

Kia ora, gday and welcome to the History of Aotearoa New Zealand. Episode 87: Speight's – Birth of Dunedin. This podcast is supported by our amazing Patrons. If you want to support HANZ go to patreon.com/historyaotearoa. Last time, we needed to go over a bit of background to get us up to speed with how beer is made and what the New Zealand brewing industry was like in the 19th century. That episode may have seemed somewhat superfluous and you may even think that this one is too but it really helps for us to understand what was going on at the time and how those conditions allowed for the rise of the Pride of the South, Speight's. Today we will be focussing in a bit on Dunedin specifically, talking about how brewing had evolved in the lower South Island city, what factors influenced these changes and we will meet some of the major players who will appear throughout Speights' story.

Of course, prior to European arrival there were already people in Aotearoa, as we have discussed and will continue to discuss at length. There was no known Māori settlement at the specific site of the Speight's brewery, which isn't too surprising since it's on a hill which isn't a great place to build a settlement in general. There was some fibrous material found under the brewery when archaeological excavation was done in 2015 which could possibly have been flax. Although it was inconclusive, if it was harakeke, that does fit with what we know about people in the region. Māori were living throughout the Otago Harbour area from about the 14th century and had been travelling in the region for a couple hundred years prior to permanent settlement. We also don't find evidence of any deforestation prior to Europeans as pictures from before the Speight's brewery was built show dense bush with some recent logging. There were a number of pā in the area though, including one out at Tairoa Head on the peninsula and one in what is now central Dunedin, however this would have been pretty close to the coast compared to today as a lot of what the modern city sits on is actually reclaimed land.

Like a lot of areas in Aotearoa, the first major group of Europeans who landed in Dunedin were sealers and whalers. James Cook did moor the *Endeavour* off the coast on his first voyage but he just stood on the deck, named some stuff and bugged off. The sealers were really the first Europeans to explore the area and were possibly the first white people that local Māori had encountered. Eventually the sealers set up a base in the harbour which grew as more and more Europeans arrived to get in on the blubbery action. This caused them to have a few arguments and possible skirmishes in the 1810s with Māori who weren't too happy about the growth of the settlement and how it was encroaching on their rohe. It was around this time that the Weller Brothers set up shop, creating a business whereby they would help resupply whaling ships out at sea, among a few other seafaring related services. You probably know them from the shanty that was written about them that became really popular on TikTok a couple of years ago. By the 1840s, a bit of talk was going around among Europeans to purchase land off Māori for an Anglican English settlement and a Presbyterian Scottish one. The former would eventually end up being Christchurch with talks for the latter being spearheaded by the recently formed Free Church of Scotland. The Free Church was keen to build a settlement in New Zealand so that they could practice their Presbyterian faith freely without having to worry about being persecuted in Britain, whose state denomination was Anglicanism. To that end, they had a surveyor from the New Zealand Company dispatched to find a suitable site for their theoretical religious haven. Eventually it was decided that the Otago Harbour constituted the best place to put down roots and the land was purchased from Kai Tahu in 1844. Charles Kettle was then appointed to map out and plan the settlement itself, which if you remember from the Baldwin Street mini episode is how Dunedin ended up with the world's steepest street. Dunedin, derived from the Scottish Gaelic term Dun Eideann, the name for Edinburgh, was then officially founded four years later in 1848.

By the time Dunedin was founded, the culture of the new immigrants was one of daily drinking. Usually, the drink of choice was beer but sometimes it was spirits, though that did have a bit of a stigma to it as we mentioned last time. There wasn't a local production of alcohol just yet but pretty much everyone was having a few every day so a lot of booze needed to be imported to keep everything rosy cheeked. To give you an idea of how much alcohol was coming into the country, between 1850 and 1857 imports of spirits were on average about 24,000L annually, while beer was 18,000L. To be fair, this was for the whole country and not just Dunedin but a fair amount of this was distributed to the South Island. In 1850 there was an estimated 20,000 Pākehā living in Aotearoa so it was about a litre of spirits and a litre beer per person, including women and kids. Speaking of women, generally they weren't given brewers licences. Only four cases were seen of women brewers in the early days of Dunedin and all four of those were because their husbands were brewers who had died, so they took up the mantle to continue having an income.

By 1856 Dunedin's first brewery appeared, aptly named the Dunedin Brewery. It didn't last very long on that site though, only a couple of years which wasn't uncommon at the time. Breweries, like any small business, could go under due to disaster, bad luck, stupidity or any combination thereof. A lot of the time it came down to capital, smaller businesses just didn't have the sort of financial backing that larger institutions could muster. Meaning they couldn't hire as many salespeople or invest in new tech or expansion. What would often happen is smaller brewers would get a loan to start up, go hard for a couple of years, have their creditors catch up with them and then file for bankruptcy. We also see some cheeky buggers who would find a different site, set up another brewery and start the cycle all over again. Back in those days, there wasn't much to stop people doing that sort of thing so they just went ahead and did it. In the case of the Dunedin Brewery though, the owner just moved the operation to another site perfectly legally. In the grand scheme of things, this brewery wasn't a particularly special one but it was the first, meaning that it was the first time Dunedinites could get cheap, local beer and for the average person living in the 1850s that was a pretty big deal. Same as how today we like supporting local businesses, so too was it back then and all the better that it would be cheaper. People weren't concerned about the larger picture of history, they just wanted to drink their beer for a good price but we are concerned about that picture and the Dunedin Brewery paved the way for those giants that were to come.

Over the next few years after the Dunedin Brewery opened, four more would crop up, fuelled by the immigrants arriving from overseas. At first the influx of people had a good equilibrium between supply and demand of alcohol. However, that drastically changed when the shiny stuff was found in Otago in 1861. Gold. The gold rush saw a huge wave of migration as people from Europe, America and China came to try and get rich. A lot of these miners were also from Victoria, Australia who had recently had their own gold rush, so when Otago became the greener pasture, they hopped the fence. While in the Australian goldfields, there a bunch of brewers were plying their trade to quench the thirst after a hard day's panning. Now that they had lost a lot of their clientele, who were by their very nature only in a specific place for a brief period of time and could not be expected to be the basis of a sustainable long-term business, they did what any sane person would do. They packed up shop, followed the miners and came to New Zealand to do it all over again!

This leads us into the first reason for an explosion in population in the 1860s for Dunedin and the wider Otago region. This gave Dunedin a huge boost in its economic development, with more people means more amenities are needed which means more money circulates in the economy. Additionally, the city was getting constant cash injections from the goldfields as some of the miners and those profiting off the miners got rich. This resulted in Dunedin becoming the wealthiest city in

New Zealand, even to the point where prominent Dunedin politicians were getting pissed at the central government for using Otago money to fund the New Zealand Wars in the North Island, which they felt didn't concern them. So in short, there was currently a lot of people in Dunedin, many of whom had a buttload of cash to burn. And given this was the 1860s a good way to burn to it, was to get wasted.

The other factor in Dunedin's growth spurt was the Immigration and Public Works Act 1870 put forward by Julius Vogel who was then Colonial Treasurer, basically the minister of finance. Vogel, unrelated to the bread guy, would go on to be New Zealand's first Jewish Premier but for now he was more concerned with trying to encourage more European immigrants to the colony as they were experiencing a bit of a manpower shortage. The whole idea of the new act was to provide assistance in the migration process and help new arrivals get jobs building the nation's fledgling infrastructure, things like roads, railways, plumbing and other public works. This not only meant more people coming into Dunedin who had paying jobs but that the government was stimulating the economy in other ways such as construction, materials and expertise with the end goal to have some improved infrastructure to show for it, which in and of itself was helpful.

The brewing industry in Otago was directly influenced by the gold rush and the government's immigration policy. Simply put, more people means more beer was needed to fuel them and it was around the 1860s and 70s that we see a lot of the major players of Dunedin brewing start to appear. Breweries like Well Park, Water of Leith, Red Lion, Strachan's and many others, all of whom are going to appear in our story of Speight's. We also see lots of breweries popping up in other towns in Otago, such as the Wakatipu Brewery in Queenstown in 1865 and Cromwell Brewery in 1874. There was a brief period just before the Immigration and Public Works Act where gold was found on the West Coast which meant a bunch of the miners headed over that way, following the scent of money. This had Dunedin go through a brief economic downturn until the immigration act was brought in in 1870 and a lot of the smaller breweries that opened up when times were plentiful had to close down since there was now more beer than there were customers. The larger breweries, those that I listed before, did quite well out of this as they bought up the facilities of these businesses, giving them more capacity and manpower. Some of these breweries, like the Water of Leith run by Marshall & Copeland, also had the advantage of having a healthy export market that they could rely on for income.

Breweries brought their own fairly significant economic benefit to Dunedin. Not only did they employ quite a few people since everything had to be done manually but they also were responsible for purchasing a lot of the barley harvest and of course all the tax they paid that came with tariffs and beer duties. A more intangible benefit that was argued at the time was one of health. Although breweries did have advertising trying to imply that beer was good for you and made you strong, or at least had no detrimental side effects, it was an alternative to lower quality alcohol, which at the time was thought of as whiskey, rum, brandy and other spirits.

So with all this growth in population and the brewing industry growing to meet its demand, Dunedin rapidly became the beer capital of New Zealand, producing the most beer out of any city in the country. This is best shown in 1880 where Dunedin brewers made approx five and a half million litres of beer, accounting for a quarter of the entire country's beer output. Why Dunedin though? Sure the economy was doing really well but there were other towns in Otago that had benefitted from the gold rush and immigration. In theory they had just as much chance to take the barley throne. Well, apparently, Dunedin had something that other Otago towns didn't, one that every Scarfie is familiar with. "Dunedin with its cooler temperatures and good quality water, had a distinct advantage over the northern cities, cooler temperature allowing a more rapid cooling of the wort before

fermentation, a time when it is most vulnerable to air borne micro organism contamination. The temperature of the wort during fermentation was, and is, of prime importance in the achievement of quality..." So interestingly, one of cities most iconic features, the fact it's really fucking cold all the time, was a great boon for those looking to brew.

Another key aspect of the industry was that it was one primarily of local supply. By this I mean breweries really only sold their product in their local region or the ones adjacent, you wouldn't really find Lion beer which was brewed in Auckland for sale in Christchurch for example. This was down to a few different things like logistics and competition with local breweries but mostly it was that beer generally didn't travel all too well. By the time the beer from Auckland got to Christchurch it had likely gone off and was not fit for consumption. There were only a few exceptions to this rule who could preserve their beer long enough through the use of hops. The one I mentioned before, Marshall & Copeland who ran the Water of Leith Brewery were the main guys in Dunedin who were able to achieve this, hence why they were able to have a healthy export market. Naturally the sorts of businesses that breweries were supplying were hotels, who would have bars for their guests and public houses, more commonly known as pubs. As the industry got more competitive with more and more brands of beer entering the market, brewers sought a way to make sure their beer was the ones the pubs were pouring and not their rivals. What they landed on was that if the brewery owned the hotel or pub, you could dictate what kind of beer they sold, which of course was your own and no one else's. The people running the pub had no choice since you were the owner and rival beer brands couldn't force a business to buy their product, so it was a pretty surefire way to ensure your brewery had a steady stream of revenue. So that's exactly what they did, breweries bought up hotels and pubs left right and centre to give them a somewhat guaranteed share of the market. Since breweries put up for sale were generally bought by other larger breweries, an important consideration on whether it was worth the price was how many outlets the smaller brewery owned and thus how much market share the potential new owner would get.

The collapse, sale and buyout of breweries was pretty common in this early era of Kiwi beer and it's a process that we will see repeated again and again in Speight's story. Though, by the fact that Speight's is still standing, you can probably guess which side of that cycle they were on. Bigger breweries were usually directly or indirectly responsible for the failure of smaller ones, either due to natural competition or being bought out by the larger brands, or some combination of both. We see breweries merging together as well, which is kinda like buying out but a bit more mutual. Such as in the case of the formation of Dominion Breweries, who became a dominant force in Auckland from 1930 onwards. They still exist today, but you probably know them by their acronym, DB. If we had to designate a single antagonist in the story of Speight's, DB would be a good contender but keep in mind that this is only due to the frame of reference that we will be using. DB would become one of three main breweries in Auckland, one of the others being the Lion Brewery, who will become important in our story later on as well.

Next time, now that we know social and economic landscape that Speight's was born into, we will begin their story in earnest talking about the meeting of its three founders and how they came to start one of the most iconic South Island beer brands.

If you want to send me feedback, ask a question, suggest a topic or just have a chinwag you can find my email and social media on historyaotearoa.com. You can also find helpful resources there like transcripts, sources and translations for some of the Te Reo Māori we have used. You can help support HANZ through Patreon, buying merch or giving us a review, it means a lot and helps spread the story of Aotearoa New Zealand. As always, haere tū atu, hoki tū mai. See you next time!