

Breweries in decline: A struggle for survival.

Around the turn of the 20th century the breweries of Lewes started to struggle for survival and by the 1950s many had been bought up by national companies. Only Harvey's Brewery held fast. The site at Bridge Wharf is now a Grade II listed building and is the oldest brewery in Sussex. Its rich heritage is passionately carried through to the present day.

Mathew Homewood (Local Historian)

Verrall's Brewery closed in 1897. In fact three breweries were either closed or taken over in the 1890s. It was not a great time for Lewes breweries at that point. The Southdown and East Grinstead Brewery took over a couple of the breweries in Lewes, and quite often they would use the buildings for storage rather than continuing to use them for brewing. The classic quote is that Lewes had seven churches, seven breweries and seventy pubs. There were actually around sixty-five pubs and beer houses at one point, and that was leading up to 1907. They closed twelve pubs in 1907, so that was when it was at its maximum. Whereas now in 2013 we've got one pub roughly for every 1000 residents, in 1907 there was a pub for every 185 residents. It's the equivalent of having almost a hundred pubs in Lewes today, so there were just far too many.

Miles Jenner (Master Brewer, Harveys)

The 1950s was the time when I remember breweries shutting every day of the week and quite often I'd go along for the ride and look at the breweries with my father when he was trying to buy equipment and he described himself as a vulture on the funeral pyre of other breweries because he would just go in and buy whatever he could as cheaply as possible, and normally at scrap metal prices. So my father duly arrived having done his homework and he was surrounded by a sea of scrap metal dealers and he started the bidding, and there was one other guy eventually bidding against him and I think he got up to £200. And this man by this time was absolutely incensed and he shouted across the floor at him, "You silly little", well I won't say the word on tape, but it was very uncomplimentary, "you'll never place it" meaning he'd never get the value of the metal back paying that for it. And Sir Edwin Chadwick Healey stopped the auction and he said "Gentleman, I would have you know that Mr Jenner is not a scrap metal dealer, he is a brewer and he wants the plant to brew with at Lewes" and there was a stunned silence and the same voice said "Well that's different mate, let him have it" and we acquired our mash tun and I brewed on it this morning, so still very much in action.