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Jacob Schweppe, soft drinks pioneer

CELEBRATIONS have been held in Switzerland and Britain to mark "the first 200 years of Schweppes" – the oldest mineral water manufacturer in the world. Jacob Schweppe pioneered the product in Geneva, (commencing commercial manufacture in 1793) and perfected it in London. The recent bicentenary celebrations included a reception in Berne, attended by the British Ambassador to Switzerland (Mr John E. Powell-Jones), senior company executives from Britain and Switzerland – and *Swiss Observer* correspondent COLIN FARMER, who traces here the rags-to-riches story of a product whose sparkle now spans the world.

The man who started the soft drinks industry...

JEAN Jacob Schweppe was born in 1740 in Witzenhausen (in the district of Hesse) in West Germany. The extraordinary course of his early life, which led him to Geneva, has a magical quality reminiscent of the tales told by those other famous Hessians, the brothers Jacob and William Grimm.

When Jacob was 11 or 12 years old, his parents, considering him to be too delicate for a life in agriculture, allowed a travelling tinker to take charge of him. After a short time, the tinker was so much surprised by the boy's dexterity in mending pots that he took him back to his parents saying that, although he might make his fortune if he kept their son, he could not think of confining him to a calling so much below his talents; that they should lose no time in placing him under a silversmith where his success and fortune were certain.

This was done and at the silversmith's the same thing occurred. Jacob's talents and skill were so evidently suited for a more difficult branch of the profession that the silversmith recommended his removal to a bijouterie. Here his success and his fortunes continued to increase.

Eventually he was drawn to the city of Geneva, attracted no doubt by its fame as a centre for watchmaking and jewellery. The year of his arrival is not known but he was certainly in Geneva late in 1765.

Jacob described himself as an enthusiastic amateur scientist. While earning his living with his gems and trinkets of precious metal, he devoted his spare time to the study of science

and to the production of artificial mineral waters.

Within a few years, he had reached a stage superior to anything which had been achieved at that time, but still not as good as he was aiming for. So he pressed on perseveringly, frequently correcting and modifying his experiments and his apparatus.

Free for the poor

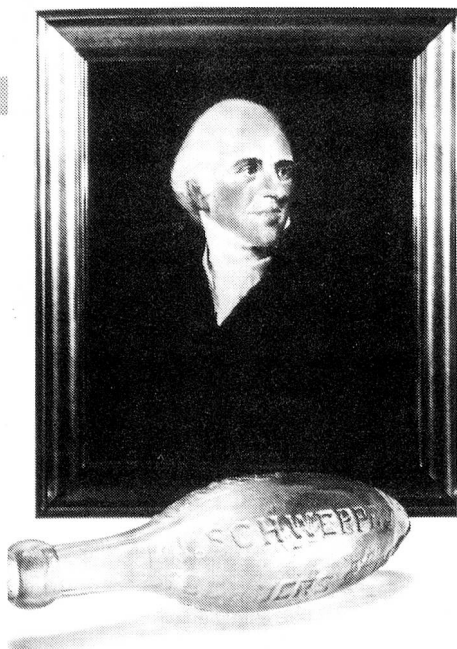
Meanwhile, the artificial mineral waters he was producing were of good quality and he regretted letting them go to waste. He therefore proposed to the doctors of Geneva that any poor patients who might benefit from them could have them free, and the offer was gratefully accepted.

Soon, Jacob reached the degree of perfection he desired. The demand for his

waters grew and he extended his offer to people in easier circumstances, and then to the rich. Many people, however, were reluctant to take the waters free, and eventually he was obliged – though unwillingly – to place a nominal price on them to cover his outgoings.

By 1783, the focus of Jacob's activities had moved from progressive experimentation to commercial development. Indeed, it would be reasonable to say that Jacob Schweppe was thus the founder of the soft drinks industry as we know it today.

On September 4, 1790, an advertisement was published in the *Journal de Genève*, announcing that Schweppe was forming a company with two partners. The announcement explained the disadvantages associated with the use of imported natural mineral waters, the loss of quality and efficacy as a result of transport and long periods of storage, and emphasised the advantages of



the firm's products which often surpassed the natural waters in purity and aeration.

Reference was made to the ailments in which use of the waters was beneficial and doctors and sick persons were invited to ask for any mineral waters which they needed, of which, they were assured, exact copies would promptly be made. Attached to the prospectus was a commendation signed by ten leading doctors in Geneva.

The following year, the partners decided to expand the company's activities abroad, and it was agreed to open a business in Britain.

The first factory was set up at 141 Drury

Lane, London, in 1792, at that time a very poor quarter.

The business met with no immediate, easy success; rather the reverse. There were in London then numerous apothecaries and others dispensing mildly aerated mineral waters prepared on the rudimentary machines that Jacob Schwegge had dismissed in 1780 as inadequate.

Lack of progress

Horse-drawn wagons carted mineral water machines through the streets for whoever would buy. Artificial mineral waters, such as they were, were no novelty before Jacob's arrival. In July, Jacob reported a decided lack of progress to his partners in Geneva.

A reply came the following month urging

Jacob to have courage and patience; he would see that in seven or eight months things would be altogether different. But, as he had feared, there was no sign of business improving, even when fashionable society returned from the country for the London season. In November, he wrote to his partners that he had hardly done anything since September.

Even the doctors, on whom so much reliance had been placed, appeared to be showing no interest. Nevertheless he was committed, at the insistence of his partners, to carry on, at least until the spring, and was therefore astonished to receive in December a peremptory letter requiring him to close down the business and return home.

From then on, relations deteriorated between Schwegge and his partners, and

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A Schweppes fleet of Swiss "Berna" trucks in London, 1915



This advertisement for Schweppes "Royal Table Waters" about 1900 captures the essence of the turn-of-the century ideal of feminine beauty

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they eventually agreed to part company.

In the dissolution of the partnership, Jacob sacrificed his share in the goodwill of the business he had created in Geneva in 10 years of dedicated work. In exchange, he kept the London business, still in its extreme infancy, and which in 1792 his partners had shown themselves ready to abandon so hurriedly for lack of success.

Perhaps the same vision and faith in artificial mineral waters which originally led Jacob to forsake his craft of bijoutier sustained him in staking his future on the new business he would build in Britain. His confidence in his product was not misplaced. In London Jacob Schweppe was free, at least from 1793, to continue to develop the business in his own style, without the distracting influence of his partners.

Desirable substitutes

The plant, so modest in scale by comparison with later standards, could easily be moved and Jacob did not stay long in Drury Lane. By 1794 he had moved to 8 King's Street, Holborn, which has long since disappeared under re-building. Jacob soon moved the factory again to 11 Margaret Street, Cavendish Square, Westminster, at Michaelmas 1795. In this street, though at several different addresses, he remained until he retired, and the firm stayed on until 1831.

The medical profession in general was beginning to recognise Schweppe's soda water and artificial mineral waters as desirable substitutes for natural spa waters, and specifically recommended them for their superiority over the waters of other manufacturers.

In the early 1800's, Jacob Schweppe introduced his famous egg-shaped bottle. This bottle was evolved or specially designed to contain aerated waters. It became the standard bottle in the trade and remained in



use for well over 100 years.

Apart from ensuring that the bottle was kept on its side, so keeping the cork saturated and expanded to retain the precious gas more efficiently, the ovate shape had other advantages. It lent itself to the even distribution of glass during manufacture, reducing the possibility of weak spots so dangerous in a glass vessel under pressure. Because of its inability to stand up on its own, it became known familiarly as the drunken bottle.

After six years devoted to the development of his business in England, publicising and extending it throughout the country, Jacob Schwegge, at the age of 58, prepared for retirement. He sold his interest to three Jerseymen, retaining a one-eighth share for himself.

His business had achieved a solid basis of success. His clear profit in the year to 14 May 1798 had been £1,200, a handsome sum in those days. His artificial mineral waters had met with even more acclamation and commercial success in England than they had enjoyed in Geneva. It is true that the supreme quality of the waters was a major factor in their success but it is also certain that Jacob's own exceptional qualities, through which he had first succeeded in the art of aeration, played their part.

Jacob would reveal to the partners "the whole art, mystery and process of making and composing artificial mineral waters". The partners covenanted not to disclose any part of the "said art, mystery or process" and to be true, just and faithful to one another.

So, as the 18th century ended, Jacob Schwegge withdrew from the scene. By his ingenuity and determination 20 years before, Jacob had transformed both the quality and the scale of production of artificial mineral waters.

In so doing, he had found himself at the hub of a commercial enterprise in Geneva. Transplanted in England that commerce had, from small and precarious beginnings, flourished exceedingly, inspired by his genius. He now left his incomparable name and reputation in the hands of his successors.

Some details of Jacob's life in retirement can be gathered from the records in Geneva. His name appears in a list of the inhabitants of Petit-Saconnex in 1804.

Charles de Constant, cousin of the more famous Benjamin, had a house beautifully situated by the Rhône where on his terrace he entertained many famous and important visitors. One of these, a Mr Wickham, who had been a British Minister in Switzerland, he took to Jacob's home to see his fine peach trees.

The fire of genius

But de Constant said: "I find Mr Schwegge more interesting to see than his peach trees; his great age, his white hair, contrast strongly with his vivacity and his energy; he has an originality of expression and a fire which belong only to genius".

He added that Jacob had brought back a "pretty fortune" from England, where he was

the first to make artificial mineral waters, which were now so widely used.

At this time, Jacob was living quietly but remaining active, with a wide range of interests. A close friend and near neighbour was François Huber, a blind naturalist.

It was Huber who described the career of Jacob Schwegge to the second Earl of Minto, who was living in Geneva in 1820. He also described Jacob's last years at his home at Bouchet, and there could be no more fitting tribute to him than to repeat the words of his old blind friend:

"He is now in a very alarming state of health having just experienced an attack which it is feared is apoplectic. He is a man of learning but so modest and of such retired habits and so much simplicity of character that none but those whom mere neighbourhood or some accident may bring into contact with him are aware of his merit or even of his existence".

One month later – in November, 1821 – Jacob Schwegge was dead.

London theatre programme advertisement, 1913

