

A Great Batch of Beers: The Social Value of Beer with Historical reference to the Ouseburn district of Newcastle-upon-Tyne

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The lower Ouseburn has long been famous for its brewing and beer outlets, and today's scene is in many respects not that much different from its past, as this short presentation will illustrate.

The most important factor in attracting beer outlets to the lower Ouseburn was its industrial character and density of population.

In an age when the water supply came directly from the River Tyne, to be distributed through lead pipes to public fountains or communal stand-pipes, it was generally healthier to drink water in the form of beer because the process of fermenting malted barley removed many of the more unpleasant bacteria. Communities generally were aware that you were less likely to suffer from a bad stomach if you drank beer, and this was particularly important for those employed as labourers and other factory workers where hot, dry, and physically demanding work required regular rehydration.

To meet this demand, public houses and small breweries produced what was called 'small beer'—a form of low alcohol ale—and consequently pubs and beer houses became a widespread feature of the Ouseburn industrial landscape.

A number of the area's most famous public houses began life as beer houses, including the Cumberland Arms off Byker Bank. Like many of the local pubs, beer houses were set up to brew beer on the premises and these small-scale outlets are the predecessor of today's micro-breweries.

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