"Ale" and "Beer"

I suppose it's now common knowledge that most European languages and many south Asian languages share common features which are interpreted by linguists as evidence that they are all descended from a common ancestor. This ancestor is known as proto-Indo-European. There is no consensus about when and where this language was spoken, but some of the vocabulary can, surprisingly, be reconstructed. One of the words of this ancient language is al- (the hyphen is to indicate that various endings would be attached in the real language). This is the direct ancestor of the English word ale. Curiously, English has another word of the same origin, taken from Latin: alum. What can ale and alum possibly have in common? Well, they are both bitter, and "bitter" is supposed to be the meaning of al- in proto-Indo-European. I find this fascinating. I have this image of eastern Europeans asking (in their own language of course) for a pint of bitter. More seriously, it seems to show that the ale of long ago was not only bitter, but bitterness was a salient feature. I can only believe that this bitterness was imparted by bitter herbs, as it has been throughout historical times, but probably not hops at this stage.

As proto-Indo-European spread and changed, it developed into several distinct languages. One of the main branches, to which English belongs, is called Germanic. This probably originated, not in Germany as you might think, but in the area that is now Denmark and southern Sweden, in the last few centuries BC. Round about this time, the Germanic peoples began to spread out over Europe. The group which stayed at home or went north is known as north Germanic, that which went south-east as far as the Black Sea as east Germanic and the group which went south to the Danube as west Germanic. The east Germanic languages did not contribute to English and I will not mention them again. Some of the west Germanic tribes of course crossed the sea to Britain in the fifth century AD: their language is known from this time as Old English.

Before this momentous event, however, a curious thing happened seldom mentioned in the history books: west Germanic acquired a new word, bier. The usual explanation is that this word is derived from the Latin word *bibere* ("to drink"). I can offer no alternative explanation but it seems to me that this account raises a number of questions: why did the Germans borrow a word for which there was already a perfectly good one (*aluth-*) in their language? The Romans were not beer-drinkers, so why use one of their words for the beverage? If a Latin word had to be used, why not the usual Latin one (or Gallo-roman, at any rate), *cerevisia*? Anyway, the new word ousted the old in continental west Germanic, which developed into modern German and Dutch, but both words continued in use in Britain.

There is a famous early citation of the words ale and beer in Old English, in the same sentence:

Alvismál `öl hestir meðmönnum, en með Ásum bjórr

This quotation makes it clear that the words meant the same thing. Of course, Old English had a number of different dialects and the two words may have been used in different ways at different times and places, but there was at any rate no consistent distinction. Some documents of the period, indeed, do appear to make a distinction between ale and beer, but what the difference was we can only guess. It has been alleged that beor was sometimes used for drinks that were not properly beer at all, just as we have "ginger beer" and "black beer". Alu, however, seems to have been the usual word for the real malt beverage..

The north Germanic speakers, meanwhile, had continued to use the ancestral word, variously spelt *oel* or *aul* by this time. A lot of them (as we all know) arrived in England in the tenth century thus beginning the linguistic upheaval that produced Middle English. Although the language as a whole changed markedly, ale and beor sailed through unscathed, though perhaps the invaders reinforced the preference for using the former, as beor sinks into obscurity at this time. Beor, it is said, was mainly used by poets and songsters - perhaps they needed a rhyme for "cheer"?

Now we come to the bit we have all been waiting for - the arrival of hops in this country. The story is surely well-known to anyone with any interest in beer. At some date in the fifteenth century, Dutchmen introduced their beverage which they called *bier*. This was distinguished from ale by having hops in it, whereas ale had only malt, water and yeast. Despite the opposition of die-hards, within a few generations this new drink was accepted and henceforth the Englishman's (and Englishwoman's) tipple was beer. Although this story has been retold many times, it seems to me to be quite flawed. The basic problem we have is that the great bulk of brewing in the country as a whole was done on the premises where the product was consumed - in private houses, inns and taverns. Almost all of these brewers (and brewsters) were illiterate: they left no records and were seldom written about. It is simply impossible to form a reliable picture of what their ale or beer was like. I can only imagine that recipes were passed on by word of mouth. Probably families and villages had their own traditions.

However, there are a few facts which we do have:

It is clear that in the middle ages it was perfectly normal for herbs (from a wide variety) to be added to ale.

Hops are a native plant growing wild across most of southern England.

Hops were in common use on the continent long before 1400. England was far from impervious to foreign influences and it is likely that most people had heard

of the use of hops in brewing.

Recorded hostility to beer and hops is confined mainly to London and (to a lesser extent) other big cities, ie, places where common (wholesale) brewers operate. Quite why some brewers were so agitated is not clear.

As early as 1484, the Brewers' Company of London complained to the Lord Mayor that some ale-brewers were using hops. If they were complaining publicly, it can be taken for granted that the practice was widespread and had probably been so for a while.

With these considerations in mind, I suggest that the following is a more plausible account. In the Middle Ages people brewed according to their own tastes and traditions. Using herbs, both cultivated and wild, was usual: hops were not grown, but where they were wild, they were used, but probably never predominated. The innovation of the Dutch was a beverage where hops were the only herb, or at least the dominant one. For some reason, this beverage was regarded as wholly different from what had gone before and was called by a name echoing the Dutch bier (Similar linguistic events happened later as we shall see). As a reaction, some commercial brewers began to insist that ale should have no herbs at all. This produced a drink at once insipid and cloying which was not well-liked, so ale-brewers began adding hops to their brews, at first surreptitiously and then openly so that by the sixteenth century, the only difference between ale and beer was that the latter had more hops. For home-brewers there was no revolution: as hops became available, they either used them if they liked them or they didn't and didn't. Gradually hops displaced all the other herbs, either by the influence of fashion, or because drinkers liked the taste or because brewers liked the preservative properties, or perhaps a bit of all three. Because the change was gradual in the countryside and small towns, dialect speakers in these places saw no reason to change their usage: thus "ale" persisted in dialect. "Beer" of course became the ordinary Standard English term henceforth.

Whatever the truth of the above, it is undeniable that the distinction between ale (unhopped) and beer (hopped) lasted no more than about a century, a minor aberration in the long history of these words. To claim this usage as the only true one, as many do, seems to defy common-sense.

So we enter the modern, hoppy, era of brewing with beer as the ordinary Standard English word. Ale persisted in three areas: first, in compounds like "pale ale" and "mild ale"; second, in dialect; and third, in brewers' jargon. But in the last case, the meaning has not stayed still. At the start, as we have seen, "ale" meant a less-hopped beverage. A shift in meaning was perhaps precipitated by the porter "revolution". Much mythology surrounds the development of porter in England, but it seems clear that the original "entire"

was intended to reproduce a mixed drink of three separate beers (sources do not agree what the three were, but that doesn't matter here). It therefore follows, does it not, that the appearance and flavour of the new drink would be entirely familiar to the drinker. So why did it gain a whole new noun porter, not "porter beer" or "porter ale"? The only suggestion I have to offer is "hype". The advantages of the new brew lay entirely with the brewers and publicans: to get the public to accept it it had to sold as something wonderful and different. The reader can no doubt think of more recent parallels. Once the usage was established, of course, it was maintained by habit and custom.

Once porter and its successor, stout, were established as distinct beverages, the brewers wanted a word for their other products. The word they adopted was ale. Thus the phrases seen outside many a nineteenth-century pub: "Ale and Porter" or "Ales and Stouts". When stout began at last to give way to paler beers, the original designation of pale ale only reinforced the idea that "ale" was the word for beers of that general type.

As the keg beers of the 1960s and 1970s were sold (mendaciously) as being the same as traditional beers, only better, they have left no linguistic change. The switch to lager is a different matter. Why this German word, in use as a verb but only rarely as a noun on the continent, should have become the British term for what most of the world would call "pilsner" is something which will probably never be answered.

Note the word "British" - in this regard, the rest of the English-speaking world went their own separate ways. Up until the nineteenth century, the USA had followed the old British traditions. Bottom-fermented beer came with the immigrants in the late nineteenth century. As the west Germanics (Germans and Dutch) comfortably outnumbered north Germanics (Norwegians and Swedes), beer was the word they ended up using. The old British style carried on as a minority taste, under the designation ale.

In the twentieth century, the British brewers followed this lead, using "ale" in opposition not only to "stout" but also to "lager". "Beer", in this usage, was the overall, generic, term. The Belgians, too, incidentally, use the English word ale to mean "top-fermented beer of the British type" - they haven't got a word to embrace all their varied top-fermented styles.

It is hard to discern linguistic change accurately while it is actually going on, but it is possible that the late twentieth century will be seen as the time when the word "ale" came back into general use. If so, the Campaign for Real Ale will be identified as the catalyst of this change. CAMRA was founded by four northern Englishmen exiled in the south, and it seems that the word "ale" was chosen in the organisation's title because it was used by northern working men and not by effete southerners. Be that as it may, the relative success of CAMRA means that

few in the UK can hear the word "ale" without the word "real" hovering somewhere in the backs of their minds.

Thus at the start of the twenty-first century, "ale" now means "traditional British beer (or some imitation thereof)" - and stout and porter are increasingly regarded as types of ale. It is possible to envisage a time before long when "beer", "ale" and "lager" have neat distinct and logical meanings. But living languages seldom allow such tidy conclusions and probably even now some movement I haven't noticed is happening to take the words on their next round of change.

When I had finished writing the above, I came across the following, an appendix to Beer:The Story of the Pint *by Martin Cornell (Headline, 2003).*

A WORD IN YOUR BEER

the etymology of brewing

The Anglo-Saxon (or, more properly, Old English) word for fermented malt liquor was *alu* (in Anglian) or *ealu* (in West Saxon), aloth in the genitive case. It became 'ale' in modern English, and it appears to come down from a Germanic root *aluth. (The asterisk indicates that this is a presumed form of an unrecorded ancestor-word.)

Words for beer derived from the same root as ale are found across northern and eastern Europe, in Finnish (*olut*), Lithuanian (*alùs*), Latvian (*alus*), Estonian (*olu*), Old Slavonic (*olu* again), modern Slovene (*ôl*), Serbo-Croat (*olovina*), Old Norwegian and modern Swedish (*ol*) and modern Danish and Norwegian (*øl*).

It also turns up away in the Caucasus, in the Iranic language Ossetian, as *aeluton*, and in Georgian (apart from Finnish and Estonian the only non-Indo-European example) as *ludi* or, in a couple of mountain dialects, *aludi*. Although the Caucasus is close to where beer brewing began, there is no evidence the word 'ale' began here and spread to Europe: it was most likely the other way round. Georgian linguists believe their language took the word from the Ossetians, who are descended from the formerly nomadic Indo-European Alans. The Alans ranged as far west as France in the fifth century AD, alongside other invaders of the Roman world such as the Germanic-speaking Vandals and Goths, and they probably picked up the 'ale' word from one of these peoples and brought it back to the Caucasus.

Despite being so common in northern European languages, 'ale' is a mysterious word, which has given etymologists some trouble. The ultimate Indo-European root, if there is one, may link it with other words meaning 'bitter-tasting', such as alum (sulphate of aluminium), the astringent salt used in leather-making. The idea that ale was 'the bitter drink' is given support by an Irish poem from some

time before the twelfth century, part of which translates as: 'The Saxon ale of bitterness / Is drunk with pleasure about Inber in Rig.' Perhaps ale was called 'the bitter drink' by northern Europeans in contrast to their other favourite intoxicant, mead, which is etymologically 'the sweet drink' or 'the honey drink'. Certainly bitter herbs were popular as a flavouring for ale: they included bog bean or marsh trefoil, and bog myrtle or sweet gale.

Another theory, put forward by a leading American Indo-European expert, Professor Calvert Watkins of Harvard University, is that the Germanic root *aluth is related to the Greek *aluein* or *alussein*, 'to be distraught', with cognates having to do with sorcery, and also 'hallucinate'. The semantic link, obviously, is that after a few jars too many of aluth the bewitched drinker would stagger about in a distraught state and begin to have visions.

If the word 'ale' goes back as far as the Neolithic, and if the suggestion by some archaeologists that Neolithic ale was flavoured with the poisonous plant henbane is correct, the possible etymological link between ale and 'hallucinate' becomes stronger: henbane ale will certainly bring the drinker feelings of terror, delirium and visual distortion.

None of the explanations for the origin of the word 'ale' is convincing, however, and there is not the obvious connection to the mechanics of brewing that the roots of other beery words show. The oldest known Indo-European word for beer, the Hittite *siessar*, found some 3500 years ago, literally means 'straining' from the verbal noun of *siya* -'to strain or sieve', a reference to making bread-beer by straining soaked bread through sieves. Many other brewing words have the sense of 'boiling' behind them. 'Brew', for example, goes back to an Indo-European root word *bhru-, connected with heating and bubbling. This root gave the ancient Thracian language in the eastern Balkans the word *broutos*, meaning beer, and English the modern word 'broth'. 'Fermentation' comes via the Latin for yeast from a connected Indo-European root, *bher-, to bubble, to boil. *Curmi*, the old Celtic word for ale (and the root, via Latin *cervisia*, of cerveza, the Spanish for beer), seems to be linked with the Latin word cremo, to burn or boil. 'Yeast' has the same Indo-European root as Sanskrit *yásati*, to seethe or boil, and Welsh *ias*, 'seething'. *Kvass*, the Russian rye beer, looks to have a connection with Sanskrit *kvathati*, meaning 'he boils'. The connection between beer and boiling is a double one: water has to be boiled up to mash the grain, and also fermenting wort will bubble like a boiling liquid.

'Ale' looks to be an old word, at any rate: certainly another etymologist, Professor Alan Ross, found the many Slavic, Baltic and Germanic variants of the word 'ale' were 'inter-related', rather than any one showing an obvious derivation from another. Perhaps - but this is only a guess - the Slavs, Balts and Germans all took the word from another, long-vanished non-Indo-European language that once existed in northern Europe, whose speakers were already brewing

something they called ale when the mead-drinking Indo-European ancestors of Slavic, Baltic and Germanic speakers moved into the ale-makers' territory from the east.

The ancestor language of modern German and Dutch also once had a word from the 'ale' family. But this was replaced around the sixth or seventh centuries AD by *bior* (modern German and Dutch bier, English 'beer'). Most etymologists say bior comes from the monastic Latin word *biber*, meaning drink: monasteries were, of course, great centres of brewing. However, the picture is made more confusing because in Old English there was a word, *beór*, which seems to have been used for cider or fermented fruit rather than ale, and the same is true of the equivalent word in Old Norse, *bjorr*: it is possible, therefore, that, like the Old English and the Norse, the tribes of Germany and the Low Countries were already using a word very similar to bior for another alcoholic drink, fermented fruit, before they transferred it to the drink made from malted grain.

In any case, if the theory that 'beer' comes from monastic Latin is true, why did the monks use *biber*, 'drink', rather than the regular Latin word for ale, *cervisia*? One possibility is that the use of *biber* for ale may be down to the many Irish scholars and clerics, such as St Columbanus, St Gall and St Kilian, who travelled to Germanic speaking Europe during the sixth and seventh centuries to spread the Gospel. In Irish, the first language of these travelling saints, *lionn*, which like biber originally meant 'drink', had replaced *cuirm* as the word for ale. Perhaps when Irish monks spoke in Latin about *lionn*, meaning ale, they translated the word literally from Irish into Latin as *biber*, 'drink', rather than cervisia, 'ale'.

From the Irish monks the use of the word biber for ale could then have spread to others in the many monasteries where Irish influence was strong (important centres of Irish Christian authority included Cologne, Mainz, Strasbourg, Salzburg and Vienna, while St Kilian and his companions brought Christianity to Franconia and Thuringia, and St Gall gave his name to an important medieval monastery in modern Switzerland). From there the use of *biber* for beer could have spread to the early Germanic population generally., If they were already using a similar-sounding word for a type of alcoholic drink, it is easy to see how they would pick it up.

The word spread from German not only to French (*bière*) and Italian (*birra*), but also to the Slavonic languages, where it became *pivo*; Turkish, where the word is *bir*, and as far away as Chinese (where the word for beer is pronounced pijiu) and Japanese, where it became *biiru*.

If speakers of the ancestor languages of German and Dutch were originally using *bior* to mean another type of alcoholic drink from ale, German philologists do not appear to have found any evidence of it. But there is little doubt that in

pre-Norman England, to the speakers of Old English, *beór* definitely meant something other than ale. There are many sources that make it clear the Anglo-Saxons regarded *beór* and *ealu* as very separate drinks (for example, one of the 'Homilies of Aelfric', written around the end of the tenth century, says of John the Baptist that he 'ne dranc nathor ne win, ne beór, ne ealu': that is, he drank 'neither wine, nor *beór* nor ale'), and *beór* was particularly potent; pregnant women were specifically warned in one Old English leechdom or medical tract that they must not *beór drince* at all, nor drink anything else to excess.

The most likely meaning for *beór*, which would fit in with its evident strength, is cider, fermented apple juice, which can hit an ABV of 18 per cent or more. The etymologist Christine Fell puts forward a very good argument for *beór* in Old English (and its equivalent in Old Norse, *bjorr*) being a strongly alcoholic, sweet, honey-and-fruit drink consumed from tiny cups only an inch or so high: such cups have been found in. pagan Anglo-Saxon graves from the sixth and seventh centuries AD. Compound words containing *beór* included, *beór-byden* or beer barrel, *beórsele* or beer hall, *beórtun* or beer enclosure, *beór-setl* or beer bench and *beórsceale* or beer server.

Some time around the Norman Conquest *beór* fell out of the English language (it is not found in Chaucer, who died in 1400), being replaced by *sither* or *cidre*, the modern word 'cider'. This comes from the Old French word *sidre*, which goes back via medieval Latin and ecclesiastical Greek to the Hebrew word *shekar*, found in the Bible to describe any strong intoxicating liquor. Confusingly, in Normandy, which, of course, takes its name from the Old Norse speakers who settled there, *bère* is the usual dialect word for cider. At the end of the fourteenth century, *beor*'s relative, *bere*, arrived in English to describe the new hopped grain drink from the continent. After a trial with the spelling 'beere' in the sixteenth century, by the start of the seventeenth century the word had settled down to the modern 'beer'.