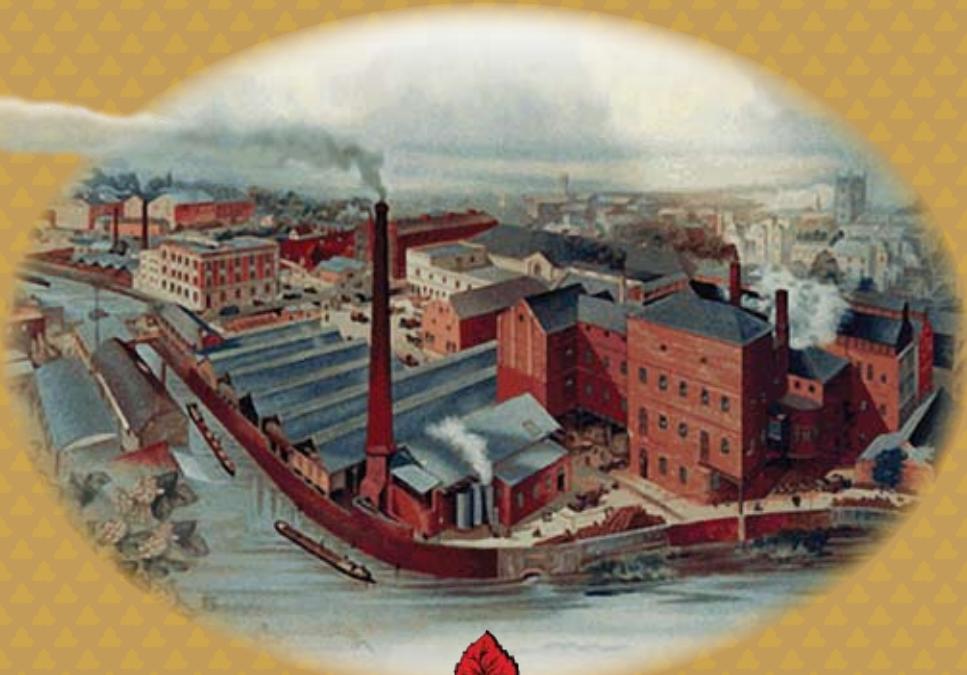


# H. & G. SIMONDS. LTD.

*THE STORY OF THE BRIDGE STREET  
BREWERY, READING, 1785 - 1980*

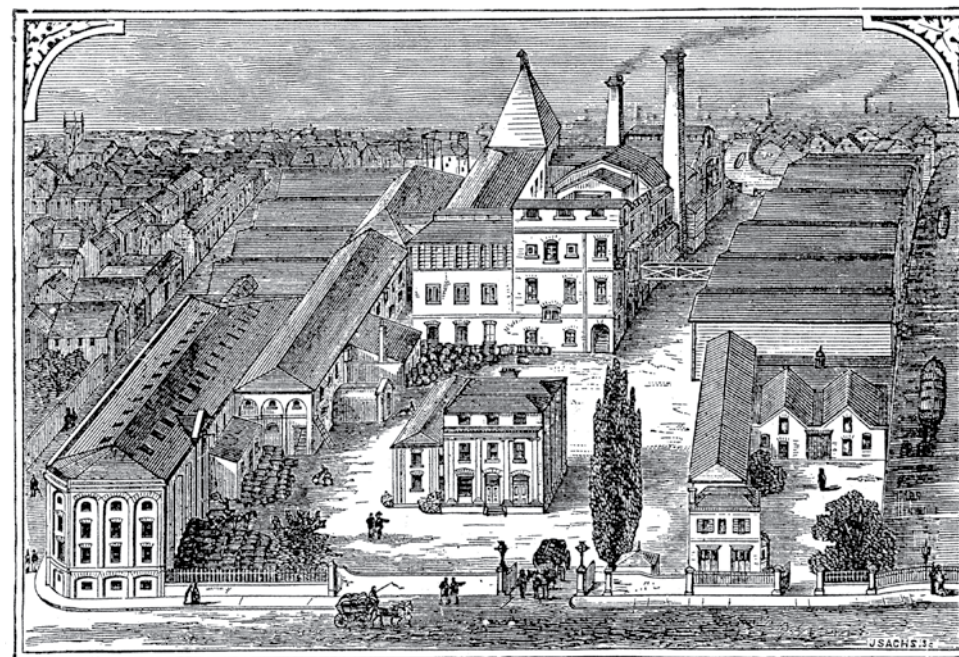
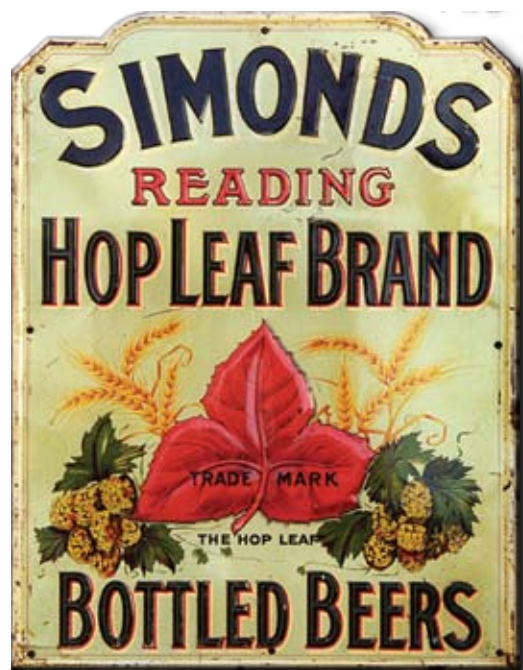




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This contemporary view from an etching shows the extent of the brewery buildings before 1895 when the John Soane designed family home in the middle was demolished to allow for the expansion of brewing.

THIS work was first published in 1980 as *'The Road to Worton Grange'* to mark the closure of the Bridge Street Brewery and the move to the Worton Grange site. It was updated by the original author Tony Corley, then further researched and edited by Raymond Simonds to commemorate the unveiling of the H. & G. Simonds Ltd., Kennet Riverside Information Board.

Other sources include: T. A. B. Corley's article *'Simonds Brewery at Reading 1760-1960'*, in the *Berkshire Archaeological Journal* Vol. 68. [1975-6] and the author's article *'The Old Breweries of Reading 1741-1984'* in the *Berkshire Archaeological Journal* Vol. 71. [1981-2]

The designer of this booklet was Jamie Nimmo.

T.A.B. Corley, *'Simonds family'* (per. c. 1768-1960), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edition, Oxford University Press, October 2007.

Family photographs and images are by permission of Raymond Simonds.

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### Founding the Brewery

WILLIAM Blackall Simonds was a lucky young man. He was well-connected, coming from prosperous yeoman stock around Arborfield and Wokingham. His father William Simonds [1732-1782] married Mary Blackall in 1756 and in 1765 decided to leave the land and take up malting in the small but thriving market town of Reading. In 1774 he also began brewing in a small way at a site later known as “*The Old Brewery Tap*” at the top of Broad Street on the south side. When he died in 1782 he left the business to his only son.

That business, and a £1,000 legacy just received from his maternal grandfather William Blackall, could

in those days have kept the young man in comfort for the rest of his life, without any great effort on his part. He was, besides, on the point of marrying well. In September 1783 at the Church of St James the Less in Pangbourne, he married Elizabeth [1763-1842] the niece and god-daughter of Thomas



William Blackall  
Simonds  
1762-1834



Elizabeth May 1763-1842  
At the time of their  
wedding in 1783

May who founded May’s Brewery of Basingstoke and settled on her a dowry of £2,000. The young couple have been preserved for posterity in portraits taken from silhouettes, the most reliable way of taking a likeness in those pre-photographic days. He has fashionably powdered hair and is wearing a fancy cravat and sky-blue coat with silver buttons; she has the exaggerated hair-style of the day and plentiful lace and muslin adorns the top of her grey dress. They lived in the ‘Brewery House’ on Bridge Street.

There would have been plenty to divert W. B. Simonds in the elegant life of a county town: the theatre, horse races, military reviews, balls, assemblies, card parties and concerts, with fishing, hunting, coursing and shooting for the men. Yet he possessed energy and determination as well as good fortune.

He knew what he wanted to do, found a large brewery, with the most up-to-date machinery that the industrial revolution could provide. He also wanted deep wells so that he would not need to rely on the dirty brown liquid from elm pipes that passed for the town water supply. So in about 1785 he acquired an extensive site in Seven Bridges (Street) now Bridge Street, Reading. It was on one of the main thoroughfares into the town and also adjoined the river Kennet, along which most of the hops and malt required for brewing as well as the finished product travelled by barge in those days.

When planning the brewery buildings, nothing but the best was good enough for him. He commissioned his school friend, the locally born and educated (Sir) John Soane, later famous as the Bank of England’s architect, to prepare designs. As this was the only brewery that Soane ever designed, the plans are of interest. The actual buildings have long since disappeared but the drawings and accounts are still in the Soane museum in London. While one end of the brewhouse contained an upper barley drying room with broad roof, the effect of the remainder was of a Roman basilica. It ended in an apse, which enclosed the horse-driven wheel for pumping and for grinding malt. This cost the princely sum of £6,400 and he borrowed heavily to fund it.

The brewery house was of double-fronted Georgian design, with Ionic pilasters on the front elevation. There were four bedrooms and two dressing rooms at first floor level and five bedrooms on the attic storey. The large drawing-room had wallpaper of hop-leaf design, which was adopted as the brewery’s trade mark. The hop-leaf could also be seen on a tablet over the imposing front door. The counting-house, with a strong chest for the cash and confidential documents, was next to his study.

He was not ready to sit back once the twenty-five-quarter brewing plant was in operation, for in 1797 he had the horse-wheel replaced by a 2 h.p. Boulton & Watt engine. This was only the second steam-engine to be installed in a Berkshire brewery, and there may have been an element of bravado in his decision, for other brewers did not consider one to be worthwhile unless output reached at least 20,000 barrels a year: at that time his output was no more than a third of that. Yet compact and reliable as it was, the engine also provided steam for heating coppers and cleaning out barrels, minor but essential functions to ensure that Simonds beer was to be of the highest quality.

### *The Years of Frustration*



Blackall Simonds (I) 1784-1875

**I**T LOOKED as if he had all that he needed for rapid and sustained growth: youth and energy to allow him to supervise with critical attention all the various activities, with every aid of current technology. By 1794 he had four healthy sons to provide continuity into the next generation. The spacious site gave scope for future growth and also room for the ancillary trades of the day, those of vinegar and timber merchants.

With his future apparently assured, William Blackall Simonds

at thirty was recognised as a man of substance. In 1791 he was appointed Receiver-General of Taxes for West Berkshire. That year he helped to found Messrs. Micklem, Stephens, Simonds and Harris's bank in Reading's Market Place, the ancestor of Lloyds Bank there; he contributed £1,000 capital as did his haberdasher, brewer and maltster partners. He also acted as town treasurer of Reading at different times from 1793 onwards.

Yet his main business and interest in life was languishing. The war with France that broke out in 1793 and the agricultural boom that followed brought Reading great affluence, and the excise returns show what a partiality its citizens had for beer. Even so, his brewery was not gaining its share of the trade that he felt it deserved. The older breweries of the town had a very tight control over the public houses there, and the licensing laws were so strict that no new beer licences could be issued. Reading then had sixty-eight public houses for its 10,000 inhabitants, and all but the two main coaching inns were tied houses. Of these Simonds had only ten, with another seven outside the town, and little chance of expanding his trade.



Moreover, the powerful Berkshire brewers used to meet regularly to fix prices, so that the others' beers, which were generally acknowledged to be badly brewed and badly looked after, cost the same as his good beer: the worst was so poor that townspeople often had to drink spirits instead. Since Berkshire was one of many southern counties thus afflicted, protests flooded into the Government, which from 1815 onwards set up various official inquiries into the matter. It was a small bonus for him when in 1813 the Royal Military College moved to Sandhurst and his brewery was awarded the beer contract: the first connection with the army that was later to become of great importance.

By 1814 W. B. Simonds was so pessimistic about the brewery's future that he determined to sell out and concentrate on banking. He therefore withdrew from the Market Place bank and founded his own across the way in King Street, his partners being his younger son Henry and two cousins John and Charles; the last-named later gave their names to the banking partnership of J. & C. Simonds which became part of Barclays Bank in 1913. Henry Simonds also had a thriving wine and spirit business. But the eldest son Blackall Simonds [1784-1875], then thirty, refused to see the brewery pass out of the family. Instead, he took over its direction single-handed. He also became chairman of the Country Brewers' Society, a forerunner of The Brewers' Society in 1828. W.B. Simonds retired in 1816 at the age of fifty-five, becoming Mayor of Reading in that year. In 1820 an Act of Parliament was passed by King George IV giving him the right, as a retired Receiver-General of Taxes, to sell or mortgage his home at Caversham Court. He then enjoyed nearly twenty years of retirement with his wife Elizabeth, first in Baker Street, London and then in the rural surroundings of Pangbourne.

### *The Years of Liberation*

**B**LACKALL Simonds was quite a different type of man from his father. Just as energetic, he had all the rumbustiousness of a Regency character. About that time he had a quarrel with another prominent townsman in the Gun Street billiard room and only at the last moment was restrained from fighting a duel. Family anecdotes suggest that he was not over-sensitive when handling members of the public who criticised his business methods.

He enjoyed to the full two of the most vigorous activities of the day: politics and fox-hunting. In parliamentary and local elections, long before the secret ballot was introduced, he was accused by his Liberal opponents of making 'practical' appeals to voters but he was never taken to court.





He hunted with Sir John Cope's hounds, afterwards the South Berks Hunt. With his groom in attendance, he pursued the fox with 'ardour' but the knowledge of the local countryside he acquired was very useful as he noted down sites for future public houses within the fifteen mile range of a horse-drawn dray, in anticipation of the liberalisation of the licensing laws. This preparation allowed him to move quickly ahead of his competitors when the opportunity finally came.



Henry Simonds 1785-1879

Yet it was fifteen years before the widespread protests and public inquiries led to Government action to combat the high price and poor quality of beer. In 1830 the Duke of Wellington's administration steered through parliament the Beer House Act, which authorised the opening of beer shops without the need to obtain a magistrate's licence. At a stroke the older brewers' monopoly was destroyed and Blackall Simonds showed what could be done with an opportunity to compete on equal terms.

Over the succeeding years the number of tied houses was gradually increased but there were also many newly-opened independent beer houses without brewing facilities that were only too glad to purchase good beer. By 1839 the brewery was larger in size than any of its Reading competitors. It produced 15,000 barrels, well over double the output of the 1790s, and had thirty-seven tied houses, twelve in Reading itself.

Blackall Simonds fully merited his reputation for business acumen, energy and foresight. By building up this powerful local trade, he helped to prevent the great London breweries from gaining a foothold in the Berkshire area. Those breweries had for a long time complained bitterly about being unable to sell their porter in the counties but he showed conclusively that locally made beer could fully satisfy the counties' needs. In 1834 he began to brew a novel kind of beer, pale ale, for export; it travelled well, even on the six-months' journey under sail to the remote colony of Victoria in Australia.

Blackall retired in 1845 and moved with his wife Emma Jane (Usborne) from the family home at Caversham Court, Caversham, to Ryde, Isle of Wight,



where he built a new home and called it Caversham House, and where he was one of the first in the family to take up the sport of sailing at The Royal Victoria Yacht Club, then in Ryde. He and Emma had no children, so his brothers Henry [1785-1879] and George [1794-1852] joined in about 1834. Henry was born on Bridge Street, married Mary Goodman in May 1811 and he became Senior Partner in 1845. A period of consolidation then set in, and it was the arrival of the senior partner's son Henry John Simonds in 1856 which led to a fresh era of expansion. The new entrant was in his late twenties; he had been a fellow of King's College, Cambridge, and a barrister. He thus had an experience of life outside Reading that the older family members lacked. Pale ale was now brewed for consumption at home, and in 1858 it was bottled for the first time. The firm began to acquire additional land for the new buildings that were becoming necessary; the family had long since moved out of Brewery House but even that was inadequate for all the paper work and purpose built offices were erected.

### *The Mid-Victorian Boom*

FROM the mid-1860s the brewery began the most sustained rate of expansion achieved in the nineteenth century. Thus, by 1871 output doubled from



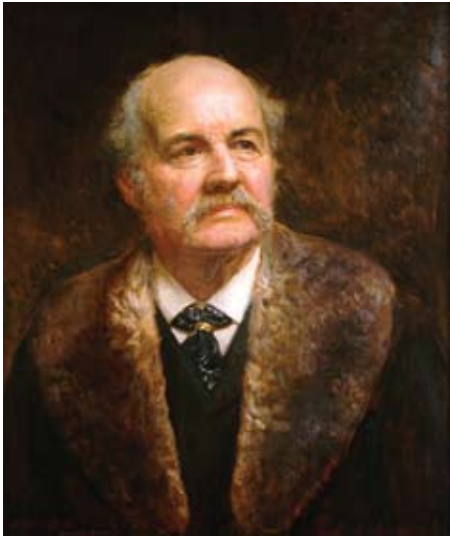
Blackall Simonds (II) 1839-1905  
He had two brothers, Arthur and George who, on his death took the Blackall name.

High Sheriff of Berkshire 1901

the 1866 level, to 57,900 barrels. Henry Simonds retired in 1868 at the age of eighty-three and Henry John Simonds, not yet forty, took over as senior partner. He acquired the wine and spirit business from his father and brought in George Simonds' son Blackall Simonds junior, a civil engineer. Blackall, born in The Old House, Bridge Street was educated at Bradfield College, where he was the first boy registered. In the early 1870s he designed the first-ever concrete industrial store on four levels to hold stocks of the firm's beer and wine. The difficulties of its construction, from the sheer quantity of concrete to be mixed by hand to the very accurate formwork required, must have taxed Blackall Simonds' ingenuity and expertise to the limit.



On the technical side its laboratory, one of the earliest in the brewery industry, employed scientists who tested both the ingredients and the standard of each brew. A decade later a system of fermentation, known as the *Burton Union*



Henry Adolphus Simonds 1823-1910  
Portrait by E.J. Gregory RA  
Chairman of the Country Brewers'  
Society in 1863, 1875 and 1885.

method, was introduced; it had already proved its value in other parts of the country but was new to Reading. This process required a large number of relatively small vessels and an apparatus for taking off the excess yeast. Although expensive in terms of labour, for cleaning and maintenance, it did enable the brewery to make a very high standard of pale ale.

Thus, on the production side, the partners tried hard to keep in the forefront of technical progress. Yet it was in marketing that the greatest strides were made. As nutrition generally was improving and machinery was replacing physical effort in many trades, demand for strong beer waned and

it was superseded by lighter types of ale. There was now the firm's own S.B. Pale Ale brand. The famous initials stood for 'Season's Brew', so called since the brewing season was from September to May, avoiding the hotter summer months. By the 1880s when brewing started year round, S.B. Pale Ale accounted for over half of total beer sales.

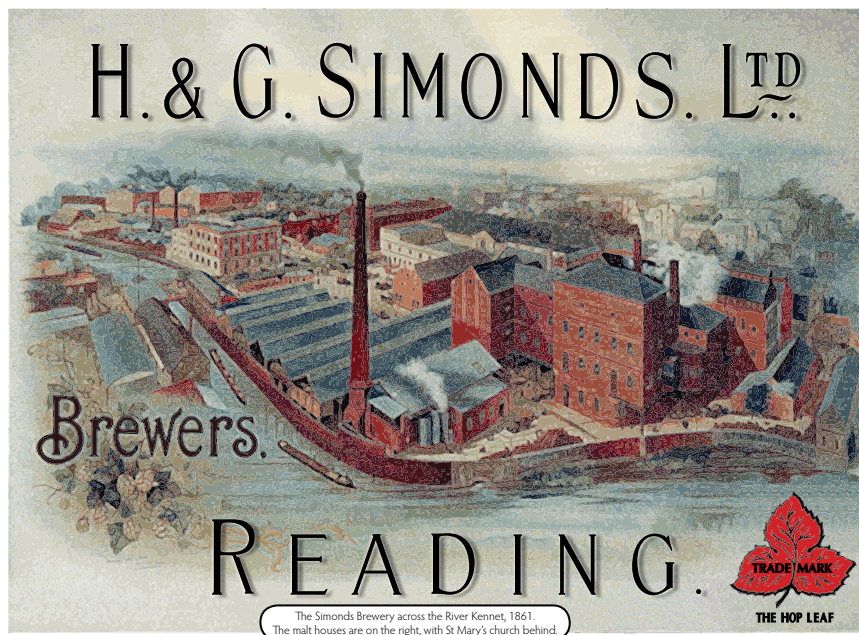
Not only the gravity of beer but also the types of outlet were changing. Supplies to the army had hitherto never progressed much beyond trade with the Royal Military College, but the partners became very alert when in the 1850s the nearby town of Aldershot was chosen as the home of the army. For the firm the big breakthrough was being awarded a contract to supply a permanent canteen there in 1872. Very soon afterwards increasing demand led it to establish overseas branches for the benefit of army garrisons. A branch at Malta was set up in 1875 and one in Gibraltar in 1881; by that time there were ten English branches, including Woolwich, Exeter and Oxford.

Yet the troops were by no means the only thirsty section of the community. The dramatic growth in rail travel had produced the new phenomenon of the parched traveller who needed something stronger than tea to help down the already notorious railway buffet sandwich or bun. In the late 1870s and early 1880s Simonds secured contracts for railway refreshment rooms. From London Bridge, the South Eastern Railway which became the South Eastern and Chatham Railway in 1899 with stations going into Kent and the South Western Railway from Waterloo, which ran down into Hampshire and Devon, the principal stations all selling Simonds beer. The firm also secured contracts for another increasingly popular phenomenon of the day, seaside piers.

All these activities of the golden years paid off handsomely in additional trade. Production in 1886 of 114,047 barrels was almost double that of 1871 but the strain on the three partners must have been considerable. They were forever writing letters, often in their own hand, making sure that their publicans, branch offices at home and abroad, railway refreshment room and pier managers were kept on their toes. There was a serious shortage of sons to ease the load and secure the future of the family business. Blackall Simonds had recruited his nephew Henry Adolphus Simonds [1823-1910]. Given the increased workload, Henry Adolphus, also childless, in turn recruited two of his brother Frederick's sons from New York, to specialise in the increasingly complex secretarial work. The elder, Louis de Luze Simonds who came to England in 1872 went on to become Managing Director and his brother Fred became Company Secretary. Louis and his family moved in with Henry Adolphus at Audleys Wood, Basingstoke in 1899. Louis's father was Frederick William Simonds [1818-1896] who had emigrated to New York in 1841. On the journey over he met Sophie Elizabeth de Luze, the daughter of the Swiss Consul in New York, Louis Philippe de Luze, they were married there in 1846.

To ease another of their burdens, the partners decided in about 1875 to recruit a professional brewer and thus relieve themselves of the need for one or other to be present at each brewing. He lasted nine months and was then fired. '*Had we presented you with a cheque for £3,000 instead of availing ourselves of your services*', they wrote bluntly, '*we should have been far better off than we were*' by engaging him, for costs had risen so much since his arrival. When space in the brewery had to be turned over to beer stores a local maltster took over the malting and he received similar dressings-down for failing to give personal attention to all aspects of his work. He however survived.





Across the River Kennet from here stood H & G Simonds Brewery where beer was brewed from 1789 to 1980. During this period the brewery was one of Reading's major employers, with 332 employees by 1901.

William Blackall Simonds, of an old Berkshire family, founded the firm in 1785 on Broad Street. In 1789 he opened a new brewhouse at Seven Bridges, designed by the locally-born architect Sir John Soane who also designed his residence on the site. It continued in operation till a further rebuilding program began in 1900.

The riverside site was well-chosen: barley for malting came from the west by way of the River Thames and the Kennet & Avon Canal, and beer was sent to London by boat until 1891. The company took water from on-site artesian wells, a crucial clean source in the days before water treatment.

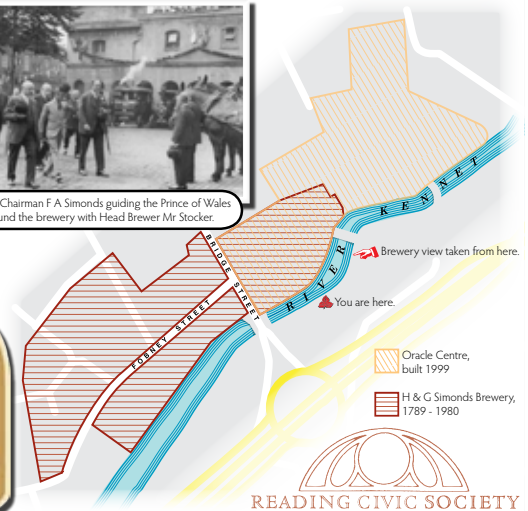
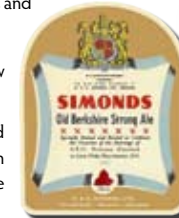
Simonds pioneered a lighter, dry-hopped style of ale; it secured contracts to supply the Army at home and overseas, and set up breweries and international distribution depots.

The company took over many regional breweries and grew to 1250 pubs and hotels across the South of England.

In 1929 H & G Simonds became a Limited company and was also granted the 'Royal Warrant' which it held till 1960 when it merged with Courage. In 1980 brewing finally ended in Bridge Street and was moved to Worton Grange south of Reading.



1926. Chairman F A Simonds guiding the Prince of Wales round the brewery with Head Brewer Mr Stocker.



The Information Board is situated on the south bank of the River Kennet facing the original site of the Brewery now the Oracle Shopping Centre.

The Prince of Wales - Visit to Bridge Street 25<sup>th</sup> June 1926.



THE Kennet Riverside Information Board, was commissioned by Reading Civic Society. The unveiling event on 26<sup>th</sup> February 2009, undertaken by the Mayor of Reading, Councillor Peter Beard, was attended by The Lord Lieutenant of Berkshire, Civic Society members, Simonds family members, Brewery pensioners, Officers and Councillors from Reading Borough Council and representatives from Courage, Reading University, Sir John Soane's Museum, The Worshipful Company of Brewers and local history groups. Commemorative bottles of "Old Berkshire Strong Ale" were given to participants.

Funding for this information board came from a special appeal to the membership, from other donors and from Society funds. The Society has thus completed an initiative by our late President, Duncan Simonds, to ensure the history of H. & G. Simonds brewery was readily accessible to both visitors and residents of Reading. The designer of the board was Jamie Nimmo and it was manufactured by A.J. Wells & Sons Ltd. of Newport, Isle of Wight.

Reading Civic Society was formed in 1962 and is affiliated to the Civic Trust. Duncan Simonds was President from 1988 until his death in 2002. He was very active in this role and we are most grateful for the support and encouragement he gave us.

*Richard Bennett - Chairman, Reading Civic Society.*



Louis de Luze Simonds 1852-1916

Director 1872-1916

Married Mary Elizabeth Turnbull

Born in New York,

Louis returned to the UK in 1872

name of H. & G. Simonds Ltd., with Henry John as the first Chairman.

### *The Limited Company*

ALTHOUGH the new company's authorised capital was £500,000, only £144,000 worth of 5% preference shares and £180,000 worth of ordinary shares were issued. Virtually all were held by the three partners, now directors. Thus the internal organisation was little affected. The company's assets had already been written up to more realistic figures, the brewery itself being valued at over £100,000 and the public houses at £250,000. A further £120,000 was added for goodwill: not an unreasonable sum when turnover exceeded £250,000 a year and profits up to 1914 permitted dividends to average over 12% annually.

A more important consequence was the ability to tap outsiders' funds, without any surrender of control, by means of debentures, which were secured on assets. By 1899 H. & G. Simonds Ltd. had issued no less than £275,000 of 4% debentures, and with the proceeds was able to join in the scramble by

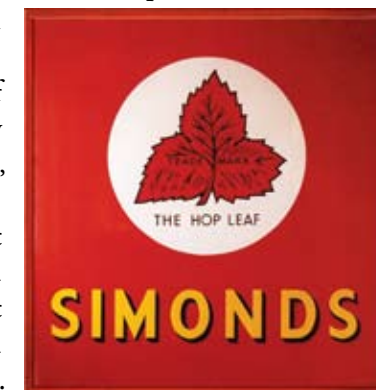


It was the question of finance which caused the partners to consider a radical change in the brewery's status. Until then the members of the family concerned had lived well, but without running down the capital that was badly needed for working expenses and investment in future expansion. However future growth could only be bought at great personal sacrifice, unless the brewery was to become incorporated as a limited company. Only Bass among the large and reputable breweries had as yet taken that step, and it was to be some years before such prestigious partnerships in the town as Huntley & Palmers or Suttons followed suit. In 1885 the firm was registered under the

brewers in general – now following the fashion of becoming public companies – to buy up retail outlets. Whereas in 1871 it had had seventy-nine tied houses and an output of 57,900 barrels, by 1896 there were 158 tied houses and an output of 112,000 barrels. This increase in volume demanded more space, so the family home at Brewery House was demolished in about 1895 as part of a major rebuilding programme. In the next twenty years Simonds again doubled the number of tied houses and in 1914 for the first time produced more than 200,000 barrels.

The First World War, from 1914 to 1918, proved to be a watershed in the brewery's history. The three original directors were all dead and the chairman was George Blackall Simonds, a famous sculptor and in 1884 the first Master of The Art Workers Guild: his commissions included the Maiwand Lion in Forbury Gardens and the statues of Queen Victoria and George Palmer in Reading besides the monumental 'Falconer' in Central Park, New York. Like his predecessors he had the sense to give the able junior directors their head in running the business. H. & G. Simonds operated, almost without realising it, a job-for-life ethic which would not have been unusual among many companies at the time. This meant that, despite declining revenues and its devastating effect on the company, no staff were laid off during the five months of the General Strike in 1926. As a consequence, the grateful workers - some 1,200 of them - clubbed together to make a presentation to the family directors of a grandfather clock made by William Barker of Wigan which remained in the Courage brewery offices in Staines until 2008 when it was returned to the family.

It was one of those junior directors, Frederick Adolphus (Eric) Simonds, who joined the brewery on his return from service with The Berkshire Regiment in The Boer War in 1902. Eric was the eldest son of Louis de Luze Simonds and his wife Mary Elizabeth, the daughter of Gavin Turnbull, an army surgeon, Eric turned out to be the great driving force between his appointment as a Director in 1905, Chairman in 1938 and his death in 1953 Eric introduced the concept of the Simonds brand by placing the red 'Hop Leaf' sign outside every pub from 1930.







George Blackall Simonds 1843-1929  
Portrait by Sir Oswald Birley RA  
Set on Salisbury Plain

He was primarily responsible for the expansion of the company's overseas trade, which by 1948 included operations in Malta, Gibraltar, Alexandria, Tripoli, Nairobi, Dar es Salaam and Mombasa. In 1916 he succeeded his father, Louis de Luze as Managing Director inheriting control of 300-350 licensed properties and one brewery. He was immediately responsible for the company embarking on the acquisition trail. Apart from such minor steps as acquiring the wine and spirit business in 1868, the firm had entirely grown from inside; when less efficient rivals in Reading started to fall out of the race, it was others who took them over.

The period after 1918 revealed a world in many ways unrecognisable to those who remembered the relative calm and stability of the Victorian age. In particular, taxes on income and wealth began to hit the proprietors of family businesses who could no longer own them outright. Even the great Huntley & Palmers had to seek amalgamation with its London rival Peak Frean. Another challenge was the opportunity created by road transport. Canals, railways and shire horses for local delivery were all declining in face of the all powerful internal combustion engine. The new trunk roads permitted the widespread expansion of markets which in turn created further scope for mergers, while the years of depression made cost reductions imperative with the rationalisation of production through mergers.

Between 1919 and 1939, H. & G. Simonds acquired a number of breweries, mainly in the south-west of England, including Devonport, Bristol, Staines, Cirencester, Brixham, Bridgend and Blandford. The only merger locally was with the South Berks Brewery Co. Ltd. of Newbury, which had itself acquired

several prominent Reading breweries including the Castle Brewery, for 150 years a close neighbour in Reading. Increasingly the regional brewery was the typical unit in the trade and H. & G. Simonds was amongst the foremost. In 1960 John Vaizey wrote in his authoritative work, *'The British Brewing Industry' 1886-1951* [p30]: *'under the impulse of efficient management and brewing, with the use of road transport, Simonds became a leading brewer in the South and West'*. By 1938 it was producing 279,000 barrels, over 40% more than in 1913, although Britons were drinking less beer than at any time since the 1880s.



Eric Simonds 1881-1953  
Married Amy FitzGerald Hill at  
St Albans Cathedral in 1909  
Portrait by:  
Sir Oswald Birley RA 1937

Eric Simonds continued the policy of acquisition after 1945, acquiring six more sizeable breweries including; Swindon, Torquay, Plymouth, Penzance and Newport (Gwent) respectively, making sixteen acquisitions in total and an estate at its peak of 1400 pubs. Perhaps most interestingly, in 1946 John May & Co of Basingstoke [Est. 1750] came under the Simonds umbrella, for it had been from that family that William Blackall Simonds had secured his bride in 1783. At the time of his death in 1953 the estate was comprised of 1132 pubs, eighty Off Licences and thirty-six hotels, serviced from four breweries. Eric was busy outside the brewery: he was active in politics on behalf of the local Conservative Party and held the Royal Warrant for King George V from 1929 and King George VI from 1940. He was High Sheriff of Berkshire in 1928 and Chairman of the Brewers Society in 1933, President of the Royal Warrant Holders Association in 1937 and finally President of the LVA Schools charity in 1946.

## *Transport down the ages*

Horse drawn drays were the only way to transport beer to the pubs till the late 1890's.

They had a maximum range of 15 miles, which explains the local nature of breweries till that period.



An early steam tractor in 1924.

Ahead of its time, this electric vehicle was used to move casks in the warehouse at Bridge Street until 1953.



In 1955 the bulk transport of beer was introduced, with regional breweries reduced to the role of bottling & distribution.



The Bear Inn, off Fobney Street, Reading, was purchased in 1897.



Ye Boar's Head, Friar Street, Reading, c1935

Duncan, like his father, held a Royal Warrant, for Queen Elizabeth II from 1955 to 1963 and was President of the Royal Warrant Holders Association in 1963. He became a member of The Brewers' Society in 1949 and served as Chairman of the PR Committee where he played an active role in the face of ill-informed public criticism of the Tied House System. He also worked tirelessly on behalf of the Licensed Victuallers Association charity to



A brewery dray delivers ale to The Griffin, Caversham, about 1880



raise funds for their schools. After Duncan retired in 1977, he took a leading role in Reading Civic Society, serving as President from 1988 until his death in 2002. He enjoyed an active retirement supporting the family passion for sailing that has endured since Blackall retired to the Isle of Wight.

Duncan's cousin David Simonds became the last member of the Simonds family to work for the company. He joined the board of H. & G. Simonds Ltd. in 1959 and was responsible amongst other things for the successful development of the company's trade in the West Country. After being Trade Director in Reading, he moved to London to be responsible for all pub trade in the company. As President of the Trade Charity, the *Licensed Victuallers National Homes*, in 1983, he helped raise £1 million. He was *Master of the Brewers Company* in 1982, and High Sheriff of Berkshire in 1984. He retired in 1985.

The brewery that the Simonds family had founded and managed in Reading remained under its control throughout a period of almost two hundred years. Thanks to a large if fluctuating supply of able family members, financial prudence in husbanding their corporate



The Front door to the Bridge Street Offices, reproduced from the *'Hop Leaf Gazette'* of July 1929 which notes: "*The sign of the Royal Warrant appointing the firm Brewers to His Majesty the King is seen here over the main entrance to the Brewery Offices in Bridge Street. It has attracted much attention in this busy thoroughfare.*"

H. & G. Simonds held a royal warrant from 1929 to 1960.

capital, a drive to innovate, and their marketing skills, the Simonds family achieved the very rare feat among large-scale British manufacturing industry of continuous profitability and growth into the sixth family generation. One of the unsolvable questions is what would have happened in 1959/60 had the Simonds family still had a majority on the Board of Directors? At the Annual General Meeting of the shareholders in 1918 it was reported that three members of the family, Lieutenant G P Blackall Simonds, Major St John Quarry and Major John de Luze Simonds, had been killed in action during WW1. What effect might these younger men and those other family sons lost as a result of both WW2 and Korea, have had on the company had they survived?



**Duncan Simonds 1917-2002**  
At the helm of the 'J' Class yacht  
Velsheda off Cowes  
for his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1987.

The old brewery buildings were replaced by the Oracle Shopping Centre development which opened in 1999, but three related buildings remain. At no.19 Bridge Street is a fine Georgian house, dating from about 1760, not to be confused with the Soane designed family house further south, which was demolished c1895. It was first leased by Simonds in 1921 then purchased in 1950, to serve as a canteen, social club and conference rooms, it is now offices. On Fobney Street stands one of three large malthouses built in the 1890s when Simonds recommenced their own malting. This survived a major fire in 2000 and has been converted to flats. Lastly, on the bank of the Kennet is a long mansard-roofed building from the 1890s, which were stables for the shire horses and is now a restaurant.

## Into the 1980s

ERIC Simonds was the last family chairman. He was succeeded in 1953 by General Sir Miles Dempsey, who had joined the company after distinguished service in the Royal Berkshire Regiment, of which he became Colonel. Dempsey enjoyed the distinction, unique in British industrial history, of being chairman of two major provincial breweries, the other being Greene King & Sons Ltd. of Bury St. Edmunds, while holding the post of Commander-in-Chief designate of the United Kingdom Land Forces.

H. & G. Simonds Ltd. made further minor acquisitions and then in 1959 entered into a trading agreement with Courage and Barclay Ltd. That combine, in tune with the post-war move towards giant national brewery link-ups, had been formed in 1955 by the amalgamation of the two London breweries, Courage Brewery and Barclay Perkins. In 1960 that agreement matured into a full-scale merger and the new Courage Barclay & Simonds Ltd. was registered.

On the eve of the merger, net operating assets – fixed and current assets less current liabilities – were valued at £9,800,000, compared with the £21,400,000 of Courage Barclay. H. & G. Simonds Ltd. assets included some 1,200 licensed houses, as against the 300-350 houses of 1916, before Eric's acquisition drive.

By the 1970s the Bridge Street site had become the headquarters of Courage (Central) Ltd., the other units of Courage (Eastern) and Courage (Western) Ltd. being in London and Bristol respectively. Like other Reading enterprises of great age, it was finding that its original site, however commodious in the 1790s, had become too cramped to meet increasing demand, so in 1980 the brewery was moved to Worton Grange, at the intersection of Basingstoke Road and the M4 motorway, allowing juggernauts – of a size that would have astonished the lorry and van drivers of the 1920s – to bring in raw materials and to take out the finished products more readily than from a town centre site.

The Bridge Street Brewery was demolished in 1983 and the 'Berkshire Brewery' at Worton Grange is itself due to close shortly, so the long connection with Reading of the Simonds and later Courage breweries will therefore finally fade away, just like the fading hop leaf signs still faintly visible on some Reading pubs.

The Kennet Riverside Information Board, erected across the river from the original Bridge Street site, commemorates the remarkable contribution made by both the Simonds family and the H. & G. Simonds brewery to Reading's industrial fame, as well as to its prosperity, over more than two centuries. It is also a testament to the loyal and dedicated staff in the brewery and in the licensed trade, who were all part of the wider Simonds 'family' that was so much at the heart of the brewing industry. 🍷







The brewhouse, stables, offices and a residence  
were designed by Sir John Soane in 1789.  
*By courtesy of the Trustees of Sir John Soane's Museum*



A contemporary view from across  
the River Kennet in 1861