

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

CORSTONS OF BUNWELL

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Ginger beer is a carbonated drink that is flavoured primarily with ginger and then sweetened with sugar (or artificial sweeteners). Manufactured commercially now as a soft drink, it was originally brewed in England in the mid-1700s as an alcoholic beverage. British soldiers so liked the taste that it was exported wherever they went, including such faraway places as the Caribbean and Africa. When the soldiers left, the ginger beer did not (though often losing its alcohol as it evolved), becoming a regular part of the cuisine in some cases. In parts of Eastern Africa it is still a popular drink. In the Ionian Islands, ginger beer first appeared with British soldiers in the 19th century, and is still produced today as a local speciality.

When it became largely a carbonated drink, reaching its peak of popularity in the early 1900s, there were many manufacturers and distributors throughout England. The stoneware and glass bottles emblazoned with their names have become collector's items, and in some cases examples command high prices on the antique market. One such Norfolk manufacturer was Corstons.



Figure 1 Stoneware Ginger Beer Bottles

The firm of Corstons owes its origin to one Harriet Corston, who had set up a cottage industry brewing ginger beer at Spooner Row sometime between 1879 and 1883. It was then that

Harriet began making “Olde Style Brewed Ginger Beer” in a warehouse next to her shop. By 1890 her son Jonathan had taken over the brewing side, leaving Harriet to manage the shop.

A few years later he moved the operation to Waterloo House in Bunwell Street where he was also to trade as a family grocer, draper and general warehouseman. In 1898 Jonathan bought the aerated water business of George Tattam of Attleborough for £45 and transferred it to Bunwell.



Figure 2 Bunwell Post Office ca.1910

Jonathan Corston is first listed in Kelly’s Directory as Grocer and Draper at the Post Office in Bunwell Street in 1892. By 1900 he was also listed as a Mineral Water Manufacturer, and continued thus until the 1908 edition. From then until his last entry he is again only listed as a Grocer and Draper.



Figure 3 A Corstons Delivery Cart

In 1902 Jonathan Corston further expanded the business. He acquired the business of Messrs. Parker and Son, including their factory at Browick Road, Wymondham, taking into partnership Mr. J. B. Cross, Parker's manager, and changing the name to J. Corston & Co. Parkers had been established as a grocers and drapers as far back as 1809, but they had not started making ginger beer and lemonade until the 1880's. The Bunwell business and plant were moved to Wymondham where a new factory, equipped with new machinery, was erected.

The business flourished, but Jonathan Corston died soon after the Great War in January 1919. The management was then taken over by Wesley Corston who died in 1979. The firm ceased to produce soft drinks in 1977 and was sold off for other purposes.



Figure 4 Later Glass Bottles Marked Bunwell & Wymondham

Although the firm was only situated in Bunwell for a very short time (circa 1893 – 1902) there are a number of different types of bottles known, bearing the name “J. CORSTON BUNWELL”, such as Codd¹, internal stopper and stoneware ginger beers. They must have also distributed soda water, as soda water siphons are known to have been printed with the name of the company whilst situated in Bunwell.

¹ The Codd-neck bottle, invented by Hiram Codd in 1872, had a marble and rubber washer enclosed within the neck. It was filled upside down. The marble stopper was kept in place by the pressure of the gas in the bottle.