

THE (NEW) LEA VALLEY DISTILLERY COMPANY

by **Brian Strong**

In *The Whisky Distilleries of the United Kingdom*, Barnard described the Lea Valley Distillery as 'the only Malt [Whisky] Distillery in England'.¹ This article summarises what I have been able, with the help of others (see Acknowledgments below), to find out about this unique, but short-lived, distillery.

Location

Barnard simply referred to the location of the distillery as "*Stratford, London*". While he wrote conversationally about the alternative ways to get there by public transport, he did not give a more precise location. However, the distillery is shown on the large scale Ordnance Survey map for 1894-6 (Fig. 1),² which shows it to the east of the Waterworks River (a channel of the River Lea or Bow Back Rivers) and to the west of the junction between Carpenters Road and Warton Road. The distillery is shown covering two buildings or groups of buildings, which I have labelled 'North Block' and 'South Block' respectively, separated by the premises of the Lea Bank Soap and Candle Works. Until work started on the Olympic Park, part of the site was occupied by a Tarmac ready-mixed concrete plant; and the remainder by car breakers. An old wall (age uncertain) survived along the Warton Road boundary but, even if it dates to the nineteenth century, it seems more likely to have been the wall of the chemical works, shown on the map; and possibly partly of the Victoria Oil & Candle Works. All these buildings have now been demolished in preparation for construction for the 2012 Olympics.

Life of the Distillery

Barnard said "*the distillery was founded by Mr E A Brock, in connection with Mr Geo. Phillips, who sold it to*" the Company. The Distillery existed for only 22 years. Surviving Companies House records at the National Archives say the company was incorporated in 1882, with a nominal capital of £100,000 divided into 5000 shares of £20 each.³ By 1894, only 961 shares were fully paid up, with £19,220 shown in the books. In that year, an Agreement for Reconstitution was made between the Company and the newly incorporated New Lea Valley Distillery Company Limited, whereby the old company was liquidated and its assets, except for "*a license [sic] dated the eighth of November 1890 and now held by the old Company for the use of certain alleged Patents known as Doctors [sic] Squires Patents*", transferred to the New Company. The latter had a share capital of only £25,000 divided into 2500 shares of £10 each.

Both companies appear in local directories. The earliest reference I found was in the 1887/8 local directory, which is indexed by street and the reference reads: "*182 Warton Road West Side **Lea Valley Distillery Co Limited** whisky distillers E A Brock, man. dir.*"⁴ This is consistent with Barnard, who also listed E A Brock as Managing Director and W A Carden as secretary. Nettleton listed the Distillery among British and Irish Distillers in 1893, giving the address "*Stratford, London*" and the description "*Patent-still*".⁵

Edward Thomas Carden was listed as "*the Liquidator*" in the 1894 Agreement for Reconstitution. Albert J Carden was the first Managing Director of the New Company and Charles Thomas Sutton Junior was the first Company Secretary. The major shareholders in the New Company were Wm. Carden 539, Wm. Richard Sutton 550, Charles Thomas Sutton 230 and Sutton, Carden & Co Ltd 498. The shareholdings did not change until 1903, when Wm. Carden and Wm. Richard Sutton were both listed as deceased. It therefore appears that the company was set up and operated, in both its incarnations, by the Brock, Carden and Sutton families.

Of the people mentioned by Barnard, the Directories and in the records at the National Archives, the only other record traced so far is of **Albert J Carden**, who is listed as a Member of the Society of Chemical Industry from 1891, including 1893, 1896, 1898, 1903 and 1917.⁶ This was the only source which came up on an internet search.⁷ I have checked the index at the Science Museum Library, the indexes to *The Engineer* and to the Transactions of the Newcomen Society but have found no reference to the company (with either of its names); or to E A Brock or the two Cardens.

The records at the National Archives show that the New Company was wound up voluntarily in 1904.³ Unfortunately, those papers do not indicate why the company was reconstituted in 1894 or why it was wound up ten years later. A search of the local press has not thrown any further light on it. The reconstruction with much lower capital and subsequent demise suggest that it was never very successful. R Wilson suggests that the company was offered to the Distillers Company Ltd in 1902 or 1903,⁸ but this is not mentioned in Weir's history of DCL.⁹

The Premises

Barnard gave a full description of his visit to the Distillery. He said:

"... The buildings cover one acre, are planted on the banks of a section of the Canal [i.e. the Waterworks River], and are erected entirely of brick, after the plans of Mr Brock. The Maltings are all at Ware, in Hertfordshire, and the malt is brought directly there from by Canal."

He went to describe the individual buildings:

- The **Granary**: a 4-storey building "which abuts on the canal" 120 feet long by 45 feet broad. The grain is lifted by hoists direct from the barges and spread out in the Lofts.' A lower floor contained Mill machinery, presumably steam-powered with 5 pairs of stones.
- Adjoining the Granary was the **Heating Tank Room**, with 3 wrought iron tanks, made by Fraser of nearby Bromley, two holding 24,000 gallons and the third 20,000. *"They stand on iron columns and girders and are heated by steam"*.
- The space underneath the tanks was used as the **Smithy and Fitters' Shop**.
- Barnard was then able to pass directly from the 2nd floor of the Granary to a **Grist Loft** on the top floor of the **Mash House**, a *"light and spacious apartment"* 85 feet long by 45 feet wide. In the centre of the Grist Loft, the Grist Hopper fed a Steel's Mashing Machine. Descending, the Mash House was of the same dimensions as the Grist Loft. The metal Mash Tun was 26 feet in diameter and 8 feet deep, *"containing a set of double rakes and the usual draining plates"*. A second mash tun was in the course of construction at the time of the visit. Both were by Turnbull, Grant and Jack of Glasgow. *"The Underback, holding 12,000 gallons, [was] placed under the paved floor, and the worts [were] pumped up there from to the Worts Receiver, placed on iron columns, 32 feet high, close to the Back House. This Receiver is a prominent object from the railway"* which runs to the north-east of the site (see map at Fig. 1) *"and is a very handsome vessel. Underneath, by a neat contrivance, there is a hanging Grains Receiver, containing an automatic measure, which registers the quantity of draff as it falls into the farmers' carts. The Mash House is well and conveniently arranged, and the walls are painted white."*
- Barnard then passed through a doorway into the **Tun Room**, *"a long gallery, 90 feet by 40 feet"*. On either side, there were four Washbacks *"unlike any we have seen before, being composed of thick metal plates, 16 feet in diameter and 18 feet deep. On the half-landing above [were] placed two of Morton's Refrigerators, of 60 barrels capacity per hour"*.

- Passing through an opening in the wall and down a flight of stairs, Barnard came level with the heads of the Stills in the **Still House**, "*a lofty apartment, 60 feet long by 25 feet wide*", containing three "*handsome*" Pot Stills made by Fleming, Bennet and McLaren, all heated by steam: a Wash Still holding 4,000 gallons; a Feints Still 3,000 gallons and a Spirit Still 1,500 gallons. Connected with them was a Wash Charger holding 15,000 gallons. On a gallery were four Low-wines and Feints Receivers, holding 2,500 gallons each, and one Spirit Receiver, 2,000 gallons.
- "*Our guide then conducted us to the No.2 Still House*". This suggests it was in another building, not directly next to the No.1 Still House. This was 65 feet long by 25 feet, containing a Coffey's Patent Still, made by John Dore and Sons of Bromley, he does not give the capacity; two Spirit Receivers, holding 2,500 and 2,000 gallons respectively; two Wash Chargers, each 25,000 gallons capacity; two Feints Receivers, each 1,000 gallons content; and a Morton's Patent Vertical Refrigerator, "*the first ever erected in a Distillery for cooling spirits*".
- The **Engine Department**, with a 30 hp engine by Deakin and Parke of Manchester and four others of lesser horse power. Adjacent were three steam boilers by Galloway and Fraser, two of 60 hp and one of 50 hp, all 31 feet long by 70 feet in diameter. He also found three sets of three-throw pumps by Hunter & English of London and several patent pumps for worts etc by Picking and Hopkins, of Arnold Works, Bow.
- Barnard then crossed a yard to the **Spirit Store**, "*a detached building containing two vats: one holding 10,000 gallons, the other 450 gallons. In close proximity there [was] a larger building used for storing spirits in vats.*"
- Three **Warehouses** containing 'a little over 1,800 casks' and a **Cooperage and Cask Shed**.
- **Revenue Offices**.

Given the detail of dimensions provided by Barnard and the scale of the map at Fig. 1, I expected it to be possible to relate these various rooms and workshops to the map, but I have not been able to reconcile them. Barnard's book was published in 1887 and the map is dated 1894-6; it is possible that the distillery had been rebuilt or altered by then. However, Barnard implies that the distillery was newly built by Brock; it seems unlikely that it would have needed to be rebuilt so soon, particularly if it was not thriving.

It seems likely that the distillery buildings were in the South Block and that the North Block may have contained the Spirit Store, Warehouses and Revenue Offices, which were separate from the distillery when Barnard visited. Fig. 1 shows a lucam or hoist over the Waterworks River, at the western end of the South Block, where the malt could be delivered.

Finally, Barnard noted that 40 persons were employed at the works. The water was from the New River. Whisky was made both from grain, annual output 305,000 gallons, and malt, 155,000 gallons. While the output of the neighbouring primary alcohol distilleries was much higher, Kraaijeveld comments that it would have made Lea Valley rank among the top 20 malt distilleries in Scotland in those days.¹⁰

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References

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