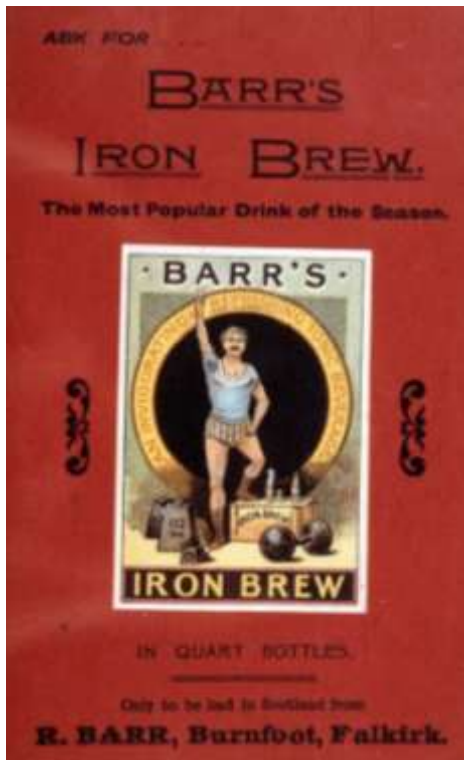


Irn-Bru

Geoff B Bailey

Irn-Bru is a very good example of the modern consumer society and the power of marketing. The vivid orange liquid with an international reputation consists of a delicate balance of ingredients which over time breaks down – if it is not consumed first - and so is difficult to preserve. We have to be content with its containers – bottles and cans – and that is why this counts as only half of an object.



[Introductory Film : Irn Bru](#)

The formula for Iron Brew was concocted in Falkirk by Robert Barr and his associates at the very end of the nineteenth century and the earliest advert that we have for it appeared in the Falkirk Cookery Book in 1900.

Illus: 1900 advert for Iron Brew.

Artificial mineral waters were seen as healthy in the first half of the nineteenth century and were made by firms such as Schwebbe's in London. They consisted simply of water and sugar impregnated with carbon dioxide under pressure and flavoured with a syrup to provide colour and to make them more palatable. In this guise they also became known as aerated water, lemonade, pop, ginger and soft drink. The first aerated water works in Scotland were in Glasgow and Edinburgh, and it was not until the 1860s that the trend of establishing works

in the smaller towns began. One of these pioneers was Gilbert Rae of Penicuik who moved his works to Dunfermline in 1868, later establishing depots at Falkirk, Alloa and Portobello. The first aerated water works to be set up in Falkirk was that of James Marshall at Garthall around 1870. At the time the address was given as Cow Wynd, from which a private lane (now Cochrane Road) led to the Garthall Aerated Water Works (now the site of the Woodlands Game Hall). Each night the lane, known as the Gote Loan, was closed off with a barrier. Very soon the Falkirk Brewery also began the manufacture of aerated waters and then in 1873 Robert Barr started production at his Burnfoot Works. At first he was cautious and continued his father's business of cork cutting which had been undertaken in Buchanan Court and Callendar Riggs since 1830. So successful was the new aspect of the business that in 1880 he decided to concentrate on it and stepped up production. The association with cork cutting was slowly relinquished, although as late as 1889 he was described in Slater's Directory as "aerated water manufacturer and cork cutter".

Illus: Barr's lorry at the drinking trough on Callendar Road with Marion's Well in the background.

Water is the main component of lemonade and the water supply was of paramount importance. In the early 1870s the quality of the public water was still rather dubious. The burgh's supply came



from old coal workings to the south of the town, whilst outlying districts such as Bainsford were reliant on private wells. Manufacturers also resorted to wells, Barr's well was 200ft deep and Reid's over 250ft - as he proudly proclaimed



on his embossed bottles. The water was carefully filtered before use, a fact that helped to sell the product, as it was practically the only safe drinking water.

Illus: A Barr's lorry at the Cross in Slamannan which was one day's travel from the Burnfoot Works.

The years following 1880 were boom years for aerated water manufacture in the Falkirk district. Fed by the unquenchable thirst of the foundry workers, the miners and the brick workers, and fanned by the rise of the Temperance Movement many new firms were established:

c1880	Dalziel & Clark, Grahamston	1890s	John McIntosh, Corbiehall
1885	Andrew Scott, Grahamston	1890s	Porteous, Murray & Co, Larbert
1887	James Johnstone, Bo'ness	1890s	Star Aerated Water Co, Bainsford
1891	Reid Bros, Bainsford	1890s	G. Thomson & Sons, Stenhousemuir
1891	James Haddow & Co, Falkirk		

By and large the market for these producers was limited to the distance that a horse and cart could travel in a day. With little slack in the local market Robert Barr's son, Robert F Barr, started an aerated water works at Parkhead in Glasgow in 1887. Five years later he moved to Ireland and the Glasgow business was run by his brother, Andrew Greig Barr, as the sole proprietor. Both firms made drinks such as orangeade, gingerade, soda water, raspberry and Kola, and gained a reputation for excellence.

A History of Falkirk in 10 ½ Objects: Object 9 ½

The use of wells was very restrictive given the amount of water needed and the rapid improvements wrought to the municipal water supply in Falkirk quickly encouraged firms to seek a connection. In 1875 Robert Barr, cork cutter, was granted a supply of water by the Council. From then on the Council was responsible for any contamination to the water used in the aerated water, which could save the firm from future litigation. This water was still filtered at the works. It also provided the ample water required to clean and sterilise the glass bottles ready for re-filling.

Carbon dioxide was usually made at the works from lime. If unattended these gas generators could explode, as happened in 1900 at the Burnfoot Works. After the First World War many firms adopted the use of high pressure gas cylinders which were filled at chemical works.

Sugar was imported, but caused those aerated water manufacturers who also bottled beers some minor inconvenience as the eleventh clause of the 1896 Finance Act did not permit sugar or saccharine to be stored on premises connected with beer bottling. No instances of sugaring beer are known from the Falkirk district and the manufacturers kept these two aspects of their business physically separated.

Illus: Shacleton's fish and chip shop at Maddiston, c1930, selling Barr's Iron Brew and orange crush.

The use of a firm's name was very important to the manufacturer not only to safeguard his bottle stock but also as a sales asset. Even today consumers feel happier about the better known brands of products, generally made by the larger firms. Barr's used this reputation in the brand names of some of their products such as "Barrino", "Kolabar" and "Sunbar", all of which were registered names. The use of registered names came in just before the turn of the century, too late to protect the name "Iron Brew" which was produced by a number of other companies. Even so the prefix Barr's was enough to marginalise other producers and to persuade the Falkirk firm to retain the name. Barr's Iron Brew was first marketed in Falkirk by Robert Barr, but within a year AG Barr of Glasgow was also producing it and the advertising for both firms was almost identical, depicting Adam Brown, a famous highland athlete from Shotts, with his weights. The emphasis was very much upon the food value of the drink as a source of strength.





Illus: Paper label on a glass bottle of the orange flavoured drink "Sunbar".

Other well-known sportsmen were also used in the advertising wars. John Blair of Motherwell FC, Willie Lyon of Celtic FC, and Fred Miller of Kilmarnock FC all endorsed Barr's Iron Brew as a fitting tonic; as did Donald Dinnie the all-round champion athlete of the world, and Alex Munro, champion caber tosser of the world and undisputed wrestler of Great Britain. Not to be outdone Reid Brothers had James McLaren, champion cyclist, to recommend their Kola Champagne. Sporting metaphors abounded: "*referee the public*"; "*on the transfer list from all shopkeeper's*" and so on. Barr's established a tug-of-war team, so did Reid's. Sponsorship of sporting activities was always a feature of advertising.



Illus: Tug-of-war team sponsored by Barr.

The food value of aerated waters was seen as one of the principal values of the drinks. This advert of 1906 is a good example: "*The fasting man Mons Beaute existed for 40 days on Barr's soda water, perfect in purity. Now recuperating on Barr's Iron Brew and Bovril.*" In 1931, when high calorific value was still considered an asset, the public was told that:

An 8 oz bottle of ginger ale contains	174 calories.
An 8 oz bottle of milk contains	163 calories.
A 1/4 lb of white potatoes contains	118 calories.

When the Falkirk aerated water firms were established the horse still provided the motive power to distribute their produce. This effectively set a limit on the size of the works as the aerated water could only be economically distributed at the radius of the horse's range. A horse can pull a loaded lorry at 3 miles per hour, or slightly faster if the driver walked beside the lorry. (In a law suit in 1902 it was noted that a lorry driver could not have committed the offence at Slamannan of which he was accused at 6.00pm because he had checked in to the Burnfoot Aerated Water Works at 6.30pm and it would have taken a loaded cart 1.5 hours to make the 4.5 mile journey.) Stirling, Kilsyth, Airdrie, Alloa and Linlithgow were thus considered to be at the margins of such activity from Falkirk. In the 1930s Barr's targeted three lorries at Stirling, but the Stirling manufacturer, Duncan, had little serious competition.



Illus: A Barr's lorry with salesman/driver at the Gentleman Fountain, Falkirk.

Another of Barr's lorries went to Kilsyth. The salesman set out at 6.00am walking beside his horse, and arrived in town around 10 o' clock. He then spent four hours working in the town. The four hours return journey ended only after he had stabled his horse, checked the harness and lorry and rested his sales book with the

cashier. He was therefore working over a twelve-hour day and could look forward to repeating the task the next day.

Although Alloa was nearer, it had its own particular problems. The Forth was crossed by the ferry, which could be very uncomfortable in severe weather. On one occasion the carter making this run got drenched when the moorings broke and he subsequently died of pneumonia. In the opposite direction, southward

towards Slamannan or Shieldhill, lay the Glen Brae. Here trace horses were used to get the lorries up the hill and these teams can be seen on the photograph of the lorries outside the Burnfoot Works.



Illus: The Burnfoot Works .

The vehicles were always known as lorries and not carts. They were flat and open-topped with a short protruding rim around the edge to retain the wooden crates. The firm's name had to appear on the tail as a matter of law so that the owner could be easily identified in the case of an accident. Firms were only too happy to comply as it provided them with a platform for advertising, and their names were generally emblazoned all over the lorry. Aerated water lorries were a common sight in the district. They had brush wheel bearings, which were harder for the horse to pull than the artillery carriage type with ball bearings, but were considerably cheaper. A loaded lorry carried around 60 to 70 dozen bottles and weighed about 3 tons. The larger works employed a joiner to maintain them, at a wage of 26s a week in 1900.

The horses were an essential part of the business and so were usually well looked after even though their work was hard. In 1905 the Glasgow firm of A.G. Barr had "*comfortable, orderly stalls for the 200 horsed [which] should make these animals grateful. Thousands of human beings might envy them their lot*" (FH May 1905). The finer animals were often proudly exhibited by the firms at local agricultural shows. The economic dependence on the horse is



clearly shown by the way in which William Innes of the West Lothian Aerated Water Works, Bo'ness, was bankrupted by an epidemic amongst his horses in December 1905.

Illus: Feeding the horse during the delivery.

Illus: Carnera in Hodge Street with Comely park School in the background.

The horses were bought at horse fairs from as far afield as Perth. They became familiar to the people of the area and some even achieved a sort of fame. Undoubtedly the most famous was "Carnera" owned by Robert Barr, Falkirk. Named after the Italian "Ambling Alp" of boxing fame he was claimed to be the largest working horse in the world. Originally owned by a Perth farmer he was purchased by Robert Barr in 1930. He stood 19 hands 1.5 inches high (6ft 6ins at the shoulder) and it took 24 inches of iron bar to make a single foreshoe for him, the average for other horses being 17. He weighed a ton. As a promotional asset for Barr's Carnera was a great success and he was well liked by the public. He often won prizes at shows in the section for Clydesdale gelding or mare in cart harness. He came to a tragic end in January 1937 when he "died in harness". He slipped on the frost-bound surface of the road at Cow Wynd and all efforts to stand him up again failed. People brought him a mattress to lie on, and fed him buns. Such was the interest that *"The crowd which witnessed the unusual proceedings during the greater part of the afternoon was of such large dimensions that three policemen were required to keep a passage clear for traffic. There was still a large crowd present when Mr Bell [the veterinary] shot the unfortunate animal at 4.45pm. They did not disperse, indeed, until the body of "Carnera" was hoisted on to a lorry and transported to Glasgow at 7pm."* (FH January 1937).



Illus: The Barr's lorry amongst the debris from the Steeple, 1927.

Another of Barr's horses achieved immortality when it was killed in June 1927 by a fall of masonry from Falkirk's Steeple after it had been hit by lightning. The horse had been yoked to a lorry delivering aerated water to Wilson and Thomson, grocers. The driver, James McComish, had been in the act of placing an empty box on the vehicle when he heard the noise of the collapsing debris and instinctively stood with his back against the front of the Steeple. He suffered only a slight cut to his head:

"A horse for beauty unsurpassed,
A victim to the storm fiend fell,
The man in charge - great miracle -
Was saved, and that we're glad to
tell." (FH 25 June 1927)



The procession of horses and lorries leaving the works must have been an impressive sight early in the morning. In 1905, for example, a convoy of 50 lorries drawn by 130 horses and carrying 5000 boxes was seen leaving Barr's Parkhead Works in Glasgow bound for Motherwell. At their works in Falkirk the local council were concerned about the effect of the volume of traffic on other road users and upon the underground sewers.

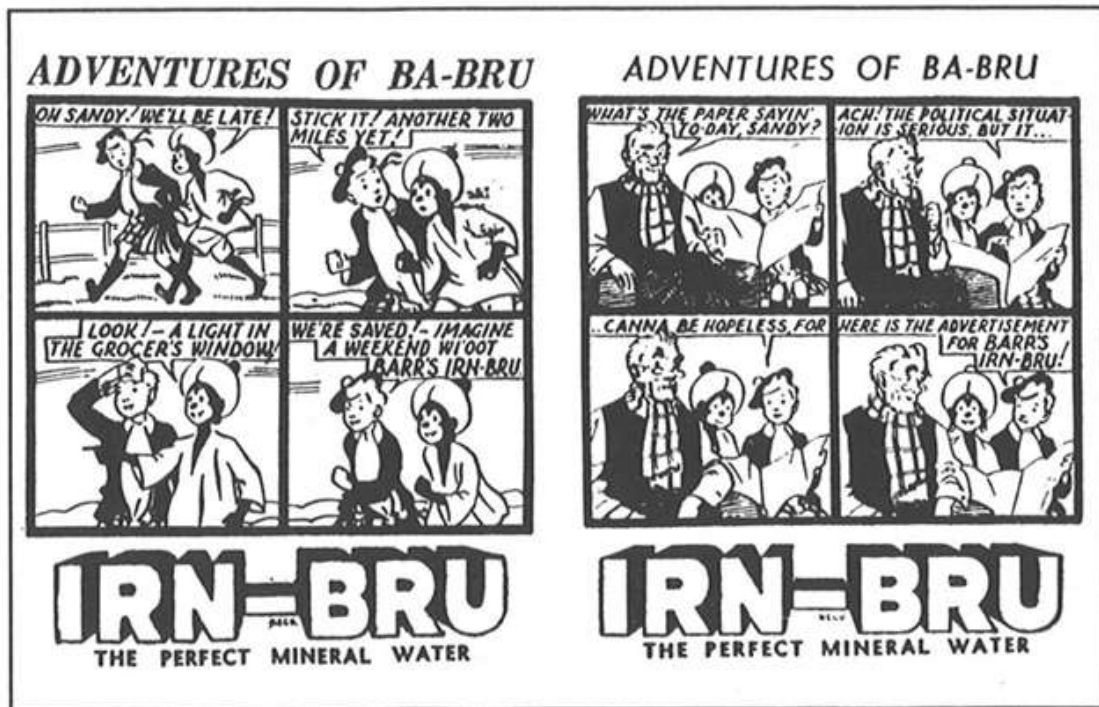
Ironically, as the roads improved they became more difficult for the horses whose hoofs suffered. Motor transport was rather slow in replacing them. As early as 1904 A.G. Barr's had purchased a motor wagon from Colchart and Co of Preston, which carried 14 tons, equivalent to 1000 dozen bottles per load. This too did the journey to Motherwell, but it was capable of two trips in the day at a stately rate of 8 miles per hour.

Aerated water manufacturers continued to prosper under the driving spirits of their energetic founders. Each firm carved out its own niche in the market and by 1910 there was no slack to be taken up by any new firms. Any works founded afresh were doomed to failure within a few years, so that when the founding fathers tired of their work, or died, their businesses were bought up as much for the goodwill or name as for the plant itself.

Over the following years the government introduced greater regulation into the trade and continued to revise its tax raising powers. The smaller firms struggled to continue production. If they were hit by some unexpected economic crisis, such as death duties or fire damage, it became easier to sell out to the larger companies than to continue production. Purchase could mean the removal of a rival business and permitted production to be concentrated in one place.

A History of Falkirk in 10 ½ Objects: Object 9 ½

Both the firms of Robert Barr and George Thomson grew by such purchases. By the end of the Second World War they were the only two companies left in the Falkirk district. Thomson's too were taken over in the 1950s. Then, in 1959, Robert Barr Ltd was also bought. The purchaser was A.G. Barr and Co, the expanding giant that Robert Barr had spawned itself in 1887. For the first time since 1903 the two firms were under the same corporate umbrella in a form of merger. Robert Barr (Falkirk) was allowed to retain its name as a temporary measure. Now the Barrs were ready to take on the world!



Illus: The comic strip featuring Ba-Bru.



Illus: Traditional glass bottle and small neck label, 2000.

One of the most successful drinks promotions ever must surely be that for Irn-Bru. From the comic-strip adventures of Ba-Bru to the present television commercials this brand has become a household name. In 1922 Adam Brown was quietly replaced on the label by a Cambridge rower to increase the appeal to a wider audience. The "Adventures of Ba-Bru and Sandy" first appeared in Scottish newspapers in the early 1930s. The black boy was inspired by Rudyard Kipling's book 'Toomai of the Elephants' and elephants were featured in the early days. (In the 1937 film "Elephant Boy" the boy was played by Sabu.) It became the longest running advertising cartoon in history, lasting until the early 1970s. It even continued to appear in the Second World War when Iron Brew was temporarily taken out of production in the period 1942-1947 due to government restrictions. The first television advert by Barr was screened on STV in 1964 and also featured Ba-Bru and Sandy.

A History of Falkirk in 10 ½ Objects: Object 9 ½

In an inspired marketing move the name was changed from Iron Brew to the phonetic spelling "Irn-Bru" in 1946 which could be, and was, registered as a trade name. In many ways this was a fortuitous accident as it was initiated by government proposals to introduce new food labelling regulations stipulating that brand names should reflect reality. Whilst Barr's Iron Brew did contain iron, it was not brewed! As it happened the regulations did not come into force until 1964, and even then it allowed brand names older than 30 years to continue even if not literally true.

The early adverts for Iron Brew had a pale blue background and a bright yellow circular band containing the words "AN INVIGORATING REFRESHING TONIC BEVERAGE" in red. Over the years the shade of blue deepened slightly but the orange and red were retained as part of the ever changing background. The background took centre stage in 1976 when a new design was introduced across the various forms of packaging then used – glass returnable bottles and aluminium cans. Now the vivid orange became prominent. That same year Plastishield covered non-returnable glass bottles were sold for the first time to cater for the supermarket trade. These were replaced in 1979 by PET (Polyethylene Terephthalate) bottles which could be produced in larger sizes. Then in 1988 the Irn-Bru design with which we are all familiar with today was launched. It had chunky white lettering in a blue rectangle on an orange background overlain by a grey male runner in a Michael Angelo style pose within the famous orange and yellow circle. Since then the only major change was the placing of the IRN-BRU lettering vertically on the label in 1993.

Illus: Tin can from 2010.

In the late 1960s a small red rectangle with "BARRS" in white had been introduced and in 1993 this changed to a sloping rectangle with the letters "BARR" still in white but now with a black shadow effect. These were accompanied by the words "Soft Drink".

In the mid-1970s a big television campaign for Irn-Bru began and the associated catch phrases "Your other national drink" and "Made in Scotland from girders" have firmly established the brew in the national consciousness. A decade later this was followed up by a new series of posters. One showed a barge laden with steel tubes removed from the Forth Bridge.

In 1996 a new factory was occupied in Cumbernauld and the Falkirk works, by then in Tamfourhill, closed. A few years later the Glasgow site also stopped manufacturing.



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