

## From beer to Bovril: Liquid history in Finsbury

By King's College London researchers Dr David Green and Eoin Dunne

In the 18th and 19th centuries some of the largest breweries in the world were located in London, two of them – Whitbread and Cannon were established in Finsbury in the eighteenth century and continued brewing for decades.

Cannon was founded around the 1720s and its impressive site on 192 St John Street – now housing architects' offices and showrooms – gives an idea of how large it once was. Remnants of its former function can still be seen in the decorative stonework of malt and hops that surround the door to the old office block at the entrance.

Even more impressive was Whitbread brewery at the junction of Chiswell Street and Whitecross Street. Samuel Whitbread founded the company in 1742 and when he died in 1796 he had amassed a fortune of £400,000 – equivalent to about £32 million today! Whitbread soon became the largest brewery in the country and by the early 1800s was producing over 200,000 barrels of beer a year. It was one of the first London companies to use a steam engine made by the famous engineering firm of Boulton and Watt. Moving the beer around the city required hundreds of horses and drays and the firm had huge stables in Garrett Street now occupied by a

builders' merchant but still with the stable signage on the wall.

At the junction of Bunhill Row and Old Street was another drink manufacturer of a very different sort. Here the Bovril company had its offices. It was founded in 1889

and Bovril was produced there until 1968 when production moved to Burton on Trent. Its popularity owed as much to celebrity marketing as it did to the temperance movement. It was widely sold in pubs as an alternative to beer and was hugely popular with football fans. It was used by famous people such as Captain Scott and Ernest Shackleton on their 1902 expedition to the South Pole. Even the Pope endorsed Bovril, providing an advertising opportunity too good to miss!



This hops and barley detail is still visible on the old Cannon's Brewery building on St John Street.