

Memories of a Career Maltster

By E. J. Sizeland

Changes in the methods of malt production in a working span of over 40 years changed very little until a few years after World War II. After that time, improvements and modernisation came along fairly fast. Fifty or so years ago almost everything was done by manual labour except for using hoists for hauling grain to upper floors or on to the kilns. Indeed I can remember as a small boy my father working in a malthouse which was absolutely devoid of any machinery, everything was done by hand, and the grain was hand winched to upper floors and the kiln. Even water for the steep was hand-pumped from an old fashioned yard pump via a trough through a hole in the wall.

From my earliest recollections extending well over 60 years, malting work has, until recent years, been carried out with slight variations on much of the same system. A malting season lasted at most about eight months, from say, September until perhaps early May, depending of course upon the weather which was a big factor, as malting work in those days was impossible in hot weather. Now - a - days of course it is carried out all the year round with little or no trouble.

However, to get back to the old methods of working. Some malt houses were small and some rather large. In our firm they varied from a one man house right through to a twelve man house, six man houses being the more usual. Each man worked an average of 25 qtrs. of grain (that being 50 coombs).

The grain in those days was steeped (or soaked for a period of about 60 - 70 hours and in that time it was drained and cleansed twice, with swimmings and trash cleared off each time with a tool we called a "dowshie", which was really a long wooden hoe. The steeps, or cisterns in those days were always situated on the bottom floor, and the wet grain had to be thrown out by hand using large tin shovels.

That operation and the resultant washing down and levelling was usually a good 1½ hours work. Large boards known as "couch boards" were arranged between columns, thus forming a "couch" where the grain was levelled off in a bed about 3 feet deep. The grain was now said to be in a "couch". Next day usually, the "couch" was broken and the grain was distributed to the three floors, a like amount to each floor. It was then levelled out again, and now called a "young piece". Then on successive days for about 7 - 8 days it was hand turned with wooden shovels, gradually working the whole "piece" towards the kiln. If necessary to move much grain in one day large barrows with broad wooden wheels were used. At one time carrying hods were used with 2 men to a hod, but they didn't last long. Again, we would sometimes use a tool called a "rake" or "plough" which was used to pull through the grain for the purpose of aerating.

Grain of course was steeped in order to make it germinate and grow and in that process the starch in the grain was converted almost to sugar. When the grain first came from the steep it was a rich golden colour and during its journey to the kilns,

as it germinated and dried out, it gradually changed to a pale yellow. It was reckoned to be ready for the kilns. (or firing as we said) when the acrospire had grown almost, but not quite along the back of the grain, the acrospire being the shoot of the grain, which if sown would grow into barley. At this stage it was known as "green malt".

As the grain was worked or turned down the floors a uniform heat of 60° F or a little more was required for the first few days, or during the last two days the temperature rose until when ready for loading to the kilns it was much warmer, and matted together and when disturbed emitted clouds of steam as well.

For loading the kilns the grain, (or green malt) was shovelled in large skeps, and hauled grain by hand to a hoist which lifted it to the kilns, and it was then hand hauled again to where required and shot out, the empty skep being lowered again and another full one hoisted up. This operation took at least two hours of hard work. In those days the twelve maltsters worked in four companies, each of three men, and kiln loading was always carried out as a race with plenty of leg-pulling for the last to finish, but all taken in very good part.

The malt usually remained on the kilns a minimum of three days and drying commenced at about 90° - 100°F for the first day or so, and as drying proceeded the heat was gradually raised until finally it was subjected to a temperature of about 210°F and it was then said to be cured, and very nice and sweet it tasted too.

Kilns of course were all hand turned as well three times a day, and when in the "green" stage iron forks were used, and then wooden forks and finally wooden shovels, and on the last day no one complained of cold feet. Malt, when finished off was said to be "cured".

Kiln floors were perforated and could be composed of either glazed tiles or of wire mesh which allowed the heat to pass through for drying and also for the dried roots of the grain to drop through into the "hot-air" chamber. These roots were now called "culms" and at the end of the season, were gathered up and sent away and used for a variety of purposes. That was a very dirty job, but *in* those days we were allowed beer for dirty jobs, also for kiln loading.

Then of course the whole process started over again. Empty the steep, work the grain down the floors, load the kilns, then after curing, unload kilns and start all over again.

The unloading or stripping of kilns was carried out by shovelling the malt down chutes which led to a hopper and from there, when cooled down a bit, into storage bins and kept until required for dispatch to breweries etc.

Steeping times are arranged so that usually we had six or seven per month, and fifty per season was reckoned to be good. It was of necessity a seven day week with Sundays and Christmas Day work the same as any other day.

A normal working day commenced at 6 a.m. with a break for breakfast at 8 a.m. starting again at 8.45 a.m. and on ordinary days finishing the morning's work at about 11 or 11.30 a.m. A fairly short afternoon followed usually from 2 p.m. until 3.30 or 4 p.m., then on most evenings four men would work a rota system of going back for an hour to "rake " or "plough " the grain. This, needless to say was classified as overtime.

Every few days we had what was called a "Field Day" and it was aptly named. These days were caused by one "piece" over running another and kilns had to be stripped on the same day as a steep was emptied in addition to all the normal working on the floors. Work on these days started at 4 a.m. the first job being stripping the kiln. This occupied a good hour, and then after a change to dry clothes and a sip of beer, work started on the loading of the kiln again, and when that was finished, and it usually took two hours or more, if there was time, work started on the floors, and then after breakfast and floor work completed, and a short break for a drink and a smoke the steeps had to be emptied again. That took up to dinner time and immediately after dinner any necessary work was done on the floors, and so straight into "breaking couch " again. That took up until about 4.30 p.m. and then for those who had to go back during the evening another one hours work. A good days work which often found out the weak spots, and I don't think anyone went dancing that night.

The majority of the maltsters spent almost the whole of their working lives at the maltings and almost without exception were a splendid lot of working chaps, and always ready to give a "green

hand" a little advice and a lot of help.

There were some real old "characters" amongst them and taken all in all there were lots of leg-pulling and laughs and plenty of fun, enough to fill a book, I'm sure, but thats another story.

The off-season of about four months for those who stayed on was spent in cleaning down, painting, and getting in coal for the following season. The coal of course was used for the kiln fires and a good many trucks loads were required for a season's work. Nowadays oil is used instead, and its a far more cleaner job now. For those who chose to leave in the close season the time was usually spent on local farms, working a hoeing, haysel and harvest, and then starting again at the maltings about September.

Years ago the major high light of the year was the Annual Outing, usually to Yarmouth. A few sllillings went into the 'kitty' each week for that purpose, and several buses were required for transport, as in most cases whole families went, and a very enjoyable day was had by all. The day started about 9 a.m. and arrival home was anytime up to midnight.

To see an old time company of maltsters at work in the old days was indeed a comical sight, Scarcely any clothes were worn and at that a very motley collection. Any old pair of slacks or even Shorts were worn, and if a shirt was worn, it was often difficult to tell the colour, let alone the style. Everyone also wore a skull cap (for dust protection) and they were all sorts and sizes and materials, and almost without exception all had their trousers tied with string as was the fashion then.

As well as the number of maltsters mentioned there were also a number employed, known as the 'Day Gang' or 'Storemen'; also a few engaged in the calling of Carpenter, Bricklayer, Engineer etc. This lot totalled about 25 or so, and altogether roughly 60 men were employed and a like total at the other two branches.

Day Gang workers were distinct from Maltsters in that they stood an 8t hour day, and a maltster was free to go home when his work was done to the managers satisfaction. Day workers were sometimes brought in as relief maltsters in time of sickness or any other reason. The main job of Day gang workers was taking in barley and kiln drying the same, filling steepes, and despatch of malt, and the 101 jobs that need doing in such a place. Actual hours worked by all averaged much the same, but the maltsters pay was somewhat higher by virtue of a seven day week against a five and half day week. A good many day workers took on malting work as old hands retired. It was also quite common for sons to be working alongside fathers, or uncles with nephews, and brothers together as well.

All lighting in those days was by parafin oil, and lamps were fixed to boards and carried about and hung on beams at the most convenient point. Some used them from the back and some from the front, but which ever way was used it was very poor illumination. It was not until a short time before World War II that electricity came to the area, about 1937 I think. For lighting in the malt silo a candle was used, stuck in a piece of kiln tile and lowered down with a length of string. Anyone up above had only to lift the string about a foot or so and let it drop, and out go the light, and that was very often done.

Then just after the war, about 1946 - 47 ground floor steeps were done away with and overhead ones put in, and that replacement made the work a lot lighter, doing away with the job of throwing steeps out manually. The new steeps were built so the grain ran from out of the base, one to each floor to where required.

A year or two later automatic kiln turning apparatus was installed, that taking out all the hard graft of turning it by hand. That, I think, was by far the best improvement. Then later on still, machines were introduced to turn the grain on the floors and at about the same time more machines to move the grain in bulk, thus doing away for the need for barrows.

At about the same time as kiln turners were installed elevators were introduced for kiln loading, thus doing away with the use of skeps. All these improvements made the maltsters job a far easier one, vastly different to the methods used a half a century and more ago.

It might be here said that in working the grain down the floors it was ideally kept at a uniform thickness to allow for equality in germination. In the "young" stage this was about 4 - 6 inches, but of course as the grain grew it became somewhat more thick, and when fit to be loaded to the kilns, was perhaps 12 - 15 inches.

A good maltster always prided himself on how level his "piece" was when it was turned, and woe betide any one who left it looking like what we called "Rocky Mountains". Many a fresh hand found that job very difficult, and then it usually became quite easy and many a trick has been tried to make it look right.

Also in those days when a period of work was finished, edges of all "pieces" had to be left as straight as the proverbial gun-barrel, and all tools hung up, or stowed away tidily.

All in all, a maltsters life was not an easy one and most of the old hands always maintained they would do the same again. For one thing, work was in the dry and warm and the job was secure, and being allowed to go home when work was done was also a great incentive. Also working days were always interspersed with lots of laughter and fun, and for the most part everyone willing to give the other a helping hand.

E. J. Sigeland