



the great locke name

# The test of time

Fred Minnick discovers a tale of a botched sale, political machinations and an Irish whiskey name that has weathered the years

Once upon a time in the whiskey world, the Locke name carried as much weight as Jim Beam or Johnnie Walker. A man of marginal status, John Locke learned the whiskey trade at a Tullamore distillery in the late 1830s. This venture proved futile in the "great falling off in the distilling trade," as the landowner said in breaking Locke's Tullamore lease.

Legitimate Irish distilleries dropped from 94 in 1838 to 61 in 1844. These declining distillery numbers coincided with the Great Famine and the Reverend Theobald Mathew, 'the Great Apostle of Temperance,' signing up more than 250,000 in his Temperance pledge movement. But, Locke still saw promise in the business, especially in Kilbeggan, a town on the upper Brosna River.

In the 1800s, farmers used the small river to ship corn, oats and barley to Shannon, while the Grand Canal Company brought patrons from Dublin and Tullamore.

Locke, who married into the Smithwick brewery family in Kilkenny, believed the Kilbeggan distillery was in great proximity for fresh clean water and business interests. The financial terms were also just right.

With the existing lease terminated, Locke rented it for the nominal fee of

£200 a year. The Locke family engrained themselves in the community; his sister, Catherine, taught the workers' children, and John helped the poor during the Great Famine. It didn't hurt that people really liked his whiskey.

Three years after he secured a 999-year lease in 1846, John Locke died and left the Kilbeggan distillery to his son, John.

During the next 50 years, John Locke's loved ones, including his wife, Mary Anne Locke, built the business he envisioned. It became one of the most popular Irish whiskeys in England and in Dublin, as production continued to increase every year.

Locke's Kilbeggan Distillery went from producing 60,000 gallons a year in the late 1860s to 78,000 gallons a year by the 1870s.

In 1886, Locke's produced 157,000 gallons of whiskey, the fastest growth the company had ever experienced. That was nearly three times the capacity of the Cardow distillery in Scotland, and 56,000 more gallons a year than Bushmills in Antrim, Ireland, in 1887.

If Locke's growth continued at that rate, it would have become the world's largest whiskey producer. But, strong competition, a UK trade war, Prohibition and an unstable Ireland were all contributors to the brand's slow demise. ▶

Issue 107 | WHISKY Magazine | 27

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In 1927, under the leadership of Mary Hope Johnston, nicknamed 'Sweet', and Florence Eccles, 'Flo' for short, John Locke's grandchildren, Locke's went into bankruptcy with £100,000 in debt.

A sharp secretary named Joseph Cooney helped bring the brand up from the brink of the end during the next decade, but little did he know it was just being groomed for sale. Sweet and Flo put the Locke's Distillery on the market, setting into motion one of Ireland's worst political scandals in history.

### The Botched Sale of 1947

When Mary Hope Johnston and her board decided to sell the distillery, it did not bring in an appraiser to create a sale price. The board purchased trade journal advertisements searching for offers. This opened the floodgates for tenders. Proposals trickled in from New York to Switzerland, but a 1930s law called the *Control of Manufacturers Act* mandated 51 per cent Irish ownership of Irish industries such as whiskey. This enticed a 'Swiss Syndicate' to recruit Senator William Quirke, leader of the Fianna Fáil party, to assist in the purchase of the Kilbeggan distillery.

Although Cooney had attempted to buy the distillery with the help of investors and an Irish distiller simply known as 'Murphy', Hope Johnston said they decided to take the largest offer, which was from the Swiss Syndicate for £305,000, equivalent to £9.3 million in today's currency.

Quirke, who for the fee of £22,000, sought support from the Department of Industry and Commerce to allow the foreign consortium to buy the distillery in accordance with the *Control of Manufacturers*



politician involved, the government called for a tribunal.

During two weeks, it was alleged the Minister of State withheld information about the sale and that Senator Quirke misled his private to help the foreigners. It was a political witch-hunt akin to 1990s U.S. President Bill Clinton's sex scandal, and Locke's was caught in the middle. Hope-Johnston had to be wondering during the tribunal what would have happened if they sold to Cooney or the other Irishman for less money. Although the scandal was clearly not their fault, the Locke board's greed may have killed one of Ireland's

## 100 years of Locke reign, the Kilbeggan distillery live and breathes its past

Ac. He was even willing to become part owner after the deal.

Meanwhile, the Swiss refused to pay the deposit for the distillery, saying deposits "always lead to trouble." The Department of Justice also obtained a proposal that the buyers planned to sell 60,000 gallons of whiskey on the England black market at £11 a gallon. If this were true, it appears the Swiss Syndicate's plan was to purchase Locke's remaining whiskey stocks, avoid duty and make a quick £660,000.

With this much money and an Irish

strongest whiskey names.

All that really came from the Tribunal was political grandstanding in the Dáil Éireann; politicians saying circumstances just showed corruption exists and the Fianna Fáil party calling the whole thing a witch-hunt.

Many historians believe that the Locke Tribunal led to the Fianna Fáil's defeat in the 1948 general election.

Nonetheless, the sale was botched and the Locke's name would never recover. It closed in 1953.

Today, Jim Beam owns the Kilbeggan



28 | WHISKY Magazine | Issue 107



Distillery and has been distilling with a 180 year old pot still since 2007. The original Locke buildings were restored in the 1980s with an emphasis placed on creating a museum that tells the Locke story. Jim Beam plans to continue producing Locke's 8 Years Old Irish Single Malt Whiskey, but the Kilbeggan line will remain the driver as Locke continues to fill a niche demand, says Stephen Teeling, Jim Beam's global marketing director of the Locke name.

But, by no means, is the Locke name dead. Operating since 1757, with nearly 100 years of Locke reign, the Kilbeggan distillery lives and breathes its past. The history ages in the Cooley whiskey barrels at the old Locke warehouses. Almost every building is a reminder of the Locke name, a glimpse of what could have been. ◀

Opening page: The Kilbeggan Distillery  
Opposite page, top to bottom: Locke's whiskey maturing, the cooperage, the filling room, the distinctive chimney  
This page, left to right: the distillery and its water wheel; part of the museum exhibits

## THIS CHRISTMAS, THE ANGELS' SHARE COULD ALSO BE YOURS.

Be an Angel yourself! Consider one of these distinctly rather special Scotches as an ideal Christmas gift, stocking filler, or – devilishly – as a self indulgence.

**OLD & RARE** – a single cask – distilled at Highland Park Distillery 27 years ago – replete with sweetly macerated fruit, soft smoke, vanilla tablet and burnt oak.

**DIRECTOR'S CUT** – another single cask full of 50 year old Scotch heritage plus fudge/vanilla/mocha and spice from the North British Grain Distillery.

**BIG PEAT at CHRISTMAS** – bottled in small batches of only 2,000 bottles at cask strength – full of all good things Islay: peat, seaweed, ash and chimney soot.

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