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Whisky Class

PURE MALT WHISKY STORIES

63,5 extraordinary
single malt stories

Fernand
Dacquin

Lannoo



1 Barleycorn

I don't need to explain what 'barley' is to whisky lovers. No barley, no whisky or 'juice of the barley', as Robbie Burns passionately called 'malt whisky'. Romantics, those Scots. But you must be very romantic about using 'one grain of barley' as a measure of length.

But believe me, a 'barleycorn' is definitely the length of a grain of barley, even by royal decree.

'One barley corne dry and rounde' was literally written in the decree issued by King Edward II in 1324, who wanted to establish the standard measures in his kingdom once and for all.

What a concept! The brains behind this stroke of genius had certainly never seen barley before, or they had been drinking too much whisky. Barley grains are like zebras: they all look more or less the same, but it is hard to find two identical ones. There are more than five hundred varieties of barley, and new strains are continuously being added. For instance, there is two-row barley, with fairly regular grains, but also six-row barley, with grains that take on the craziest shapes.

Now it's up to you: how long do you think a grain of barley is?

Well, it's easy: the law of 1324 also says that a row of three grains of barley 'laid lengthwise' is one inch long. See how easy it is?

But wait: at that time, an 'inch' was defined as 'the width of a thumb measured at the base of the nail'... And thumbs are like zebras... etc.

We haven't made any progress at all.

Fortunately, the British are much more level-headed today than back in 1324. Since 1 July 1959, only imperial units have been used in the UK (and the USA), and they clearly state that one inch is 25.4 mm.

Voilà: 25.4 mm divided by 3 is 8.47 mm. So, the law states that one barleycorn is exactly 8.47 mm everywhere.

Look, another good thing about reading this: from now on, anyone – wherever you come from – can buy shoes in the UK (where shoe sizes are measured using barleycorn) without a problem.

This is essential for my non-British and non-American readers: you must remember that a 'UK size 12 men's shoe' is precisely 12 inches. And you know already: 12 inches is 36 barleycorn or 305 mm.

But... this '12 inches' is not the length of the shoe, but the 'length of the foot': from the tip of the longest toe to the heel, measured in millimetres. A foot length of 305 millimetres corresponds to a non-UK size of 47 or 47.5. The rest is easy: subtract one barleycorn for each smaller UK size! So, UK size 10 is 305 mm minus 8.47 mm minus 8.47 mm or 288 mm.

Voilà, simple, isn't it? What could possibly go wrong?

Come on, let's go shoe shopping in Edinburgh. Don't panic... I'll stay with you.

BARLEYCORN

WHAT

English measure of length

MEANING

The length of one grain of barley

USAGE

It is only used for shoe sizes in the UK and a few other English-speaking countries

What is your shoe size? 42? OK. Ouch... I need to know the length of your foot, from the tip of your longest toe to the heel, in millimetres. You don't know that by heart? I expected that, but as you might have guessed, I have the answer: divide your shoe size by 0.15 and then subtract 15 mm. In your case, your foot length is 265 mm. All that remains is subtracting 265 from 305 and dividing the result by 8.47. Then we know how many barleycorns to subtract from 12. And that's how we know your UK shoe size: 8 or 8.5.

Well, that's solved satisfactorily!

And now, to my many readers who are also shoe retailers in the UK: if you see one of us in your shop struggling with the most complicated calculations, help us! Please show us your little conversion table with the two shoe size systems side by side. We'll be out in an instant, and two minutes later, we'll be in the pub next to your shoe shop with a wee dram in front of us.

There will be much less calculation involved.

But now that I've unlocked the mathematical knot that's been dormant in the back of your mind for so long, I'm sure the same question is going through your head as it did mine: while I am writing this, I've got 5 centilitres of whisky at 40% ABV in front of me. How many barleycorns did it take to make?

Well, I worked it out for you. (To keep it simple, I'm going to use very rounded numbers from now on.)

A 'Thousand Grains Weight' of barley (a measure that really exists, mind you) is 40 grams. So a thousand grains of barley weigh 40 grams. Therefore, one tonne of barley contains 25,000,000 grains. One tonne of barley gives us 400 litres of pure alcohol. With this, we can make 1,000 bottles of 1 litre at 40% ABV.

Therefore, I need 25,000 grains for one bottle and 1,250 grains for one glass (5 centilitres).

Come on, let's lay out those 1,250 grains, as the law of 1324 says, 'lengthwise' one after the other, and we get 1,250 times 8.47 mm = 10,587.5 mm.

That's about 10.60 metres.

Ten metres! It's not that far, is it?

You see, 5 centilitres of whisky is a small whisky indeed!

Barley grains are like zebras:
they all look more or less the same,
but it is hard to find two identical ones.

2 Welsh whisky

WELSH WHISKY

QUESTION

Do we attribute 'whisky' to the Irish? The Scots? Or the Welsh?

OUR CONTENTION

Welshmen claim to be the very first whisky distillers

OUR WITNESS

Taliesin

When Alfred Bernard visited all the distilleries in Britain in 1886–1887, he finished off the Welsh distilleries in one fell swoop. There were none left! Someone made a bold start shortly afterwards, but the story was over again twenty years later. Prohibition had nipped it in the bud.

But the Welsh were not sad. In fact, they boast that their whisky history goes back further than that of Ireland or Scotland.

You only have to tell us once, and we look for proof. We can't resist the urge.

And behold!

In the second half of the sixth century, at the court of King Urien of Rheged in Wales, there lived a bard renowned for his talents in song and word: Taliesin was his name. We know little about the good man, except that he was still regarded as one of Britain's greatest poets centuries later. That may be why his songs and poems were passed down from generation to generation. In the 14th century, for example, a booklet entitled 'Llyfr Taliesin' or 'The Book of Taliesin' appeared, containing 57 of his poems in Welsh. Thankfully, some brave soul later translated them all into English, but Taliesin's surprising imagery doesn't make you much wiser. Slaloming through his verses requires some imagination.

In his long poem 'Angar Kyfyndawt', which roughly translates as 'The Enemy Confederacy', I stumbled through such sequences as

*I have been a stock,
I have been a spade,
I have been an axe in the hand;
I have been a needle in tweezers,
A year and a half;
I've been a speckled white rooster
With chickens in Eiddyn.*

I admit I lasted only a short time, unlike Stuart McHardy. Stuart is a celebrated Scottish writer, researcher, musician, poet and storyteller. He went through the whole poem and snagged on a few lines near the end:

*I am a grain discovered,
That grew on a hill.
The man mowed me,
Drained me of my juices,
In a room full of smoke.*

It is generally accepted that the poet was alluding here to the use of hallucinogenic mushrooms. Bards seem to have indulged in magic mushrooms at the time.

But Stuart McHardy did not fall for it. Although he can often be hilarious, he takes the following conclusion very seriously: the ‘grain on the hill’ is ‘barley’; these ‘juices’ refer to the sugary ‘wort’ filtered from the barley; and this ‘room full of smoke’ puts us in a Welsh hut, without windows or a chimney, where a primitive still is glowing on a peat fire, slowly spitting out a clear ‘new spirit’. Here, whisky is distilled.

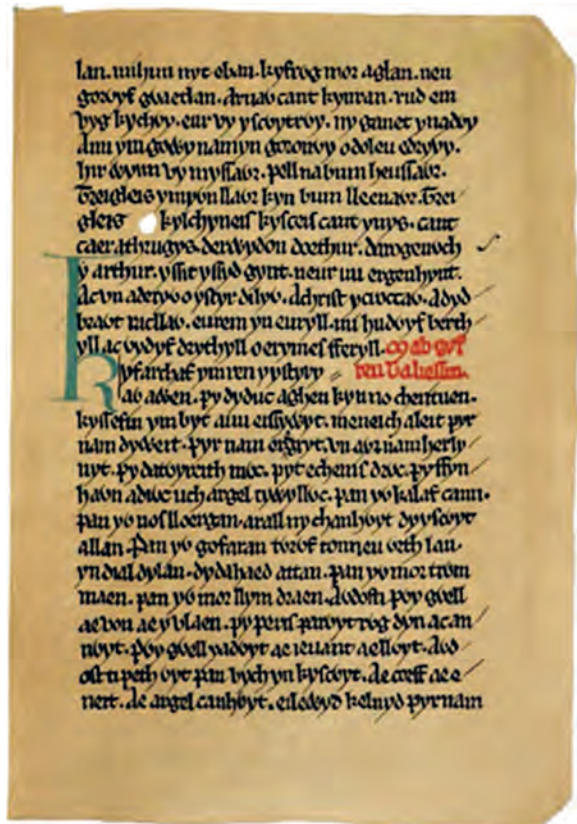
Conclusion: Wales was first. It was not the Irish who brought whisky to Scotland, but the Welsh! In the sixth century! And they taught it to the Picts who lived there.

Just forget once and for all that we learnt distilling from the Arabs about a thousand years ago.

But wait, not so fast.

The question now is: were these Picts eagerly awaiting this import? Perhaps they already had a distillate of their own that preceded the Welsh! Unfortunately, we know very little about the Picts, not even their actual names; we are still determining what they called themselves. Apart from some beautifully carved stones, almost nothing remains of them.

Except for the name ‘Heather Yill’.



According to legend, as early as the fifth century, the Picts were brewing a secret drink that they called, misleadingly, Heather Yill. The recipe was top secret, and the reference to heather was only there to deceive the enemy. After all, Heather Yill gave the warriors strength and courage, something that could also be co-opted by the enemy.

In a battle in what is now Dumfries & Galloway, the Scots, who had come over from Ireland, captured several Picts. Among them were an older man and his son. The Scots told the man that they would kill him and his son if he did not give them Heather Yill's recipe. The father, knowing they would kill them anyway, suggested they kill his son first, and then he would reveal the secret. That way, the son would not witness his father's weakness and betrayal. They did so.

But when they got to the father after killing the son, he refused to reveal the secret.

“I did not want my boy to see me die,” he said proudly. And he, too, was killed. Tell me honestly, for what drink would you go as far as that father? That's not difficult to imagine. There is only one! So that means the Picts might have been first...

↓ Snowdonia National Park, Wales



3 What Is a Tot?

WHAT IS A TOT?

WHAT

Old British measure of volume, often a source of confusion

SIZE

Nobody knows exactly how big a tot is. The term is similar to a 'lump' of butter or a 'handful' of nuts.

USE

Tot, as a measure of volume, is often used in the context of whisky, such as *'porridge with a tot of whisky'*.

But as a whisky enthusiast, have you ever wondered what a 'tot' of whisky is? Is it 2 centilitres, 5, 10 or more?

Let's delve into this intriguing topic.

In his excellent reference work, 'A to Z of Whisky', Gavin D. Smith explains, "A 'tot' is a small quantity of whisky or other alcoholic liquor...".

Well, with all due respect to Gavin, who is undoubtedly one of the foremost whisky writers, but (for a start) 'small whisky' is a pleonasm. Like 'white snow' or 'green grass'. You're saying the same thing twice. Surely every seasoned whisky drinker knows: EVERY whisky IS a 'small whisky'.

So that doesn't get us anywhere.

Fortunately, we have Stanley Ager's wisdom to guide us. A retired butler with fifty-three years of distinguished service, including to the esteemed Lord Coventry and his daughter Lady Barbara Smith, Ager is a respected authority in his field.

He trained many of the butlers who have graced Buckingham Palace and other distinguished places. If anyone knows, it's him.

In his textbook, 'The Butler's Guide to Clothes Care, Managing Table, Running the Home and Other Graces', he puts it very clearly on page 112: "...an inch of whisky is a respectful measure in any glass".

He added that he only poured less whisky if he noticed the guest shaking.

After careful consideration and consultation with the esteemed Stanley Ager, we have finally unravelled the mystery. A tot is 'an inch', he says, literally. At least that is clear.

An inch is 2.54 centimetres. And because he adds 'in any glass', we know he means height. So it's up to us to choose the width of our jar.

Solved...

But of course, you want to know more.

You're probably wondering, 'Isn't a centimetre of whisky too much to drink at breakfast?'

Be careful! You don't have to drink this whisky. On the contrary, you should pour it into the porridge. Yes, whisky lover, you may shudder at the thought of pouring whisky anywhere but down your throat, but let me explain what porridge is, and you will understand.

Porridge, 'the backbone of any tough Scot', is oatmeal or oat grains cooked painfully slowly in a mixture of milk and water and stirred continuously clockwise with a 'spurtle', not a spoon! A spurtle is simply a wooden stick.

Some add salt, others sugar, syrup, cinnamon....

The result looks like clotted wallpaper glue. But it is low in calories and lowers cholesterol.

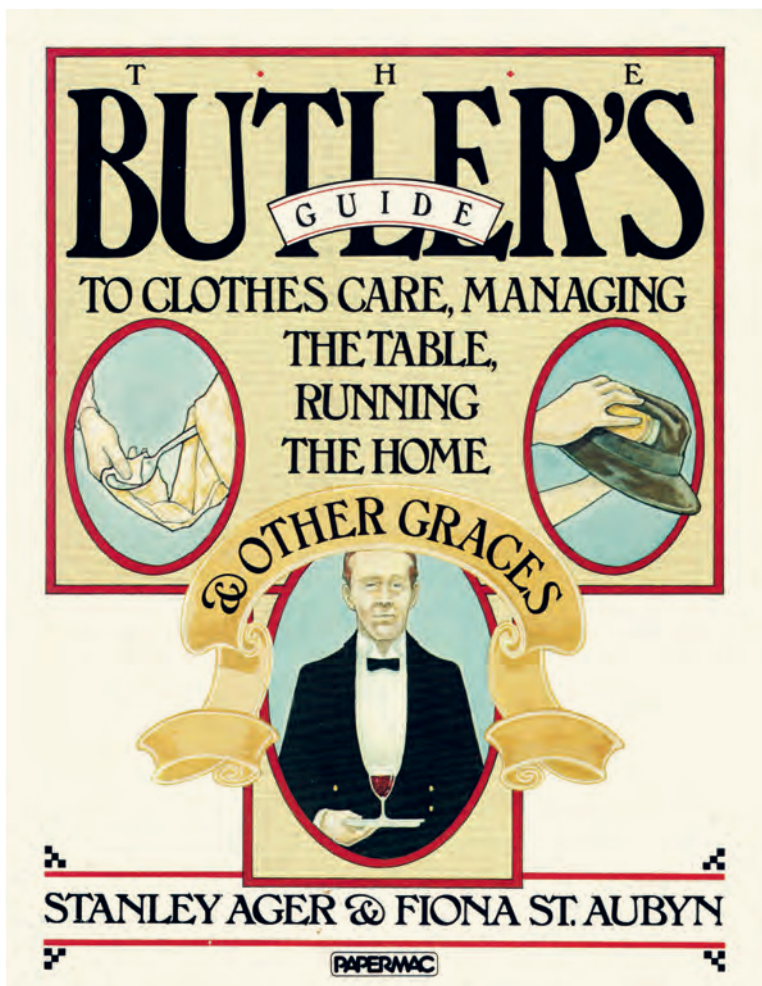
And it tastes pretty good. I wouldn't say that porridge is my favourite breakfast, but it does have one big plus: no matter what you add, it only gets better.

So sacrificing a whisky is no crime.

Of course, you can always ask for two 'tots' with your porridge to ease the pain. One to pour and...

Stanley Ager's friend George Summers used to ask for three tots. He was the Duke of Buccleuch's gamekeeper and would pop into Stanley Ager's after work for a chat and a couple of tots. Just before leaving, he would always ask for three tots: one in each of his boots and one down the back of his neck. This, he claimed, kept him warm on the journey home.

Note: 'A tot of whisky' should not be confused with 'a finger...', 'a nip...', 'a dram...', 'a slug...' or 'a sniffer' of whisky. These are other critical British measures of volume that we will talk about later.







4 Cambus

“As we passed in the train from the Bridge of Allan to Cambus, the sun, hitherto obscured, suddenly shone forth, pouring down its golden light upon the scene, bringing out in bold relief each crag and pinnacle, and casting fantastic shadows on the wooded slopes below, relieving the former of their wild ruggedness, and rendering to the latter an air of peaceful repose. For once we could not regret that our locomotion was slow, and that the train stopped at every station, otherwise we might have lost the view of the Wallace Monument, standing on a crag 560 feet above the level of the plain, the Links of the Forth, and the swelling hills each with their rich groupings of scenery, intersected here and there with farmhouses... Just before arriving at the station we crossed the Devon, a river of sparkling beauty, which flows into the Forth at Cambus Distillery.

“This distillery was founded in the year 1806 by John Moubray, the grandfather of one of the Directors of the Company... Originally a small work, it has now grown to enormous dimensions... The buildings are spread over fully eight acres of ground and are everywhere intersected by the railway.”

CAMBUS

WHAT

Name of a distillery in Clackmannanshire, in the Lowlands. Name of accompanying whiskies.

PRODUCED

Malt and grain whiskies

SIGNIFICANCE

Behind two significant events in the history of Scotch whisky

We are in 1886, and the above musings were penned by Alfred Barnard, who was in the middle of writing his masterpiece ‘The Whisky Distilleries of the United Kingdom’.

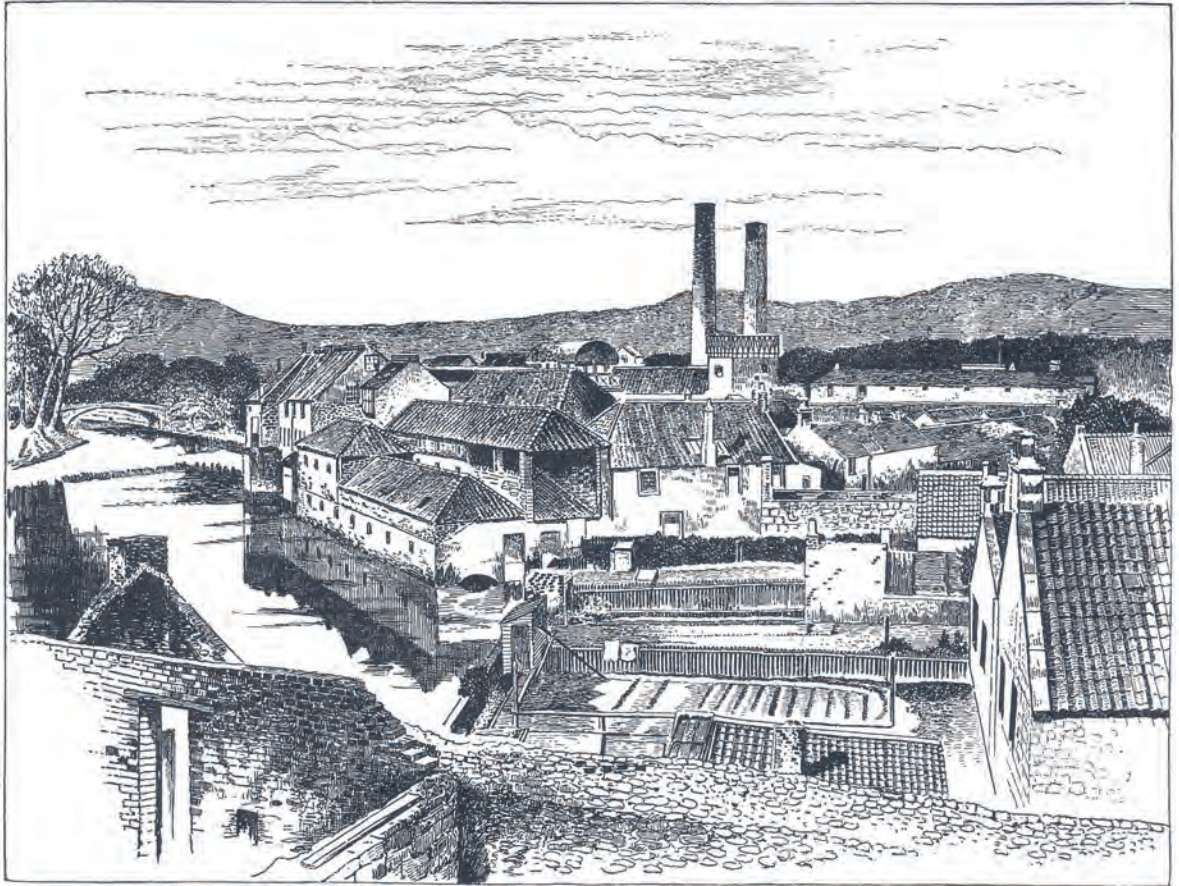
He must have been quite impressed, not only with the countryside around Stirling but certainly also with the Cambus distillery. He meticulously describes all the buildings, stills, pots and pans found there and ends his account with the all-important final line: “There are seven excise officers at the distillery.” So one was apparently not enough.

The distillery was indeed one of the big ones. Founded 1806 as a small malt distillery, Cambus installed a prototype ‘Robert Stein column still’ in 1827. This provided a continuous supply of alcohol but did not produce the desired results. Four years later, Aeneas Coffee patented a much-improved version: a good, constant process with a high alcohol content that could use raw materials other than grain. This system convinced Cambus. In 1836, he installed two of Coffee’s stills. But they were not alone in this: Scotland, England, Ireland and even Germany and Belgium switched to the column still.

At first, no one in Scotland saw anything wrong with it. The blenders eagerly took up the ‘new’ alcohol they distilled in the column stills, and Cambus even exported a lot of it to England, where it was further processed and used in gin and other applications.

But in 1848, the British legislature came up with a great idea: in Scotland, only cereals could be used for distilling, while any agricultural products could be used in England. This was a kick in the teeth for Cambus.

Along with five other large lowland grain distillers, they decided to fight back. In 1856, they formed a consortium that, by 1877, would become the Distillers



CAMBUS DISTILLERY.

Cambus was praised for its quality not only by blenders, but also by consumers.

Company Limited or DCL, which became hugely important in British whisky.

Their ultimate goal was jointly controlling prices, quantities, promotions and discounts on grain alcohol. They quickly became the most significant player in the UK whisky market, and their influence continued to grow. In 1997, after various mergers and several acquisitions, DCL became drinks giant Diageo. By that time, the whole whisky world could no longer ignore it: Diageo is the world's largest drinks company, operating in 180 countries with over 30,000 employees. The multinational owns 28 malt distilleries and several grain distilleries in Scotland. Cambus had been one of those, but its previous owner, Guinness, had already decided to close down and phase out production at Cambus in 1993. Diageo eventually established a cooperage in the old buildings.

Cambus was praised for its quality not only by blenders, but also by consumers. Cambus was the first to bottle and sell 'single grain' column alcohol.

In 1906, DCL even marketed a seven-year-old Cambus grain whisky as the figurehead for an expensive but crucial advertising campaign. An advertisement for 'Cambus grain whisky' appeared on the front page of the Daily Mail with the telling headline: 'Not a headache in a gallon'. This was an invitation for readers to discover that grain whisky was authentic and delicious, too.

It would become a standard phrase in marketing language.

This advertisement was the battering ram that the grain distillers would use in a legal battle against the malt distillers. A fight to the death! The famous 'what is whisky?' case.

Spoiler... the grain distillers won. Thanks to Cambus?



5 Mount Vernon Distillery

MOUNT VERNON DISTILLERY

WHAT

US President George Washington's estate

WHERE

Near Alexandria, Virginia

SIGNIFICANCE

Once the largest distillery in the United States



They worked for days on that damned text, weighing each word three times, arguing, shouting and threatening, adjusting where they could, reckoning with the wishes of yet another pesky delegate from yet another one of those twelve colonies, rehashing it all out loud, and then, with everyone nodding, very satisfied, almost in unison, they put down their brand-new pens. They had finally completed the text of one of the most significant documents in human history: the new Constitution of the United States of America. The year was 1787.

Undoubtedly, someone must have stood up and shouted, “Gentlemen, let’s have a drink!”

Chances are that it was none other than George Washington, the very first President of the freshly forged USA. He must not have encountered much opposition: if you look at the original document of the ‘Constitution’, you cannot ignore some traces of a less than steady hand in the signatures. The ‘Founding Fathers’ of the United States were anything but teetotalers; we would now call them ‘drunkards’. Taking the lead in all matters, Washington seized every opportunity to throw a party.

On 14 September, three days before the signing of the Constitution, he held a dinner party with 55 guests, including members of the Philadelphia City Cavalry. The list of empty

bottles from that evening speaks for itself: 60 bottles of red wine, 54 bottles of Madeira, 8 bottles of cider, 8 bottles of whisky, 22 bottles of stout, 12 (small) kegs of light beer and 7 bowls of punch.

In those days, no one thought twice about such an astounding amount. Around 1800, the average alcohol consumption in the United States was 27 litres of pure alcohol per person per year. That’s a lot! But all these drinks were safer than water, and some were even cheaper than tea or coffee. In the minds of the new Americans, they were categorised as ‘food’ rather than ‘drink’.

Alcohol was daily fare.

President Washington’s successor, John Adams, drank three glasses of Madeira before breakfast to rinse his mouth and consumed a good deal of rum and wine before bed. George Washington had a similar habit, which he continued steadily throughout the day.

To this day, evil tongues claim that good old George was a drunkard!

Why is that? Because he drank a bottle of Madeira daily, supplemented by rum and punch? Or because his accounts show that in the last six months of 1775, he bought six hundred dollars’ worth of liquor (about 16,000 British pounds today)?

Or because he gave his gardener an extra month's pay at Christmas and Easter and a permit to come to work drunk four times a year? George, a drunkard? Come on. What are you talking about?

Ah yes, it's said that his wooden dentures had to be replaced several times because they rotted from drinking! But that's just 'fake news': although he did in fact have several sets of dentures, none were made of wood. They were all made of metal (often gold), inlaid with first-class cattle teeth or little jewels carved from ivory. Proof of this is in his last set of dentures, which is on display in the historic Mount Vernon estate museum.

I hope I have completely cleared poor George's record.

President Washington died in 1799 – not from cirrhosis of the liver, but from the consequences of a respiratory infection. He came home from his estate that night soaking wet but kept his wet clothes on (which was a terrible idea even then) and got up the next day with a sore throat. His health got worse and worse, and the doctors decided to treat him by bloodletting. One session turned into two and then three... Once they had drained almost four litres of blood, they were about to suggest trying something else, but he suddenly dropped dead. Even a president has no more than five litres of blood, and that last remaining litre turned out not to be enough.

In 1797, George Washington established a distillery at his Mount Vernon estate in Virginia. It was the largest in America at the time, boasting five stills. The distillery was not solely for Washington's personal consumption, as he produced more than 40,000 litres shortly before his death. This production amount surpassed the other 3,500 distilleries in Virginia, which hardly produced 2,500 litres.

Washington himself knew more about brewing beer than about distilling whisky, as a keen beer drinker. For his whisky, he therefore enlisted the help of a Scottish emigrant, James Anderson, who trained six of Washington's over one hundred slaves to become full-fledged distillers. As a result, their casks (the whisky was sold by cask and had no real brand name) easily found their way to eager customers. James had brought extensive crafting experience to the New World, so he distilled according to a tried-and-tested recipe: 60 per cent rye, 35 per cent corn, and 5 per cent malted barley. And he distilled twice.

This process is still done today at the Mount Vernon distillery, rebuilt in 2007, which has a tasting room.



The 'Founding Fathers' of the United States were anything but teetotallers; we would now call them 'drunkards'. Taking the lead in all matters, Washington seized every opportunity to throw a party.

A little-known detail in the whole story: George Washington, like all other distillers, received a notice from the tax authorities at the end of the year to pay taxes on the alcohol he produced. He introduced this law himself in 1791, much to the dismay of the entire distilling world. That law, incidentally, led to a veritable people's uprising (later called the Whiskey Rebellion) and an uncontrolled witch-hunt against anyone who had anything to do with these taxes.

In 1794, George Washington was compelled to dispatch a 13,000-strong army to Pennsylvania to quell that rebellion. However, it never led to a battle as none of the rebels showed up on the battlefield. Instead, they all stayed home. The army only managed to capture two passers-by who were later sentenced to death. But President Washington showed his wisdom by pardoning them, proving that he was a clear-headed leader.

In 1798, he paid \$332 as tax for his whisky, which would be equivalent to approximately £8500 today. It's often said that history repeats itself, but have you heard of any presidents or heads of state who have dutifully paid taxes on all of their income and assets, like responsible citizens?



The distillery in Mount Vernon →