

DUNCAN SIMONDS

A grand passion for the beers of Britain

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DUNCAN SIMONDS believed passionately that British beers are just as good as foreign ones, and as the joint managing director of a family-owned brewery he was well placed to promote that view. He used his firm's longstanding connections with the Army to establish footholds overseas, and also promoted British beer vigorously on board visiting merchant ships when they called at British ports.

W. B. Simonds established his brewery in Broad Street, Reading, in 1785, and by the mid-19th century it was the largest and most successful of many breweries in the town. Five years later it moved to what is now Bridge Street, on the banks of the River Kennet. He won an important contract to supply beer to the Royal Military College Sandhurst in 1813, and the following year opened a bank in Reading. The nameplate of J & C Simonds can still be seen on Barclays Bank in Market Place, with which Simonds Bank merged in 1913.

The military contacts proved to be extremely profitable for the brewery, with overseas branches of the company formed to deal with the Army's growing demand for supplies in places such as Malta and Gibraltar. Back home, the expansion of the railways provided more opportunities, with the brewery supplying stations throughout the West Country and the South West of England. It also owned several public houses in the region.

It was to this heritage that Eric Duncan Simonds was born in 1917. He was educated at Eton and Magdalen College, Oxford, before joining the family firm as a pupil in the brewing room in 1938. He was called up in September 1939 and saw active service with the Royal Horse Artillery in the Middle East and North Africa. Twice wounded, he also was taken prisoner but escaped. He was mentioned in dispatches three times, and ended the war with the rank of major.

On demobilisation Simonds returned to the family firm, joining the board of directors in March 1947. He was appointed joint managing director in 1953. His main interest was in the licensed trade, particularly the company's pubs and the sale of beer in pubs. He was in the forefront of modernising public houses after the stagnation of the war years.

During the 1950s he wrote an article for the *Financial Times*, the thrust of which was that brewing is simply a form of manufacturing and easy enough to master. The value, he argued, was in the distribution of the product and the support of public houses. While today this may be seen as straightforward management theory, it was considered at the time to be something of an *avant garde*, not to say revolutionary, concept and caused a flurry of excitement in the industry.

As a senior figure in the Brewing Society, Simonds toured the world to promote British beer. On one occasion, while being interviewed on American radio, he was taunted by the question: "Why is Limey beer drunk warm?" He startled his hosts by replying: "It's not that we drink ours warm, it's that you drink yours cold. Scientists will tell you that taste buds are less sensitive to cold drinks. Your beer tastes so bad that it has to be drunk cold."

The Simonds brewery merged with Courage in 1960, by which time the plant had expanded to both sides of Bridge Street. Simonds remained with the new company under various ownerships until 1974, playing an important role in managing the Courage pension fund. Brewing finally ended in Bridge Street in 1980.

In later life Simonds became increasingly involved in supporting the world of Olympic sailing. Having invested in a Soling class boat in 1969, he joined the International Soling Association committee in 1977.

In the 1970s and 1980s Soling was one of six Olympic sailing classes, and when his sons demonstrated a talent for the sport Simonds supported them. They won the trials and selection for the Soviet Olympic Games in 1980, but Britain and the US did not participate.

Duncan Simonds married Monica Stevens in 1947. She survives him, as do their three sons.