a bucket," and standing up, with his frothy pint, say "If it wasn't for my cloth I would stand on the office door and drink it."

Another vicar, a bachelor, would walk into the office once every week, bring a dozen eggs and take two small bottles of stout, at 3d. each, and I would pay him from the till 2d. difference.

Another vicar would give me a dozen of sitting eggs, from his prize-winning fowls.

We had one drayman who could not leave with his two-horse wagon until he was full up. Each man was allowed to take half a gallon jar of beer on his journey. This drayman would harness one horse, walk up to the brewhouse, have a drink, fill his jar, take it to the stable, harness up the other horse, go again to the brewhouse, have a drink and fill up the same jar, bring horse and wagon to the brewhouse door, have a drink, fill up the jar again, and off he would go, the wagon loaded up by other men whilst he was having a chat with the brewer. He would handle the reins in a masterly manner and deliver his goods safely.

He could swallow a pint of beer without breathing, and let it run down without swallowing, because his Adam's Apple would not move up or down.

Chapel people would come for a bottle of whisky, gin, or brandy, only in the dark, and say to me, "It is only Doctor's orders. It's for my husband, you know, he's got a bad heart."

Brandy is a good stimulant; I have known a woman come in quickly, her lips blue, and walking one-sided and not able to utter a word. I jumped the counter and held a glass of brandy to her mouth. She revived at once and felt better.

All the men working in the brewery who drank excessively, died before they were sixty.

A great character was the milkman, and a familiar spectacle with milk cans hanging from his yoke. He bought a bottle of rum at 3/6 every morning except Sundays for ten years, and he would drink four of five rums and milk on his journey.

Our traveller at the Brewery was landlord of a public house opposite to the brewery, across the road. He was a very good scholar and always did his accounts to the halfpenny. He would start out on Monday am with horse and trap, call at three tied houses, to our brewery, and three free houses.

In the former he would only treat himself to one drink, and in the others, he would perhaps spend 4/- at each. He would be late coming home, and walking into the office supporting his balance by touching the walls with his hand, his little ledger and money in a leather bag slung over his shoulder. He would get to the other side of the counter, tip all the money out, and the old gent would say, "What sort of a day have you had?" and all of a sudden he would reply, quite soberly, "Very good, Sir, Mrs. James paid her account of £100," and he would appear quite sober. After that he would be swaying, reckoning the gold and placing it in heaps, until they were reckoned by the Boss; it was never counted wrong. "Expenses, please," and placing three halfpence on the counter would reply "19/10½d, Sir." He would be handed £1. Perhaps the next day his expenses would be 30/-, yet he would only charge the firm 18/6 or 19/-. On other days it would be a case of give and take.

Sometimes the wives would come to the cellar to receive their wages from their husbands, otherwise they would not see much of it. I remember one foggy November evening, one of the worker's wives stood inside the doorway, and at the back of her was a large round tub of barm. Her husband came in after receiving wages, "Harry, hand over," she said. He gave her a gentle push, in a friendly manner; she stepped backwards and sat in the tub of barm. I can now see her two black stockinged legs standing straight out, and the barm bubbling over the sides. She managed to get out, shouting vengeance to her husband, as she ran up the passageway, with her black dress dragging at her heels, and the white barm covering the brown bricks.

Whilst checking in the cellar grating after transferring stock to a new purchaser, I came across two sixty-year-old bottles of Port, which were covered in cobwebs and lime. They had been pushed forward (by other bottles when filling the space) into a crevice in the brick wall. I placed them on the counter, and in came an Irish doctor by the name of Moynon, and on seeing them he got quite excited and offered me 20/- each, and I was told by his manservant that the Doctor, at dinner that night, was very careful that the bottles should appear at table covered in lime and cobwebs. He said it was the best port he had ever drunk.

The Doctor was a great sport; he kept two hunters and followed the hounds - a great gambler. He used to parade the town daily, at each time in different clothes. He visited his patients riding in a very smart trap drawn by a high stepping pony.

Another well-known doctor lived in the town. He was a London doctor, and when he first came here at the age of twenty-five, he wore a very long black beard, box hat, striped trousers and morning jacket. He had a very big practice and was very kind to the poor. I remember him telling me about a man who would not leave his bed. He had been there for five years. His wife complained to the doctor that she could not get him out of bed. The doctor called at the house, and spoke to the man upstairs. He said he would not get out of bed. The doctor shouted to the wife to bring him up a bundle of sticks and some paper. He placed them under the bed and set a light to the paper. The man was so frightened that he jumped out of bed and ran downstairs. That cured him; he got up next morning.

The doctor was a very patient man. He always did his rounds in a very high trap, driving a very nice looking stallion who sometimes would jib, and I have seen the doctor fasten the reins around the lamp, take up a paper to read and sit there for one and a half hours until the stallion took it in his head to move.